Storied Transitions

Post-trauma growth and narrative imagination in leadership development

Michael J. Stanford

Ashridge Doctorate in Organisational Change (4)

October 2020

Word count: 74,171 excluding footnotes

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to the many explorers who guided this inquiry.

To my wife Roxane and my stepson Antoine, thank you for the wonderful stories that you've brought into my life and for helping me to become a storyteller with something to say.

To Dad, thanks for your love, for your curiosity, and for your thirst for digging deeper. The example of how you live your life inspires me more than you know. You are a most wise and wonderful teacher.

To Mom, who left early, thanks for the many lovely ways you helped prepare us all for the trip. Thanks, as well, for the gift of your last story. I am still wrestling with it.

To Katherine, James, and Paul, thanks for joining me during my travels into the narrative underworld. Your guidance nudged me deeper than I imagined I could go. And to John, the truth-teller, thank you for steadying the ship and calming the waters.

Finally, to the family, friends, clients and colleagues who have walked with me into the territory of unexplored story, a heartfelt thanks for the privilege of walking with you. Without your honesty these pages would be blank.

Abstract

Conventional leadership development fails to acknowledge that leadership can be traumatic, or that leadership development has a duty to help leaders grow through their traumatic leadership experiences.

Clinical research shows that victims of profoundly destabilising experiences can grow when they shift their narrative-shaping and exploration mechanisms (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2013, 2014).

Storied Transitions brings post-trauma growth practice into the world of leadership development to explore how leadership development practitioners can help leaders grow when they are destabilised by their experiences.

Building on clinical research in post-trauma growth (e.g. Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, 2014;; Meichenbaum, 2014; Janoff-Bulman, 1990; 2014) and narrative psychology (e.g. Freedman & Combs, 1996; Denborough, 2014; McAdams, 1993; Crossley, 2000), the inquiry asks: *how can leadership development help leaders explore their narrative worlds so that they can use their most difficult leadership challenges as catalysts for personal growth*? In the context of the inquiry, *narrative* refers to the stories consciously or unconsciously attached to events, experiences, objects or images in order to give them meaning.

The inquiry builds on the literature in clinical research in post-trauma growth, narrative psychology and a selection of other clinical approaches (evolutionary, existential and depth psychology, e.g. Buss, 2004, 2005; Yalom, 1980, 1989, 1999; Strenger, 2011; Stein, 1998, 2003; Kalsched, 2013). It also explores the researcher's experience of developing a narrative-based self-therapy practice in the wake of his own profoundly destabilising leadership experience. It includes observations from taking this emerging practice into leadership development programs and into counselling for individual executives.

The inquiry concludes that the challenges of leadership can be traumatic when they shatter narratives that have been essential to the leader's self- and worldview. It shows how difficult leadership experiences can disable narrative-shaping and exploration

mechanisms. It demonstrates how imagination is essential to re-establishing those mechanisms.

The inquiry recommends that practitioners who support leaders through their disruptive transitions integrate narrative imagination into their work. It suggests a narrative exploration process that includes *confession, interpretation, education and transformation* to help leaders emerge from their experiences with a stronger sense of self, with deeper relationships, and healthier life philosophies.

Table of Contents

Introduction
What Are We Doing Here?

> *If you want to know me, then you must know my story, for my story defines who I am.*
>
> *And if I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self – the personal myth – that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years. It is a story I continue to revise, and to tell to myself (and sometimes to others) as I go on living (McAdams, 1993, p. 1).*

Storied Transitions is an inquiry into the meaning of the stories and inner storytellers that accompanied me while I navigated a psychologically destabilising career transition. It is a work of action research turned inward so that I might 'question and improve my taken-for-granted ways of thinking and action,' to paraphrase McNiff and Whitehead (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009), placing my inner stories and story-making mechanisms at the centre of the questioning. Schein might call it a clinical inquiry, intended to result in positive psychological outcomes for the client (me) through the help of the researcher (also me) so that I might 'better understand the pathology of a given situation' (Schein, 2008).

The inquiry's 'situation' started when I accepted a complex senior leadership role in a small organisation where I had worked for many years. If the inquiry's first act is my ambivalent acceptance of the role, its second act is about how I was dismissed from the organisation when I clashed with important people in the organization's power structure. Its third act is my attempt to launch a leadership development practice after I was fired, at the age of 50. The first two acts played out over the inquiry's first two years. I continue to work through the third act.

The deeper story – the story beneath the story, Laurel Richardson might say from her work on writing as a research method (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005) – is the story of what it means to wrestle with who you might be when you aren't who you thought you were anymore, and when you want to become someone else. The career transition I explore is a proxy for a psychological transition in what it means to be a good person,

a man, a leader, to be successful, to feel worthy of love. *Storied Transitions* is an attempt to better know myself through my stories, as McAdams writes, so that I could imagine a happier path after a destructive experience. If the inquiry is an attempt to wrestle meaning from a painful experience, the meaning I wanted to wrestle from the work was the meaning of me, of where I came from, of who I was, and of who I wanted to become.

In case you, the reader, are wondering *is this research into job loss at middle age, or into what happens when mid-life crisis plays out in the theatre of work,* it might be both, but it is mainly a report on what might happen when the stories which have given us a sense of who we are become obvious fictions. When these stories don't feel like truths anymore, we can lose our narrative bearings. The emptiness left behind in the absence of core self-narratives can be dark and deep.

This deep and dark territory is the territory of the psyche and so the inquiry work is indeed psychological work. It concerns itself with understanding my psychological state through the stages of job acceptance, of being asked to lead important organisational changes in an archly political environment, of confusion when it became obvious that I didn't understand the rules of the game and it was clear that my path lay outside of the organisation I had spent a good part of my career helping to build.

The point of the inquiry was not to comment on how organisations can be brutal. This is not a purely autoethnographic work, according to the most common definitions of autoethnography (see Sparkes, 2018). The inquiry was not intended to comment on organisational cultures in general. Nor was it intended to comment on the people or the culture of the organisation in which the drama played out. Each of the drama's players will have their own stories to tell. The point of the inquiry was to explore how psychological turmoil might be a catalyst for personal growth. I wanted to understand how I went about constructing stories of my experience, and to see how my story-making mechanisms helped or hindered the positive outcomes that indicate quality in clinical inquiry (Schein, 2008).

My question at the beginning of the inquiry was whether or not I could emerge from it feeling better in my own skin. Post-trauma growth research nudged the inquiry's goal towards exploring how my painful leadership experience might help me become

of version of myself that I liked better. The goal of clinical work in post-trauma growth is to emerge from the trauma with newer and healthier self- and world-views, what post traumatic growth clinicians and researchers Calhoun and Tedeschi call *a changed perception of self* ("vulnerable but stronger", according to their research) and *a changed philosophy on life* (including "changes in priorities, new appreciation for life, and a greater sense of spirituality") (Calhoun & Tedeschi, 2006). I thought I might use the experience to reach similar outcomes.

By 'story-making making mechanisms' I mean the ways in which my imagination turned experience into story. When I was working through the leadership transition, my internal narratives constructed themselves unconsciously, automatically and in fragments around the experiences that stood out for me. For example:

A first act story…

I am having dinner with a senior member of the organisation's leadership. We are here so that we can talk about the position he wants me to take. I'm nervous. The restaurant is executive-posh, all white linen and crystal wine glasses. People around us hush through their conversations. We are conducting our own business. I know the politics of the place where I work. I think of myself as an important part of its success. But I doubt my dinner host will support me when important people get in the way of what he wants me to do. He doesn't smile much. I feel small. As he's talking, a scenario of what will happen to me if I take the job plays out in my imagination, as clear as can be. I want to say to the man across from me at our dinner table: "If I take this job and do what you are asking me to do, you will have to choose between me and the four or five members of the privileged class in our hierarchy who always cause trouble, and you will choose them because they can hurt you and I can't". It would take 17 seconds for me to tell this story of how he won't support me when I need it (I write it out and time the telling of it later). But I keep my mouth shut. The wine is good. He is smart. I will be fine. The story sits in me as a story of courage withheld. I take the job. I am right about what happens. When I write about the dinner later, I call the story "The conversation that didn't happen". It feels like weakness.

Second-act stories …

The head of our harassment committee is trying to mediate a truce between me and two members of the organisation's privileged class who are working hard behind the

scenes to have me thrown out. They won't talk to me directly, so they talk to me through her. Colleagues tell me that my two adversaries see me and my team as a threat to their ability to bend the rules that govern how they are allowed to make money outside the organisation. She talks to me from behind her desk, serious, sympathetic, helpful, and firmly on the side-lines. The bookcase on the wall beside her is lined with books about how to be a good leader. They won't give up until you step aside, or you are fired, she says. You can fight. Or you can surrender. I choose to fight. But I fight under rules that are different from their rules. This particular hierarchy privileges a certain group of people over experience or performance. "No one ever wins by standing up for the institution", a colleague tells me. The headline of this story is something like 'blindfolded and brawling'.

There is the story I think of as 'I know how this fucking place works', my surprising outburst during one of our leadership team meetings. Just before the meeting a colleague tells me that our boss is complaining in the hallways about someone I had hired. I feel an angry spirit in me preparing for battle. Our boss is a talented hallway complainer. During the leadership team meeting that follows, my boss tells us all, yet again, that he hasn't taken an action he promised to take that would finally advance us after countless debates and delays and unkept promises. When he excuses himself with a shrug – "you know how this place works" – I slam my fist on the table and tell him that how the place works is also up to us. I'm shaking when I leave the room. Part of me thinks, good for you. Another part of me thinks, that's the best you can do? If this is a war, I am an amateur warrior.

There is the story of two usually sympathetic colleagues, members of the privileged group, taking me for a drink to interrogate me about my lack of respect for our leaders. It is a strange idea, given how openly critical they are of the same leadership. Are they setting me up? It feels like they are setting me up. Also, the story of an old friend, likewise a member of the privileged class, who writes to tell me that he is there for me, and that he will always support me. When we meet the next day for a coffee he says: I can't talk to you about all of that. Sorry. I'm stunned. An old and grizzled long-time member of the aristocracy calls me from his death bed, a week or two before he passes away from cancer, to encourage me in my fight against "those bastards". I receive a flood of emails expressing support. The betrayals hurt more than the support helps.

... and the story of the outsider brought in to investigate our work who goes about his investigation by talking to many members of the privileged group, including the few who are trying to remove me so that they can take over, rather than just the two or three who are actually qualified to comment.

"It's all part of the process to get rid of you", supportive colleagues in the privileged class tell me. "It is institutionalised mobbing", they say. I haven't heard of the term. I find a definition from two clinicians who have turned their research towards the field of mobbing.

They describe it as "the targeting of an individual within an organisation, subjecting that individual to a series of abusive and humiliating behaviours that are designed to cast them in a negative light, destabilize them, create suspicion about their worth to force them out. Mobbing is not an act of a lone individual. Organisational dynamics are always present. Results of this typically protracted traumatizing experience are significant".[1]

They write: "...mobbing is a social process in which individuals, groups, or organisations target a person for ridicule, humiliation, and removal from the workplace". I read that mobbing always leads to loss: "loss of dignity, loss of respect, loss of status, loss of personal identity, loss of professional identity", and that it includes degradation ceremonies designed to ruin the reputation of the mobbed. Ominously, they write that "some people survive being mobbed. Others do not. Injury, illness, suicide are fairly common outcomes. Homicide is not unknown".[2]

A helpful but helpless insider arranges for a coffee with me over a weekend to show me evidence of the mobbing campaign, email exchanges going on in the background, plotting to get me out of the way. He knows something about the technical aspects of mobbing. I don't understand how this all works.

Anger gathers momentum when I am fired. My boss stumbles when I ask him why. They promise me a nice going-away party if I leave quietly. In the same breath they ask me to sign a settlement paper that offers far less than I am contractually owed. Later, the organisation's leadership writes a letter to my lawyer stating that my work has been of such poor quality for such a long time that if they hadn't fired me, the future of the

---

[1] Here I paraphrase Duffy and Sperry, 2012, pp. 61-63.
[2] The three quotations about mobbing are from the opening chapter of Duffy and Sperry, 2012.

organisation would have been at risk. My lawyer smiles when she compares their letter with the years of outstanding feedback in my human resources file. Their story is an obvious fiction. I am ushered out of the organisation. I am told not to come back.

A third act story …

I'm searching for a job, wondering what I will do, now that the last job is behind me. I'm lost. I want to keep food on the table and a sense of security for my wife and stepson. I try not to show my fear. I don't speak the local language and we aren't in a big city. I don't have a lot of choice.

I find part-time work with a group of cool new-ageish leadership development consultants, friendly in a 'let's-see-if-you're-one-of-us' kind of way. They ask me to coach in one of their proudest programs, a gig near Paris for partners of a prestigious management consulting firm. When we all sit together for the first time and introduce ourselves to the participants, the other coaches all seem to have something clever to say. "I was a lawyer, super successful, now I do this…"; "I'm a psychologist, I can analyse your dreams during break…"; "I teach yoga… ". I feel like a child in a room of adults. When my turn comes, I don't know how to explain who I am and what I do, and I come across badly. Later, the participants have to choose a coach from amongst the faculty and the spaces under my name fill up last. A few months later I leave the group.

These stories played out in the early stages of the inquiry. To try to make sense of them, I started to write them down. Sometimes I wrote factually. Sometimes I wrote emotionally. Sometimes I wrote imaginatively, to see if I could wrestle some sort of meaning from experience by fictionalising it. Putting the jumble of stories whirling in my head into writing fragments was the beginning of my methodology.

Using inner narrative as text for exploration is a methodology that borrows from overlapping practices in first-person action research, in autoethnography, in narrative inquiry, and in the clinical use of story. Each of these practices guide writers to write about what captures their imagination. Marshall and Turner-Vesselago suggest that first-person action researchers "go where the energy is or go fear-ward" (Turner-Vesselago, 2013, pp. 27-28). Autoethnography encourages writing into areas of therapeutic usefulness (Bochner and Ellis, 2002, especially *Wounded storytellers: vulnerability, identity and narrative*, pp. 87-232). Depth psychology urges us to

explore where unusual psychological energy sparks our imaginations to action (Stein, 1998).

My inquiry energy went towards what felt threatening.

For example:

I knew that I stood a good chance of an unhappy ending when I accepted the job. I didn't understand why I was so outraged when my prediction came true. The outrage felt like a possession. Something strange in me wanted blood. This spirit fought against a contrary inner voice that looked at the people attacking me and said, "They are only human, they have their own stories". This second voice felt uncomfortably like an inner betrayer trying to deal with a murder-in-progress by hoping that the murderers were OK. His sympathy didn't sit well with the overpowering sense that I was being attacked, that my family was being attacked, and that the consequences of these attacks were deadly serious. I was even more angry when I tried to tell people the story of being attacked and they told me that everything would be fine if I would just let it go. *Fuck letting go when there are knives at your throat.*

The anger, frustration and hate were exhausting. It wasn't calmed by the outpouring of support from colleagues and members of my team. It wasn't satisfied with an out-of-court settlement that my lawyer described as their admission of guilt. It didn't trust any of that. Whatever the possession was, it wasn't letting me go.

I also struggled to understand why I couldn't tell a coherent story of my experience. When people asked me to explain what was going on, I stumbled with where to start and with how to describe the events and their impact on me. Whatever mechanisms in my brain were responsible for organising experience into story had short-circuited. When I did try to tell the story, I could only come up with incomplete versions: *I was fired because they are corrupt. I was punished by a malignant system because I tried to do the right thing. They are so scared of their own weaknesses they refuse to look at themselves.* These simplified versions of the experience lacked nuance. I knew that their simplicity hid some truths. That didn't matter. I needed to protect myself. But, when I tried to imagine how I might think about the experience in a more growth-ful way, my imagination came up empty. I didn't know what the story-telling rules were.

It was confusing to me how the story I told myself about the difficult leadership experience become the only story that mattered *and* the story through which I

reinterpreted some of my other stories. My narrative incoherence was accompanied by a growing narrative consciousness. I began to see how the difficult experience I was living was crowding out other stories in my life. The stories of my successes, of appreciation, of my family, of the many ways in which our lives were working well, became small.

Also, I began to see how the story of the current crisis was shaping the lens through which I interpreted older experiences. During the possession, the rich and nuanced story of my childhood became the story of *being bullied*. The story of moving to new countries, often with my family when I was young, became the story of *needing to belong.* The story of what I had thought of as healthy spiritual explorations became the story of *lost faith*. The black-and-whiteness of how I told myself the story of my current experience bled over to the stories I told myself about old experiences.

My imagination's mysterious story-making behaviour didn't make sense. It might have been possessed, but it seemed to be trying to help me to set it free. It couldn't, or wouldn't, give me direct answers. It could only give me hints. The hints sometimes took the form of vivid dreams. Sometimes they took the form of metaphors that helped me explore the experience indirectly: *You are alone in a small boat in a storm-tossed sea, no land in sight; you are on a rock face, searching for firm holds while your feet slowly slip away from the wet rock.* These metaphors helped me describe my experience to others. I sensed there was greater meaning to them, but I wasn't sure what that meaning might be.

I didn't understand a growing tension between the person I thought I had been but wasn't anymore, the person I felt I was expected to be, and the person I imagined I wanted to be. I had no clear picture of any of these people, but it seemed important that I understand all three of them so that I could make sense of the distances between them. I wanted to have a stronger sense of who I was, *really*, in my past work and in my past life. It felt important to examine my story of 'me' deeply and honestly, perhaps so that I could be confident in the foundations on which I was building a future version of myself.

It felt just as important to explore who I thought I needed to be to build my leadership development practice. My initial descriptions of what I thought I needed to be in that space – an expert, a guru – didn't feel correct.

It seemed essential to me to define who I wanted to become, even though I was sceptical about my ability to dive into that work without first sorting who I had been, and being careful about what forces might be influencing my image of who I wanted to be. I didn't want to leave this image in the hands of forces that I didn't understand. All three of these stories were low resolution. It seemed to me that part of my path out of my narrative confusion lay in trying to sharpen their resolution.

Structure

The inquiry is structured in four parts. Each part describes a stage of in the inquiry. The four steps mirror the messy method of clinical practice in Jungian therapy: *Confession, elucidation or interpretation, education* and *transformation*. I use the Jungian structure to organize the messiness of the experience.

In Part One: '**A Rape of the Soul**', I take the first methodological steps in wrestling meaning from my experience through the stories I was telling myself about it. I make two claims: First, that leadership can be traumatic; and, second, that trauma damages our imagination's usual story-telling mechanisms. The chapter describes how my research into organizational mobbing led me to the frame of trauma, which, in turn, helped me to understand the intensity of my emotions at the time. I explain traditional definitions of trauma but settle on recent refinements from post-trauma growth practitioners who describe trauma as an experience that destroys the narratives that we rely on to make sense of our worlds (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006, 2013). Our primary narratives – the load-bearing walls that carry the most weight in our narrative constructions of meaning – are defended against deconstruction because they are so critical to our psychological stability. I position my personal experience of something like mobbing as a proxy for any experience in leadership that invalidates primary narratives. Mobbing isn't the only leadership experience that can shatter old inner narratives, but it's a useful example of the kinds of experiences that can happen to leaders and that can have traumatic impact.

The chapter is the inquiry's equivalent of depth psychology's *Confession*, the first stage of the therapeutic process. Confession is an honest telling of experience that helps the therapist and the client frame the analysis ahead. In this inquiry, Confession by telling the stories of my experience in diverse forms was the method for generating

text for analysis. Confession might have once been a controversial and ethically challenging theme in qualitative research (see Sparkes, 2002), but in qualitative psychology, and in clinical practice, it is an essential opening to the therapeutic process. In post-trauma growth terms, it is the first step in the critical journey from turning maladaptive intrusive narratives into wiser intentional narratives.

Part Two: **Narrative Fragmentation**, mirrors *Interpretation*, the stage of depth psychology in which the client and the therapist explore what might be going on beneath the surface. The chapter describes the first meaningful step in my emerging method of using my stories as text for analyses. I make two additional claims in this chapter: First, that we can start to repair our narrative constructions by first identifying the storytellers who dominate our inner theater; and, second, that exploring each of the stories and their relationship with each other helps us to make meaning from what might feel is a confusion of contradictory stories. I explain how identifying the inner characters who might have been at play, or at war, during my experience helped me understand the different sources of my inner stories. It also aided me in the understanding that an effective way to replace older narratives with wiser, new ones was to work with my inner narrators. Part Two introduces the role of imagination as the interpreter of experience and of mythos exploration as the most effective method for wrestling meaning from the imagination's stories.

Part Three: **Captured Imagination,** is the equivalent of *Education*, depth psychology's approach to understanding below-the-surface territory once initial maps of it have been constructed. The chapter describes how different schools of psychology view the therapeutic usefulness of narrative. It also explores how various psychological mechanisms shape how our imaginations translate experience into story. The chapter makes the inquiry's fifth and sixth claim: one, that our narrative-making processes are subject to powerful unconscious forces; and, another that clinical psychology has important things to say about how these forces work. I explain the perspectives of narrative psychology, evolutionary psychology, existential psychology and depth (Jungian) psychology. The perspectives of attachment theory are also touched on, which point to our early narrative-making mechanisms. If the first methodological step was to tell my stories and the second step was to identify who on

my inner stage was telling which stories, education explored why they were telling the stories they told.

It's important to note the choice of inquiry into multiple psychological approaches – I simply didn't trust any single school of clinical thought to have all the answers. I was highly suspicious of any one approach that promised 'the truth'. If confession was telling my stories and interpretation was understanding which characters inside me were telling them, understanding was my way of looking at these stories through different lenses to acknowledge the possibility of multiple layers of meaning.

In Part Four, **Narratives In-Between**, I examine how narratives behave when old narrative structures have failed and before new ones are created. This chapter includes examples of experiences from the leadership development practice that were generated during the inquiry. It shows how the journey between intrusive and intentional narratives can play out in leadership development work. I use this chapter to explore my final two claims: First, that it is useful to think of leadership development work as work in-between old and new ways of storytelling; and, second, that we can use this in-between space to help leaders use their traumatic experiences as territory for profound personal growth.

Included are imaginary conversations and story explorations within and between the four chapters. These explorations are examples of inquiry practices that helped me understand myself and tell my own stories on my path to personal growth.

Before we turn to the positioning of the research and to its challenges, I want to be clear about what I mean by *story* and *narrative*. Social scientists and qualitative psychologists define narrative in different ways:

Narrative is a broad term describing the form of discourse generally known as story. All narratives tell of experiences and are commonly constructed to highlight a particular aspect or event, offering a powerful means of acknowledging and remembering them (The Sage Encyclopedia of Action Research, 2014).

... we are born into a storied world and we live our lives through the creation and exchange of narratives. A narrative can be defined as an organised interpretation of

a sequence of events (Qualitative Psychology: A Practical Guide to Research Methods, 2015).

In social research, 'narrative' also refers to a diversity of topics of study, methods of investigation and analysis, and theoretical orientations. It displays different definitions within different fields, and the topics of hot debate around these definitions shift from year to year (Doing Narrative Research, 2013).

Narrative meaning is a cognitive process that organises human experience into temporally meaningful episodes… Examples of narrative include personal and social histories, myths, fairy tales, novels, and the everyday stories we use to explain our own and others' actions (Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences, 1988).

We do not deal with the huge literature – some modern, some postmodern – that talks about narrative… we wish to make it clear that we are <u>not</u> setting out to define narrative (Narrative Inquiry: Experience and Story in Qualitative Research, 2000).

The definition of narrative that I use for this inquiry recognises narrative's usefulness in both social and psychological domains: **Narrative is the story my imagination consciously or unconsciously attaches to an object, an image, an event or an experience in order to give it meaning**. I will sometimes refer to inner narratives in the work that follows in order to emphasise how our narratives are often shaped by unconscious inner forces.

The research territory

In keeping with action research, my inquiry intention was to pay close attention to my practice of leadership. To paraphrase Wicks, Reason and Bradbury, I wanted to see how my experiences of transition integrated with and perhaps shifted my 'philosophical, political and intellectual underpinnings' – my beliefs about leadership transitions – and how 'relationships, events, influences, role models and experiences' underpinned my leadership practice as I navigated my role transition (Wicks, Reason, Bradbury, 2008, p. 16). I hoped to have something original to say about how senior leaders might navigate important career changes.

When I became a casualty of the transition, I started to notice how vivid my inner storytelling became. And how rigid my stories were. I noticed too how they became large and loud and mythical, as well as how self-serving many of them were. I wrestled with their dishonesty. I began to imagine myself as my own therapist and began to think of my stories as the prime material for my therapeutic work. Since the work was becoming psychological, however, it wasn't clear to me how to position it in the world of action research.

Edgar Schein describes action research as what happens when the researcher or consultant initiates the project, when researcher involvement is high, and when subject/client involvement is high (Schein, 2008, pp. 228-249). Schein states that action research is remarkable because it involves the researched in the research (Schein, 2008). But Schein also describes a type of inquiry in which the researcher involvement remains high and subject/client involvement remains high, but the subject/client rather than the researcher initiates the project. He calls this clinical inquiry.

Schein might describe *Storied Transitions* as both action research (researcher initiated) and clinical inquiry (subject/client initiated) because it is self-focused inquiry using the researcher's own experience as the main source of data. The implications of this approach to research are, as Schein writes, that valid data comes from open self-disclosure and from the success of the helping process:

> The critical distinguishing features of this inquiry model are (1) that the data come voluntarily from the members of the organization because they initiated the process and have something to gain by revealing themselves to the clinician/consultant/researcher, and (2) that the helper consultant actively involves the client in the inquiry process itself not to improve the quality of the data (as in action research) but in order to improve the quality of the helping process. If the helping process is successful, the client is motivated to reveal more, hence the depths and validity of the data improves as the helping process improves. *Valid data are the result of effective helping rather than the basis for choosing interventions* (Schein, 2008, p. 273, italics mine).

Schein claims that the power of clinical research is "revealed as one uncovers causal phenomena that lie in deeper levels of group and organizational dynamics, and that lead to the real insights both on the part of the clinician and the client" (Schein, 2001, p. 273). Replace *group and organizational dynamics* with *inner or psychodynamics* and we describe an approach to research in which the researcher explores his own psychological mechanisms to help himself through a psychologically challenging situation. This is the approach I have taken in *Storied Transitions*.

The methodological and ethical challenges of managing research in which the researcher is the subject of the research showed up early in the work. Schein's comments about clinical inquiry helped me establish a baseline approach to these challenges. He writes:

> Clinical research…involves the gathering of data in clinical settings that are created by people seeking help. It is my argument that if the helper takes an attitude of inquiry, this enhances not only the helping process but creates the opportunity for using the data that are produced to build concepts and theory that will be of use to others. The best examples come from medicine, particularly psychotherapy, where the publication of analyses of selected cases builds knowledge for fellow practitioners (Schein, 2008, p. 267).

For example, I was challenged by (dis)honesty in my work. How could I trust that the stories I told about my leadership experience were truthful, and not just meant to paint me in a certain light? Narrative psychologists believe we all want to feel that we are living heroic stories (McAdams, 1996). Mead and Marshall reflect on the dangers of first-person inquiry degenerating into "misplaced heroic individualism" (Marshall and Mead, 2005). Trauma researchers say that we seek to tell the stories of our trauma in the simplest possible terms because we need clarity in the midst of trauma's chaos (Van Der Kolk, 2014). It would be understandable reflex for me to tell the tale of my leadership experience as a simple one in which the good guy (me) stood up to the bad guys (them). Schein's emphasis on inquiry solves this challenge by framing clinical inquiry as the exploration into what can we learn rather than into judgments of who was right and who was wrong. Within this framing, if I'm telling my story in a heroic light, my task as an inquirer is to notice this reflex and work hard to understand what insights I can take from it.

I was also challenged by the question of my own psychological safety, especially when sharing my stories with the outside world. This concern helped me understand the usefulness of starting with self-inquiry and only sharing the results of the inquiry once I was confident enough in their validity and in my stability. Here again Schein's belief that helpfulness is the ultimate measure of validity for clinical inquiry served me well. It encouraged me to err on the side of radical but wise self-disclosure. Self-disclosure turns out to be an essential to the therapeutic process in general therapy (Yalom, 2002) and in the context of clinical support for post-trauma growth (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006, 2013).

I also wondered how I could judge the quality of the helpfulness that came from my work. I was especially concerned about avoiding easy conclusions that might seduce myself or the executives in my care. Here Schein's reference to treating what is helpful to me as data for what might help others was useful. It encouraged me to be as precise as possible about what in my narrative explorations helped me grow, why it helped, and how it helped. Answers to these questions weren't always clear but searching for them was always helpful.

The path from clinical inquiry to narrative inquiry

The possibility of inner narrative as text for inquiry has been explored from many qualitative research angles. Carolyn Ellis's and Arthur Bochner's work on autoethnography and personal narrative led me deeper into the possibilities of personal narrative as text for therapeutic purposes. Ellis and Bochner immerse themselves into the dual issues of how to derive meaning from personal narrative, and how to make this personal meaning useful to others. On the former topic, Bochner's thoughts on personal narratives helped. Bochner describes personal narrative texts as:

> Stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meanings and values into question (Ellis and Bochner, 2000).

His description was an accurate portrayal of the territory I was writing into – territory marked by betrayals by others, self-betrayals, betrayals of imagination, and especially betrayals by trusted narratives that had once given structure to my life. His explanation of the usefulness of personal narratives as a function of their accessibility, their ability to blur the lines between literature and social science, and their evocation of emotional response helped me understand how the interweaving and sometimes discordant narratives of my own leadership case study might be relevant.

At different points in the research I wasn't clear about how to manage the tensions between writing therapeutically and writing academically. Often, I arrived at a mix of both. On this question of form, Ellis and Bochner write about the importance of how they communicate their work to others: "We need a form that will allow readers to feel the moral dilemmas, think with our story instead of about it, join actively in the decision points that define an autoethnographic project, and consider how their own lives can be made a story worth telling" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 735). "How to encourage the reader to consider how to make their own lives a story worth telling" defined the objective of my own clinical inquiry. I felt a deep need to understand the story of my leadership challenges in the context of the other stories in my life, and I was nervous about how to make the meta-story a good one. Likewise, I was nervous about how my desire to make my stories sound good might limit their therapeutic usefulness.

Ellis and Bochner describe autoethnography as "An autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis and Bochner, 2000, p. 738). However, they acknowledge that the academic territory covered by autoethnography covers more than the link between culture and person. They list dozens of approaches to using autobiographical writing as research data in their chapter in *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject (2000)*. No one approach captured my imagination more than the idea that self-narrative exploration can be psychologically helpful. Ellis writes:

> I teach a course on writing lives, and I tell my students that one of the goals
> of the course is that they should become their own therapist. That doesn't
> mean, I say, there won't be times they go *to* a therapist, but writing can help
> them have insights about themselves, help them work through problems

themselves. In the class, we try to work through these problems, not to solve them or even necessarily to heal them, but to open them up to greater understanding or to a multitude of understandings (Bochner and Ellis, 2002).

The idea of inquiring into personal narratives as a self-therapy practice is explored in a chapter of the book of ethnographies edited by Bochner and Ellis called *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetics*. The chapter is called "My Father's Shoes: The Therapeutic Value of Narrative Reframing" (Bochner and Ellis, 2002, pp. 95-114). The author of the chapter, Christine E. Kiesinger, uses it to tell the story of her experience of her physically abusive father. She also tells movingly of how the quality of her engagement with a story that had dominated her inner narrative for years shifts dramatically when she discovers that a family friend once abused her father. *Her story* and *his story* suddenly intertwine. It becomes impossible to understand her story without also understanding his. Kiesinger writes about the experience of hearing her father tell his story of abuse for the first time:

> In this same moment, I see that behind his rage is a terrified, seven-year old child, pretending to sleep, as a grown man – reeking of smoke and hard liquor – invaded his body and crushed his child spirit. This child feels confusion and shame.
>
> In this moment I feel a deep connection to my father. Much like in my experience, the monster my father feared as a little boy was, indeed, very real.
>
> Finally, my father's rage had a home – a 'story' around it. I come to realize that his rage was never really about me. I now held in my hands a major missing piece of the puzzle. My father, wounded as a child, was a fragile human being (Bochner and Ellis, 2002, p. 106).

Kiesinger writes about the therapeutic importance of externalizing inner narratives and contextualizing our stories as threads in a greater tapestry (Bochner and Ellis, 2002). This conclusion comes partly from the insightful work of Michael White and David Epston, both family therapists and early practitioners of narrative therapy whose work with families focuses on the nature, tone and precise content of family narratives (White and Epston, 1990; White, 2007).

My desire to make sense of my leadership experience led me to clinical inquiry. Clinical inquiry led me to autoethnography and personal narratives as text for research. These led me to the narrative therapy practices that Kiesinger mentions in "My Father's Shoes".

In the writing that follows, I explore this path in detail, but two final turns in the journey were critical for my own work. One was a move beyond narrative therapy to other therapeutic schools. In order to look at the experience through different lenses, I turned to other fields; I was suspicious of trusting in 'one true answer' to my experience. This search, in turn, led me to the importance of imagination and especially of *captured* imagination – that is, imagination that is captured by forces beyond our conscious understanding or control – in the process of self-therapy. Kiesinger hints at the importance of imagination and its capturing in the introduction of her story of her father's abuse when she writes: "Regardless of any negative implications associated with casting myself as the victim, at the time, this particular tale of my experience became *the sustaining fiction I clung to and lived by*" (Bochner and Ellis, 2002, p. 96, italics mine). It was important to me to understand which of my inner narratives were fictions that I clung to, but also to understand why I clung to them, where they came from, and to what extent they had outlived their usefulness. The *fictionality* of my own narratives became a critical theme.

Part One
'A Rape of the Soul'

Hannah and Ash

During the first months of the inquiry I was confused about how to think about the events that led to my dismissal. There were many possible headlines for the story. Each headline implied a different interpretation of the experience.

For example, it could be a story of *being mobbed*. My lawyer believed that this description was correct, and my experience had much in common with the experiences of mobbing described by clinical experts.

It might also have been the story of *getting fired and launching a new career in middle age*. It could be a story of *character in leadership*, or about *shadow in leadership*, about how the stresses of leadership might bring malevolent behaviours out of normally good people. All of these headlines attracted my attention. None of them captured the confusion I experienced or addressed my hope to grow from it.

Ervin Goffman writes about our need for primary frames through which we interpret our experiences (Goffman, 1974). Goffman's primary frames are the narrative structures that allow us to "locate, perceive, identify and label a seemingly infinite number of concrete experiences defined in its terms" (Goffman, 1974, p. 21). Primary frames allow us to organize our experience in meaningful ways. Part of the stress of my response to the experience of getting fired and launching a new career was that I had no convincing primary frames within which to organize my narrative.

The low-resolution frame of mobbing became sharper when I met with two confused and angry executives who had stories to tell me about their own leadership experiences. At the time, I was becoming known in the local community as someone who was working through a difficult confrontation with his organization's leadership. People familiar with my story were putting me in touch with leaders who were suffering through similar circumstances.

I met the first executive, Hannah, over coffee at a luxury hotel in Lausanne, Switzerland, close to where we both live.[3] We didn't know each other. An old colleague who was a rare vocal supporter during my work battles introduced us over an email exchange. All I knew about Hannah was that she was going through a difficult time at her work. All she knew about me was that I was further along the journey of my own leadership transition.

After we introduced ourselves and ordered our coffees, we began the awkward dance of sharing our stories. Our neighbors in the hotel café might have thought we were business executives conducting some sort of deal, except Hannah had a young baby in tow and she interrupted our conversation occasionally to feed him.

Hannah said: "I work for a large company". She mentions the name of the company, a multinational based not far from where we both live. It was hard to work in the area and not come across the organization in one form or another. She says: "I am Canadian. I was enjoying a successful career in Canada when the company asked me to take up a role in our headquarters here in Switzerland".

I knew the company. I had worked with them when I was an executive in the organization whose leadership had recently dismissed me. Once upon a time, I had even written case studies about their brave efforts at culture change when I was a research associate at a business school nearby. I too am Canadian, so early in our story-sharing we talked about Canada.

Hannah continued: "I wasn't sure I should take the role, but the request came with promises. This position, they promised, would prepare me for even greater responsibilities. I could go back to North America afterwards, in a couple of years, I was told. I would have an even more interesting job there if only I would take this headquarters job first.

"It was a challenge to convince my husband to leave our life in Canada. We have a house there, and we had just bought a cottage in the country. Our families are there, and all our friends are there too. After some long and difficult discussions, though, we decided to make the leap".

---

[3] Details of my two conversations, including names, have been changed to protect the storytellers' identities..

When she told her story, I wondered if I looked like her: a bit shell-shocked, tired to the bone, bitter at having trusted, seeing monsters around too many corners. It must have been difficult for her, I thought, living through all of this while taking care of a baby without the comfort of familiar surroundings.

She said: "Once we arrived and I immersed myself in the job, I loved it. I was busy but my husband didn't mind. He was busy too. He loved taking some time to explore our new home. We started to love our life here. It was a joy. It was an adventure.

"But then I got pregnant", she tells me. She looks down at the baby nestling against her breast, feeding quietly. She hesitates for a few seconds, collecting her thoughts, before going on. It wasn't planned, but we were very happy. What a thrill to be having a child while on this amazing adventure in our new home. Unfortunately, my boss didn't share my excitement".

Hannah appears strong, resolute, and professional. I imagine her operating well within the structures of conventional big business. But at this point in her story she looks heartbroken.

"He was angry at me. He told me that it made no sense for me to get pregnant. He accused me of sabotaging his plans for my career. I was shocked at his reaction. It was so unexpected.

"I came back early from maternity leave, but my relationship with my boss and with the company has changed. I am no longer being considered for that job back in North America. They aren't clear that they will have anything for me back home once my time at headquarters is done. I think they might fire me or wait out my contract here so they can let me go".

That Hannah was being so open with me was touching. Perhaps knowing that I have been through my own organizational battles reassures her. Perhaps it connects us.

Then I share my own story of leadership transition, disappointment and dismissal with her, and I offer her my own experience of what was helping. I tell her that I have good legal support managing the conversations with the organization to negotiate a settlement that is correct. I give her the name of my lawyer and I tell her that my family,

a few close friends, and the good wishes of the people who used to be on my team have all helped. I also tell her that I am shifting my doctoral work away from the tactics of leadership transition towards the psychological risks of it, although I am not quite sure what that means. I feel a long way from having made any sense of the experience.

We part after discussing some more details of our respective cases. I wonder if her psychological turmoil is anything like mine. I imagine her trusting her organization's leadership and having that trust betrayed, as well as her being stunned by the behavior of people who have a tremendous influence on her life inside and outside of work. I wonder if she is blaming herself. Self-blame, I am learning, is a common reaction in the mobbed and traumatized. *In order for the world to make sense someone must be to blame when bad things happen. Maybe that someone is me.*

As we are about to part ways, and she is carefully tucking her baby into the stroller, she thanks me for taking the time to talk with her. She almost smiles when we share a formal handshake to say goodbye, with people milling about and chatting all around us. Swiss custom would have us exchange three small kisses, left cheek, right cheek, left cheek, but it seems right to put some distance between us. As she leaves, she tells me about someone else from her organization who has been in a long legal battle against the company for mobbing and false dismissal. She promises to connect the two of us, and then she is on her way.

Ashley, her contact, and I do connect as soon as Hannah sends me the email address, and we plan a coffee right away to share our stories. We meet in a small village on the shores of Lac Leman. It's a familiar place for me, slightly bohemian and usually full of old friends speaking casually over their artisanal teas. Ash lives close by. When I arrive, it is clear that she has been there for a long time. Papers and empty coffee cups are scattered around her. Her back is to the wall, and she is facing the door, like a careful gunfighter in an old Western movie.

We are both nervous as we start our conversation. It seems curious to connect with a stranger through mutual tragedy, like we are stepping together into a dark room unsure if we can hold hands.

First, I tell her my story. She knows the organization I worked for. This saves me the trouble of explaining what it does. I share some of the details of my leadership

experience, paying special attention to my inability to understand how my new role turned into such a dramatic conflict with a few of the organization's privileged executives. I tell her about how surprised I was at the behavior of seemingly good people. Also, I tell her about my efforts to be treated with the respect I believed I deserved after so many years contributing to the organization's growth. I don't tell her the less comfortable stories that captured my imagination most powerfully during those months. Those stories I keep to myself because they are dark and unexplored.

Ash describes her years of success working in a highly technical field. She talks about the request she received to join the company to oversee an important operational role. There was only one level of leadership between her and the CEO. In a large organization one might imagine that a certain amount of power would come with such a lofty position. Her energy dampens when she talks about how her line manager prevented her from doing her job because her recommendations got in the way of profits. She describes being sidelined by the organization's leadership and being desperate for a voice, uninvited to meetings that she should have chaired and forced to suffer through the humiliation of being publicly silenced. She vividly describes the ten-year court battle she has been waging against the organization and the battle's immense psychological cost to her. She nervously recounts the court meeting she will soon have with the company's CEO and the four or five members of its attending executive committee. Later, after the court session, she tells me about how her body shook and her voice quivered when she told her truth. She tells me about how proud she was when one of the senior executives, a woman, apologized openly for how badly Ash had been treated by the company.

Ash summarizes her experience with two phrases. "It's psychological torture", she says, referring to her treatment at the hands of the organization. "It's 'a rape of the soul'".

Other stories have guided this inquiry. There are stories of the *'catastrophic failure of senior leaders put into roles for which they are unprepared and unsupported'*, to paraphrase the group head of leadership development for another organization. There are stories of the executives with whom I now work in my leadership development practice who are struggling to cope with the unexpected psychological challenges of

their work. There is also the story of my own leadership transition, an experience whose exploration became the focus of the research.

Hannah's and Ash's stories marked a shift in the inquiry because it turned me towards a primary frame. When I started the work, I had planned to inquire into the process of transitioning into a new senior executive role as if it were a tactical exercise. My assumption was based on my review of the prevailing executive transition literature that described career transitions as if they are simply a matter of mastering new skills. My personal experience of transition was that it can be much more psychologically challenging than strategically challenging. My conversations with my two coffee companions convinced me to explore the psychological challenges.

My imagination turned towards all sorts of promising frames, but until Ash's tale about 'a rape of the soul' turned me towards deep and unexpected psychological impact, I had no way of piecing together a coherent tale from the scattered story fragments in my mind.

Trauma researchers would claim that my inability to tell the story of the experience indicated that the experience was psychologically significant. According to trauma research, people who experience dramatically destabilising events often struggle to organise them into a narrative (Van der Kolk, 2014). Trauma 'has a direct impact on the capacity to organise experience into logical sequences and to translate our shifting feelings and perceptions into words' (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 45). Loss of story-telling function is a hallmark of the traumatic experience:

> … people may scream obscenities, call for their mothers, howl in terror, or simply shut down. Victims of assaults and accidents sit mute and frozen in emergency rooms; traumatized children "lose their tongues" and refuse to speak. Even years later traumatized people have enormous difficulty telling other people what has happened to them. Their bodies re-experience terror, rage, and helplessness, as well as the impulse to fight or flee, but *these feelings are almost impossible to articulate*. Trauma by its very nature drives us to the edge of comprehension, cutting us off from language based on common experience or an imaginable past (Van Der Kolk, 2014, p. 43. italics mine).

My meeting with Ash finally gave me a frame within which I could explore my experience. To paraphrase Goffmann, primary frameworks are the sometimes unconscious, often elaborate narrative-making rules we use to make sense of our experiences. The frames of conventional leadership development described transitions as skill-building exercises. The meta-narrative of *transitions as skill-building exercises* is reflected in the work of scholars who position leadership transitions as movements through a pipeline (Charan, Drotter, Noel, 2011), as shifts that require overcoming certain intellectual challenges (Watkins, 2009), as a matter of changing old habits (Goldsmith, 2008), and as occasions for nurturing new mind-sets (Dotlich, Noel, Walker, 2004). None of these frames mention the possibility of trauma.

Searching for a narrative frame

I tested the narratives I had written about my experience against Van Der Kolk's observations regarding narrative incoherence in the face of traumatic experience. As Van Der Kolk would have predicted, my narratives became less coherent the more I was destabilised by my experience. At the beginning of the inquiry, I wrote about the transition as if I were preparing for a walk in familiar woods:

> My inquiry is about how I can manage my career so that I bring more to the work community that depends on my full engagement. How do I improve my ability to act as change agent when the change I am mandated to make is against the short-term interests of some powerful internal stakeholder? (from personal notes).

As the work became more confusing, the tone of my writing became anxious. I focused on what was missing. The writing feels like a grieving:

> I notice that the emotions I bring to my change work are sometimes heightened because I place so much importance on my leadership as a source of my rootedness.

> This search for roots might come from living an un-rooted life, moving from country to country in my childhood. Every time I move to a new place, I treat it as where I am until I move somewhere else. Such a mind-set prevents rootedness, and so in the past years I've searched for roots in other dimensions of life. The religion of my youth doesn't work – I'm a divorced and remarried, non-practicing Catholic with too many unanswered questions to find roots in the Church. Neither does the family

of my childhood, which is too spread around the world to provide lasting deep connections (from personal notes).

Later in the inquiry, when I struggled with wrestling meaning from my anger, the best I could do was an incoherent sketch:

REACTIONS

ANGER!

OUTRAGE "HOW COULD THEY, HOW DARE THEY..."

SET UP TO FAIL

LACK OF ETHICS, LACK OF COMPETENCE...

TRUSTING THE UNTRUSTWORTHY

ANGRY BECAUSE...
- BETRAYED.
- THE OLD STRATEGY OF PUTTING MY HEAD DOWN, WORKING HARD, GETTING GOOD OR GREAT RESULTS, DIDN'T MATTER. PLEASING CERTAIN PEOPLE MATTERED MORE.
- SCAPEGOATED, UNDERMINED, SET-UP TO FAIL (BUT DIDN'T).
- UNFAIR, UNJUST OUTCOME. FEELS LIKE THE BAD GUYS WON.
- I DIDN'T EXPRESS MY FEARS/ CONCERNS EFFECTIVELY THROUGHOUT. ANGRY AT MYSELF, SELF-DIRECTED.

WHAT NOW?
CHANNELING ANGER FOR CONSTRUCTIVE PURPOSE
UNDERSTANDING THE SOURCES OF THE ANGER

NOTE TO SELF:

After I was fired, my narrative turned tired and inwards:

I'm suspicious that the 'me' I am bringing to the world has been strangely contorted over by my work. I feel provisional.

It's my fault. I stopped wanting to be clever for a goal I didn't value anymore. I've lost belief in what I have been working for.

Maybe nothing is wrong. Fatigue might be part of what it means to be immersed in the corporate world. Maybe my disequilibrium is just reaching a point in life when the days ahead are shorter than the days behind. I want to lead a life that matters.

> I looked in the mirror this morning and saw fatigue written in my face. Is this the meaning of my life? What are we doing here? (from personal notes).

Noticing the incoherence of my own jumbled narratives and with Ash's words about psychological torture still in mind, I explored the connections between trauma, leadership, and story. I was guided by some curiosities:

Was my experience 'trauma', or at least something close enough to it to benefit from exploring how the traumatized process their experience?

Are executives often psychologically destabilized by their work?

Could the stresses of leadership reawaken old traumas?

Can the story of poor leadership sometimes be the story of leadership by the traumatised or psychologically destabilized?

Other threads followed:

If organisations employ traumatised leaders, what can trauma research tell us about strategies for helping them recover?

Does conventional leadership development address the possibility of traumatised or traumatising leadership?

Does it address the organisational systems that traumatise?

This last curiosity came from my long career in executive education, where I hadn't seen any work dedicated to helping leaders grow through their most difficult experiences. I wondered if leadership development should integrate trauma and post-traumatic growth research into its work.

Trauma's connection to story

When I started to test trauma as a narrative frame, I had certain beliefs about trauma. I thought of it as something that happens on the battlefield, or in secret rooms between shamed and shameful people. I imagined that trauma is an extraordinary event. My initial review of much of the trauma research supported these beliefs.

In early trauma research, trauma researchers told the story of trauma in terms of child abuse, other crime, (by which they meant violent crime, including rape), natural catastrophes and war and genocide. They identify unremitting violence, exploitation and rape, combat neurosis and, more recently, sexual and domestic violence as sources of trauma (Herman, 1992, pp. 7-32). They provided a long list of potentially traumatic experiences:

> Wars, genocide, famines, political violence, and terrorism continue to rage into the second decade of the Twenty-first Century. Disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, tsunamis, floods, industrial accidents, and airplane crashes threaten survival and well-being of millions across the world. Many more millions are affected every year by traffic collisions, accidents at home and at work, criminal and sexual assaults, life-threatening illnesses, bereavement, divorce, separation, child abuse and elder neglect (Joseph, 2011, p. 27).

One trauma researcher lists what he calls obvious and less obvious causes of trauma. Obvious causes include war, severe childhood emotional, physical or sexual abuse, neglect, betrayal, or abandonment during childhood, rape, catastrophic injuries and illnesses. Less obvious causes include minor automobile accidents, invasive medical procedures, falls and other so-called minor injuries, natural disasters, illness, being left alone, especially in young children and babies, prolonged immobilisation, exposure to extreme heat or cold, sudden loud noise, especially in children and babies, and birth stress (Levine, 2008, pp. 12-13).

Leadership and mobbing were not on the list, so I turned away from examples towards definitions. Like definitions of narrative, definitions of trauma vary. A clinician who focuses on childhood trauma describes it as 'an affliction of the powerless':

> At the moment of trauma, the victim is rendered helpless by overwhelming force. Traumatic events overwhelm the ordinary systems of care that give people a sense of control, connection, and meaning (Herman, 1992, p. 32).

Other clinicians go into more detail about the components of traumatic experience. They define trauma as experience which is "(1) sudden, unexpected, or non-normative, (2) exceeds the individual's perceived ability to meet its demands, and (3) disrupts the

individual's frame of reference and other central psychological needs and related schemas" (McCann and Pearlman, 1990, p. 10).

The importance of the experience being non-normative added a useful touch of the subjective to the definition. I was curious that trauma might be caused in part by unexpectedness. It seemed to me that just because an event is unexpected does not mean that it is uncommon. Trauma might be a common occurrence in the task of organisational leadership, I thought, in part because so few of us expect it to be as destabilising as it can be. We don't expect it because we think of leadership transitions within the usual frame of skill-building.

Recent trauma definitions describe trauma as much by its attack on psychological health as its threat to physical safety. Joseph uses a broad definition of trauma in the context of his research into post-traumatic growth. He writes:

> Psychologists still use trauma … as a metaphor for life-events that tear the psychological skin that protects us, leaving us emotionally wounded. When we experience psychological trauma, our bodies go into shock and our minds are overwhelmed (Joseph, 2011, p. 22).

The most useful definition of trauma came from emerging research into post-trauma growth. It was useful because it turned the definition of trauma inward. According to two leading researchers in the field, an experience is traumatic when it invalidates how we have thought about the world:

> … we use the terms trauma, crisis, major stressor, and related terms as essentially synonymous expressions to describe very difficult circumstances that significantly challenge or invalidate important components of the person's assumptive world (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, p. 22).

I imagined that such destabilising events were not rare in organisational life. I imagined that many of us in leadership roles live through experiences that challenge our beliefs. My confusion might have been because beliefs that I had cherished belonged in a world that doesn't exist. Having that imagined world ripped away was Ash's 'a rape of the soul'.

This new definition helped me understand colleagues and clients who struggled to recover from their own leadership transitions because the world had organised itself against their leadership in ways that invalidated beliefs that were important to them. They would tell me that "the bad guys won", "the Board didn't take its job seriously", and "you don't win in this place by taking an institutional perspective". At the heart of these comments were assumptions about how bad guys should lose, about Boards being active and informed, and about how a leader's focus on the organisation rather than on individual self-interest should win. When these stories turned out to be false, important narrative structures were shattered. This shattering can be painful. So painful, in fact, that Calhoun and Tedeschi claim that it is at the heart of the traumatic experience.

Trauma as a frame for exploring my experience seemed promising, so I inquired more deeply into trauma and its relationship to story. Much of the recent research into the link between our inner narratives and trauma builds on the idea that trauma happens when our psychological constructions of the world fall apart. Epstein believes that we use both rational and experiential information processing systems to construct these core schemas or stories. Some of them are flexible. Others aren't easily changed because they form the foundation of who we imagine we are or how we imagine the world works.

> … everyone, like it or not, automatically constructs an implicit theory of reality that includes a self-theory, a world-theory, and connecting propositions. An implicit theory of reality consists of a hierarchical organisation of schemas. Toward the apex of the conceptual structure are highly general, abstract schemas, such as that the self is worthy, people are trustworthy, and the world is orderly and good. Because of their abstractness, generality, and their widespread connections with schematic networks throughout the system, these broad schemas are normally highly stable and not easily invalidated. However, should they be invalidated, the entire system would be destabilised (Epstein, 2003, p. 4).

Epstein's observations seemed like a reasonable explanation for why my transitional experience was so challenging. Some of my beliefs were invalidated by the experience

and lightly discarded. When other beliefs were invalidated, the results were psychologically crippling.

Emerging narrative frames

Epstein's hierarchy of schemas helped me to think of my leadership experience in terms of narrative whiplash.

When I took on the new leadership role, I told myself stories of good relationships with people that mattered, of friendships with colleagues, and of a system that would treat me fairly. I believed that a history of excellent results put me in a strong position.

I left the experience believing that organisations poison human connection, that doing whatever the boss tells you to do is a smarter career move than doing the right thing, and that power in the hierarchy trumps integrity and competence.

Epstein would claim that my pain came from the destruction of stories I wanted to believe in but couldn't. I was grateful for the explanation, but I had two curiosities.

First, I wanted to know the extent to which my narratives were conscious. Epstein says they are not. "A personal theory of reality does not exist in conscious awareness but is a pre-conscious conceptual system that automatically structures a person's experiences and directs his or her behaviour" (Epstein, 1984, p. 65). The implications felt profound. Working on an unconscious assumptive world might require engaging with narrative-making forces that were beyond my awareness.

I was also curious about Epstein's claim that inner narratives arrange themselves into a hierarchy of psychological importance. Dr. Ronnie Janoff-Bulman's clinical work with trauma sufferers provided me with one answer to the question of narrative hierarchies. She identifies three core assumptions we humans tend to place highest on our hierarchies of narrative structures: that "the world is benevolent, that the world is fair, and that the self is worthy" (Janoff-Bulmann, 1992). I include her explanations in detail because they helped me open the door to exploration into my unconscious story-telling mechanisms:

> In general, people believe that the world is a good place. The 'world' in
> this context, is an abstract conception that refers to both people and events.

When we assume other people are benevolent, we believe that they are basically good, kind, helpful, and caring …

In considering the benevolence of "the" world, people are actually considering the benevolence of "their" world. Generalisations move outward from experience, such that our own experiences with people and events form the basis for more general assumptions about the world (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, loc. 136).

There was an important subtlety to Janoff-Bulman's conception of the stories we tell ourselves about the world being good. She writes that the abstract conception I might have about how the world works *in general* is less important than the story I tell myself about how *my world ought to be*. The world clearly isn't always benevolent, but we hold dear to our psychological structures a story of how our personal worlds *should be* benevolent. We might not react when we see evidence in the abstract that the world is often not benevolent at all. We are likely to react violently when the evidence comes from personal experience.

Janoff-Bulman explains the second fundamental assumption – that the world is meaningful – as "one in which a self-outcome contingency is perceived. There is a relationship between a person and what happens to him or her" (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, loc. 152-169). We like to hold beliefs that allow us to interpret seemingly random events as having some sort of orderly and predictable meaning. We like to believe that there is a link between how a person behaves and what happens to that person (Janoff-Bulman, 1992).

Some researchers translate Janoff-Bulman's second fundamental assumption about the world being meaningful as "good people generally enjoy good lives, and bad people generally do not". Janoff-Bulman's focus on our fundamental belief that good behaviour leads to fair outcomes supports this interpretation:

The assumption is that we can directly control what happens to us through our own behaviour. Thus, if we engage in appropriate, precautionary behaviours, we will be protected from negative events; similarly, if we engage in appropriate positive behaviours, good things will happen to us (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, loc. 202).

Janoff-Bulman's third fundamental assumption is self-worth. Here she states simply that "this assumption involves a global evaluation of the self, and, in general, we perceive ourselves as good, capable and moral individuals" (Janoff-Bulman, 1992, loc. 232).

The different strands of trauma research, I noticed, seemed to fit together. One strand claimed that trauma is painful, in part, because it cripples our story-telling capability. Another claimed that we use stories to organise our engagement with the world, that they are unconscious, and that they come in a hierarchy of importance to our psychological security. The higher they are in our hierarchy, the more painful it is when experience invalidates them. Yet another strand claimed that the stories we tell ourselves about being worthy participants in a fair and benevolent world are high in our narrative hierarchies.

I tested this last claim by comparing the contents of my anger sketch (p. 30) with the three themes of worthiness, benevolence and fairness. The links were strong.

The first theme in the sketch seemed to be about quality in human connection in the workplace. The invalidated belief was that friendship trumped the instrumentalization of relationship in the workplace. My scribbles about *betrayal*, *friends who became enemies* and *those fucking bastards* were all blood dripping from the wound of that lost belief. This belief could have been included in the idea of benevolence. A benevolent world is one in which relationships are valuable for reasons of human connection, not because of their contribution to self-interest.

Janoff-Bulman's theme of *fairness* was the second. The invalidated belief seemed to be that if I worked hard for the good of the organisation, I would be treated fairly.

The third theme was my disbelief that I had been bested by people I thought were incompetent and unethical. I struggled to accept that sometimes organisational life privileges hierarchy over performance. I was ashamed that the battles seemed to have been so one-sided. I didn't realise at the time that I wasn't the only fighter bearing the cost of the fight. This belief combined Janoff-Bulman's themes of worthiness and fairness. I was worthy (I believed), and so I deserved fairness.

Trauma's impact, and trauma in the workplace

At this point of the inquiry, I was ready to follow where trauma and its impact on inner narratives led me. But I had two remaining queries.

The first was to better understand how trauma impacts the traumatised. How do people whose inner narrative worlds are shattered tend to react? I was hoping to understand my own reaction to the experience.

Trauma research tends to categorise the symptoms of trauma as both physical and psychological. Referring to the physical manifestations of trauma, research points to a disturbing list of ailments including: "tension headaches, gastrointestinal disturbances, and abdominal, back or pelvic pain ... Survivors may complain of tremors, choking sensations, or rapid heartbeat" (Herman, 1992, p. 86).

Trauma researchers McCann and Pearlman divide emotional, cognitive, behavioural and interpersonal response patterns to trauma into two biological response patterns: physiological hyper-arousal and somatic disturbances (McCann and Pearlman, 1990, pp. 40 – 46). Hyper-arousal is perhaps the most common physical symptom of trauma listed in the research. It is described as "persistent symptoms of arousal. This phenomenon results in bodily symptoms characteristic of anxiety, such as accelerated heart rate, rapid breathing, cold sweats and heart palpitations" (Joseph, 2011, p. 38). Levine describes hyper-arousal as among the first symptoms that appear after an overwhelming event (Levine, 2008, p. 15). Herman describes it as a state of permanent alert, "as if the danger might return at any moment" (Herman, 1992, p. 35). She writes that the hyper-aroused person "startles easily, reacts irritably to small provocations, and sleeps poorly" (Herman, 1992, p. 35). She also claims that hyper-aroused people "do not have a normal 'baseline' level of alert but relaxed attention. Instead, they have an elevated baseline of arousal: their bodies are always on alert for danger" (Herman, 1992, p. 36).

Herman's second category of trauma symptoms, intrusion, describes the "indelible imprint of the traumatic moment" (Herman, 1992, p. 35). She claims that trauma tends

to reform our mechanisms for understanding the world so that they are more sensitive to threat:

> Small, seemingly insignificant reminders can also evoke these memories, which often return with all the vividness and emotional force of the original event. Thus, even normally safe environments may come to feel dangerous, for the survivor can never be assured that she will not encounter some reminder of the trauma (Herman, 1992, p. 37).

Her final category of trauma symptoms, constriction, refers to what she describes as "the numbing response of surrender" (Herman, 1992, p. 35). She writes that constriction, "a feeling of indifference, emotional detachment, and profound passivity in the person relinquishes all initiative and struggle" is a protection against unbearable pain (Herman, 1992, p. 43).

All these claims helped me add material to the story I was constructing about my experience. Once a leader's core narratives are invalidated, the research said, she can expect to behave as if she is constantly under threat. The reaction made sense. If my ways of understanding the world have proved to be painfully wrong, why wouldn't I be more conscious of the possible dangers that might lurk in what is now an unfamiliar world?

My second query was about research into workplace trauma. Ash described her experience in terms of mobbing. She pointed me towards two researchers who had recently published work on the trauma associated with workplace mobbing. I had heard about mobbing from a colleague in my old workplace who witnessed some of the background conversations between a few of the power players conspiring to eject me from the organisation. He told me that he believed that I was being mobbed. I hadn't pursued mobbing as a line of inquiry until Ash reminded me that it might be an important way to think about my story. Once I did, I was surprised to find that my experience was common enough to have justified serious research.

Duffy and Sperry's work describes the act of mobbing and how those who have been mobbed are likely to react to the experience. I appreciated the precision of their definition, and also the seriousness with which they took the possible consequences:

Workplace mobbing is nonsexual harassment of a co-worker by a group of members of an organisation for the purpose of removing the targeted individual(s) from the organisation… Mobbing involves individual, group and organisational dynamics. It predictably results in the humiliation, devaluation, discrediting, and degradation of the target; loss of professional reputation; and, often, removal of the victim from the organization through termination, extended medical leave, or quitting. The results of this typically protracted traumatizing experience are significant financial, career, health and psychosocial losses or other negative consequences (Duffy and Sperry, 2014, p. 13).

I include a lengthy quotation from their description of the experience of mobbing because so much of it is similar to my own story. When I read it, I understood that my experience had a name, and that it wasn't a lonely narrative after all. Footnotes are attached to the description because parallels can be drawn between it and my experience. The parallels aren't perfect, but there were enough similarities to convince me that my story had a home.

When the target-victim realises what is going on and understands that he/she is the victim of a series of on-going hostile and abusive interpersonal acts in the workplace, the victim responds both with disbelief and with a sense of helplessness and terror about both the immediate and longer-term future[4].

The victim ruminates on the traumatic workplace events and thinks about them over and over down to the minute details of what happened; who did what and when; dwells repeatedly on why he/she became the target-victim, comes up with no good answer, and starts the cycle of ruminating on the mobbing all over again. Images of the key instigators and key players involved in the mobbing enter unwelcomed into the target-victim's mind, and the victim is disgusted, disturbed, and saddened by them[5].

---

[4] Disbelief and helplessness were part of a confusion of reactions. While I wasn't terrified, I did worry about how I would find another job. There was significant anxiety associated with keeping my family in place and intact.

[5] Duffy and Sperry introduce common post-trauma growth language into their text here. Rumination is critical to the post-trauma growth process. Post-trauma growth researchers and clinicians Calhoun and Tedeschi claim that *intrusive* rumination (read: anxiety-inducing narratives that dominate the narrative world) demonstrates pre-

Being reminded of the mobbing or having to go to work in the place where it happened is accompanied by feelings of dread and anxiety. The victim experiences physical symptoms like tightness in the chest and stomach, clenched fists, sweaty palms, and tachycardia, together with a sense of helplessness and loss of control[6].

While many, if not most, of the co-workers with whom the victim worked have already distanced themselves, the victim's previously cordial and friendly relationships with co-workers no longer exist, and the victim feels used and betrayed. As a result, the victim has lost trust in his/her co-workers and reciprocally distances from them even more. The victim actively avoids coming into contact with signs and symbols of the workplace[7].

As is consistent with those who experience many different types of trauma, the mobbing victim has a hard time recalling details and specifics of the traumatic events. It is easier for the victim to say in a general way, "I was treated very badly at work", than it is for the victim to recall specific, detailed events.

The end result of the workplace mobbing is ostracism and social exclusion. The body reacts to social exclusion and ostracism the same way it reacts to pain – it hurts, and often very badly. When the victim is dealing with both emotional and physical pain and is ruminating over the events of the mobbing, previously important interests, activities, and other pursuits are forgotten[8].

---

growth narrative mechanisms while *intentional* rumination (read: narratives that are constructed and explored purposefully by the narrator) is necessary for post-trauma growth.

[6] Duffy and Sperry include many of the trauma symptoms listed earlier in the text. I would add sleeplessness and a high state of arousal to their description. When I imagine my physical state at the time, I think of the cornered leopard surrounded by attacking hyenas in 'It Doesn't Work', a story I will tell later in this document.

[7] Watching previously friendly colleagues shrink away or become complicit in the attacks was difficult because it invalidated a core narrative about the value of authentic human connection in the workplace. Duffy and Sperry note that this disruption in connective relationships is often the most difficult consequence of mobbing (Duffy and Sperry, 2014). It was for me. More on this in Part 4.

[8] Duffy and Sperry underplay the implications of the destabilising experience dominating the inner narrative world. In my experience, the confused and sometimes hyper-aroused narrative of the failed leadership transition not only diminishes the importance of other narratives at the time (say, family, hobbies, other interests) but also influences how I imagined old narratives from childhood (for example, what it meant to move often from country

Being keyed up, irritable and quick to anger are common responses for those who have been mobbed. Some victims remain emotionally numb and don't understand why they do not have strong feelings of anger toward the perpetrators. Other victims become outraged at the injustice, humiliation, and betrayal that they experienced and remain in a protracted state of anger. For others, anger and outrage build slowly over months and years as the victim puts pieces of information together and realizes more about who the key players in the mobbing actually were and what they actually did (Duffy and Sperry, 2014, pp. 81-84).

Duffy and Sperry mention three important dimensions of the mobbing experience. Mobbing is likely to invalidate some tightly held but unconscious core beliefs. The invalidation of these beliefs disrupts the worldviews and self-views of the experiencer in ways that are deeply disorienting. The trauma of the experience inhibits the narrative/story-telling capabilities of the experiencer. *Workplace brutality destroys existing narratives, makes necessary the construction of new narratives, but at the same time sabotages the ability of the narrator to reconstruct coherently.* Here the authors link the trauma of workplace mobbing with the core concepts of narrative schemas, our assumptive worlds, and the consequences of their destruction. Just when we need our story-telling ability most, it has been crippled.

Narrative in post-trauma growth

Calhoun and Tedeschi believe that the post-trauma growth process is one which forms new and wiser narratives. As mentioned in my footnotes to Duffy and Sperry's description of mobbing, these wiser narratives form only when the story-telling process switches from automatic and intrusive rumination to intentional rumination:

Recently, researchers who have done much work on rumination have made a distinction between 'brooding' and 'reflective' rumination have made a similar distinction… The content of this more deliberate ruminative process tends to be repair, restructuring, or rebuilding of the individual's general way of understanding the world. Posttraumatic growth tends to be

---

to country, or to be the youngest child in a family of five). It also degraded my trust in happy narratives for the future. Dominant current narratives shaped past and future narratives.

more likely when the individual ruminates, *with a wide variety of content, trying to make sense out of what has happened* (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2014, p. 10, italics mine. I return to the importance of variety in rumination at the close of this chapter).

Narrative and the narrative process plays a central role in how they describe the post-trauma growth process, which they illustrate as follows (2014, p. 8):
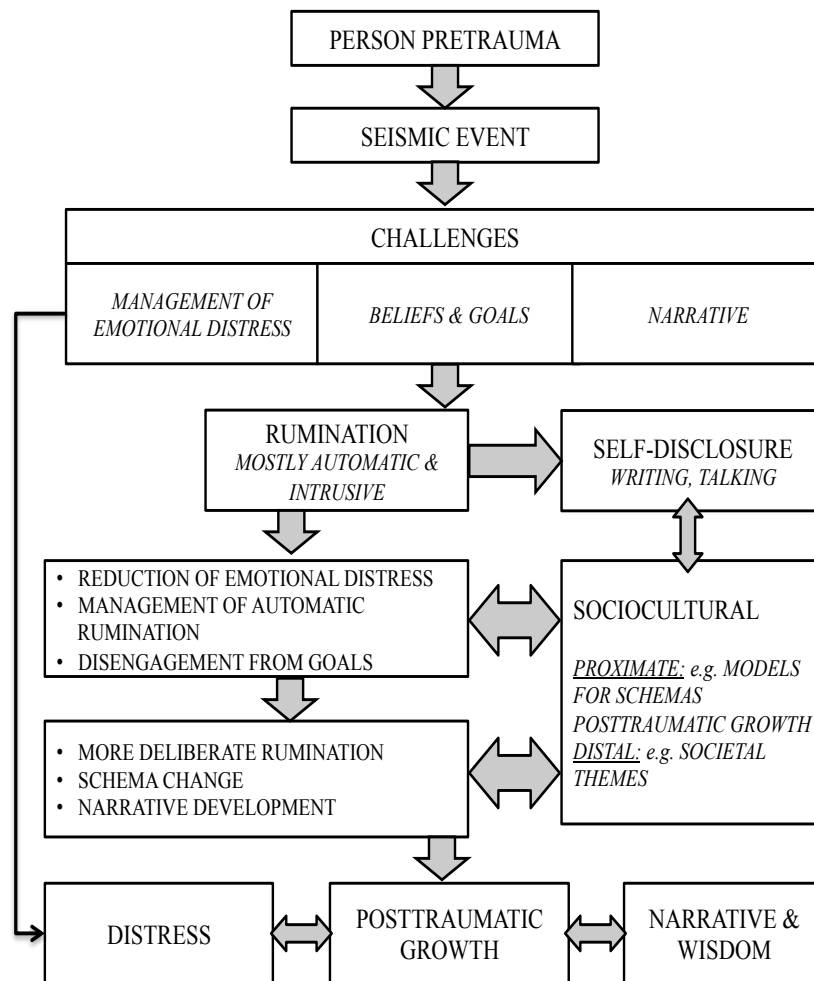
According to the model, trauma brings a series of challenges to the traumatised, including challenges to existing beliefs, goals and narratives. Cognitive engagement (*rumination,* in their language) is likely to be unwelcome, automatic and disturbing (*intrusive*) early in the experience. By telling their stories (*self-disclosing, or 'confessing' in therapeutic terms*) and by exploring them, rumination becomes more intentional. New schemas lead to growth through new, wiser narratives. Tedeschi and

Calhoun describe these wiser narratives as reflecting changes in the stories one tells about oneself, changes in the experience of relationships with others, and changes in one's general philosophy of life (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2006).

The model helped to position the inquiry and to shape its next steps. My inquiry objective turned to the challenge of how to turn an inner world of intrusive narratives into one of intentional, wiser narratives.

Confession, in the narrative sense

Jungian therapist Murray Stein describes confession as one of four dimensions of the therapeutic relationship. He writes that the term "suggests … the confidential nature of the psychotherapeutic interaction and communication and the opportunity in therapy to speak openly about carefully guarded secrets, both acts and thoughts" (Stein, 1998, p. 77). An important outcome of confession in the therapeutic setting, in Stein's clinical experience, is that it "typically results in an attitude of empathy and acceptance on the analyst's part and one of relief and self-acceptance on the analysand's" (Stein, 1995, p. 77).

My experience of confession in the narrative sense is that means telling my stories openly, even if it is just to myself and even if they are stories that feel shameful. Confession meant getting the stories out of my head and into some explorable form. By articulating them in some way, I was able to bring higher resolution narratives out of my imagination's narrative mess.

The point of confession wasn't to answer questions. It was to sort out which questions needed to be asked. In my case, confession meant being honest with myself about my experience. Without this honesty, I couldn't have found the primary frames (a leadership experience that resulted in mobbing and a host of associated psychological reactions that are common to the trauma of mobbing) that I needed to explore my story. Identifying a primary frame that resonated with me was the first step into the space between intrusive and intentional storytelling.

As noted earlier, post-trauma growth researchers comment on the variety of rumination content. I found that my confessions came in different forms. Each form had its own usefulness.

Some of my confession was in the form of writing out the facts of the experience. The 20,000-word, blow-by-blow description of the events that led to my dismissal, complete with names, dates and copies of the emails, is an example of factual writing. So were the meticulous notes that I wrote for my lawyer as we were negotiating the terms of my departure.

Some of it was in the form of expressing my emotions. The anger sketch on page 30 is an example of confessing an emotion.

Confession felt more calming and curious when I wrote neither factually nor emotionally but rather imaginatively. The following story as an example of imaginative confession. I'll close the chapter by telling you this story but will come back to it for interpretation in the work that follows.

I call this story "Up on a Ledge". The climb I describe in it is a climb I once did in my mountaineering days. The conversation and my conversation partner are both imagined. The usefulness of imaginative confession came because opening the narrative to imagination seemed to offer up questions for exploration that factual and emotional writing didn't. Factual and emotional writing seemed to close the story. Imaginative writing opened it up and helped me step away from it, with curiosity. Why this setting? Who is this conversation partner? Why are we having this conversation?

Up here in the thin air the sun shines pure and clean. It warms us now as we sit comfortably on a thin rock ledge just below the crest of L'Arête des Papillons – the Ridge of the Butterflies – high above the Chamonix Valley. Dropping below our feet is the few hundred meters of slabbed and jagged granite that we'll soon rappel down to make our way back to the Plans des Aiguilles cable car station, where the tourists gather to take in the view and enjoy their picnics. We can see them from our little ledge, and many others scattered in ones and twos along the hiking paths that wind this way and that below the majestic Aiguilles des Chamonix peaks stretching far above and around us. Behind us, dozens of the sharp granite needles reach high into the skies like cathedral spires. The round white dome of the spirit mother of them all, the Mont Blanc, is hidden behind the rock face of the Aiguille de Midi to our left. Far into the northern horizon, mountains and hills and valleys sit, peaceful and still in the hazy autumn air.

Resting on our small ledge in the sunshine is our way of celebrating the half-day climb we've almost finished, and for preparing ourselves for a return to a busier world. I've had a good climb, at the limits of my capabilities, sometimes slipping

slightly against the rock, sometimes gripping the tiny handholds with frightened energy. I made sure not to leave any cams wedged in the rock this time. I have an expensive habit of leaving gear behind on these climbs.

On this day, after this climb, my mind and heart are searching for answers to questions of ego and identity. My climbing friend is open to the discussion, and so between sips of warm tea and bites of the ham sandwiches we bought in town this morning, I talk about my search. I talk into the warm mountain breeze, and over the occasional cries of the ravens riding the wind nearby, waiting for us to offer up some of our bread. I start by talking into the pain.

"I left my job six months ago. The departure was harsh. I confronted some important people. I tried to open up space for more voices in the running of the place. I focused on our clients rather than on the well-being of the power structure. Some powerful people didn't like my interference in what they saw as their territory. And, so, despite many years of service and a reputation for integrity and skill in the institute, I left. My emotional reaction to all this has been complex and raw".

"And angry", my friend says.

"I am angry at them for putting themselves ahead of the rest of the community. I am angry at their dishonesty. I am angry at weak leadership. I get even angrier when I imagine these guys gloating at how they managed to get me out of their way. I am also angry at myself, that I wasn't able to find a solution. I wondered what was wrong with me that I couldn't make it work".

I break a small piece of bread away my sandwich and throw it to the rocks below. One of the lingering ravens swoops down to retrieve it. The others fly nearer, hoping for another offering.

"I had an important job and a good salary. I felt respected. I bought into many of the things that the culture was selling. I have a nice car and a big house. I take my family on great vacations. And I identified with it. The successful businessman, the family provider and all that. Member of the Leadership Team. Industry expert. An important part of my identity was built on this shaky ground. Fucking idiot".

With a kind smile my friend reaches over to the silver thermos sitting on the rock ledge between us to pour some tea. He hands me a steaming cup before helping himself.

"Your reaction was deeper than anger", he says.

"Also fear. I was afraid of what was next. Afraid that I had let my family down. Uncertain how to start over. With all the glittering packaging of a so-called successful career gone, I had to take a long hard look at myself to understand what had happened and where I would go. That fear turned out to be prophetic. Finding

ontological mooring through life's crucible moments is my inquiry. It a courageous thing, to look below your surface and into your depths".

"By confronting the toxicity in the organization, you provoked a nervous power structure. You weren't surprised that a few in it were frightened enough to push you out" ?

I reflect for a moment, letting my gaze wonder over the wild, prehistoric landscape. On a neighbouring ridge we can see a guide patiently coaxing his desperate client through a series of difficult moves, all the while holding him secure on the rope that attaches them together. The client is immobile against the rock, yelling angrily at the guide. A series of colourful French expletives reverberate off the granite walls. The guide waits quietly, knowing that movement will come out of necessity, despite the fear and doubt. Freezing is not an option. Neither is retreat. The only way to go is forward. Forward is hard sometimes.

"I forced the decision. I didn't want to work at a place that accepted what they were accepting. But I was surprised at the brutality. I was surprised at how these definitions of success had become important to me. When did I become that guy? I was especially surprised at how destabilized I was when I left the familiar structure of my work life. I felt like I belonged there. Now that I don't, where do I belong? Where are my roots? How can I nurture them? What role does faith play in this root system? What role do my family and friends play? Leaving aside the surface voices that tell me to be this or that kind of man or leader or believer, what voice inside of me is my true voice"?

My friend laughs gently. "So many questions," he says. "Do you have any answers"?

"It feels like a mysterious journey. Knowing myself beyond my ego or my identities might lead to a richer, more anchored life. Maybe that person would be less vulnerable to the battles and losses and existential crises of life. But I can't imagine who that person is yet. I can't even imagine how to find him".

My friend is familiar with my writing, which sometimes plays with real situations by writing creatively around and through them, slightly changing details or reshaping conversations. It is my way of holding events at arms-length, turning them this way and that to explore them from different angles. It is a reflexive process that helps me make sense of myself in the events I describe. It includes my body and spirit, as well as my intellect in the sense-making process.

"Why imaginative writing"? my friend asks. "How does it work"? Here he is asking questions of quality similar to those often come up with unconventional approaches to developing knowledge. How do I know this writing is useful?

"I pay attention to the congruency between the form of the writing and the territory I'm exploring with it. Does the style of writing present my inner explorations, for example, in a way that evokes the reader's imagination too? Does the aesthetic form of the writing invite the reader into the story? The explorations are personal, and therefore should be felt personally. I am also mindful of the quality of my immersion into a world in which images and metaphors and symbols speak their truth. My story about the woman running through the woods, with her encouraging husband and hungry kids and the newly fallen tree across her path, is rich with meaning for me. Through it the imaginal world speaks loudly about the possibilities of family roots that are just starting to anchor into the earth, as well as those that have already burrowed deeply. The fallen tree that bars our heroine's path speaks to me of the violent but natural upheavals that are fertile opportunities for regeneration. The forest setting tells me about the spiritual energies in nature, which are as powerful and enriching as in any church. None of these messages was planned in the writing. They spoke to me afterwards, when I reflected on what I had written from a silent place".[9]

I look over at my friend to see if he is paying attention. He is leaning back against the rock wall, feet dangling over the empty space below us. His eyes are closed, and his hands lay loosely in his lap. He looks relaxed, but he isn't sleeping. It is time for us to prepare for our rappels down the rock slabs, but up here in the warm sun, reclining against the ancient rock, neither of us is in a rush.

"Also, I pay attention to the movement within myself as I write and especially as I reflect on my writing. Holding my themes at a slight distance through my writing allows me to experiment with different frames for myself and for other players in my stories. Reframing is an important part of the sense-making process because it bends assumptions and truths and emotions. I can test which shapes and forms resonate best. I can reframe events and emotions to see if there is meaning to be wrestled from them. A story of job loss and a search for meaning also becomes a story of values lived and character freely expressed. Through this reframing process I can fasten myself a little more securely to newer and stronger psychological anchors. When I write the facts of the story, something in me wants to defend them as facts. When I write the emotions of the story, something in me often gets stuck in the emotion. When I write with imagination, something in me wants to explore".

With that, my friend leans forward to stretch out his back. He looks over at me. "What a journey", he says. "Don't be afraid of losing your hold. You're always on belay. Always. Now let's get down to the telepherique and see what the tourists are

---

[9] This passage refers to a narrative I wrote about a woman going for a run in the forest near her house. Like this narrative, the forest run narrative was an experiment with imaginative confession. I share that story at the end of the next chapter.

up to". He grabs the rope lying twisted and bundled on the rock ledge between us and starts to arrange it for our first rappel.

Part Two
Narrative Fragmentation

The frame of mobbing-induced trauma led to the inquiry's next question: *How do I use storytelling as an act of intentional rumination when my stories are so fragmented, confused and urgent?*

According to research in social sciences and psychology, narrative-making is a human instinct. Narratives are critical to our ability to orient ourselves in the world. Social scientists describe narrative as the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful (Polkinghorne, 1988) and as one of two modes of cognitive capability in humans (Bruner, 1983. Bruner describes logico-scientific thought as the other mode). Psychology builds on the usefulness of inner narratives for sorting out our lives, claiming that "experience must be 'storied' and it is this storying that determines the meaning ascribed to experience" (White and Epston, 1990, p. 10); that "realities are organised and maintained through stories" (Freedman and Combs, 1996, p. 29); and that "through the inter-related processes of story plotting and storytelling we partially determine the stories of our lives" (Crossley, 2000, p. 53).[10]

More recent work aimed at making self-narrative exploration accessible outside of clinical practice builds on this positioning of narrative as our primary meaning-making tool. Denborough opens his distillation of lessons from the clinical world of narrative therapy with the claim that "who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories we tell about ourselves" (Denborough, 2014, p. 1). Denborough's claim is echoed in Drake's narrative coaching work. Drake writes: "What we believe, to whom we belong, how we behave and who we become are profoundly shaped by our stories and the larger narratives in which we live" (Drake, 2015, p. 105).

---

[10] The 'partially' in Crossley's explanation of narratives is important. In her introduction to narrative psychology, Crossley describes the debate amongst theorists regarding the extent to which life can be adequately described through narrative. On the side against narratives as useful meaning-making tools are those who believe that life isn't lived as coherently as the tidy narratives we use to describe it would imply. Crossley's important response is that while this is undoubtedly the case, our narrative instinct is a necessary device for arranging the chaos of life into an order that we can navigate with some psychological confidence. The ordering process might not be factually correct, but this isn't the point. Developing a sense of order is. I explore the role of narrative for navigating the space between order and chaos in Part Four.

We use narrative to make sense of our lives (McAdams, 2012). We construct self-narratives to establish coherence. What do we do when experience destroys this coherence? Clinical work that pointed to the possibility of multiple internal storytellers helped me move further along the path of intentional story-making.

Tension in narrative hierarchy

According to trauma research, the traumatised often relive their experience when they are triggered by an event that brings the past to the present.

A war veteran might be triggered by a loud noise. A victim of childhood abuse might be triggered by a trip back to the childhood home. In both cases the brain's survival mechanisms take on one or all of three post-traumatic stress symptoms: the persistent expectation of danger; the tendency to relive the past traumatic event as if it were recurring in the present; or a numbing of the body and mind (Herman, 1992, pp. 35-47).

Post-trauma growth researchers describe these symptoms as manifestations of *dissociation*. Here, I include three quotations from one clinician's description of disassociation because all three helped me to interpret the triggering story that I will explore later in the chapter.

> The psyche's normal reaction to a traumatic experience is to withdraw from the scene of the injury. If withdrawal is not possible, then part of the self must be withdrawn, and for this to happen an otherwise integrated ego must split into fragments or *dissociate* (Kalsched, 1996, pp. 12-13).

> For the person who has experienced unbearable pain, the psychological defence of disassociation allows external life to go on but at a great internal cost. The outer trauma ends and its effects may be largely 'forgotten', but the psychological sequelae of the trauma continue to haunt the inner world, and they do this, Jung discovered, in the form of certain images which cluster around a strong affect…(Kalsched, 1996, p. 13).

> …research with patients suffering from the so-called "dissociative disorders" showed that it is not a passive, benign process whereby different

parts of the mind become disconnected and "drift apart". Instead, dissociation appears to involve a good deal of aggression – *apparently it involves an active attack by one part of the psyche on other parts*. It is as though the normally integrative tendencies in the psyche must be interrupted by force (Kalsched, 1996, p. 13, italics mine).

Kalsched describes the withdrawal of part of the self from consciousness to cope with trauma's destabilisation. In narrative terms, we might describe this act as the psychological rejection of an experience that is too damaging for the narrator to bear.

In the second quotation, he claims that this rejection has negative consequences for the patient's inner world. He also describes the process as aggressive. The rejected part of the psyche doesn't hide. It expresses itself in the form of attacks which play out in the patient's inner world.

Kalsched's description of this splitting process prompted me to wonder if the difficulty reconstructing narrative worlds post-trauma might be because trauma sets inner narrators against each other. The idea became more vivid for me when I tried to write the story of an event in which my wife, who I met in the organisation where I lived out my leadership drama, came face-to-face with two of the people who manipulated me out of the organisation. I share the story here because it describes a quality of psychic energy that helped me understand the conflicts that might be taking place under the narrative surface.

It's important to note that the triggering event took place several years after I left my old workplace. I was working in a new organisation at the time and going through the challenging but constructive work of building a leadership development practice. I was far enough from the leadership experience to have some detachment to it, but the triggering event brought me back. *Close-but-far* turned out to be useful positioning. It allowed me to explore the narrative through the lens of different narrators. From a narrative exploration perspective, trauma triggers are useful data sources.

I call the story "Picking up the apples". I will tell the story and then explain why writing was helpful.

"Picking up the apples"

We sit around the circular white stone and iron table that sits to the side of our long rectangular kitchen. We have eaten countless family meals around this table in the ten years we've lived in the house. We gather together in a group hug just before we eat, like grace before the meal.

It's been a good few months. We are sorting out ways to roll with the punches. Our repair mechanisms are stronger. My new job is going well. I am respected. I am treated as if after 25 years in the industry I might know something.

My wife went into my old workplace that afternoon. She used to work there too. It's where we met. It's where we formed the same group of friends. She quit before the drama started, but she lived through it as if she were still there. She knows all the actors, and they all know her.

She went in that afternoon to pick up some apples from a friend who's been working there forever. The friend and her family run a farm in the Valais, home of sprawling hillside vineyards and some of the world's best skiing. During spring strawberry season, the friend brings in baskets of strawberries, and we all line up behind the trunk of her car during the lunch break to pick up the strawberries we've ordered in advance. In the autumn she brings in some of her apple harvest so that we can use her apples in our apple pies. We love her apples. Antoine and I love the apple pie my wife makes from them.

After we finish dinner, Rox tells me what happened when she went to pick up the apples.

She says: I saw V when I went to reception. I turned away from him, but he came up to me.

V was a peripheral but important player in my drama. I saw him as a troublemaker, always provoking from behind the scenes but never brave enough to confront directly. We worked together in the early days. In the later years I didn't have much to do with him, until my last year at the organisation. I went up against him when my sales team discovered that he seemed to be taking our clients into his private work. I flagged his behaviour to our senior leadership team, but his colleagues didn't care. V asked me for a coffee one day just as the tension was heating up. During that meeting he told me to fire one of the strongest members of my team. When I asked him why, he explained that he and some of his colleagues didn't like the guy. Later, when it came time for me to appoint a new lead for one of our important geographic regions, V refused to support the woman who had agreed to go. He was painful enough to convince the woman to step away from the role.

I can feel my body tense up when Rox mentions his name. He was one of the bad guys. Smug and ridiculous.

Rox says: He came up and greeted me as if nothing happened. We made small talk. He asked about Antoine. I asked about his kids.

Thinking of them exchanging small talk makes my blood boil. But I keep calm. A few years of rebuilding separates me a little from the war we once fought.

Rox says: Right after V left, Z showed up.

Z was a main character in my drama. His lack of leadership, inability to stand by his decisions and skill at deflecting blame from himself was a topic of constant hallway talk. I placed most of the blame for my departure on his shoulders.

Rox says: I turned my back to him, but he approached me anyway. I didn't know what to do. He was just as friendly as V.

This guy approaches my wife as if the damage he caused doesn't matter. I'm furious. I feel their smugness and I want them to pay.

I think I am calm but how I appear is not how I imagine I appear.

Rox asks me why I am being so aggressive with her. I remember my conversation with Ash, the woman who believes that she was wrongfully dismissed from her organisation for whistleblowing. Ten years later she is still in court. She was the one who introduced me to the idea of organisations as fertile ground for trauma. She described her experience as 'a rape of the soul'. I understood her immediately. 'A rape of the soul' by people who do what they do without fear of retribution.

I wonder out loud why Rox didn't tell these guys to fuck off. She wonders how I can doubt her after so many years of support. She is angry with me for being angry with her. I'm back with the outrage, feeling it boil in my head and in my heart. I see them gloating.

I wake up often in the middle of the night during the week that follows. I imagine these guys approaching her. I feel their smugness. I want to beat it out of them.

What stood out for me when I wrote "Picking up the apples" wasn't the story. What stood out for me was how difficult the story was to write. I didn't know where to start. I wasn't sure how to describe the main characters. I struggled with how much detail to include. No matter how I wrote the story, it felt false in important ways.

It occurred to me that the problem wasn't that I didn't understand *how* to tell the story, but rather that I didn't understand *who* to tell the story.

Something in me wanted to tell the story from the outrage of a monster who was suddenly thrown back into a storm of corruption that threatened his wife and his family. He wants blood. He could happily tell the story as an imaginary tale of meeting his two enemies where he could have a fair fight with them. This character might have been responsible for the anger sketch that helped me identify some of the stories at the top of my narrative hierarchy. He isn't articulate. He is furious.

Something else in me wanted to tell an empathetic story. In this character's version, V and Z are struggling humans wrestling with their own complexities, tragedies and lost dreams. They aren't the cartoonish villains I constructed in my first versions of the story. *Anger won't help*, this character thinks. *It's best to turn the other cheek, to not sink down to their level, to be true to the highest version of yourself* (*blah blah blah, the monster rolls his eyes…*). Where the monster is full of furious energy, this character feels self-righteous. And neutered. "Leave it to me", he says to the monster. "I've managed all of it well so far". To which the monster answers: "Just because you think you know why they are behaving like assholes doesn't mean that they aren't behaving like assholes anymore. Fuck them. They need to pay".

Other voices wanted to be heard, but none are as prominent as the monster and the nice man who are having an odd debate about who owned the rights to tell the story.

Feeling the confusion of the contradictory energies vying for storytelling rights helped me form a hypothesis about why creating coherent narratives is so difficult for psychologically destabilised people. The hypothesis came in five parts. It describes the challenge of post-trauma narrative as a problem of confused inner narrators:

1. We rely on an established and coherent hierarchy of inner narratives to orient ourselves in the world;
2. Equilibrium in our narrative hierarchy comes, in part, from an equilibrium amongst our internal storytellers. Which stories dominate the narrative hierarchy reflect which storytellers dominate in the hierarchy of inner characters. There is more than a hierarchy of stories in each of us. There is also a hierarchy of storytellers in each of us;
3. Any event that shatters the narrative hierarchy also shatters the prevailing hierarchy of inner storytellers;

4. In the disequilibrium that follows such shattering, internal characters attempt to establish a new equilibrium. This struggle is unconscious, confused, and sometimes violent;

5. Establishing a new narrative equilibrium might begin by working with the inner characters, some of whom might be vying for more prominence on the story-telling stage and some of which may want to defend their old privileged positions.

To test the hypothesis, I searched for how the world of narrative psychology deals with the concept of inner characters. This search led me to Dan McAdams, whose work on narrative and narrative identity brings developmental, social, clinical, and personality psychology into the narrative realm. McAdams describes narrative identity as the "internalised and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life" (McAdams, 2012).

According to his research, we are myth-creating creatures, forever forming and reforming our personal myths as we age, gain experience, and seek to shape our lives in ways that we value and understand (McAdams, 1993). How we create our myths, according to his research, is in part shaped by how we imagine the main characters that constitute our inner theatre of narrators. In his words, "creating a personal myth that contains a rich but finite source of characterization – a suitable cast of imagoes – enables an individual to resolve the problem of simultaneously being the many and the one" (McAdams, 1993, p. 122). An important part of his work is the idea of the imago. McAdams describes imagoes as idealised players on the inner stage:

> Each of us consciously and unconsciously fashions main characters for our life stories. These characters function in our myths as if they were persons; hence, they are "personified". And each is a somewhat exaggerated and one-dimensional form; hence, they are "idealized". Our life stories may have one dominant imago or many. *The appearance of two central and conflicting imagoes in personal myth seems to be relatively common* (McAdams, 1993, p. 122, italics mine).

McAdams writes about some of the imagoes that he has encountered in his research: the sophisticated professor, the rough boy from the wrong side of town, the steady caregiver, the corporate executive, the worldly traveller, the athlete, the sage, the

soldier, the teacher, the clown, the peacemaker and the martyr (McAdams, 1993, p. 123). He also provides a taxonomy for common imagoes that he maps according to their properties of personal agency or of communion. McAdams describes these as the two central themes of human story. Agentic imagoes personify personal power. Communal imagoes personify human connection. McAdams provides more detail on why agency and communion are so important to our storytelling:

> Power and love are the two great themes of myth and story. Protagonists and antagonists are striving, in one way or another, to do one or both of two basic things: (1) to assert themselves in powerful ways, and (2) to merge themselves with others in bonds of love, friendship and intimacy. Desires for power and love provide gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, kings and queens, curious little boys and brave little girls alike with energy, direction and purpose. They move the plot forward; they make the action meaningful (McAdams, 1993, p. 68).

His taxonomy and examples of characters who fall into its different parts are as follows (McAdams, 1993, p. 124):

Agentic & Communal

Healer
Teacher
Counselor
Humanist
Arbiter

Agency

Warrior (Ares)
Traveler (Hermes)
Sage (Zeus)
Maker (Hephaestus)

Lover (Aphrodite)
Caregiver (Demeter)
Friend (Hera)
Ritualist (Hestia)

Communion

Escapist
Survivor

Low in Agency, Low in Communion
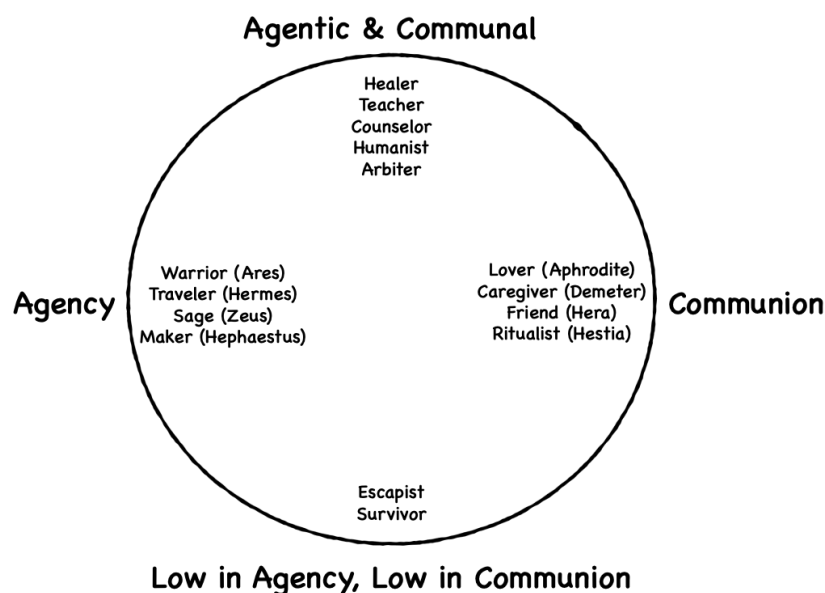
McAdams points to the importance of managing relationships amongst our main inner characters: "We come to understand ourselves better by a comprehensive understanding of the main characters that dominate the plot of our story and push the narrative forward. With maturity, we work to create harmony, balance, and

reconciliation between the often conflicting imagoes of our myth" (McAdams, 1993, p. 123).

A theatre of narrators

The next step of the inquiry was to try to understand the inner characters that were most active during my version of the soul's rape. I'll describe the main steps of what is now a five-year old process here. I include personal details of the work because they are relevant for the remaining stages of the inquiry.

I started with McAdams' taxonomy as an organising structure. I imagined how my confused energies might show up as different characters, some representing personal power, some personifying the need for human connection. I also tried to imagine where each of the characters might sit inside McAdams' structure.

Characters were eager to show up. It wasn't hard to translate behaviours or patterns of behaviour as players on my inner stage. I imagined the anger I mention above as a ferocious warrior or a furious beast. Sometimes he was a warrior in the form of a tribesman. Sometimes he showed up with a wild red screaming face, full of wide-eyed rage and terror. He was at home in the jungle, hunting to survive, fighting to protect. He was unfiltered anger, rage against enemies. He was the lion who catches and dispatches the hyenas. But he felt like an unformed character. I placed him on the agentic side of the structure.

I placed the clear, rational, polite and friendly spirit on the other side of the structure. He appeared in my imagination sometimes as a subtle and clever figure, calculating what moves would most likely reach the right outcome. I imagined that during my leadership challenge he was frowning, as if he were running out of moves to make. Sometimes he was wearing a suit, sitting on the floor up against a wall, head down, wondering what to do next. I wasn't sure what to call him because, like the warrior, he was multidimensional. I thought of him as a Diplomat, bringing together different players for the right outcome. Sometimes I thought of him as a Pleaser. I didn't like this label as much as I liked Diplomat. Diplomat implied a level of professionalism. Pleaser meant sycophant. But I couldn't remove the Pleaser label and remain honest.

Whoever he was, he had felt at home in the hallways of the organisation until those hallways became dark. He thought things through and then thought them through again. He spoke carefully. Sometimes he felt wise. He felt guided by a strong set of values, and he was convinced that living according to these values would help him have a good life. He believed in Janoff-Bulman's three primary narratives, that he was a worthy player in a benevolent and fair world.

The warrior-monster and the pleaser-diplomat were the two first imagoes to appear, I think because they were at war. The Pleaser had been running the inner theatre for a long time. He had guided my behaviour. He managed me into a favourable place in the hierarchy. He was clever. He was calculating. Thanks to him, I imagined, I had had a good career, a nice salary, a beautiful house. He enabled me to create many of the prouder stories I told myself about who I am. When I imagine him at his best, he is saying: *If I follow the rules, do my work, get good results, I'll be ok.* When I imagine him sitting on the floor, back against the wall, he is saying: *What the hell happened? What kind of world allows this shit?* Most of the narratives at the top of my narrative hierarchy belonged to him. He didn't want to give them up. He had the most to lose. It seemed like the story of my trauma was also a story of the dominant narrator losing his grip and howling at the moon.

Because the monster was so used to being in the cage, he didn't know what to do when he was let out. He showed up in the strangest ways. I imagined that the monster was all strength and claws and retribution. I imagined that if he showed up more, that if he were stronger and more visible, the hyenas might think twice about biting when my back was turned.

I noticed that it wasn't helpful to think of the Monster or the Pleaser as inherently good or bad. Mediating between them meant that any judgement of wrongness was probably a judgement by another imago driven by its own agenda. But the centre of gravity between them seemed to be too far in favour of the Pleaser. The cost of giving so much narrative power to the Pleaser, I imagined, was that I couldn't 'nice' my way through mobbing. I thought that some shift in narrative power between the Monster and the Pleaser needed to take place to keep life's hyenas at bay. The Pleaser had been working according to a narrative that promised a good life if rules were respected and the right people were pleased. The monster introduced a counter-narrative, that the world is

brutal and vicious and unfair and to be prepared to fight because there are monsters out there and you need your own monsters to fight back.

The mystery of the Monster and the Pleaser imagoes felt like enough territory for me to explore, but three other imagoes showed up.

One was detached from the first two. He was curious spirit, observant, interested, somehow stern and judgemental in the beginning. At first, I thought he might be a Healer, but the name didn't stick. I settled on Artist-Author, although I am not sure if this is quite right. He observes my inner world and makes notes. He is curious about the two main players in the structure. I thought of him as both an agentic and a communal imago because of his ability to observe curiously felt powerful and connective. I also felt that he was somehow above the fray, so it felt correct to place him above the others in McAdams' structure.

The other two imagoes sit at the bottom of the structure. They are connected but different. I think of one of them as the Wound. He sits on a cold stone floor, back against the wall, head up, arms resting on his legs. He is grey-skinned and muscular. His only clothes are tattered grey pants, and his big wide eyes are open and a little sad. His mouth is permanently shut. I am not sure how to understand this imago. I think of him as the container of pain. His posture might be of a fighter taking a break between rounds. Over time he shows up more and more as holding something important within him. He isn't a victim. He is much deeper than that. Because of his presence, I shifted how I thought of the bottom of McAdams' structure. When I first saw McAdams' labelling in the "low in agency, low in communion" area of the structure – the Survivor, the Escapist – I believed that imagoes that were neither agentic nor communal were weak. When the Wound arrived, I began to imagine that we might have characters within who are deeper than concepts of power and connection. The Wound held darker knowledge than did the other imagoes. He lived in my underworld. But he wasn't speaking. It didn't feel wrong that he wouldn't speak. I imagined that he imagines that his presence says enough, if I am willing to listen.

Keeping company with the Wound at the bottom of the structure is a character I think of as the Dreamer-Child. He is how I imagine I sometimes was when I was very young in moments when I opened myself up to mystery. He asks: "Where is God"? and "What

is after the Universe"? He likes the Church's rituals. He is captivated by the idea of a heaven and an earth and a mediator between them. He immerses himself in their stories. He goes alone to the little creek near the family house in Ottawa and explores the water and the forest, for hours. He looks sideways at my work troubles and wonders why they matter. It feels proper that the Wound and the Dreamer-Child are at the bottom of McAdams' structure. They access deeper meaning.

McAdam's structure was a useful way for me to imagine how my inner narrators might have reacted to my leadership challenge. It helped me imagine in what sense reconciliation between imagoes might be necessary. The approach was a useful answer to the kind of psychological stress that Duffy and Sperry claim comes from the non-sense of organisational aggression (Duffy and Sperry, 2014) and a first step in healing Kalsched's inner aggression (Kalsched, 1996).

When I worked on mapping out my inner cast of characters, I noticed some phenomena of the imagination

I noticed that all five of the imagoes came quickly and had an immediate core meaning to them. I also noticed that my imagination flickered between images around each character. I took this to mean that each character held multiple meanings. For example, the warrior was sometimes noble and expert, and sometimes he was a raging monster. In my experience, imagoes were not the idealised and simple characters that McAdams described. Each one had its own complexities. Each one had its own stories. The real value of working with them seemed to be in exploring their stories.

I also noticed that exploring my inner theatre started to free my imagination from a sense of being held captive by my work troubles. Exploration distanced me from the experience. Creating this distance felt like another essential step in turning advocacy into inquiry, pain into learning, past mistakes into future possibilities, intrusive rumination to intentional rumination.

Relationships between cast members

McAdams writes that reconciliation between imagoes is the process of a mature adult (McAdams, 1993). Much of my work in service of this reconciliation was to sort out the spirits behind the imagoes, the truths they contained, and the lies they told. For

example, the Pleaser had a thoughtful and conciliatory spirit. His truth was contained in a deep need for connection and a belief that conflicts should only happen when the outcomes truly matters. His lie was that his was the only way to manoeuvre through the world. Likewise, the Monster's brutal energy fuelled a spirit of action and conflict. His truth was that sometimes it is necessary to fight, and that there is no shame in being properly equipped. His lie was that he could step in and save the day whenever the Pleaser failed.
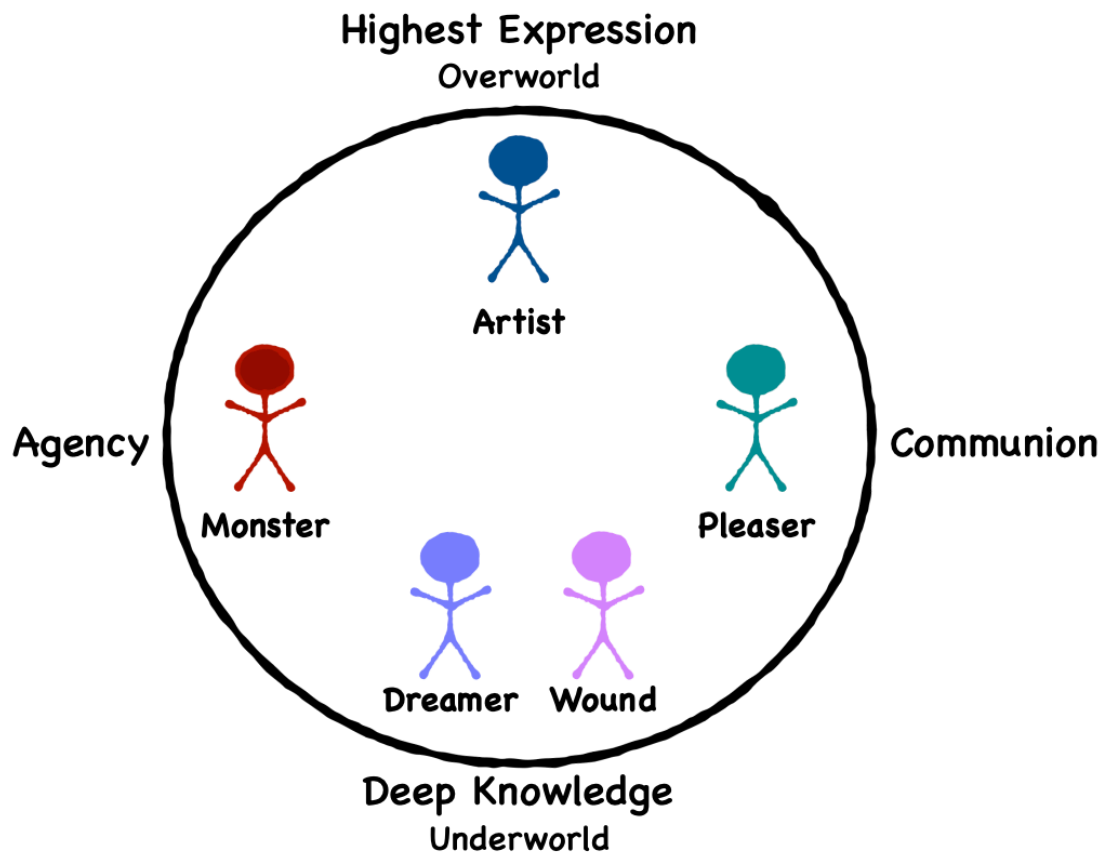
In my emerging version of McAdams' structure, horizontal relationships and vertical relationships had different qualities. By that I mean that the horizontal relationships between the agentic and the communal spirits needed balance. The vertical relationships between the Dreamer-Child, the Wound and the Artist were a different story. My sense was that the two imagoes at the bottom of the structure were deeper than ideas of power and connection. Something in them seemed to contain deep knowledge. The state of my understanding of them fed into the quality of the image at the top of the structure, the Artist-Author. The better I understood my depths, the clearer the meaning behind the Artist-Author image came to be.

I came to think of the vertical relationship between the Artist and the two spirits at the bottom of the structure as one of *Orientation*. The imagoes in my depths nurtured a spirit that helped me understand what might be most meaningful to my life and what might be worthy of my focus and energy. The figure that emerged out of these depths, the imago at the top of the structure, was both powerful and connective.

Additionally, I came to think of the horizontal relationship between the Warrior and the Pleaser as one of *Engagement*. The imagoes that I could define by their agency or communion seemed to be there to help me manage myself effectively in the world. The Monster and the Pleaser had their own points-of-view on how I might best do this. In my case, there was an imbalance between the two that needed correcting, both in terms of stage time and competence. The Pleaser was better at pleasing than the Monster was at being monstrous.

I settled on a configuration that built on McAdams myth-based structure but reflected my inner theatre. On the sides were the imagoes who balanced power and connection because both were needed to manage myself in the world. At the top was an imago

that seemed to represent me at my best, when I was living my life in the most meaningful way. At the bottom were deeper, more mysterious spirits that held a different kind of knowledge.

Highest Expression
Overworld

Artist

Agency

Monster

Pleaser

Communion

Dreamer   Wound

Deep Knowledge
Underworld

Constructing the imago map was creative and distracting. Making sense of the spirits that stirred up in me in the face of the external aggression was itself an agentic, emergent act. I could think of myself as an inner stage on which different characters played. I could learn about myself by learning about the stories told by these different inner spirits.

To the Pleaser the leadership experience was a story of approaching a difficult challenge with a clear head and high hopes. The arc of his story is that the old beliefs on which he constructed his world didn't work in the new circumstance. As he lost confidence he began to doubt.

To the Monster, it was a story of being needed but also being underdeveloped. He was frustrated at his inability to express himself properly. He wanted out of the cage but didn't know what to do once the cage door was opened.

The Artist watched from above and took notes. He was a silent observer. He is now more active and more joyful, mediating between the others without judging. He is also forming.

The Wound held a more interesting and elemental wisdom. He wouldn't talk, but as the leadership story progressed it was clear that he had much to teach to the players who were interested enough to learn from him.

The Dreamer-Child was distracted from his awe and wonder and beauty in the world by the work events. He was saddened and a little disappointed by them. He felt the pain of the experience as much as the Wound did.

Approaching the experience from the different angles of the imagoes helped me deal with the confusion of competing inner narratives. It was a way of exercising narrative completeness, a process that Duffy and Sperry believe is essential to recovery from destructive experiences:

> The fuller and more complete a post-trauma narrative is in terms of the details of the mobbing and its effects on the victim and the victim's family and friends, the more likely the victim is to recover well from the trauma. Being able to tell the story of what happened during the mobbing and to map its effects helps victims to place the mobbing experience into context and to attribute personal meaning to it. For most mobbing victims, the experience of having been mobbed is a life-altering one that shatters previously held beliefs about fairness, justice, loyalty, personal competence and confidence, and what the future will hold (Duffy and Sperry, 2014, p.118).

I add to their observation that the more imaginative and exploratory a post-trauma narrative is, the more likely the victim is to open up possibilities for growth from the trauma.

I began to think of the many different ways the imagoes told their stories and the importance of hearing each of their voices. I saw the anger sketch as an indication of the Monster's inability to express himself in a nuanced way. I saw many of the notes I took during the experience as coming from a Pleaser that was losing control and having a hard time looking away from his own limitations. I saw my writing about 'what's wrong' as the Wound making a difficult confession.

Giving all voices space on the inner stage was important. Unifying narratives were even more helpful. "It Doesn't Work", a mythologized version of the story which was written late in the inquiry, and which I share later in the text, might have come from the Artist. The 20,000-word version of the story that I wrote after reading Duffy and Sperry was a prequel to that story, written by a grumpier version of the Artist. That story also let in all the voices without privileging any of them. They were happy to be noticed.

Working with and refining McAdams' imago structure put me on more solid psychological footing. Now, I had a story to tell about my experience that was more interesting, honest, and helpful than 'they are bad, I am good'. But the work led to two additional questions whose exploration was the next stage of the inquiry. The two questions were connected.

The first question was about my ability to make conscious changes in the inner structure. I noticed that the imagoes came on their own. I noticed that while it took conscious effort to attach meaning to them, the meaning itself also appeared on its own. I noticed that many of the imagoes had different ways of showing up and that the impermanence of their imagining seemed to relate to how well I understood their meaning, or to the multiple meanings in them.

Finally, I noticed that identifying imagoes was not the same thing as controlling them. Feeling that there was an imbalance between the Monster and the Pleaser didn't solve the issue. Nor did trying to summon the Monster to be more present. Working with the imagoes to understand their presence and to make them more or less present required deeper exploration. My curiosity was about how to explore.

My second question came from recognising that the act of exploring the imago map was an *imaginative* act. It was an imaginative construct, shaped by McAdams' own

imaginative construct. I couldn't claim a truth to it other than it passed Schein's test for validity-through-helpfulness. Realising the importance of imagination in how I interpreted experience, including my leadership experience, led to a curiosity about how imagination interprets experience. A series of related questions fed the inquiry's next step:

My imagination produced five imagoes. It helped me to attach meaning to each of them. What forces guided these imaginative outcomes? Why these five imagoes, and not five others? Or ten others? Or none?

How did these forces influence my imagination as it gave meaning to the leadership events that led to my dismissal? To what extent could they help me heal after the experience?

Could my imagination be trusted? Did it serve me? Could it betray me? Did its ability to serve or betray change due to the narrative destruction implied by trauma?

Narrative fictions

These questions turned the inquiry towards how my imagination functioned during the disorienting leadership experience. There were two dimensions to the exploration: One was a general question about the function of the imagination. The second dimension was a curiosity about how to interpret the results of the imagination's story-producing mechanisms. Two helpful steps towards the exploration of clinical psychology's perspective on imagination helped set the stage for that work.

The first step was to understand the importance of the imagination's ability to construct fiction. Historian Yuval Noah Harari describes this ability as the cognitive evolution that allowed Homo sapiens to triumph over our Neanderthal competitors (Harari, 2011). Harari's work focuses on the importance of shared fictions to bring together large groups of people. He writes about our "ability to transmit information about things that do not exist at all. As far as we know, only Sapiens can talk about entire kinds of entities that they have never seen, touched or smelled" (Harari, 2011, p. 27). He calls such entities "fictions", and he includes amongst his long list of shared fictions organisations, myths, religions, and even legal systems (Harari, 2011). They are useful

because they bind large groups of people together in ways that would not have been possible without the fiction's connective glue.

Harari focuses on fiction's usefulness in the outer world rather than in the inner world, but he helped me understand the importance of imagined realities – fictions – in my imago work. I imagined that a cast of characters lived in me, but I could not see, touch or smell them. They were a fiction, a useful way for me to make sense of my conflicting spirits. Each of the imagoes was an imagined fiction. So were the relationships between them.

Harari is careful to state that imagined realities or fictions are not necessarily lies. "Unlike lying," he writes, "an imagined reality is something that everyone believes in, and as long as this communal belief exists, the imagined reality exerts force in the world" (Harari, 2011, p. 35). An interesting turn in inner work happens when imagined realities are assumed to be actual realities, and when their fictionality is exposed. For example, I imagined that the organisation in which I worked would operate in a certain way, but this fiction did not hold up to reality. An exploration of this fictionality shows that it isn't surprising. Gareth Morgan describes over a dozen images of organisation in his work on how imagining organisations risks distorting them (Morgan, 2006). I imagined fictions about each of the players in the drama – *they are evil, I am good* – just as I imagined a fictional set of characters inside of me. Doing so helped me to make sense of the story.

Opening myself to the usefulness of imagined fictions helped me detach myself from the need to arrive at 'truthfulness' in my work. Exploring narratives began to feel like a creative enterprise rather than a search for empirical evidence. It also made me more willing to accept the possibility that some of my fictions were actually lies. The encouragement of Marshall and Turner-Vesselago to turn narrative energy fear-ward expanded. I turned my energy lie-ward as well. The fictions that were obvious lies seemed to hold a promise of growth. I could imagine that my narrative lies were there for important reasons.

A second step was to understand how to explore my imagined realities. Narrative researcher Molly Andrews' recent work on narrative imagination helped me set some theoretical foundations. Andrews writes that imagination:

> … guides us from our waking hour to when we go to bed at night. It is with us always, sitting side by side with our reason and perception… It is our imagination which assists us in synthesising the information we take in about the world around us, and helps us to process it, looking beyond and beneath what is (Andrews, 2014, p. 11).

It seemed to me that a mediating force of such importance ought to be explored. The worlds of religion and psychology steered my exploration. So did Andrews' comments about the importance of movement between belief and scepticism when it comes to narrative research. I will share the story of this movement in her own words because it mirrors my sense that caution should be liberally applied to any sense of having found a truth when it comes to narrative research.

> Our narrative imagination both synthesises and deconstructs the knowledge we acquire from being in the world; thus, it helps us to bring together discordant entities, to perceive a new 'wholeness', a new reality or potential reality, just as it assists us in making the familiar strange. This dynamic creates a fundamental tension which lies at the heart of personal narrative research: a tension between the willingness to believe, to be transported to somewhere new, on the one hand, and a critical scepticism on the other, contradictory positions which often sit hand in hand, alternating turns of dominance at different moments of the research process (Andrews, 2014, p. 14).

Andrews describes narrative research as an exploration for personal meaning rather than as a search for empirical truth. It was a quest for what might be rather than for what necessarily was. Her description of *the tension of what might be* helped me understand an interesting phenomenon when I wrestled to extract meaning from my imagoes. McAdams positioned imagoes as idealised characters who play important parts in our inner mythologies (McAdams, 1993). I noticed that imago exploration was only useful if I imagined at the depth of details. It was not enough just to imagine that these idealised inner characters existed. I needed to dig into who they were and why they were the way they were. I needed to imagine each of their stories. They were too complex to be simplified. But the attempt to understand imagoes in detail, even if detail

was elusive, was the point. The value of the exploration was in exploring the 'what might be' and not at all in arriving at a 'what is.'

I rejected imago exploration as a surface-level exercise using vague ideas of archetypes or spirits as imaginative material. I found this type of approach in most of the literature I reviewed regarding inner-character work. Larsen's work on mythic imagination, for example, was useful for its warnings about the dangers of having one character dominate the inner theatre. He writes about a dream he had which indicated this dominance might be happening within him: "The reason I awoke with fear was that for my soul to become identical – married – with any part-personality would be a psychological disaster" (Larsen, 1996, p. 185).

He also writes about the need for harmony amongst the inner actors: "We all have inner committees, and we are healthy when they (mostly) agree, and unhealthy when they do not, especially when they disagree in serious ways" (Larsen, 1996, p. 187). And: "What is truly frightening in madness and possession is the cast of characters that is out of control or has gotten caught in some warped drama of ultimate struggle. None of our internal parts has the right to seize exclusive control (the dictator), and all do best when they recognise the existence (and the right to exist) of all the others" (Larsen, 1996, P. 204). But in his clinical work Larsen stays with vaguely defined characters, referring to the imagined mythical figures that best define their different energies: Zeus for authority, Ares for force, Hermes for guile, etc.

I had a similar experience when exploring other models for structuring inner theatre. Boothroyd's recent work on what he calls the male archetypes of Warrior, Magician, Lover, and King mirrors in some ways McAdams' structure. Boothroyd explains that each archetype – each template that shapes the way we think and feel and that are common to all of humanity – is complex enough to carry a shadow within it. Even as he explains possible connections between archetypes, though, he imagines them as universal energies (Boothroyd, 2018, in recent work that acknowledges and builds on similar work from Moore and Gillette, 1990).

That may be, but while their universality was reassuring (I'm not alone!), for me the value of imago work was through imagining each of them as keepers of their own unique narratives. Each imago was *my* imago by virtue of having been developed

through my experiences and shaped by the complex mechanisms of my imagination. It seemed to me that I was instinctively playing with Andrews' tension of detachment and belief here. Each imago was a rich character within me and so wasn't all of me. I could explore them individually without fear of self-harm. But if I explored their richness from different angles to learn what I could from their stories, which were also versions of my stories, I could believe in them far more than if I thought of them as idealised mythical characters, or as external spirits that had somehow possessed me.

Andrews' tension between belief and scepticism highlights the challenges of research in narrative-knowing, one of two ways of knowing observed by cognitive psychologist Jerome Bruner (Bruner, 1986). Bruner describes a well-formed argument, the other way of knowing, as a search for empirical truth. He describes a good story as a search for lifelikeness, a search for "how to endow experience with meaning" (Bruner, 1986, Loc. cit. 166 of 2507). I found further guidance in narrative sense-making when I turned to religious scholarship to understand the strange tension between my doubts about the religion in which I was raised and my lasting attachment to its stories. I struggled with the incoherence of that doubt-and-belief, and I wondered if attempts to derive meaning from religious myths might help me understand how to work with my own stories.

Karen Armstrong's vast scholarship on evolving concepts of God helped. In her introduction to *A Case for God* (Armstrong, 2009), she argues that we miss the point of distilling meaning from the idea of God if we try to do it through reason, which she calls *logos*. *Logos* is "the pragmatic mode of thought that enabled people to function effectively in the world" (Armstrong, 2009, p. xi). Reason has been essential to our survival as a species, according to Armstrong, but "it has its limitations: it could not assuage human grief or find ultimate meaning in life's struggles. For that people turned to *mythos*, or 'myth'" (Armstrong, 2009, p. xi). *Logos* and *mythos* are two operating systems, each with its own benefits for sorting out how we engage with the world. *Mythos* is helpful in arenas where *logos* is ineffective. Armstrong explains that our inner world is such an arena, where myths were "designed to help people negotiate the obscure regions of the psyche, which are difficult to access but which profoundly influence our thoughts and behaviours. People had to enter the warrens of their own minds and fight their personal demons" (Armstrong, 2009, p. xi).

Armstrong mentions that attempting to derive meaning through *logos* in *mythos* territory risks turning Andrews' balance between belief and doubt into extremes: either blind, rigid belief (fundamentalism), or absolute scepticism (atheism). *Mythos* territory is territory for wrestling with the possibility of meaning, not for finding dogma. The point is in the active wrestling, not in rigid answers.

Turning towards *mythos* engagement helped me contend with my inner narratives in three ways:

First, it seemed natural to wrestle with possible meaning rather than search for rigid answers in the fiction-rich territory of my imagination. *Mythos* engagement helped me remain in the tension between belief and scepticism without feeling that the tension was destructive.

Second, my experience with organisational life is that it privileges *logos* far above *mythos*. Much of the leadership scholarship that I had encountered pretended at science. The therapeutic helpfulness of the work, however, increased when I was able to turn away from dogma towards meaning. Privileging *logos* came at the cost of deeper meaning.

Third, until this point in the inquiry I had experienced a strong tension between *logos* engagement and *mythos* engagement that I suspected was at the heart of trauma's disabling of our narrative capability. Trauma stimulates a need for narrative clarity. To the traumatised, uncertainty is threatening. In the chaos of trauma, our narrative instinct is for order. Order implies *logos*. My sense was that rich growth in narrative therapy for the traumatised might exist when the world of inner-narrative shifts away from the search for dogmatic clarity towards mythos possibilities, where meaning is wrestled from the imagined realities of our richly fictive narrative worlds.

Interpretation, in the narrative sense

At the end of Part One I included a narrative written shortly after losing my job. The story is imaginative: It integrates an imagined climbing partner and an imagined conversation with a climbing route I managed with a guide many years ago. Some of the details of the story – the description of the mountains around the route and the

screaming climber berating his guide on a neighbouring route – are not fictions. The rest is just a story.

Stein describes *elucidation/interpretation* as the stage in depth psychology that makes the temporary relief that comes with *confession* more permanent. Permanence comes from *interpretation's* ability to "help the person grow out of childhood and assume the power and responsibility of adulthood" (Stein, 1998, p. 78), and by bringing parts of ourselves that we don't like or might have hidden away because they don't help us get along in the world (the Jungian concept of shadow).

What struck me most about "Up on a Ledge" was that it brought me more relief than my factual or emotional writing did. Something about taking myself into a familiar but slightly dangerous place, the site of a past victory, and confessing in a fictional way lifted a psychological weight. Part of that lifting, I believe, was because my imagination located the story where I once overcame a significant mental challenge (I was nervous for most of the climb because I was stretched to the limits of my climbing capabilities). But my imagination was captured by two other dimensions in the narrative. I was intrigued by the quality of my friendly climbing companion, and by the quality of our conversation. Later, I concluded that the story was my imagination's way of pointing out that there are many characters in me, and that I was missing an inner character with whom I could have curious and constructive conversations. He might have been a more adult version of myself, and he might have been my imagination's way of hinting at who I wanted to become. This realisation came after I explored the story through McAdams' lens of multiple inner characters. The story was a confession, but my imagination included enough material for it to lead to interpretation. This was my main conclusion about writing imaginatively: *that the imagination naturally provides material for exploration and interpretation even when it's confessing, and that the relief of interpretation is a further step along the path towards wiser intentional narratives.*

Both of Stein's claims reflect my experience of interpretation. There was a sense of adult responsibility in conducting cycles of inquiry into who my inner characters might be, how they showed up, what stories formed them, what stories they told, and how they related to each other. Working with them was the first act in changing the headline of my leadership story from 'this happened to me' to 'this is how I am growing because

of it'. This maturation was reflected in how the Artist character developed in my imagination the more I explored the Dreamer-Child. The Artist seemed to be a more adult version of the Dreamer. He kept the Dreamer's sense of mystery but found ways to express it rather than simply hold it in awe. The Artist emerged when he developed a better relationship with his younger self.

Importantly, the work helped me understand that *interpretation* is an exercise in imagining what might be possible. It is not a search for truth. The search for the possible needs a language. Quality in interpretation is through the language of curiosity. It is a willingness to explore rather than to look for ways to support an established narrative dogma. This important quality characteristic might be difficult for the traumatised because traumatised people seek narrative certainty. When I challenged my 'they are bad, I am good' dogma I set off a war between an underdeveloped Monster and a tired and doubtful Pleaser. Imago work enabled me to distance myself from that war – it was 'their' war, not 'mine' – and to adapt a stance of curiosity. Curiosity brought me out of *logos* territory into *mythos* territory. This step was at the heart of the therapeutic usefulness of interpretation. It was the step that enabled me to ruminate more intentionally on the experience of my departure from my old workplace.

At the close Part Two, I share a narrative I wrote before "Up on a Ledge". The story, like "Up on a Ledge", integrates fiction with reality as a way to explore the unknown. The main character is a woman, and she is on a run that I used to do in the forests behind my house before my right knee gave out. I wrote the piece a few years before I became familiar with McAdams' work on inner characters, but the writing became a meaningful exploration of the imagined spirits within. Writing as a character who was so obviously different from me physically seemed to release me from the need to think about myself in a certain way. I will come back to that meaning in Part Three.

There is no fixed title for the story. But, for the purpose of this work, I'll call it "The Fallen Tree":

Breathing in…

exhaling….

Breathing in….

exhaling…

The cool forest air fills her lungs and she releases it sharply so that the oxygen in her veins can keep up with the demands of her moving body. She's running, more quickly than she usually would, on her favourite forest trail, a meandering loop in the woods behind her house. She's alone on the trail. Saturday mornings are quiet out here – most of the villagers are still sleeping. No dog-walkers in sight.

She runs and runs, breathing quickly, hurting, feeling the pain run through her legs and her lungs, arms keeping pace, head upright and fixed on the path ahead of her. She's grateful for the pain, a different kind of pain than the pain that has been following her home from work so often these months and especially these past days, after her confrontation with the President. Thank God for cleansing pain, she thinks. Thank God for her husband, who insisted that she go out for a run while he took care of breakfast for the kids. "You go", he said with a warm smile and a tight hug. "I'll manage here. You go." "Are you sure…?". He smiled and yelled upstairs "Kids, time for pancakes!" Pancakes!

I love this forest, she thinks. The trees are so tall. I love how they move in the wind. She notices the many branches littering the ground and the occasional newly fallen tree. A storm came through ten days ago and did some cleaning. One old beautiful oak has fallen directly across her path that hasn't yet been removed by the local forestiers. She has to scramble over it every time she passes through on one of her laps. I think I'll do ten today. Maybe twelve. At this pace she'll be lucky to do eight. I wish they'd remove that tree. It's tough to jump over. It breaks my stride.

The loop meanders up and down through the hilly forest and as she runs her legs get more painful, her breathing heavier, and she struggles to keep her form. But she doesn't slow down. She runs, and runs, until she is almost gasping for air. With each step, with each breath, she feels her mind clearing. That's why I love to run.

I hope he makes me some pancakes when I get back. She smiles.

She looks down at her sports watch. Her time is excellent, but at this speed there's no way she'll be able to run her usual distance. She's been going too quickly. Should I slow down? She doesn't.

Until she comes to the fallen tree again, blocking her path. The new and unwanted obstacle, breaking her stride, breaking her rhythm. She starts to plan her course over the trunk and through the branches once again, but then…

She stops.

She looks blankly at the fallen tree, and the scattered branches pointing this way and that, silent, absolutely mute and beautiful lying across the path. That's enough, she thinks, gasping still. No more running today. I'm done.

Instead of walking back to where she has left her the old Audi, a few hundred metres away, on a whim she veers off the path and walks slowly uphill, into the forest, through the browns and oranges and greys and greens of the trees and bushes and fallen leaves. After a few minutes of making her way around the bushes and trees, catching her breath as she goes, seeking some distance (but not too much) from the forest path, she spots just what she has been looking for. She walks up to a tall straight majestic pine, looks for signs of flowing sap against its trunk and, confident that she won't get any on her running shirt, she sits down against the tree. A cushion of fallen leaves feels comfortable beneath her. The bark of the tree against her back less so, but it is strong and solid. It supports her well.

Leaning back against the tree, arms balanced on her bent knees in front of her, she breathes, and listens to the sound of the wind in the trees. The ebb and flow of the wind, and the great trees bending slowly to its rhythm, dancing an eternal dance. She breathes in deeply, exhales slowly, and listens.

After a few minutes, she turns her mind from the soothing sounds of the forest around her to the recent confrontation at work. She remembers how terrible the President looked before her argument with him. How beaten. What a job it must be, herding these cats. How difficult it must be for him, a relatively quiet and introspective man. Many of his colleagues are so contemptuous of him. But he seems to want to do his best.

A quick thought passes through her mind – he wanted the job, he fought for it, he hurt other people to get it, now he has it so he should live with it – but she doesn't let the thought get traction. She reaches out for the balance that seems to be settling in her mind. Without focusing but with this idea of balancing in her heart and body and in her breath, she tries to stay open to these new perspectives. She lets them come to her.

He fought for the job, for sure, but how terrible it must be to have so many people he thought were friends turn against him. How terrible to have to exercise control when it seems impossible with this group.

How terrible that his natural leadership style, to build consensus, has been so badly abused by the people who asked him to lead. There is no consensus in this place – it is designed against consensus! These 'friends' asked him to lead because they trusted that his soft nature would serve them well. They were

right, but how they beat any sense of strength and decision-making out of him. And we, his team, aren't helping.

Even if he is unfit for the role, so what. He took up a challenge hoping for success but without any guarantees. We all do that. Life is like that.

What about how badly he has treated you? The thought passes through her again. What about the constant undermining and badmouthing and bullying? The previous thoughts felt artificial, like small drops of water being poured on a fire, but at least they weren't feeding the fire. This last thought, this 'what about me' feels like gasoline.

Don't worry about me, she thinks. We are both doing our best to make it work, and we are both struggling. It is natural that he reaches for influence and success in your area – he believes that he has an expertise in what you do, and he is desperate for influence. Of course, he is. If you want to focus on you, focus on why you took the job when you knew the risks, when you knew him, and his personality. Focus on the boredom you were feeling when they asked you to take this on. Focus on your own stubbornness, your own 'do it my way' spirit. Focus on all of that. But gently. Very gently. And once you have sorted out how to be gentle with your own many mistakes, you might be wiser with his.

But what about…!!!

She stops the thought before it gets too far. And smiles. She turns her attention again to the feel of the hard bark against her straight back, and slowly she gets up, still smiling.

They may be little drops of water on the fire, she thinks, but they still feel good. And little drops add up.

Time for those pancakes, she thinks, and starts to jog slowly through the leaves towards the old car.

A conversation about the research
Writing into the periphery

Before turning to Part Three, I want to share another example of how working with imaginative storytelling helped shift me from intrusive narrative to intentional narrative.

The following example is a conversation between some version of me ('M', in the story) and an imagined character who showed up in my imaginations as 'E'. The conversation with E came long after I wrote two other imagined conversations in the form of "A Fallen Tree" and "Up on a Ledge". In both of those narratives I integrated the real (place, topic) with the imagined (the person with whom I engaged in conversation and the conversation itself).

These imaginary conversations helped me to bring form to my scattered thinking. The conversation with E came after imago work enabled me to imagine the characters who dominated my inner theatre during the work crisis. The point of that work was to harmonize the relationships amongst them. The conversation with E was a harmonizing conversation.

I couldn't identify her with any of the characters in the inner theatre. She might have been helping me to bring my inner characters together. In this sense her presence was therapeutic and writing out conversations with her was a practice in developing a sort of self-therapeutic consciousness. As articulated in Part Four, post-trauma growth emphasizes the importance of expert companionship in the process of growth. E became one way I tried to become an expert companion to myself.

It is important to note that my imagination was specific when it conjured up E – a woman (but not the same woman as my runner in the woods). She is younger than I am, maybe in her late 30s or early 40s. She shows up in some detail in my imagination, but I can't quite make out her features and I am not able to consciously change who she is. She ignores my attempts to give her a different form, or to call her something else. She is E. My imagination conjures her up as she is for its own reasons. When I try too hard to define her, she starts to fade.

The writing that follows contains a story within the story. E and I talk through a piece I wrote when I was developing skills in writing-as-inquiry. I was frustrated by my inability to use writing to bring order out of my inner chaos. Every time I tried to write directly into my experience, I came up empty.

The piece I discuss with E is the story of a family member who passed away from cancer just before I was offered the new leadership role. I decided to write the story because I imagined it might have something to do with how I was feeling about myself and about how the world works. I wondered if writing about something *just off to the side* might help me understand how to write about something *right in front*. In the following piece I write the story of the experience, the story of writing the story, and the story of writing the story within the story.

To set up my conversation with E, note that we don't know each other well and, as a prelude to our meeting, I have sent her a mythologized version of the story about how I was fired. This is a second 'story within the story' in our conversation. The story is called "It Doesn't Work".

"It Doesn't Work (A Useful Fiction) – Part One"

The man steps across the alcove and through the door into the King's office.

The King sits at his small wooden table. The office is large and there are old bookshelves lined with books on the surrounding walls.

The King is a big man. He wears a blue suit and a tie, and the top button of his shirt is undone.

Beside him is the Jester, who is smaller than the King and awkward and has a thin beard.

On the table sits a single white sheet of paper, set in the middle and turned towards him. The typing on it is large and the first line says LETTER OF DISMISSAL.

The man sees the writing on the paper and he becomes angry. You corrupt and cowardly fuckers. He hears the sound of iron chains clattering and crashing, threatening to break.

The man tries to calm himself. He knows the players well enough to know how they work. This is expected.

The man sits opposite the Jester and beside the King. The King sits back in his oversized chair. He tries hard to look relaxed.

Out? The man asks the King, his shaking voice betraying a rising hate. We were supposed to talk about what's next, not about it's over.

He doesn't expect a truthful response. He expects squirming. Squirming is what he gets.

The King says something about bad leadership. He says that the man did not follow the Wizard's directions. The Wizard oversees the running of this little kingdom and although the Wizard advised, he was not supposed to orchestrate. The King was supposed to orchestrate. The man imagines that his firing would have been orchestrated by the two of them, with the blessing of a handful of the Kingdom's gang of Aristocrats, the Kingdom's real holders of power.

The man is confused by the King's response. He asks for honesty. He asks for clarity. The King squirms more, like he is trying to hold on to a flapping fish that's too big for his small hands. The King struggles to articulate in the formless space around the truth. They both know that the King speaks nonsense. They both know that it doesn't matter.

The man jots down notes as the King mumbles his explanations. The man's lawyer suggested this practice. But the man isn't listening. His imagination jumps in and around a random mess of memories he's collected over twenty years of work in the Kingdom.

He remembers the young man he was when he first arrived two decades ago, wide-eyed and captured by the beauty of the place. He left the Kingdom after a few years but came back. He remembers telling a friend at the time: I'll stay for a while and then find something else to do. Forever the wanderer, thought the man. I'm here, but I'm always on my way somewhere else.

A few years turn into many years in the blink of an eye, not because he planned it that way but because that's what happened while he wasn't paying attention.

He went from a small job in the Kingdom to a larger one, and the larger job eventually became important for the Kingdom and important for the young man. As the Kingdom grew, so did his belief that he was doing meaningful work and that he was good at it. He imagined that the Kingdom's success was his success, and he appreciated this clever trick of the imagination. It allowed him to lock away his doubts about himself and his doubts about the Kingdom in a quiet dark corner.

He worked hard, and the small group of Aristocrats who ran the Kingdom appreciated him for it. He became friends with some of them. When he married a woman that he met in the Kingdom and suddenly had a 7-year-old stepson, his

wonderful stepson became friends with the children of some of the Aristocrats. He found land and built a nice house and settled and felt some roots grow into the earth.

This matters, and because it matters, I matter too, he said to himself. Real connection between us can happen, even at work, he told himself, surprised at the conclusion and curious that it mattered to him. Knowing that this was the case felt like pulling light out of a deep black hole.

Snapshot memories passed quickly, images that attached meaning to his time in the Kingdom.

Meeting his first wife there and, after they parted, meeting his second wife there too. Trips and parties and hallway talk, adventures great and small, celebrations and serious conversations, and year after year deep discussion about where the place was going and how it should get there. Deciding at one point that the country in which the Kingdom lay was home and that he would no longer treat it as if it were someplace he was staying on the way to somewhere else. Work successes and happy performance reviews and gratitude for his contribution, and year after year of praise and nice bonuses. Lofty positions on industry bodies, papers written, and presentations made. If these years were a chapter in his life, it was a long and happy chapter and the man who was no longer the young man would have called the Chapter "It Works!". He had proof that it works. Look at how we live, he would tell himself. Look at the places we go. Look at the work we do. It is important work. Often the man believed it.

The man knew it worked because the doubts he had about himself and about the Kingdom rested quietly in that dark corner, a magnificent leopard, the truth of being human waiting patiently to be free.

The man remembered the quick succession of events that grabbed the shoulders of that truth, shook it awake and set it free.

He remembered being offered a job on the Inner Council when the new King was appointed. He was proud to accept the offer even if he wasn't too sure about the new King. I belong, he thought. I am good, he thought. It felt good to be good.

He remembered being asked by the Wizard to take over a part of the Kingdom that had once been ruled directly by the King. He accepted that offer too. He also remembered the Wizard's words as he tried to convince the Man to step up to that role. We'll support you, the Wizard said, as the King stayed silent. If you don't take this, we will find someone else who will, said the Wizard, in what sounded to the man like a threat.

Voices in the man's head said: be careful.

The man answered back: I will be. This will work. This could work.

The voices echoed: be careful.

The man answered: I will be careful.

But the man couldn't find any space between being careful and being honest. When some of the Aristocrats pointed out to him that some of their colleagues seemed to be stealing from the Kingdom, he noticed that their fellow Aristocrats in the Inner Circle looked away.

When the Kingdom performed well and the Wizard and King told him not well enough, the man wondered why they turned a harsh eye towards the Kingdom's workers but ignored the damage being done by some of the flustered and flailing Aristocrats.

After he talked to the Inner Circle about the stealing Aristocrats, a few of them started telling lies about him. A friend said to him: They won't stop until you are gone, you can step aside, or you can fight. The man was angry, and he fought. They are crazy, a wise man told him. There's no winning! Run! But the man didn't run. Don't become like them just to fight them, another wise man told him. Fight by the rules that matter to you. The man tried, but their rules were the Kingdom's rules. The rules were made for them. They did not help him.

Too bad we can't settle this on the street, the man sometimes thought. They hide in a pretend world that allows them to do what they want. They don't need to be afraid. Sometimes there was a spirit in him that wanted to meet these hyenas where they couldn't hide. It would be different if these rules didn't protect them, he thought. He dreamt about how satisfying it would be to meet these hyenas on his ground.

You must be tough on your people, the King told him once. Make them work! The man brought in people to help them work well and some of them complained to the King. Don't be so tough on your people, the King told him. I didn't bring you in to be tough on your people! He felt like he was being lectured by a man who had no idea what he was doing.

A strange transformation happened in the man during these months when the hyenas started to bite and run, bite and run. The Kingdom's hallways became dark. Where once he felt safe, the man now felt threatened. This space was no longer his space. Where once he understood the maps that defined the Kingdom's territory, he was now confused. The skin he inhabited felt uncomfortable too, like it was losing its shape. It was awkward. He was awkward.

The Aristocrats that had been his friends became dark too. Some of them averted their eyes when they saw him, or they turned and walked in a different direction. One approached him in the middle of the Kingdom's main hall when many people were around and said to him: The King tells us that you will soon be told to leave. Is it

true? When the Aristocrat asked this question, he sounded excited. I am entertainment for these hyenas, the man thought.

The Wizard asked an old member of the High Council to look at the man's work. They made the results a secret and they decided to include the hyenas and the ignorant on the man's jury. The man thought, now I am done.

This place is perverse, the workers told him, shaking their heads and going back to their work.

Here in the King's office the man wants to punch the King in the face, to take him by his big pale white neck and throw him against the book-lined walls of his office. Instead, he asks the King questions. Something is wrong with his voice when he speaks to the King. Whatever chains restrain his monsters also restrain his voice. He isn't saying what he wants to say.

Soon there is nothing more to talk about without lawyers so the King finishes by saying, don't worry, we will throw you a party if you leave nicely. The man thinks, we are too different to ever connect.

The man leaves. As he walks out of the King's office, he wonders at the strange mix of anger and fear, shame and hate that is in him. He walks to the space where he has sat every day for many years. As he walks, another memory comes to him. He remembers the Wizard taking him to a banquet hall to discuss the possibility of assuming responsibility for a part of the Kingdom that had been ruled directly by the King. The King was there too, but the Man couldn't remember the King saying anything while they ate. The man did remember how beautiful it all was, and how he felt privileged and at the same time out-of-place. Such beautiful clothes, he thought.

As the Wizard explained all the good reasons why the man should do what he was being asked to do, a script ran through the man's mind. The script was a version of how the drama would play out if the man bowed now to the Wizard. It told him: to do what the Wizard asks you to do you will need to fight the Aristocrat hyenas. The Wizard will be forced to choose between the hyenas and you. The hyenas will win. The man thought to share this script with the Wizard, but he didn't. Later he counted how many seconds it would have taken to tell that story and it wasn't many.

Maybe if I stretch myself a little this way and that way the clothes will fit, he thought.

The clothes look good, the Wizard said. But later the man would ask himself, what if I had shared that script, which was a prophecy. What would it have changed? He didn't know the answer. This is the first time the treacherous game of questions captures his imagination. It would come back often in the months that followed. What if I hadn't taken the job, he asks himself many times, and he thinks he knows the answer. What if I had been more careful with these people is a harder question to

answer. What if I imagined me being him, and him being me is a more difficult version of the game?

The man gets to his space and puts some things in a bag to take home. The King asked him to be nice, but the man knows that he will fight. He knows that ahead of him are a host of questions that he will struggle to answer. If not this, what? If not here, where? If not this me, which one? As he slings the bag over his shoulder and walks out of this treacherous space, he thinks: It doesn't work. If it doesn't work, what does? When he arrives home and talks to his concerned wife, he sounds more confident than he is. If I don't know what works, he thinks, will any of this stay?

"That's an interesting story," E says, looking up from the final page of "It Doesn't Work". Her coffee cup is empty, so she waves over one of the University café's student baristas for a refill. Most of the University's students finished their exams a week or two ago. Except for a few unlucky off-season residents, they are alone.

It's too early in the day for the jazz music they normally have blaring over the café's large screen TVs to be turned above a whisper. Leave it to the Swiss to have a funky, hip Montreux Jazz Café at the edges of their most accomplished technical research university. Leave it to their sense of discretion to notice that they need quiet for their conversation. The baristas pay attention but refrain from interrupting, content to chat amongst themselves behind the counter. They're busy making their own stories.

When the barista comes over with E's coffee, friendly and tattooed in the manner of today's hip Swiss youth, M asks him for another. He has plenty to talk about. Early-morning caffeine fuels the conversation.

M doesn't know E very well. She finished her own doctoral thesis a few years back and is familiar with the academic territory. He met her through work a couple of months ago during a program design day that was being hosted by her organization. They were at first unaware of their common academic paths but when they stumbled upon the subject and he described his research, E was interested enough to agree to a deeper conversation.

"I'll ask questions", she told him. "You answer them honestly. And you pay for coffee", she said with a smile. He agreed.

"Promise?" she asked, looking him in the eye.

"Promise", M said.

E is often in Geneva and so they arrange to meet in the café of the prestigious technical University where M's wife works, 30 minutes away from the city, along the north shore of the lake. The café's mood is relaxed. With the jazz theme all around us it is easy to sink into the world of improvisation and exploration, of working hard to understand a deeper meaning and even harder to express it soulfully.

E looks up from the papers she has in her hands. She closes her eyes, and, in keeping with their agreement, she starts with a question.

E: I am trying to imagine you during the time *right after* you were fired. I picture you in distress. I wonder how you must have thought about yourself at the time. Let's start there. What was going on inside of you?

M looks down at the empty coffee cup in his hands, wondering how to respond. Maybe with what was going on beneath the layers of confusion. He remembers those feelings well. Even now they are just below the surface.

M responds, looking directly at E.

M: I hated the people who conspired to get me out of their way. I hated the friends who weren't. I hated the complicit organization. Mobbing was many things, including a path to hate. I wasn't used to hating.

Behind the hate was anger, and beneath the anger was pain, and below that was humiliation. I suppose I was ashamed.

E: You suppose?

He frowns, looking back to his empty coffee cup. *Ok then.*

M: I didn't know how to fight back. I guess I shouldn't have been surprised at their behavior. Heifetz writes about how difficult it is for organizations to modify the stories they tell themselves about what they believe in. He writes about how brutal people can be in the face of that kind of change. It's not the change they resist. It's the loss that they imagine comes with the change.[11]

---

[11] *Heifetz writes about*… (Heifetz et al, 2009). Research by Heifetz, Grashow and Linsky explains the types of organisational change that are likely to result in traumatising behaviour. They describe adaptive change, or change in something that has been essential to the organisation's DNA and which will lead to a profound sense of

I was ashamed at my weakness.

His voice trails off. Funny how the memories are so vivid.

E: And?

M: I had to organize my legal case against the organization's leadership. I had to reassure my family that we were going to be OK. I had to find another job. I wanted to do more than the work I was doing at the old organization. I wanted to teach, to work with people who wanted to help their organizations be good organizations. And I had some work to do on myself.

His voice trails off again. The memories are thick.

E: And?

M: I lost confidence. My imagination hadn't been equal to the task to understanding the world. I imagined not being able to find a job, losing our home, losing my family. We wanted to stay in the area because my stepson's father lives nearby. But I don't speak the local language. I couldn't easily find a job in the local business community and there aren't too many global organizations nearby.

He catches himself. He doesn't want this to be a story of victimhood.

M: It's interesting how your confidence vanishes when you don't believe your own stories.

The young tattooed barista comes over with a fresh coffee. M is grateful for the interruption. He knows that he is only telling one version of the story. He remembers reading Umberto Eco's *The Infinity of Lists*. When we don't understand the boundaries of something, Eco writes, we pretend to comprehend it by listing its properties. But those properties might be infinite. And so, we fall to the aesthetic of it, to its essence, which is itself often infinite and unknowable.[12] His exploration into himself was an

---

loss, including the loss of the stories the organisation has been "telling themselves and the rest of the world about what they believe in, stand for, and represent" (p. 23). Their descriptions of adaptive change and its consequences reassured me that my leadership story wasn't unique.

The researchers provide what they call four tips for leaders who are considering taking on adaptive change. The first, "Don't do it alone", helped me understand a painful part of my narrative. They explain that enemies and allies alike will happily encourage the adaptive changer to pursue their change plans, but will very quickly abandon the change leader when support comes at a cost (pp. 41-42).

[12] *He remembers Umberto Eco's writing…* (Eco, 2009). Eco describes list-making as a method for attempting to make form out of the formless infinite. I was intrigued by the idea that listing inner narratives – that is writing them, exploring them, perhaps even categorising them – might be a helpful way for the destabilised leader or trauma victim to rediscover form in internal narrative structures that have been lost.

attempt to answer unanswerable questions. How to explain this task of writing his stories as if they were lists, meant to give form back to his life when essential forms were missing?

E saves M from this question by turning the conversation from the infinite to the formed and factual.

E: In the midst of all of this, your research shifted from the tactical to the psychological. What's *that* story?

M turns to a metaphor that helped him early in the story.

M: When you're alone on a small boat in the middle of a stormy sea, you look for safe places. In the early days of the research I searched for the safety of answers. Peterson and Seligman's work on character in leadership caught my attention.[13] The idea of shadow in leadership also caught my attention because it seemed to me that my story had a lot of shadows.[14] I also thought that exploring the sacred in leadership might help. I turned to meditation, prayer, mysticism. I tried to develop practices in some of them. I hiked and ran. These weren't new practices, but they had a different meaning when I took them up after having abandoned them for two years.

E: And?

M: I wrote about what I was experiencing. I wrote in all sorts of forms and about all sorts of different aspects of my life. I wrote first person narrative. I wrote as if I were someone else, looking in on my story. I wrote fairy tales. At the beginning of my leadership story, I worked with a body psychotherapist who suggested that I write down my dreams so that we could explore them, and I did that too.

E: And?

M: What I wrote about in the beginning were expressions of anger and disappointment. It took me a while to get through that phase.

---

[13] *Peterson and Seligman's work on character in leadership…* (Peterson and Seligman, 2004). The exploration on the importance of character in leadership continued with David Brooks' recent writing on the forces that form the character of leaders who seek to influence significant social change (Brooks, 2015). Later in the work I wondered if I had an immediate narrative reflex to go towards narratives about that which destabilised me most. Each of the themes I list here are related to what I imagined at the time were the causes of my leadership trauma. Character, or its lack in leadership, was the obvious first reflexive narrative step.

[14] *The idea of shadow in leadership…* I explore the Jungian concept of shadow in a later chapter. In the early days of the inquiry, *Meeting the Shadow* (Zweig, Abrams, 1991) and *The shadow side of power* (McLagan, 2013) were useful introductions to the topic. Research into Jung's concept of shadow came later.

E: Tell me about your writing phases. Tell me about what you noticed about your writing.

M nods, appreciating E's reference to the importance of noticing. He remembers Judi Marshall's helpful texts about first person action research, research in which the researcher is the subject of self-inquiry. He remembers especially her comments about the importance of paying attention to expressions, attitudes, physical sensations and psychological reactions. She writes: "This approach also means seeking to pay attention to the 'stories' I tell about myself and the world, appreciating that these are all construction, glimpses perhaps of transitory purposes and perspectives, and of social discourses within which meanings unfold. I can 'listen' to them with interest, noticing what shapes they take and whether I seem attached or not to their rhetorics".[15] While he takes issue with the characterization of inner narratives as construction – it is too deliberate a description for the many unconscious forces that conspire and compete in the inner-world's theatre of story-telling – M appreciates Marshall's focus on the quality of noticing. It is a skill that he has worked hard to develop.

E notices M's reverie, but lets him stay wherever his imagination has taken him. She can tell that he is working hard to organize his thinking. He is working hard because for him it is hard work.

Another long sip of coffee helps.

M: Most of my enthusiasms in the early days of the research were momentary. This is when I understood that when it comes to self-therapy, there is an important difference between what *catches your attention* and *what captures your imagination*. Plenty of topics caught my attention. Far fewer captured my imagination.

E: What's the difference?

M: Caught attention feels like a first level of noticing. It appeals to something in me that needs attention. Caught attention might also be an instinctive search for material for narrative reconstruction. In the face of the formless, any potential for form seduces.

---

[15] *"This approach also means paying attention…"* (Marshall, 2016, p. xvii). Marshall's work, including and especially her recent writing on first person inquiry, establishes a methodological platform for action research that leads seamlessly to research for self-therapy. In both cases, the subject and the object of the research are the same.

Captured imagination is stronger. It is something that _insists_ on deeper exploration. It doesn't let me go until I've attended to it. What caught my attention helped me build some initial inquiry muscles. What captured my imagination guided me through the experience and helped me emerge from it a newer, more soulful version of myself.

When I wrote into whatever captured my imagination, I noticed that different forms of writing served different purposes.

Writing that focused on the factual grounded me. Workplace trauma experts write about the importance of telling your story as a way to reclaim a narrative that has been stolen from you.[16] Writing the facts of the story as if I were telling my truth in a court of law was useful. It felt important that such an account exists, especially after hearing so many lies from the other players.

Emotional writing guided me to where psychic energy was high. My strongest emotions pointed me to an inner imbalance. Without the guidance of my emotions I would not have been able to re-establish balance.

Imaginative writing helped me explore my experiences with an unfettered gaze. Purely imaginative writing was the most difficult for me, though, unless I was writing about a dream. Writing into the fanciful felt like an avoidance. I found that the most therapeutically useful writing usually combined all three forms. For example, writing in the form of a conversation that takes place in a real setting with an imagined partner became a favorite way of exploring certain narrative themes. Imagination is the essential ingredient. That's what this writing is. That is what we are doing right now.

E: What else did you notice in the early days of your writing?

M: I noticed that many of the stories were black-and-white stories. _They are bad! They are evil! They are corrupt!_ And _I am good! I am right!_ There was no in-between. I began to suspect that therapeutic usefulness might hide in narrative nuance. But accessing nuance requires a step into the unknown that might be almost impossible for someone who has been badly destabilized.

---

[16] _Workplace trauma experts…_ Duffy and Sperry's recent research on workplace mobbing (Duffy and Sperry, 2012, 2014) points to the importance of "telling the story" as an act of recovery. Their _Ten Mobbing Recovery Principles_ include an explanation of storytelling: _Reclaiming personal agency and power is an antidote to the trauma and helplessness of being mobbed. Telling the story of being mobbed_ is first on their list of agency-recovery activities. They also write about the importance of writing a detailed account of the event: _The fuller and more complete a post-traumatic narrative is in terms of the details of the mobbing and its effects on the victim and the victim's family and friends, the more likely the victim is to recover from the trauma_ (Duffy and Sperry, 2014). Later in this section I explain the importance detail played for me as I explored my narratives imaginatively.

I noticed that narratives don't take place in a vacuum. They are shaped by how I tell myself my stories about what has happened before, and even by fantasies of what I think might happen in the future. My narratives about the past shape my narratives of the present. And my present experience shapes how I might re-interpret older narratives. This interplay between the narratives of my past, narratives of my imagined future and my narratives of present experience were an important area of exploration for me.

For example, a primary experience of my leadership challenge was a sense that I wasn't being heard, that I was being scapegoated, that the organizational system was privileging a certain level of hierarchy and subjecting the rest of us to a much different standard of behaviour. I noticed that this experience caused me to imagine my childhood through a certain lens: that as the youngest child in a family of three children I had had to work hard to have a voice, that I wasn't listened to, that I was often treated unfairly by more powerful people. But it isn't clear to me the extent to which my interpretation of my present experience *was shaped by or was shaping* my narratives of my past. I wondered how the narrative deconstruction caused by trauma provokes a reflexive reinterpretation of old stories.

E frowns. M wonders, is she struggling with the complexities of inner narrative, or is she playing with her own narratives now? Is she reflecting on how much of the story she tells herself about her experience in the present is shaped by the stories she tells herself about the past, and how much of *any* of this is conscious? Maybe we should be ordering more coffee? Maybe we should be ordering something stronger?

M: Maybe we should we talk about quality.

E: Let's talk about quality.

M: Schein says that quality is helpfulness. I wanted to be precise about how I was helping myself. So, I started with Schein's question: what in my narrative self-therapy practice helps, and what exactly does help mean? To do this exploration justice I needed to understand the conversations the different schools of thought I was integrating into the research are having about research quality.

E: You mean the conversation about quality in action research?

M: Also, in qualitative research in qualitative psychology and in narrative research. I needed to understand what quality might mean in first person action research, as well as in the different schools of psychology I used to understand inner narratives. Quality meant asking myself: Have I brought the essence of each of these lenses to my practice of narrative self-therapy? Have I chosen the right lenses? I've read extensively about attachment theory and cognitive behavioural therapy as part of

this inquiry but will only give them a passing reference in the text. How did I make the choice to leave them out and the others in? Remember, I was skeptical of anything promising 'the truth'.

E: I sense that it would be important for you to define quality according to what your experience tells you it is. Peterson asks us to *integrate the specifics of our personal experience with what we've been taught, to synthesize something that is genuine and surprising and engaging in a narrative sense.*[17] You might have something to say about what quality is in research into narrative self-therapy, given your work.

M hesitates. A frown crosses his face. He glances up from his empty coffee cup and looks directly at E.

M: I'd like you to read a story I wrote during the inquiry. I can use it as an example for how I think about quality in the work. It's not a long story, and I have a copy of it here with me for you to read. Would you read it?

E notices M's struggle and measures her own risks. Are we going to stay on safe ground? It would be good to know.

E: What story?

M: I wrote the story after I had framed the inquiry work as an exploration of trauma and post-trauma growth in leadership. At the time, I was working with the differences between caught attention and captured imagination. I wrote about an experience that had captured my imagination but was sitting in the periphery. I wrote about my experience of my mother's death. She passed away from cancer on December 2, 2011. The day I turned 48.

M reaches towards the ragged black leather backpack that's been resting in the chair beside him. Jazz music still plays softly in the background. He glances around the café as he pulls his old backpack towards him and notices that a few new customers have wandered in while he and E were talking. Two of them look like students, each sitting at her own table, each with a book in her hand, each nursing a cup of coffee. He sees a man and a woman sitting at a booth near the door, away from the rest of them. The woman is talking loudly, waving her arms and smiling broadly at the man sitting across

---

[17] Taken from the Youtube video: "Jordan Peterson 'There was plenty of motivation to take me out. It just didn't work' British GQ" (1:08:58-1:09:06). Peterson is referring to the importance of attention to personal experience as a safeguard against ideological possession. Here he is building on his earlier research, found *in Maps of meaning: the architecture of belief* (1999), into the role ideology plays as a social ordering mechanism through shared cultural narrative.

from her. M can only see the back of his head, but he notices that the man is leaning forward, being pulled into whatever story his companion is telling.

M shuffles through a heavy stack of papers in his backpack and pulls out a thin tattered document. E notices a faint light brown coffee stain on the front. The pages look like they've travelled the world.

M places the backpack down on the floor and holds the document in both his hands.

M: This was the first inquiry story I wrote out of real curiosity. I started it because I wanted to write something about being *in-between*. I thought that the months between my mother's cancer diagnosis and her death qualified as liminal space, for her, for the family, for me.

I wrote the story almost four years after she passed. When I wrote it, I had only a few curiosities in my mind. Did I miss her enough? Were my memories of her the right ones? It's worth noting that she died only a few months before I was offered and accepted the job that led to my dismissal. I wondered if her passing shaped my attitude towards the silliness I started to experience at work.

It's also worth noting that Judi Marshall's work on first-person action research, Barbara Turner-Vessalago's work on freefall writing, and Max Van Manen's work on phenomenological writing all influenced my approach to the writing.[18] I wanted to write freely.

M passes the thin, worn document to E, and looks down at his empty hands.

M: I knew that I would share the story with my doctoral supervision group. I felt a strong desire to *not* use the story to create a spectacle of grief. I wanted the writing to connect me with the reader, and the reader to connect with my experience in a

---

[18] Marshall writes extensively about writing as a process of discovery (Marshall, 2016) and mentions the notion of action research writing taking the form of "sometimes having a theme in mind to explore, sometimes starting out with no intent and seeing what arises" (Marshall, 2016, p. 99). She also describes writing "to explore an issue, image or event (past or anticipated) by writing and seeing what comes" (Marshall, 2016, p. 99). I wrote this story with a theme in mind but wasn't sure what purpose writing into the theme using the example of my mother's death would serve. I had a theme, but no intention. As I explain in the text, Van Manen's description of writing of the experience rather than analysing it is an essential ingredient to the phenomenological approach (Van Manen, 2014).

Marshall refers to Turner-Vesselago's work on freefall writing both for its precepts and for its usefulness in putting aside the conventions of research writing. Both of these ideas hint at the usefulness of writing self-narratives for therapeutic purposes. Turner-Vesselago's precepts might be found in a therapist's handbook, and the idea of abandoning conventional academic writing styles when the writing and the research are for therapeutic outcomes is critical. Therapeutic usefulness dictates form.

way that might encourage her to connect differently with her own experience. I didn't want the story to just be sad.

M hands the document over to E, who accepts it with a small smile. He says: "Let me go grab a couple more coffees".

"Just water", she answers, and she starts to read.

"Up the Stairs"

I'm driving to a doctor's appointment in my old Audi when the phone rings. It's a beautiful day, Swiss Spring in full bloom and a fresh hugging warmth in the air. A south breeze comes up over the French alps and across the lake, tossing and turning the trees that line this stretch of the highway between Lausanne, Switzerland, where I work, and Morges, where the doctor has his practice. My mood is buoyant. I don't mind that I'm on my way to have a few tests done to make sure my system is working properly. I'm of an age.

When my mobile phone rings I reach across to the passenger seat to pick it up. The number on the screen startles me. Dad?

Since I moved to Switzerland in 1991, I've spoken to my parents every Sunday evening. It's our way of bridging the physical distance between us and maintaining what feels like normal, regular contact. I've cherished this lovely routine. Every Sunday evening, we talk about the family, our lives, our work. Since they both retired, we talk more about the local sports teams, wishing the Blue Jays to another pennant race or the Ottawa Senators to the NHL playoffs.

Sunday night is our appointed time. Getting a call on a weekday afternoon from either of them is strange. I wonder quickly if there is an obvious reason for the call – an upcoming trip to be planned, or a family birthday I need reminding of. Nothing comes up. Anyway, it would be mom calling for that sort of thing.

I answer my phone. Dad asks, "Can you talk"?

"I'm driving", I say. "I'm on the highway".

"Call us back when you get where you're going, ok?"

"Ok", I say. But something is not ok.

I arrive at the doctor's office and do the usual check-in at reception. I have time before the doctor will see me, so I call dad back. I don't remember the exact words he uses, but the message is terrible.

"Your mother's cancer is back", he says. She's been clear for almost five years. Isn't she supposed to be safe?

"It's aggressive", he says. They said it would be if it came back. If it comes back, they said, the prognosis would be grim.

Somewhere in the conversation I hear "six to twenty-four months, it's difficult to say" and "there was no sign of it. We found out by chance". It turns out that her orthopedic surgeon, a guy who lived down the street from us when I was a kid and who used to be part of our street hockey gang, did a few tests to check out her ailing hip. His tests discovered her re-emergent and virulent new cancer. Despite the all-clear results of her last annual medical review only six weeks ago, the cancer has already spread. It is in her bones. It is in her lungs, and in her gut. Six to twenty-four months. It's difficult to say.

Jim the orthopedic surgeon insisted on delivering the news to Mom himself. He cried when he did. He cried at the funeral as well. His eyes were as red as mine.

After Dad's calm, holding-it-together description of this sorry state of affairs, Mom gets on the phone. I'm so sorry, she says. She feels bad for Jim, the surgeon. She feels sorry for the trouble. She's been a nurse all her life. She knows what's coming.

I'm more grateful than ever for our weekly Sunday evening calls. I can keep tabs on her, get a sense of her health, see how she's holding up, physically and emotionally. I can also check in on Dad too, who has taken on the role of her dedicated caretaker with quiet strength. Every week they fill me in on the latest. They never mention the word 'terminal', but we know it is. They both sound strong. Their voices sound fine. Each week I listen for some change, some indication that an end is nearer. I don't hear it.

My wife and I talk about our summer holidays. We agree to cancel our plan to see old friends in California and fly to Ottawa instead. We want to be with the family. That summer we all gather around the old family home for a few weeks. Brothers and sisters, wives and husbands, nieces, nephews, grandkids. Family dinners are large and chaotic but we all chip in. Mom orchestrates, but the pain in her leg where the cancer has nested prevents her from moving around too quickly. There are happy moments, but often she is sad. Once, when I pass her in the foyer of our old house and no one else is around, she puts a hand on my arm to stop me and says, "Can you believe this?" She sounds deeply disappointed. She sounds shaken to the roots of her faith and her understanding of how this is all supposed to be.

The day before my wife, stepson and I fly back to Switzerland I find her resting on the living room couch, alone, frowning. She is upset that she has to go. She wants to stay longer. Isn't it unfair, she asks?

Yes, it is, I tell her. She rests her head on my lap for a few minutes.

The Sunday evening telephone calls continue through September and October. Every week I ask her how she's doing. Every week I also ask Dad how she's doing. He is less protective of us. I can count on him for a more truth.

It isn't until mid-October that I hear the change I've been dreading. It comes subtly, like a great cat stepping its paw out of the covering foliage, betraying the coming attack. She's weaker. Her voice is softer. Her words occasionally slur. It might be the drugs.

"It's the painkillers", Dad confirms. But she's still mobile and still coherent. Just sometimes dazed by the drugs.

I'm scheduled to take a trip to California in a couple of weeks for work. Should I come by on the way, I ask.

It's a good idea, he says. When I hang up the phone, I start to make arrangements.

A few weeks later Dad meets me at the airport in Ottawa. How vast and modern it seems, all sparkling chrome and glass. A huge Inukshuk, three meters high, sits on display in a corner of the arrivals lounge, presumably to remind visitors that they are in Canada. I've always liked the shape, a cairn of rocks arranged in the form of a human, used by the Inuit as inanimate guides across the barren northern landscape so that they can return home safely. Dad is there, waiting with a soft smile. We hug, and we fill the time until my luggage arrives with necessary catching-up. It isn't until I'm in the car on the way home – my parent's home, that is, but where we grew up when we weren't on postings overseas – that I ask about Mom. She's weak. Tired. She has a special bed set up in my old bedroom that helps her get up and that will accommodate the various tubes and wires that will soon be needed to sustain her. He warns me about this because it is the most visible dimension of her transition. When we arrive and I step out onto the driveway, I notice how cold the November air is, how sad it feels. Inside I see Mom and give her a hug. She smiles and hugs back. She's wearing a flowing white gown.

She spends a lot of time on the family room couch, resting in between the handfuls of drugs Dad assembles at the appointed hours from a jumble of containers in the kitchen closet. Drugs for the cancer. Drugs for the pain. Drugs for the side effects of the cancer drugs and pain-relievers, and more drugs for the side-effects of those. But during the first few days of my visit she is mobile and mainly alert.

I meet the palliative care doctor, a stern and alert woman who stops by daily to check in. She is too professional to be warm, but her dedication to the work is uncanny. She must be used to holding this space for people. Attached but distant. Inside but outside. What a calling that must be. In my second or third conversation with her I ask, what can we expect. She says we might need to bring her bed downstairs by Christmas so that she doesn't have to navigate the stairs. And let's see how she is in the Spring. I appreciate the milestones, the sense of concrete steps along the way. Concrete is good. Spring as a time to re-evaluate even better. It feels far away. Yes, let's do that, I say.

My sister comes up from her home in Miami to help. My brother lives only 40 minutes away and so Mom calls a family meeting shortly after I arrive. The immediate family is all there. Mom and Dad sit together on the old family room couch, holding hands. There is so much going between them these days. The space between them isn't filled with words, at least in front of the kids. It isn't fairy tale space, but it is rich and deep and so profound and also their space only. It is shared between them, the good and the bad, the love and the disappointments, after 54 years of marriage. My brother, sister and I each take one of the family room chairs. It's 38 years since we moved into this home. How many times have we all gathered in this room, between these walls?. The old wooden wall panels and the red brick chimney are probably all that's left from the old days. Everything else has been collected over the years. Paintings on the wall are mainly of the Canadian wilderness, a favorite theme because of all the canoe-camping adventures Mom and Dad have done together. On the wall beside the chimney hang our three university graduation pictures. Across the room on a small walnut-brown table sits an assortment of family photos.

Mom wants to use the time while she is still lucid to help orchestrate some of the forthcoming ritual. It's a long way off, we tell her. She is sharp and strong. She asks my brother to do the first reading at her funeral Mass. She asks me to do the second one. My brother and I look at each other nervously but agree. Why are we talking about this now? She asks my sister to read a short eulogy. Eulogies are forbidden at Catholic funerals, but we've been attending St Monica's for almost 40 years. Mom's earned certain dispensations. My sister agrees to the eulogy. Later, when I am choosing my reading, my sister suggests a passage about the good wife, and how much she means to her husband. I choose another, shorter reading. I am not confident of my ability to be coherent for long at the funeral Mass.

The milestone of Spring seems a long way away and it feels easy to agree to the requests. There is plenty of time to prepare.

A few days later my sister heads back to Miami. Mom is sleeping more, sometimes sitting up on the couch. I stay close to her when Dad is off running errands. Twice, when she falls asleep beside me sitting up on the couch, I become angry at her for being sick. I feel ashamed for being angry.

The palliative care doctor comes by more frequently. She asks Mom questions, I suppose, to judge her responsiveness. The doctor seems concerned. Let's get ready for bringing the bed down to the main floor and setting up room for her there, she says. And let's see how she is at Christmas.

I'm in my mother's old Toyota Camry when I get another call.

I'm driving in the cold dark November Ottawa air. I have just finished a stock-up run at a local pharmacy. The streets are familiar but strange. I spent much of my childhood around here, but after twenty years away there's not much that hasn't changed. The street names haven't, but the strip malls and the fast-food restaurants that line the both sides of Merivale Road, the long, straight four-lane congestion that heads up and out of the great commercial sprawl to the neighbouring farmland and the small community where we live, these are all new. None of this was around when I lived here, so it all seems shiny and invasive.

It's bitterly cold but I'm happy to be out. As much as I love Switzerland, I also love our visits to Canada. I have roots here. And there is the distinctly North American attraction of 24-hours-a-day pharmacies, which sell fifty types of toothpaste. So many possibilities. So unlike Switzerland, where the governing authorities take seriously the need to protect us citizens from the burden of too much choice.

My parent's telephone number is on the screen of my mobile phone and so I expect to hear Dad's voice when I answer. I wonder for a second if he's calling to ask me to pick up a pizza on the way home. Instead, I hear the urgent voice of the palliative care nurse, a woman I haven't met. She has stopped by the house to prepare my mother for bed. For the first time, my mother's physical strength has failed her. Come home now, the nurse says. We need you. Your mother can't make it up the stairs on her own. We can't get her up to her bedroom.

"OK, I'm on my way".

I'm puzzled. I arrived only a few days ago, and when I arrived Mom was up and active, absolutely able to walk around under her own steam, albeit with the help of a cane. How is it that now she can't manage the stairs?

I'm on my way, I tell her. Can you put my Dad on the phone? I need to ask him what he wants for dinner.

Come now, she says, all urgency and action.

"OK", I say.

When I arrive home Mom is sitting back on the family room couch. Dad and the nurse are near her, talking to her, reassuring her. I enter the room and she catches my eye. She looks afraid, maybe of the impending journey into the night, or maybe just of the short journey up the stairs. She's wearing white pajamas and flowing white gown.

"Can you carry her up the stairs", the nurse asks me.

"Yes", I say.

"Are you sure Mike", Dad asks. "Are you strong enough"? It hadn't occurred to me that I might not be. Of course, I can carry her up the stairs.

I'll be in front of you, the nurse says. And your Dad will be behind you in case you need support. I'm getting annoyed with this nurse. I think: I'm just carrying her up the stairs. It's maybe twenty steps. Fuck off. Dad feels my annoyance but keeps his silence.

I ask Mom if she is OK. "Are you ready"?

She asks, "Are you sure you can do this"? "Of course", I say.

The nurse stands to her right, Dad to her left. They help her to her feet. We have an awkward moment, trying to sort out how I can get her up into my arms. She is awake, lucid, afraid, surprised. All of these things show in her eyes. Her body doesn't work anymore. This is how it feels to be in a cracking vessel. She looks scared.

"Are you sure", she asks. "Yes", I say.

She raises her left arm up and around my neck, and soon her right arm follows. She is hugging me close. I bend down in the tight awkward family room space and put my right arm behind her back. My left arm reaches lower behind her knees, and in one quick movement I pull her up into my arms.

She feels heavy. I feel not so strong. I'm not thirty anymore. Now would not be a good time for me to overestimate my strength.

With the nurse leading the way and Dad behind, I walk slowly, step by careful step, out of the family room towards the stairs. Dad has a supporting hand against my back. Mom is watching our progress, still worried.

We get to the bottom of the stairs. The way up is closed and contained, far too narrow for four of us to be going up in our little huddle. The nurse walks up the stairs backwards, her eyes never leaving my mother. Both of Dad's hands now rest lightly on my back. There is a long row of small Victorian pictures lining the wall up the stairway and for a brief second I think about not knocking any of them off their hooks. I take a step up. And another. And a third step which follows the sharp left turn here at the bottom of the stairs.

She really does feel heavy. Only a few steps up I begin to doubt if I am up for this journey. I think about how dead weight is somehow supposed to feel heavier than live weight, that a person who is alive somehow makes herself feel lighter when she is carried. Mom feels heavier than she should. I wonder if there's such a thing as half-dead weight. I wonder if my feet have good purchase on the slippery dark hardwood stairs. For the first time I wonder about the consequences of a slip and a fall.

I take another slow step, and another. Mom's relaxes and her head rests against my chest, her auburn hair against my shoulder. She is an old and infirm version of a child being carried up to bed.

I've been up and down these stairs countless times. As a seven-year-old running away from my brother in a game of tag, as a teenager bounding down them to rush outside for a game of pick-up football with my friends, as an adult coming down from my father's upstairs den after one of our discussions about work and life. I remember that my brother used to tip-toe up these stairs as a teenager whenever he came home late from a date, hoping that a tell-tale creak in the wooden floorboards wouldn't give him away. I remember how he used to do pull-ups on the bannister.

Halfway up the stairs I am happy for the growing strength of my father's hands on my back, supporting me. My legs are strong enough for this journey upstairs, but my arms feel weak under the half-dead weight. She feels as if she might be asleep, with her head resting against my chest, her arms draped loosely around my neck. How strange it feels to be carrying her, to be her protector on this short journey. How strange it feels that our roles have changed, that I am carrying her after so many years of her doing so much to carry the family.

We get to the top of the stairs, finally, and my arms start to tremble. We squeeze through the door to her bedroom and I lay her gently down on the bed. The nurse immediately sets about adjusting the sheets and pillows so that Mom is comfortable. I don't remember if Mom says anything after I release her. Maybe she thanks me. Maybe she is just relieved. Maybe she drifts off to sleep without a word.

Two days later I am about to leave for my flight to Toronto and then on to Los Angeles. The palliative care doctor is no longer talking about next Spring. She is

surprised about how quickly Mom is fading. Maybe the cancer spread to her brain stem, she says later.

I stop by Mom's bedroom to say good-bye before I head out to the airport. She is sleeping, breathing deeply. I sit down on the side of the bed and look at her for a second. I whisper, see you at Christmas mom. Christmas is only a few weeks away and I'll be back with my wife to spend more time with the family.

My weight on the bed or my whisper rouses her. She is very quickly awake, and very quickly sitting up in bed. Something has snatched her out of her stupor. She is lucid, calm and more aware than I have felt her in a few days. She adjusts her sleeping gown for decorum, but not before I notice the pale alabaster skin on her rail thin legs.

She puts her hands on my arms and looks me directly in the eye. Her gaze is calm, sharp, but she seems to be in a hurry, as if she is afraid that this momentary lucidity will fade before she is done. Are you happy? She asks. Are you ok? Are you having a good life?

I don't answer.

Have a good life Mike, she says. Be happy. Make sure you are happy.

"Ok Mom", I say.

We share a hug. She lays back down in her bed and is asleep again before I get up from the bed. My Dad is in the hallway outside her room. We also share a hug and then we are on our way to the airport. I call my wife from the airport donut shop after I've passed through security, but I can't speak.

Two days later Dad calls me while I'm on a break at the conference. She's almost gone Mike, he says. They're moving her to a care facility. Do you want to see her one last time?

I've said good-bye, I tell him. I'm not sure what it would be like to see her again.

Two more days later I am staying with old friends in San Diego. It's my birthday. Dad calls again to tell me that she is gone. I call my wife to talk about arrangements for her to fly over for the funeral.

My brother has just read a long passage from Ecclesiastes about time. The church is full to the brim with friends, neighbours, family from near and far. There are seven priests up on the altar, all of whom have led St. Monica's Parish at some point or another during the forty years we've been parish members.

I read a passage from Saint Paul that I've chosen for its simplicity. Paul is telling his community that his time is almost up. He writes:

> *As for me, my life is already being poured away as a libation, and the time has come for me to be gone. I have fought the good fight to the end; I have run the race to the finish; I have kept the faith; all there is to come now is the crown of righteousness reserved for me, which is the Lord, the righteous judge, who will give to me on that Day; and not only to me but to all those who have longed for his Appearing.*

I read slowly, looking up every few seconds to the mass of faces crowding the pews and aisles of the church. When I finish, I sit down beside my wife at our appointed places in the front pew – the pew reserved for the mourning family – the tears come.

After the funeral we gather together with close family and friends at the family home. Franz, a parishioner and part-time caterer, supplies all the food, just as he will continue to provide meals for my father during the coming months. We chat together, sons and fathers, husbands and wives, sisters and brothers, cousins, uncles and aunts. We talk about everything and nothing, moving casually from room to room, mingling amongst ourselves, enjoying the opportunity to tell our stories over warm food and good wine.

M stays up at the counter while E reads. He tries not to watch her too closely, but part of him wants to look for signs of impact. He wonders lightly, is it personally therapeutic to be therapeutically useful for others? He notices an occasional frown cross E's face as she reads, and when she reaches out for a coffee cup that is no longer there, she doesn't seem to notice its absence. He knows that he wants E to be captured by the story. Being captured might lead to an honest negotiation with the capturer.

When he sees E turn over to the last page and then finally put the manuscript down, he grabs their two cups of fresh coffee and walks over to their table. She seems reluctant to talk. M is curious about the silence between them. When she does talk, she honors their rules of engagement. She starts with a question.

E: What do you want to tell me about this story?

She resists the temptation to fill the space between them with words. She thinks, *maybe sometimes scrambled thoughts are more honest than coherent thoughts*.

M: I want to tell you that it felt meaningful to turn towards something as mysterious and inevitable and important as the passing of a loved one. I think I was telling myself: *Why are you paying so much attention to your work drama when there are these other things that need your attention?*

What I want to tell you is that writing out the story settled something for me. Some of the originators of narrative therapy note how important it is to locate your stories outside of yourself. *You are not your stories. Your stories are just your stories.* Holding them lightly and at arms length turns out to be a therapeutically useful practice.[19] I learned later that just the act of intentionally ruminating over destabilizing experiences is an inflection point in the journey to growth after trauma. It's not that I wasn't curious about the meaning of Mom's death. It's just that the curiosity no longer disturbed me.

I struggled to understand how writing the story was impacted by knowing that it would have an important audience. Curiosity was coupled with a desire to impress. Erving Goffman might have said that my storytelling was shaped by a desire to control the impression the readers have of me. Framing was important – me, writing for the purposes of doctoral research, and an audience mandated to criticize the work. He might have said that I had assumed a storytelling role, and that this role had accepted conventions.[20] I felt the weight of expectations when I wrote the story. I worked hard to prevent it from affecting what I wrote.

---

[19] Michael White's work on narrative in family therapy, *Maps of narrative practice* (2007) begins with a chapter on externalising conversations about troublesome family dynamics so that they can be explored objectively. It builds on his examination of narrative in family therapy with fellow therapist David Epston (see *Narrative means to therapeutic ends* [1990]). Chapter 3 of that work introduces the concept of externalizing of the problem. They write: '*Externalising' is an approach to therapy that encourages persons to objectify and, at times, to personify the problems that they experience as oppressive. In this process, the problem becomes a separate entity and thus external to the person or relationship that was ascribed as the problem. Those problems that are considered to be inherent…are rendered less fixed and less restricting* (p. 38). Narrative therapist David Denborough picks up on the theme, dedicating the second chapter of his recent work to the claim that "we are not our problems" (Denborough, 2014).

[20] When I searched for a new job after leaving my old organisation, I noticed that I struggled to introduce myself in social settings. The idea of telling some part of the story of myself felt like a performance for which I'd lost the script. The body psychotherapist I was working with at the time suggested that I look into Erving Goffman's work on how behaviour plays out in the public sphere. Two of Goffman's concepts about social behaviour helped me connect my anxiety to what was going on in my world of inner narrative. The first was the idea that we perform most convincingly in social situations when we understand and believe in the role that we are playing (see Goffman, 1959). The second, the concept of 'framing', describes how social engagement tends to happen most comfortably when participants have consciously or unconsciously agreed on their rules of engagement (see especially Goffman, 1974). Goffman provided two possible sources for the narrative anxiety I experienced when I was asked to introduce myself. First, my work experience had destroyed some essential self-narratives that had anchored my sense of identity. Without these narratives I struggled to understand who exactly I was introducing when I introduced myself. Second, my lack of self-sense meant that I placed a heavy burden on myself to show

E: Did it?

M: My inquiry intersects action research, research in qualitative psychology, and narrative research. Remembering how researchers deal with quality in all three helped me focus on the writing as an act of inquiry.

Jean McNiff and Jack Whitehead refer to personal and social validation of action research, by which they mean the extent to which the research helps the researcher practice her practice with greater coherence to her value system, and the extent to which the research is understandable, honest, sincere, and appropriate given the cultural and historical context within which the research claims are being made.[21] This second set of criteria translates Juergen Habermas's thinking on criteria for quality in public discourse into the realm of action research.

Habermas believed that discourse mediated the interplay between one's inner world and the external social world – a role that narrative psychologists argue our inner narratives also play. I translate his thinking into the realm of my research with four quality questions: (1) Are the claims I am making clear and evidently important for leaders and for leadership development?; (2) Am I willing to disclose openly what has been helpful and what has been harmful to me in my narrative practice?; (3) Is my claim sincerely in the service of healthier leadership, healthier organizations and a healthier world?; and, (4) Do I understand the political, cultural and psychological contexts within which my research takes place?

Applied to the story of my mother's death, the four criteria are nuanced. Is the story and my exploration of it resonant in a *captured-my-imagination* way? Does my story appear truthful? If something rings false, do I examine what purpose its dishonesty might serve? Am I exploring the story for genuine personal growth or have I sacrificed that goal in any way for the sake of other objectives – say, to beguile the reader?

E: So, Habermas gave you the criteria you used for working with your narratives?

M: And he also almost destroyed my ability to write therapeutically. I struggled with my writing when the gaze of the analyzer intruded on it. This was the most important outcome of writing about my mother's death. I suspended the analyzer's gaze when I wrote. I tried to write honestly. I followed an interesting confluence

---

up as I imagined I was expected to show up, but I had lost confidence in my understanding of the rules of the game. Both inner-narratives and framing narratives were missing.

[21] Quotation is from McNiff and Whitehead, 2009. They are drawing from Habermas' work on quality in communication, especially *Communication and the evolution of society* (Habermas, 1991).

of thinking from phenomenology, from first-person action research, from free-fall writing, and from therapeutic work.

E: Say more.

M: To paraphrase Max Van Manen's explanation of the practice of phenomenology, the focus is first on the experience, especially the *wonder* of the experience. Reading Van Manen helped me to reflect on the experience first before exploring how I might derive meaning from it. He writes about phenomenology's focus on the *pre-reflective now*.[22] I wrote about my mother's death with that gaze in mind. Finding meaning would come later.

E: But you had therapeutic outcomes in mind?

M: I just wanted to write the story. The therapeutic outcome was to turn the topic of my mother's death from a source of uncomfortable intrusive rumination into a source of focused curiosity. It shifted from a psychologically loud and intrusive DEATH IN THE FAMILY to something calmer.

E: So, your therapeutic writing was formed by the practice of phenomenology?

M: The practice of *writing first and exploring later* started with Van Manen's description of phenomenological research. Judi Marshall and Barbara Turner-Vesselago encourage a similar approach. Turner-Vesselago's work isn't constrained to inner-narrative or self-therapy, but some of her precepts were a useful guide for writing for self-therapy in the context of leadership trauma. She encourages her students to write whatever comes up, to leave aside editing, to include detail, to go where energy or fear lead, and to reach at least ten years in the past when writing autobiographically. Marshall writes that the first four precepts have been particularly important for her own first-person action research.[23]

Going fear-ward turns the writer towards sources of unusual psychic energy. It was this energy that had me write about my mother's passing. Leaving aside editing is a helpful way to think about the writing as a therapeutic process rather than as a product, a theme that Marshall refers to in her first-person action research work. And writing about detail opens the door for different levels of noticing. The details of carrying my mother up the stairs of the old family house, for example, helped bring the memory alive. They helped me reflect on the possible personal meanings of the primary images that came up when I tried to remember the details, of the palliative care nurse trying to force order in the moment's chaos, of my father's strong supporting hands, of my mother's failing, heavy body in my

---

[22] Van Manen, 2014.
[23] Marshall, 2016.

weakening arms. All of these details pointed to sources of deeper meaning in the story.

E: So, write where you feel compelled to write, leave the therapeutic analysis until after the writing is done, and leave your imagination open to the details that come up?

M: In the context of trauma and post-trauma growth for leaders, yes. These practices all support a process of intentional rumination.

E: And what about the analysis that comes after the writing?

M: Here I looked to the conversation that researchers in narrative psychology and researchers in qualitative psychology are having about quality. Both were partially useful. But…

His voice trails off. He remembers poring over the texts on narrative research when he first tried to make sense of his stories. Narrative research in social sciences focused mainly on methods for distilling knowledge from the stories of others. Narrative researchers discussed the difference in meaning-making approaches for narratives that represented *events* and how they were different from those that represented *experiences*. They discussed methods for coding different narrative components and for attaching meaning to each component. They wrote about the dangers of evaluating narratives according to the ease within which they fit into one carefully structured meaning-making model or another, a danger that one author noted was particularly true of the jumbled narratives of trauma victims. Some methods for narrative interpretation proposed framing narratives in cultural terms, arguing that even self-centered narratives can only be understood as reflections of the cultures in which they take place. Some researchers searched for recurring themes in the narratives of the people they studied. Some thought of narratives in terms of the power dynamics they might represent, positioning narratives as an interplay between the powerful and the less powerful. Still others thought of storytelling in alternative media, and of the way in which stories sit in the body of the storyteller. This last approach was interesting to M, who had worked with a body psychotherapist in the initial days of his research. The psychotherapist helped him understand how his stories occupied his body.[24]

---

[24] My exploration of research methods in narrative inquiry focused on three main sources: Reissman (2008) for working with narrative structure and theme; Clandinin and Connelly (2000) for the history of narrative inquiry and some examples of narrative inquiry in practice; Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou (2013) for an overview of the evolution of narrative inquiry methods and especially for methods that explored the therapeutic usefulness of

Some of these approaches to narrative analysis captured M's imagination because they edged narrative towards the world of therapy. He remembered reading about the *rhizomatic* approach to narrative inquiry, an approach that took the self as something that evolves as the nature of inner narratives evolve. According to the rhizomatic approach, there is no one correct way to understand the self through narrative inquiry, or even one *self* to inquire about.

These narrative inquiry approaches aligned with what he soon learned about the uses of narrative for exploring the psyche. Research methods in qualitative psychology shared some common stories with narrative inquiry in social sciences. Qualitative psychology also concerned itself with wrestling meaning from experience. Researchers in the field had useful things to say about interpretation, including, he remembered, the differences between what phenomenologist Paul Ricouer called the *hermeneutics of meaning recollection*, which focused on a faithful recollection of the experience, and the *hermeneutics of suspicion*, which sought a below-the-surface interpretation that might challenge the so-called faithfulness of meaning-recollection. Qualitative psychology places psychotherapy firmly in the hermeneutics of suspicion camp. M had the same experience. When he wrote about the facts of his experience, he felt grounded because he reclaimed authorship of his story. But exploration and growth lay in imaginative exploration.

Qualitative psychology research also had something to say about the use of narrative for inquiry.[25] Researchers viewed narrative as a primary method for meaning-making in our lives. M was encouraged by qualitative psychology's belief in the power of narrative for understanding ourselves and for interpreting the world around us. It was qualitative psychology's conversations about narrative structure and tone that turned him towards narrative's role in clinical psychology.

---

narrative. The references to rhizomatic approaches to narrative inquiry and to Ricouer's two hermeneutics come from this last work.

[25] The primary source for insight into current conversations about research methods in qualitative psychology is the 3rd Edition of *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (Smith, 2015). The fifth chapter, authored by Michael Murray, discusses current thinking about narrative research.

M remembers exploring all these conversations about research methods in which narrative serves as the text for analysis. When he finally responds to E's question, though, he turns to the fundamentals.

M: Schein's comment about validity in clinical inquiry was my anchor. The test of validity is: *does it help*? The act of writing the story is already therapeutically useful. Mobbing researchers refer to it as an *act of reclaiming agency*. Post-trauma growth researchers refer to it as an act of *intentional rumination*. Further interpretation isn't always necessary. The *hermeneutics of meaning-recollection* and the *hermeneutics of suspicion* can both be therapeutically useful. The first is a stabilizing mechanism. Growth comes through the second.

I was interested in what might be helpful beyond that act of writing. Ricouer's idea of the *hermeneutics of suspicion* was important. It helped me understand that when it comes to using inner narratives as text for self-therapy, suspicious interpretation helps. Different schools of psychology have different approaches to interpreting narratives. Quality meant looking at my narratives through different lenses. It meant being suspicious of the momentary euphoria that might come from a sense of having *found the truth!* Multiple entry points and multiple interpretations help derive many useful meanings. There's no one truth about me, or about my experience. There are multiple interpretations, each of which might have its own therapeutic role to play.

E: So, quality in narrative interpretation means understanding which interpretations are therapeutically useful. How do you know? By what resonates in you?

M: By understanding *why* it might resonate in me. This is a crucial component of quality. Insight comes through forming possible answers to the *why* of resonance. Take the story of carrying my mother up the stairs when the cancer finally stole her mobility. This is the passage that stays with me most.

E: Why?

M: Because that's where the story of her transition is also a story of my own transition. It's where our stories touch. Because that's where something in me confronts the need to become my own parent.

M notices his empty coffee cup. As soon as he does, the ever-watchful bearded and tattooed server is beside him at their table, asking if he needs a refill.

"Latte machiatto", M says, looking over at E and reaching into his backpack for the next chapters of his research story. E returns the look and the smile.

"Same", she says.

As the server walks away to prepare their drinks, E looks at M directly, acknowledging the quality of connection that is developing between them. She asks: "What's next"?

M smiles back. When he closes his eyes, he can imagine some of her features. She has an open, inquisitive face, long, wavy, blond-brown hair reaching just below her shoulders. She has a warm smile. She looks at him without judgment, in a way that reminds him of the Carl Rogers saying about the importance of unconditional positive regard in a therapeutic relationship. Post-trauma growth researchers write about the need for expert companionship in the growth process. She is that too. But she is also no one he knows. He imagines her as a compilation of spirits. She is one way he uses his imagination to practice the art of narrative self-therapy. Self-therapy is not just the practice of using your material for exploration. It is also the practice of developing a therapeutic self-gaze.

M: Now we turn to the spirits and mechanisms deep within us that shape our stories without us knowing. We turn to the territory of the Dreamer and the Wound. It's a strange land. Want to come?

She smiles again.

E: I wouldn't miss it for the world.

Reassured by E's gentle encouragement, M reaches into his backpack and hands her the story's next chapter.

Part Three
Captured Imagination

The third therapeutic stage in depth psychology is *education*. If *confession* is honest self-disclosure and *elucidation/interpretation* explores possible interpretations of what's been disclosed, *education* helps the experiencer use those explorations to develop a fresh understanding of herself and of her world. In Stein's words, education is "the task of making a new adaptation to life" (Stein, 1998, p. 78). It leaves behind "the old habits of idealisation and childish wishful thinking" (Stein, 1998, p. 78) and learns more adult ways of operating. In narrative terms, it means finding new stories to live by once important core narratives have been destroyed.

In the world of inner-narrative, confession was the act of getting stories out of my head and onto paper. Interpretation was exploring those stories for underlying meaning. In my case, exploration led to the recognition that I might usefully think of myself as a multitude of inner storytellers, each with its own characters and agendas, struggling to operate as a functioning unity in the face of crisis. Education was the step I took to understand the unconscious forces that were fuelling these inner spirits.

In my case, *education* meant trying to understand the unconscious forces that shaped how my imagination turned experience into story. I wanted to know what forces might have interpreted my leadership experiences the way they did, and if these forces might have been the same that conjured up the five imagoes, or climbing companion, or the woman running in the woods. If my inquiry method started with writing out the narratives of my experience in all sorts of forms and continued with trying to understand what meaning I could wrestle from those stories, it made sense for me to explore my unconscious meaning-making mechanisms.

Qualitative research pays close attention to the ways in which the researcher shapes and is shaped by the research. The interplay between the researcher and the research is especially interesting in clinical, self-therapeutic inquiry, where the subject of the research *is* the researcher and uncovering unconscious narrative reflexes is the point of the research.

I explored different clinical approaches to narrative with four questions in mind:

(1) What does the approach say about inner-narrative's contribution to psychological health?

(2) What does it say about the psychological forces that might unconsciously shape the way we tell the stories of our experiences, especially when we are highly stressed?

(3) What does it say about how we might use our narratives to improve our psychological health?

(4) How could I interpret the stories I told myself about my leadership experience through the lens of the approach?

I explored narrative psychology, evolutionary psychology, existential psychology, depth psychology, attachment theory and cognitive behavioural therapy.[26] I distil their lessons to five narrative themes that helped me deepen my understanding of my unconscious narrative-making mechanisms: *narrative instinct*, *culture's impact on narrative reflex*, *narrative reflex as a survival mechanism*, *narrative protection against anxiety*, and *narrative reflex in service of self-development*.

Narrative instinct

Attachment theory claims that our narrative instinct appears even before we have language to tell our stories (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001). It also claims that the instinct to translate experience into story through imagination means that some of our core narratives form from our earliest experiences.

Attachment theory draws on the work of developmental psychologists John Bowlby and Jeremy Holmes. Bowlby observed that a child's approach to exploring her environment was contingent on the quality of her attachment to her primary caregiver. The more attentive, encouraging, comforting and correcting the caregiver when the child's explorations of the outside world resulted in pain (say, poking the family dog and getting bitten), the more likely it was that the child would have a healthy and

---

[26] Note that I will *not* refer to cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) in the pages that follow. CBT concerns itself with what it calls cognitive distortions, or unhelpful patterns in how the mind interprets experience. It identifies fifteen different distortions, including polarized thinking (black-and-white interpretations of experience), emotional reasoning (if I feel it, it must be true), and catastrophizing (imagining that the absolute worst outcome will happen). Using the metaphor that Jonathan Haidt developed in *The happiness hypothesis* (2006) and explored in *The righteous mind* (2012) and *The coddling of the American mind* (with Greg Lukianoff, 2018), if the conscious, reasoning mind is a rider sitting on top of the elephant of the unconscious, intuitive mind, CBT addresses the quality of the conversation between the rider and the elephant. My inquiry focused on understanding the elephant.

curious approach to on-going exploration (Bowlby, 1988; Holmes, 2001). Bowlby and Holmes suggest that the narratives we construct in infancy last through adulthood. Our ability to engage in a healthy way with others as adults, for example, is influenced by the narratives we formed while engaging with others when we were infants.

Attachment theory hypothesizes that a person with healthy early attachments who formed early positive narratives about how to engage with a risky world might react differently to potentially traumatising experiences than would a person who lacked secure attachments.

Attachment theory claims that our need for secure attachments continues throughout our lives. The more we have access to people who provide us with a sense of security, the more likely we are to demonstrate openness and resilience in the face of life's challenges. To paraphrase Bowlby and Holmes, people who act as secure bases tend to be *available*, *empathetic*, *understanding*, *consistent*, *encouraging*, and *guiding*. They comfort us, they help us interpret our experiences, and they encourage us to continue to engage wisely with the world.

Attachment theory led me to two curiosities:

(1) What was the state of my secure bases at the time of my leadership transition?
(2) To what extent can someone become his or her own secure base?

My answer to the first question was that I had lost an important secure base when I accepted my new role. The Kingdom and its people had been kind to me over many years. My wife and most of my friends came from the Kingdom. My social support system outside of it was weak. I wasn't in close enough contact with my birth family for it to step in. I couldn't turn to my faith, since that relationship had become strained and slightly bitter once I got divorced. It may be that one of the reasons my reaction to the work experience was so strong was because I wasn't just losing a job. I was also losing something that had been an important source of psychological security for me for many years. The loss of this secure base would help explain why my story-telling mechanisms were so panicked.

My exploration of the second question led to an important inquiry turn. Attachment theory gave me helpful guidance to what behaviours I needed to demonstrate towards

111

myself if I were to become my own secure base. Until this point in the inquiry, I was used to imagining my inner stage as a collection of five characters who operated according to their archetypal energies. I hadn't thought of the quality of internal gaze I might nurture in order to mediate peace with them and between them. According to Bowlby and Holmes, paying attention, being empathetic and understanding, encouraging myself and my inner characters and guiding my future actions with the wisdom of past experience were all ways in which I could act as my own secure base. I will expand on this thinking in Part Four, but attachment theory gave me important first lessons on how to calibrate my attitude towards myself and my inner characters as I worked through the process of self-therapy.

Culture and the narrative reflex

While our narrative instinct appears to be in innate (Bowlby, 1988), it appears that the narratives we form are shaped by the cultures within which we live. Narrative psychology helped me understand the role of culture as narrative-shaper.

Narrative psychology positions itself as a powerful evolution in our attempts at self-understanding because of its emphasis on how culture and language shape narrative (Crossley, 2000; Freedman and Combs, 1996). Crossley compares it to three previous approaches to psychology.

The first is experimental social psychology, which Crossley describes as "premised on the quaint, curiously time-warped dream of behaviourism; the attempt to produce a 'hard', rigidly defined 'scientific' discipline with theories and hypotheses that can be tested under rigorous laboratory controlled conditions" (Crossley, 2000, p. 6). Crossley states that the behaviourist belief that we operate as if our lives were tightly controlled laboratory experiments is invalidated by the complexity of our behaviours. We need a more person-centred approach to understanding our psychological mechanisms.[27]

The humanist approach followed. Humanist psychology emphasises the complexity, uniqueness and inherent subjectivity of what it means to be human. We do not live the

---

[27] Experimental psychology's research record reinforces Crossley's concern. Recent attempts to replicate some of its most famous and cited results achieve a success rate of about 50%. See Dan Robitzski, New Research Just Debunked 14 Classic Psychology Experiments, *futurism.com*, November 21, 2018. See also Le Texier, T (2019). Debunking the Stanford prison experiment. *American Psychologist*, *74*(7), 823-839.

experience of our lives in tightly controlled conditions. We are each immersed in a complex intermixing of internal and external experiences. To understand our selves, humanist psychologies lean towards qualitative rather than empirical, positivist methods, including, according to Crossley, "auto/biographical and individual case-study methods (and in their application, counselling and psychotherapy)" (Crossley, 2000, p. 7). Because humanistic psychology emphasises the uniqueness of the individual, it believes that "each individual has the potential for personal growth which is unique to them" (Crossley, 2000, p. 7). Humanists would say that my stories are my own, and that I have the freedom to choose the story of how I live my life.

The humanistic approach assumes personal agency that the next approach, the psychodynamic approach, questions. According to the psychodynamic approach, our ability to change our behaviours is limited because so much of our behaviour is unconsciously motivated (Crossley, 2000). Like the humanistic approach, psychodynamic approaches to understanding the self recognise individual depth and uniqueness and "are similarly qualitative, incorporating largely case studies based on interviews, clinical material and textual data (including works of fiction and autobiography)" (Crossley, 2000, p. 8). The psychodynamic approach suggests that important aspects of how we create the narratives we live by are unconscious. As long as these mechanisms remain below the surface levels of our consciousness, our ability to understand them is constrained.

According to Crossley (and in keeping with the writings of narrative therapists White, 2007; White and Epston, 1990; Freedman and Coombs, 1996), narrative psychology differs from the previous three approaches to self-understanding because it emphasises the importance of language and culture as shapers of our narrative-making mechanisms. Both language and culture play a critical role in how we understand ourselves, according to narrative psychology, because they are the two lenses through which we socially construct ourselves. If psychodynamics points out that we are motivated by unconscious forces, narrative psychology claims that these forces are shaped mainly by culture.

I struggled to sort out the impact of culture and language on how I wrote my leadership story. I was certain that the impact was there. A family culture that emphasised thoughtfulness and kindness might have authored the story I told myself about how to

behave at work. A religious culture that told the story of turning the other cheek might have co-authored that story. The culture of the organisation, which encouraged new members of the privileged class to behave as masters of all the organisation's universes, even those in which they had no experience or expertise, made it clear who had power and who didn't. I remember a strange situation when a member of the privileged group suggested that I apologise to one of his colleagues for confronting her on her bad behaviour. In his mind, the culture of the organisation told a story of how the privilege of hierarchical position was more important than good character.

Post-trauma trauma growth psychology agrees that culture has an important impact on how we interpret experience. It claims that culture can contribute to trauma (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2014). It also claims that understanding cultural influences on how we interpret experience can be important for clinical work (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013). But researchers point to the difficulty of understanding exactly what we mean by culture. Calhoun and Tedeschi include core beliefs about the world as elements of culture. They claim that culture authors the core narratives that we rely on for a sense of psychological stability:

> The many elements of culture include, but are not limited to, the following: a group's history, the values considered to be important; central beliefs about the world and the group; beliefs about what role an individual is expected to play and the person's place in the group; rules of conduct for specific social situations; general norms of good or desirable behaviour; desirable and undesirable life goals; definitions of success; what it means to live a good life, etc. (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, p. 40-41).

Understanding how culture was shaping my stories was difficult because I couldn't sort out where culture ended and where I began. It might be that the Pleaser in me was nurtured by family culture (*I was the youngest in a family of five and so 'getting along' was a viable survival strategy; also, polite, conformist, upper middle class, Canadian*), by religious culture (*Christianity's entreaty to love your enemies, and that if you behave in this life you'll be fine in the next*), and by organisational culture (*if you aren't high in the dominance hierarchy in an archly political organisation, then you must operate by a different set of rules if you want to survive*). But I could also imagine that others might have engaged with those cultures through more artful or aggressive

imagoes. Nurturing the Pleaser was my strategy, but it wasn't the only strategy available to me.

I was intrigued by the emphasis some narrative psychologists place on culture as a tool for gaining, exercising and preserving social power (Freeman and Combs, 1996; White and Epston, 1990; White, 2007; Crossley, 2000). I wondered if my inner narratives reflected a power struggle amongst the characters who were active in my inner theatre at the time. Something in their culture kept the Warrior/Monster at bay. Something in the organisational culture helped. Certain types of Monster behaviour were encouraged by the culture, but only for the dominant players in the hierarchy. Thus, the attacks against me were accepted with barely a shrug. Fighting back against these attacks was a serious breach of cultural protocol.

I left the exploration of narrative psychology's point of view on the influence of culture on the imagination's interpretative mechanisms with three conclusions.

First, it was easy for me to imagine the many ways in which culture influences how my imagination turns experience into story. Culture shapes how I think about what it means to lead a meaningful life and to have a meaningful career. The stories I told myself about having a nice house and a nice car were satisfying because the cultures closest to me told me that they should be.

Second, in the story of my leadership transition, the culture of the organisation where I lived my leadership experience played an important role because it:

(1) Encouraged Pleaser/communal behaviour in the people who occupied the lower levels of the hierarchy, presumably so that the privileged could exercise their privilege freely;

(2) Reserved Monster behaviour for the most senior members of the dominance hierarchy;

(3) Indoctrinated us in narrow perspectives of what constitutes a meaningful life (for example, through descriptions of organisational purpose that might substitute for personal purpose, for promoting organisational values that might substitute for personal values, and by encouraging us to behave according to a list of leadership expectations);

(4) Kept the power of the culture intact by discouraging us from deeper personal explorations of our own meaning in life, separate from the meaning provided to us through the organisation.

Third, I appreciated how seductive culture can be. I may not have liked my organisation's culture, but at least it provided a structure. One of my biggest fears during my leadership transition was a fear of non-structure. It wasn't clear to me how I would replace what I was leaving behind. It wasn't clear if whatever I replaced it with would be healthier.

If culture manipulates imagination, the undiscerning imagination might take whatever it's offered, especially if the offer-er pays its salary, provides it with structure, and takes away the need for making difficult choices. Or, promises eternity with God in paradise. Henry Giroux writes about 'disimagination' at the societal level in a way that has an equivalent in organisational life. Giroux describes how American culture is manipulated by government, business and media to reduce the population's ability to imagine a world in which profit is not the only worthy goal.

He writes: "A culture that once opened our imagination now disables it, overwhelming the populace with nonstop marketing that reduces our sense of agency to the imperatives of ownership, shopping, credit and debt"' (Giroux, 2014, loc 61). It's possible that organisational culture plays a disproportionate role in satisfying our imagination's need for meaning, particularly for leaders who are imbedded in it. It is also possible that the usual collection of culture-building 'talent management' initiatives, including leadership development, are complicit in using this role for power and profit.

I recently worked for a global organisation that was preparing to launch a new set of 'leadership expectations' to guide the behaviours of its leaders. It isn't unusual for organisations to create such lists, but the idea had a more sinister meaning for me after my experience with my old organisation's leaders. Telling leaders that they are expected to behave certain ways is both an expression of power (*watch what happens if you don't do what we expect you to do…*) and a method for limiting imagination (*we expect you to do these things and only these things…*). It also reflects an interesting

irony, since many organisations claim to expect their leaders to be entrepreneurial, courageous and empowered.

Against what he calls the 'disimagination machine', Giroux writes, "the radical imagination waits to be unleashed" (Giroux, 2014, loc. 2412). Education, critical thinking and encouragement to dissent are all antidotes to 'disimagination', according to Giroux.

I imagined that leadership development might have an important role to play in radical imagination in organisational life. I notice in my practice that it is difficult to move imagination outside of the usual organisational boundaries. There are unspoken deals at play that might be too difficult to bring into the openness of imagination. I often ask the executives I am coaching to imagine what their best life might look like. Once they tell me about how they will have a bigger job occupying a position higher in the hierarchy, I ask them to tell me about how their relationships inside and outside of work might have changed. Executives often respond as if they are unsure that they are allowed to let their imaginations play in this territory. It might take four or five conversations for them to tell me about the son with whom they want to build a stronger relationship, or a spouse who is tired of all the travel, or friends who have fallen by the wayside because the career takes too much time. When I ask them to imagine how their relationships with themselves might change on the way to becoming a better self, they struggle. This is often the first time that they're being asked to imagine themselves differently. One executive, a large, gruff and engaging man who had an important and difficult role in his organisation, left it until the final five minutes of our last conversation to mention to me, almost under his breath, that he feels lonely.

Finally, I was convinced that culture couldn't explain how angry I felt at the organisation's betrayals. Culture couldn't explain why I chose a strategy of getting along until I chose to fight. I turned to evolutionary psychology to explore these energies.

Narrative reflex as a survival mechanism

Like attachment theory, evolutionary psychology claims that our narrative-making mechanisms are with us at birth (Buss, 2004, 2005). They are there to help us survive.

Our narratives are formed by instincts, urges, conscious and unconscious desires, and what evolutionary psychologists call psychological mechanisms:

> Just as our bodies combine thousands of specific mechanisms – a heart to pump blood, lungs for oxygen uptake, a liver to filter out toxins – the mind, according to this analysis, must also contain hundreds or thousands of specific mechanisms. Because a large number of different adaptive problems cannot be solved with just a few mechanisms, the human mind must be made up of a large number of evolved psychological mechanisms (Buss, 2004, pp. 54-55).

Scholars of evolutionary psychology tend to consider our imaginative reflexes in terms of their service to how we solve the essential problems of being human, including survival, sex and mating, parenting and kinship, and group living (Dawkins, 1976; Barkow, Cosmides, Tooby, 1992; Wright, 1994; Pinker, 1997, 2002; Buss, 2004, 2005). These mechanisms show up as instincts towards aggression and murderous rage, as well as altruism, kindness, morality, and the day-to-day deal-making that goes along with nurturing our many relationships. They play out in family life, in friendships, in intimate partnerships, and in organisations.

From the perspective of evolutionary psychology, a useful interpretation of my leadership story is that it is a familiar narrative of status, dominance, cooperation and aggression in an organisational setting. In this version of the story, I had achieved reasonable organisational status after many years of serving and submitting to the dominance hierarchy. While serving the dominant organisational group was sometimes difficult, doing so earned me a good salary and a sense of belonging in an established community.

When my new role required me to turn a blind eye to the perceived misdeeds of several members of the dominant group, I asked the organisation's leadership to address the issue. Because my challenge was limited and aligned with the organisation's espoused values, I thought that it would be successful. It was not. I misjudged the internal dynamics of power, and I failed to understand that many of my organisational relationships were really relationships of convenience that served the needs of the dominance hierarchy. My outrage was the kind of response that an evolutionary psychologist might expect when a member of the dominated group tries to increase the

cost to the dominant group of their attempts to contain him, and vice versa. When both sides risk injury, there is usually a careful dance as both sides try to minimize damage to their self-interests. When one side has nothing to lose, constraints to its behaviour are removed. Buss explains the dynamic:

> The strategies of each individual have a function, and in the aggregate they produce a stable hierarchy. This means that we have to consider the functions of being submissive, as well as the functions of being dominant.
>
> All-out fighting in every encounter is a foolish strategy. The loser risks injury and death and so would have been better off giving in – relinquishing its territory, food or mate – from the start. Fighting is also costly for the victor. In addition to the risk of injury from battle, victors allocate precious energetic resources, time, and opportunities in battle. So both losers and winners would have been better off if each could determine who would win in advance and simply declare a winner without suffering the costs of fighting. By submitting, the loser is able to walk away alive and injury free (Buss, 2004).

In evolutionary psychology terms, status and dominance in social settings brings resources to high-status, dominant individuals that improve their ability to survive, procreate, and nurture future generations (Dawkins, 1976; Wright, 1994; Pinker, 1997, 2002; Buss, 2004). Since resource scarcity describes the environment in which our species evolved, access to additional resources has traditionally been a significant boost to genetic survival: hence the overwhelming evidence of naturally occurring hierarchies in all sorts of species, including our own (Buss, 2004; Pinker, 1997). In modern terms, being dismissed by the dominant group was the predictable cost to me when I played by the formal rules and organisational Code of Conduct but didn't appreciate that such rules were constructed only to govern the behaviours of people who occupied positions low in the hierarchy.

While these psychological scripts evolved to help us manage the life-and-death situations we were likely to face over the many millennia of our evolution, evolutionary psychologists argue that they are just as powerful today (Pinker, 2002). They manifest themselves frequently in family and organisational life, even when the circumstances are objectively safe (in evolutionary survival terms). We are primitive

brains scripting primitive narratives in a modern world. Pinker describes how our status scripts might show up in the academic world, comparing faculty to young men who resort to violence to solve the problem of who gets to play at the best table in the pool hall:

> Academics are known by their fellows as "the sort who can be pushed around" and "the sort who won't take any shit", as people whose word means action or people who are full of hot air, as guys whose work you can criticise with impunity or guys you don't want to mess with. Brandishing a switchblade at a scholarly conference would somehow strike the wrong note, but there is always the stinging question, the devastating riposte, the moralistic outrage, the withering invective, the indignant rebuttal, and means of enforcement in manuscript reviews and grant panels. Scholarly institutions, of course, try to minimise this rutting, but it is hard to eradicate (Pinker, 1997, p. 498).

It is also worth noting that evolutionary psychology has an opinion on the importance of culture as a social construction for mitigating the inner narratives that drive our nature. If evolution has designed our imaginative reflexes to ensure our survival in a harsh and deadly environment, culture has the power to over-ride our evolutionary behaviour. Culture is the expression of universal psychological mechanisms: "The claim that some phenomena are 'socially constructed' only means that the social environment provides some of the inputs used by the psychological mechanisms of the individuals involved" (Tooby and Cosmides, 1992, pp. 116-117). Culture provides input to the imagination, but the imagination's interpretive instinct is biological.

Dawkins goes further in his early work tying evolutionary biology to human psychology. Central to this work is the idea that our genes are essentially selfish in their pursuit of survival, and that culture has a role in this pursuit. Culture is useful for our survival. Culture has the power to over-ride the more primitive expression of our genetic selfishness:

> We have the power to defy the selfish genes of our birth and, if necessary, the selfish memes of our indoctrination. We can even discuss ways of deliberately cultivating and nurturing pure, disinterested altruism – something that has no place in nature, something that has never existed

before in the whole history of the world. We are built as gene machines and cultured as meme machines, but we have the power to turn against our creators. We, alone on earth, can rebel against the tyranny of the selfish replicators (Dawkins, 1976, pp. 200-201).

Through the lens of evolutionary psychology, I could imagine the story of my experience in a different way.

First, I could imagine that my narrative-making imagination interpreted my colleagues' behaviours direct and serious attacks on me and on my ability to provide for my family. We might have been well-dressed people acting out our drama in the hallways of a conservative organisation, but I might also have been a tribesman fighting off aggression from other tribesmen who wanted my resources, who were willing to fight dirty to get them, and who had little to lose in the fight. The organisation was only the stage-setting for what was a much deeper psychological conflict.

Second, I could imagine that the violence of my emotional reaction to the attacks reflected the imagination's response to this deeper conflict. The black-and-white stories in my imagination at the time were designed for their survival benefits. As I said to an executive recently when he was describing his unexpectedly violent response to a perceived slight by his CEO, we don't spend much time reflecting on the purpose of the tiger's fur if the tiger is chewing on our leg. Under threat, narrative nuance disappears. I needed clarity to react, and polarized interpretation helped me to react quickly.

I struggled with how to translate the impact of evolutionary psychology on my emerging imagoes. I understood how surviving in a hierarchy might require a wise balance of monster and pleaser behaviours, so that an executive is neither one who is willing to be walked over or one who responds too aggressively to perceived slights (Pinker, 1997). The deeper territory of imaginative instincts felt like the kind of *mythos* territory that needed exploration without the expectation of firm answers. It was useful enough to turn towards evolutionary psychology for possible explanations when I reacted to events in a psychologically violent way. This reflexivity helped me understand the events described in "Picking up the apples" as an imagined attack on

my wife by the people who had attacked me at work. It was helpful to be alert to whatever evolutionary mechanisms might be at play.

Finally, I came away from evolutionary psychology believing that it is something of a miracle that physical violence is rare in organisational life. Recent research indicates that job related stress cause over 100,000 deaths each year in the United States alone (Pfeffer, 2018). French courts have recently found a group of senior executives at a French telecoms company guilty of "institutional moral harassment" that led to 31 attempted and 19 successful suicides amongst employees ("Former Orange CEO gets jail term for harassment linked with employee's suicides", CNN, December 20, 2019). Organisational mobbing experts note mobbing's frequency and its strategy of humiliation (Duffy and Sperry, 2012, 2014), while humiliation and loss-of-face at the hands of rivals are both common precursors to thoughts of murder and actual attempts to kill (Buss, 2005). According to Buss's study of murder in the United States, "public humiliation in front of others tends to lead to especially violent fantasies about killing the tormentor… The vividness and exquisitely elaborated details of such homicidal fantasies highlights the magnitude of the social cost and psychological agony experienced by those whose reputations are damaged" (Buss, 2005, p. 208). I imagined that in organisational life, culture has had an important role to play in regulating the instinct to kill, partly by raising the cost of violence. That the potential for violence is in us – *the Monster is there, whether we like it or not* – felt like an important realisation. My conclusion wasn't that there are always deep murderous undertones to living corporate life, but rather that there are fundamental instincts at play in leadership. Leaders must be aware of their presence in themselves and in the people they lead.

I've had interesting experiences shifting narratives that come from evolutionary mechanisms in my practice. They tend to involve evolutionary narratives in the context of organisational hierarchy. My experience is that dominance hierarchies tend to protect themselves vigorously. This protection sometimes takes the form of sanctioning humiliating behaviour if and only if it comes from the most senior leaders. In the absence of careful and disciplined governance, such behaviours are likely to kill the hope of a positive organisational culture. I dealt with that behaviour best when I could distance myself from it. A pivotal moment in my reflections on "Picking up the apples" came when I imagined that one of the antagonists might be telling himself a very different story about what was happening between us. I didn't need to understand

what that story was. Just the acknowledgment that my unconscious story might not be much better than his unconscious story gave me room to play with both stories. Playing with them gave me the distance that narrative therapists believe is so important to the therapeutic process.

Narrative protection against death, freedom, isolation, and meaninglessness

Like evolutionary psychology, existential psychology explores the unconscious motivations of human behaviour. Existential psychology is concerned with "certain intrinsic properties that are a part, and an inescapable part, of the human being's existence in the world" (Yalom, 1980, p. 8). According to existential psychology there are four intrinsic properties which shape our fundamental narratives. The existential psychotherapist Irvin Yalom identifies these as *death*, *freedom*, *existential isolation* and *meaninglessness* (Yalom, 1980, 2002). I dive into some detail about these four ultimate concerns here because of their importance as sources of deep human anxiety (therefore as shapers of core narratives) and because of the protective mechanisms against that anxiety that feature strongly in Yalom's description of his therapeutic work (in the form of comforting if sometimes contrived counter-narratives). For the purposes of framing this exploration, I refer to existential psychotherapist Rollo May's definition of anxiety:

> *Anxiety is the apprehension cued off by a threat to some value that the individual holds essential to his existence as a personality.* The threat may be to physical life (the threat of death), or to psychological existence (the loss of freedom, meaninglessness). Or the threat may be to some other value which one identifies with one's existence: (patriotism, the love of another person, "success", etc). (May 1977, pp. 205-206).

Both May and Irvin Yalom, who builds on May's early work on existential psychotherapy, focus their therapeutic work on the four ultimate human concerns of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness.

On the topic of death, Yalom writes:

> At an early age, far earlier than is often thought, we learn that death will come, and that there is no escape. Nonetheless, "everything", in Spinoza's

words, "endeavors to persist in its own being". At one's core there is an ever-present conflict between the wish to continue to exist and the awareness of inevitable death (Yalom, 1989, p. 5).

Existential psychology contends that while some of our fundamental psychological drives might be useful for our survival, we humans are uniquely challenged with the knowledge that we will eventually lose that game (Yalom, 1980, 1989). Many of our imaginative mechanisms exist to protect us from the fear of that loss.

Yalom describes two counter-narratives that we create when confronted with the inevitability of our deaths. One is a narrative of personal specialness, "the belief that one is invulnerable, inviolable – beyond the ordinary laws of human biology and destiny" (Yalom, 1989, p. 7). The other is a "belief in an ultimate rescuer (which) permits us to feel forever watched and protected by an outside force" (Yalom, 1989, p. 7). Yalom writes:

> Together these two belief systems constitute a dialectic – two diametrically opposed responses to the human situation. The human being either asserts autonomy by heroic self-assertion or seeks safety through fusing with a superior force: that is, one emerges or merges, separates or embeds. One becomes one's own parent or remains the eternal child (Yalom, 1989, p. 7).

A driving awareness in our lives, existential psychology says, is that they will end. It also says that there are strategies for dealing with such anxiety so that it becomes a constructive force. Our knowledge of our inevitable deaths can help us grow. We are saved, according to existential psychology, when we accept the challenges that death implies for the act of living. We are saved when we absorb death intentionally into our narrative schemas rather than ignore it.

Yalom writes about two different approaches to dealing with death. "Forgetfulness of being" is an approach in which we distract ourselves from the inevitability of death with the idle chatter of life. "Mindfulness of being" uses the knowledge of death to deepen life's meaning:

> In the other state, the state of *mindfulness of being*, one marvels not about the *way* things are but *that* they are. To exist in this mode means to be continually aware of being. In this mode, which is often referred to as the "ontological mode" (from the Greek *ontos*, meaning 'existence'), one

remains mindful of being, not only mindful of the fragility of being but mindful, too, of one's responsibility for one's own being. Since it is only in this ontological mode that one is in touch with one's self-creation, it is only here that one can grasp the power to change oneself (Yalom, 1980, pp. 311-312).

Yalom's comment about marvelling "not about the way things are but that they are" describes one function of my Dreamer-Child. His main expression seems to be through connection with the unexplainable, the unknowable, the unreachable, and to remind the rest of the characters in the theatre that even their most clever machinations won't make the unknowable disappear.

The second ultimate concern associated with being human is *freedom*, which, in existential terms, means that "one is responsible for one's own choices, actions, one's own life situation" (Yalom 1989, p. 8). Although freedom implies the positive aspects of the ability to choose, it also implies responsibility in the face of evident disorder, "to be 'the author of,' each of us being thus the author of his or her own life design. We are free to be anything but unfree: we are, Sartre would say, "condemned to freedom" (Yalom, 1989, p. 8). This freedom comes with the burden of self-authorship, the task of writing our life narratives in the face of choice and, importantly, in the face of disorder. "It is here, in the idea of self-construction, where anxiety dwells: we are creatures who desire structure, and we are frightened by a concept of freedom which implies that beneath us there is nothing, sheer groundlessness" (Yalom, 1989, p. 8).

The tension of authorship exists in two ways. First, it implies exclusion-by-choice. If I choose one path as I construct my life narrative, I exclude other paths. More importantly, it implies a world in which choices must be made and responsibilities accepted which, in turn, implies an underlying absence of order, this frightening groundlessness to which existential philosophers and psychologists refer.

Both to constitute (to be responsible for) oneself and one's world and to be aware of one's responsibility is a deeply frightening insight. Consider its implication. Nothing in the world has significance except by virtue of one's own creation. There are no rules, no ethical systems, no values; there is no external referent whatsoever; there is no grand design in the universe (Yalom, 1980, p. 221).

According to existential psychology, our imaginations seek comfort from groundlessness through protective narratives. These narratives include compulsivity (a psychic world in which freedom is lost at the hands of an irrepressible external force); displacement of responsibility (shifting the burden of choice to another); denial of responsibility – innocent victim (experiencing oneself as an innocent victim of events that one has set into motion); denial of responsibility – losing control (behaving in a temporary irrational way); avoidance of autonomous behaviour (refusing to take healing action, withholding agency); and disorders of wishing and deciding (accepting neither, since both are acts of responsibility) (Yalom, 1980, pp. 223-230). In each case a narrative schema is imagined in order to deaden the threat of responsibility and to push away a sense of groundlessness, in all cases by placing agency in the hands of some disconnected force.

The third ultimate concern in existential psychology is *isolation*. Isolation "refers to the unbridgeable gap between self and others, a gap that exists even in the presence of deeply gratifying interpersonal relationships" (Yalom, 1989, p. 11). Yalom refers to two types of isolation, *interpersonal isolation* or loneliness, and *intrapersonal isolation*, which occurs when parts of the self are split off (Yalom, 1989, p. 11). In existentialist theory, isolation is the understanding that life and death are ultimately experienced alone, despite the possibility of comforting relationships. In existential psychology, particular attention is paid to relationships whose primary purpose is to mitigate the anxiety of existential isolation, whether these relationships are with another person or with a divine being.

I will return to the role of isolation in my story of leadership transition when I retell the story through an existentialist lens, but for now I will move on to the fourth and final ultimate concern of being human, which existential psychology identifies as *meaninglessness*. Yalom frames the concern as follows:

> … if death is inevitable, if all of our accomplishments, indeed our entire solar system, shall one day lie in ruins, if the world is contingent (that is, everything could as well have been otherwise), if human beings must construct the world and the human design within that world, then what enduring meaning can there be?

This question plagues contemporary men and women, and many seek therapy because they feel their lives to be senseless and aimless. We are meaning-seeking creatures. Biologically, our nervous systems are organised in such a way that the brain automatically clusters incoming stimuli into configurations. Meaning also provides a sense of mastery: feeling helpless and confused in the face of random, unpatterned events, we seek to order them and, in doing so, gain a sense of control over them. Even more important, meaning gives birth to values and, hence, a code of behaviour: Thus, the answer to *why* questions (Why do I live?) supplies an answer to *how* questions (How do I live?) (Yalom, 1989, p. 13).

We struggle to find meaning in what might be a meaningless universe. We avoid confronting directly the possibility that there is no meaning because such an admission would negate all the comforting constructions that remove the uncertainty of meaninglessness from our lives. Our narrative lives, according to existential psychology, are crowded with meaning-making stories that allow us to function day-to-day, month-to-month, year-to-year in the face of the possibility of meaninglessness.

Where do we find meaning? "The culture that provides us with meaning is of profound existential importance to us" writes Strenger (Strenger, 2011, p. 122). And so too is our worldview, a point of view that existential psychology has in common with narrative psychology's belief that we construct meaning through a storied world:

It turns out that one of the prime sources of existential safety is indeed a more or less integrated worldview. In fact, existential psychology shows us that our need for a worldview that provides us with meaning is so overpowering that we will do almost anything to defend it (Strenger, 2011, p. 122).

Through the lens of existential psychology my leadership story is one of the anxiety-reducing narratives at play in the modern organisational world.

In this version of the story, many years of service in the organisation might have meant that the values that allowed me to survive there became my values. My good salary and sense of conventional career success provided me with a feeling of specialness, one of existential psychology's narrative responses to the reality of death. This feeling of specialness was all the more important given that the other defence against the

reality of death, my belief in an ultimate rescuer (divine power) had weakened under years of relentless doubt.

Success at work over many years had helped me ignore the idea of death. It also helped me ignore a distant uncomfortable feeling that I might not be so special after all. My work, my conventional sense of success, lured me into Heidegger's state of *forgetfulness of being*, into what he would have called an inauthentic life (Yalom, 1980). The pain of leaving a place that had made me feel special was the pain of removing what had been an important psychological barrier against death anxiety.

A sense of freedom was also at play. I stayed for many years in a role with fixed boundaries. I faced choices, but not choices that might endanger my sense of existential safety. I might have stayed in a role that required me to relinquish a great deal of freedom so that I wouldn't face the existential drama of a more choiceful, less structured role. Yalom might claim that I was unconsciously following a path of *non-decision-making* because it enabled me to ignore the possibility of groundlessness. The organisation and my role in it were the ground I needed to convince myself that I had all the existential stability I needed.

Isolation also features in the story. I imagined that I had built a deep sense of belonging in my work community. I counted quite a few of my co-workers as friends. This settled and stable community provided me with a sense of connection against a fear of isolation.

Finally, the culture of the organisation became my culture. I stood for what the organisation stood for. The personal narratives I used to make sense of my life and the world I lived in were all shaped by my years of experience as a leader in the organisation. If "we all need to feel we do something that matters within a frame of reference that defines our experiential world" (Strenger, 2011, p. 31) then my work environment had become my defining frame of reference. I was, in many ways, a product of the company.

Strenger notes how difficult it is to relinquish our meta-narratives. Existential psychology agrees. Yalom writes:

> Heidegger realized that one doesn't move from a state of forgetfulness of being to a more enlightened, anxious mindfulness of being by simple contemplation, by bearing down, by gritting one's teeth. There are certain

unalterable, irremediable conditions, certain "urgent experiences" that jolt one, that tug one from the first, everyday, state of existence to the state of mindfulness of being. Of these urgent experiences (Jaspers later referred to the as "border" or "boundary" or "limit" situations), death is the nonpareil: death is the condition that makes it possible for us to live life in an authentic fashion (Yalom, 1980, p.31).

Imagined through the lens of existential psychology, my transition is a story of leaving behind the comfort of *forgetfulness of being* and, without realizing it, leaving myself open to the existential anxieties of death, freedom, isolation and meaninglessness. Yalom describes this move towards mindfulness of being as a move *towards* anxiety. With the protective mechanisms dropped, anxiety rushes in to fill the psychic vacuum. Here anxiety is a positive sign. It signals the move towards a more authentic life. My strong reaction to the sudden plunge into the cold waters of existential anxiety could be a common experience for executives who have depended in their conventional careers to keep existential anxieties at bay. It may be why many executives choose to stay where they are despite the organisation's toxic air.

I left the exploration of existential psychology with a deep appreciation for how organisational life might be an important stage on which we play out our struggles for existential meaning. Organisations provide structure. They limit choice. They imbue a sense of specialness that just might help us feel that the normal rules of death and meaningless don't apply to us. They give us comforting frames of reference. My work provided all of those things to me in a way that a religion might also have. It was brutally difficult to give them up. As Strenger and Yalom would have guessed, it took an urgent experience to force me to do so (Strenger, 2011, Yalom, 1989).

I also left with a deep sense of responsibility for the executives in my care. Existential psychology might warn me that as I worked with executives in their leadership roles, I must understand that these roles might be important sources of existential comfort. It might be impossible for me to help them move towards *mindfulness of being* without forcing them to question the validity of these sources. I wondered if organisational life might work because it prods us into *forgetfulness of being.* The narrative structures that organisations provide – a sense of purpose, espoused values, codes of conduct and career paths – are a sedative. What kind of leadership development work asks executives to consider how they are avoiding death, freedom, isolation, and

meaninglessness? My personal experience showed me that organisations are not trustworthy sources of comfort against existential anxiety, not necessarily because of some conscious malevolence but because profits usually trump concerns for psychological health.

I wondered if part of my practice should be to help leaders take responsibility for their existential work out of the hands of the organisations that employ them. When existential psychology's principles show up in my practice, they usually do so discretely. For example, when executives ask me about which is more important, organisational purpose or personal purpose, I respond that I believe having a personal sense of meaning in life and in your leadership is more important. I explain that the leader's psychological health depends in part on being able to tell herself a satisfying story about leading a meaningful life. It also depends on being able to imagine how that meaning is served and will continue to be served through her leadership. For the leader, this inner work is far more important than whatever organisational glue might come from forming an organisational purpose into words.

Finally, existential psychology helped me understand the link between the Artist and the Dreamer and Wound. If the Artist at the top of my imago map is the highest expression of myself, he gets his power from the depth of meaning that existential psychology says provides us with personal direction. In the early months of my imago work, this character was the most elusive. During that time, I participated in a personal purpose workshop in London. I was already out of a job and was searching for what might be next. I also had a post-trauma hyper-awareness that I wanted where I was going to be more meaningful than where I had come from.

At the end of the workshop, we were each asked to present our personal purpose statements to each other. I remember standing in front of the group when it was my turn and sharing with the group that my purpose was "to help people walk on water". I wasn't convinced at the time that such purpose statements are genuinely helpful. I certainly wasn't convinced that I could communicate the depth of what the statement meant to me to the group of people in front of me. I didn't understand it myself.

So, I explained what I thought the story meant. I recounted how there is a story in the New Testament in which Jesus is out on a stormy Sea of Galilee with some of his followers, when He decides to walk over the tossing waves. His followers are afraid

that they will all become victims of the stormy sea, but Jesus calls one of them out of the boat to walk on the water with him. The follower, Peter, ventures out of the boat and, according to the story, manages to walk towards Jesus on the dark deep water for a few steps. He succeeds until he realises that what he is doing isn't possible. Then, he sinks.

I explained that I would be satisfied with the next chapter of my career if I spent it helping leaders understand how they could wrestle with the chaos of their lives and use it to elevate themselves. I use the example that when I work with executives on their sense of personal purpose, not because I claim to be like Jesus (I tell them, which usually gets me a few smiles) but because what is important to personal purpose work is not a purpose statement but rather the story behind the statement that gives it rich personal meaning.

Narrative reflexes for growth

Narrative psychology encouraged me to consider how my narratives might have been shaped by cultural influences, including the culture of the organisation in which I worked.

Evolutionary psychology led me to explore my narratives as if they were manifestations of biologically imbedded survival instincts that jumped into action when my (career) survival was threatened. For traumatised leaders, these narrative mechanisms might show up as hyper-alertness to threats. They might show up as unconscious behaviours in the context of power hierarchies. And, occasionally, they might show up as acts of violence when humiliation becomes too much to bear.

Existential psychology helped me imagine that playing along with our unconscious instincts are a series of deeply embedded human anxieties. The presence of these anxieties shapes how we imagine the world and our place in it. Organisational life can give us narrative structures against these anxieties, I imagined, but organisations are typically not good sources of existential comfort or of mindfulness of being. Their primary purpose is usually not the existential coherence of their employees.

Each of these schools of clinical psychology helped me imagine the unconscious forces that might have shaped the stories I conjured up when I was under attack in my old

leadership role. But none of them explained why I chose to fight rather than submit. For this exploration, I turned to depth psychology.

Depth psychology concerns itself with the process of making unconscious psychic forces conscious in the pursuit of what its co-founder, Carl Jung, called *individuation* (Stein, 2006). Jung described individuation as the uncovering of the true self from under the incomplete or even false characters – the personas – we create to make ourselves acceptable in a social context (Stein, 1998, 2006; Jung, 1953, 1974, 1989; Harding, 1947; Singer, 1972). Jung claimed that "individuation, becoming a self, is not only a spiritual problem, it is the problem of all life" (Jung, 1953, p. 124). The process of individuation is an endless exploration. It is a drive that exists deep within us (Stein, 2006).

Jung and the depth psychologists who followed him note that while individuation continues throughout life, the process can be usefully divided into two stages, loosely called the *first half of life* and the *second half of life* (Stein, 2006; Hollis, 2005). The purpose of each stage is psychologically distinct. In the first stage, we create versions of ourselves that secure our safety in a demanding world. The second stage brings into consciousness all the parts of ourselves that we have pushed aside in the first stage so that we become an integrated and individuated individual. Stein calls this "becoming a unified but also unique personality, an individual, an undivided and integrated person" (Stein, 1998, p. 175).

Stein describes the central theme of the first half of life as "ego and persona development to the point of individual viability, cultural adaptation, and adult responsibility for raising children" (Stein, 1998, p. 174). The driving narratives of our youth are narratives of accommodating the demands of society so that we fit in. According to depth psychology, however, fitting in comes at a psychological price that we only begin to understand when we approach the second half of life. Depth psychology's goal is to help people understand the compromises they have made to fit in, and to stop making the compromises that prevent a truer self from forming. This isn't an easy process:

> The nearer we approach to the middle of life, and the better we have
> succeeded in entrenching ourselves in our personal standpoints and social
> positions, the more it appears as if we have discovered the right course

and the right ideals and principles of behaviour. For this reason we suppose them to be eternally valid, and make a virtue of unchangeably clinging to them (Jung, 1933, p. 194-195).

A great deal of depth psychology's work supports mid-life transitions away from the culturally determined self towards the true self (see Hollis, 2005; Singer, 1972; Stein, 1998, 2006). Stein describes these transitions as metaphorical deaths, as old psychological structures must die before new ones are born (Stein, 1983).

Depth psychology helped me to imagine that my step away from my old workplace might be a step towards individuation. It might say that the unconscious mechanisms at play were forces in my soul working hard to leave aside an old desire to fit in. Stein might have described it as a transition into adulthood and into becoming my own parent (Stein, 2006). It marked a transition not just into a new role but also into the second half of my life, when old and ignored energies needed expression. Stepping into this transition meant taking note of what was most meaningful to me and of the parts of myself that I had set aside earlier in life to be acceptable to society. The narratives I wrote and explored were all useful ways to present my conscious mind with shadow material in the form of characters, images and symbols. Understanding this material through my narrative inquiry helped me shape and occupy a defining image of myself into whose skin I could comfortably fit.

The process of uncluttering who you truly are, rather than who you have become in order to fit in, can be a messy one because it can be difficult to separate cultural values from personal values. Depth psychology has a rich array of practices for exploring our stories and story-making mechanisms in this untidy territory, all of which are deeply imbedded in mythos: soulfulness, shadow work, imagining meaning in symbols, myths and archetypes. All of these practices bring the unconscious to consciousness, a process that can only happen through an intentional exploration of the hidden soulful, typically through imaginative work. My interest in depth psychology came mainly from its use of the imagination to work with the unconscious. Four concepts in depth psychology were especially useful. These are the *shadow*, the integrated *imago*, *active imagination* and *dream analysis*.

Depth psychology suggests that we each have shadows hidden in our unconscious. The shadow represents the culturally dubious aspects of the personality that is often "the

first figure we usually meet in the confrontation with the unconscious" (Hannah, 1981, p. 7). The shadow is a figure that "mainly consists of what we have rejected in ourselves" (Hannah, 1981, p. 7), the refused and unacceptable characteristics that do not go away but collect in the personality's dark corners (Johnson, 1991, p. 4). An evolutionary biologist might refer to it as the biologically driven psychological forces that have helped our survival as a species over tens of thousands of years, but that are now socially unacceptable.

According to depth psychology, our shadows shape our narratives, whether we like it or not (Stein, 1998). They require expression. They can do so without our interference, uncontrollably, or through integration into the ego, where our shadow drives are accepted, and their energies channelled. This shadow integration is an important part of the individuation process (Stein, 1998). Integration, a key theme in depth psychology, refers to the sense that we understand and accept all the players in our inner theatre, even if we are sometimes uncomfortable with them. It refers to our ability to use all of their energies in the proper way. For me, shadow work meant understanding that pleasing can tend towards submissiveness. It meant not viewing myself too harshly when the Monster expressed himself in ways that were not always appreciated. Each of my internal characters had its own shadows. Understanding them and accepting them as parts of the character that might sometimes be useful was important work.

Depth psychology emphasises the need for intentional engagement with the imagination in the process of making the conscious unconscious (Jung, 1933, 1953; Stein, 2006). Like McAdams' work on inner realities through mythical imagoes, depth psychology uses *imagoes* to help explore inner landscapes. In the case of depth psychology, however, the imago is often developed from or influenced by what Jung called archetypes of the collective unconscious (see Jung, 1968). Archetypes are patterns of behaviour that are so important to our survival that they are biologically embedded. We explore them by imagining them as symbolic figures: (the mother, the child, the trickster…). "The archetype is, so to speak, an 'eternal presence', and the only question is whether it is perceived by the conscious mind or not" (Jung, 1974, p. 301).

Clinical work helps to define a final imago, usually with archetypes to help guide the imagination, on which to settle a dominant sense of the self. Stein refers to this final imago as "the fully formed imago, and, as a result of it, integrity within a transformed personality" (Stein, 1998, p. 108). While it has been more useful for me to follow Adams' practice of identifying and working imaginatively with multiple imagoes, I imagined that my Artist might be an example of a fully-formed imago because he only appears at his best when he is connected in a productive way to the other characters. In any case it was the process of understanding each of them and bringing them together with a sense of harmony that helped me most through my leadership work.

Active imagination is any practice that allowed for the expression of unconscious energy through the use of imaginary images, characters and stories. My conversations with E are one example of active imagination. It allows my imagination to bring up images (E), themes (whatever it is that E and I decide to talk about), senses of self (I am open and honest with E, and she is the same with me), and images (we meet in a jazz bar attached to a university where my wife works). All of these workings of my imagination are useful texts for reflection.

My imaginative engagement with my inner characters is also a work of active imagination. I opened my imagination up to the question of who was present in my inner theatre during my work crisis. It supplied me with enough information to lead me into a deep and engaging journey into myself.

In his personal and clinical work, Jung saw active imagination as a two-step process: "First, letting the unconscious come up; and second, coming to terms with the unconscious" (Chodorow, 1997, p. 10). Chodorow explains the two stages:

> At first, the unconscious takes the lead while conscious ego serves as a kind of attentive inner witness and perhaps scribe or recorder. The task is to gain access to the contents of the unconscious.

> In the second part of active imagination, consciousness takes the lead. As the affects and images of the unconscious flow into awareness, the ego enters actively into the experience. This part might begin with a spontaneous string of insights; the larger task of evaluation and integration remains. Insight must be converted into an ethical obligation

– to live it in life. For Jung, the second stage is more important because it involves questions of meaning and moral demands. (Chodorow, 1997, pp. 10-11).

An important lesson in depth psychology is that working with the imagination is not frivolous work. Jung was cautious about active imagination. He was concerned that reckless imaginative play might blur the important line between the imaginal world and the physical world in ways that confused both. In his introduction to active imagination, Johnson warns readers to be sure that they have resources available if they become too engrossed in their imaginal worlds. He writes:

> But some few people are subject to being so totally possessed by the flow of images, once they start down a particularly powerful segment of Active Imagination, that they can't pull out of it. Their minds get lost in the realm of fantasy and can't find their way back to the here-and-now of the ordinary world (Johnson, 1986, p. 137).

The warning told me that imagination is its own force and that using it constructively requires skill. In my narrative explorations it was necessary for me to remember that imagination is *mythos* territory, where questions aimed at exploration and possible meanings rather than at finding the one truth. It couldn't be trusted as a source of facts. It had to be explored. It was a strange realisation to understand that imagination is its own mechanisms, that it can be manipulated, that it responds to all sorts of unconscious forces.

Finally, depth psychology pays close attention to how the imagination communicates unconscious energies through stories in the form of dreams. An important part of my therapeutic practice in the early days of my inquiry was through interpreting dreams with my body psychotherapist. With his help I learned how to pay special attention to the layers of meaning in dreams. For example, I experienced a vivid and powerful dream a few months after my mother passed, when pressure at work was growing thanks to my increasingly open confrontations with a few members of the organisation's privileged class. In the dream, powerful images seemed to suggest that I needed to express my power much more than I had before. I wrote out the dream for exploration with a therapist. This is what I shared with him:

I am flying high above a brown and barren mountainous desert, scanning the land below from cloud-level. As far as I can see there are jagged peaks and valleys, sun-baked lifeless beautiful harsh land. The clouds cast shadows that play across the rugged earth.

I know the land. It is the Sinai desert, where I once travelled as a teenage boy with classmates and friends on school trips or vacation while my father was posted to Israel as the Canadian Ambassador. We lived in a house in an orange and lemon orchard north of Tel Aviv during those years. I slept under the stars here in the desert, on the shores of the Red Sea. I played baseball there on school trips with my friends. I snorkelled along the great underwater wall in Dahab.

I am all-of-a-sudden swooping down towards a strange man-made structure on the edge of the sea, between the barren mountains and their flash-flood valleys and the impossibly turquoise-blue sea. The structure is a huge water park, built in a kilometres-wide concrete circle as a fresh-water lake where families come and play in the shallow cool water. There are no rides or slides or jumps: only the vast concrete circle containing the lake. Far in the distance I see the faint shimmering image of a small tower and concrete wharf.

In my dream there is an Orca, a killer whale, glistening black and white in the shallow dark water. The Orca isn't swimming. He is still. All around him children are playing and swimming, climbing on top of him so that they can jump off and splash in the water. The Orca is here for the entertainment of the children. As I watch this strange scene, the Orca looks at me. He smirks somehow. He is bored. He wasn't made for the children's amusement. He isn't angry at the children. But he knows that this is not the life he was made for.

Suddenly, I am swimming in the middle of the vast artificial lake. The water is deeper. I am far from any shore and the water is rough with waves. My faceless friends are in a small boat, close to me. If I get tired of swimming I can climb aboard their boat. But I am enjoying the swim.

I decide to see how fast I can swim. I swim faster and faster and even faster. I swim impossibly fast. I can't believe how quickly I am swimming and how powerful I feel. I am swimming too fast for my friends to keep up in their small boat. I see the concrete

tower and concrete wharf at the other end of the huge concrete man-made lake and decide to swim as fast as I can towards them.

I suddenly see a huge, magnificent killer whale leap high out of the sea, water pouring off of his glistening powerful, black-and white body. The image breathes power and nature, health, and vitality. In the background are the green mountains of the Canadian Pacific Northwest.

I woke up just as the Orca launches himself out of the depths into the air, all power and beauty, monster energy at its noblest form. Earlier images in the dream suggested that the killer whale (me) had been held captive in man-made structures for too long and had outlived his usefulness as a plaything for children in a public aquarium.

I loved the messages I took from the dream: power, strength, speed, integration with nature, plunging into the depths and emerging out of them with grace and energy. The dream seemed to be telling me that the time had come for me to express my own strength. It was a message to my Monster, or from him, I imagined.

When I recounted the dream to my body psychotherapist, he didn't mention any messages about power or liberation. He said simply: "You are alone". It was true. One of the many transitional moments in the dream was when I was swimming in a circular man-made lake beside a group of friends who were following in a small boat. In the dream I decided to see how fast I could swim, and suddenly I was swimming faster than the boat. I was swimming so fast that I left my friends in the boat behind. The dream's next image was of me as a killer whale, breaching the water, on my own.

The psychotherapist cautioned me about the dangers of being alone. I needed help. But I was too taken by the idea of expressing my own power that I neglected to build the kinds of coalitions that are necessary for dealing with the systemic challenges or organisational change. My agentic energies and my communal energies hadn't yet learned how to work together.

Integrating clinical approaches into imaginative work

When I first started to work with my inner characters and I pictured them together, they always appeared in a dark circular stone room, like a dungeon. There was no sense

of connection between them. They were silent and brooding, each sitting on his own, facing away from the others. The room was lit by torches on the walls, and it is dark and damp and cold. There is no sense of a functioning unity between them.

After exploring what forces might have been behind their appearance and their behaviour, it was helpful to take the exercise in active imagination a little further. It helped to imagine what it would be like if they understood themselves and each other better. I imagined what a more harmonious existence between them might look like.

In that image, the light in the room is a little brighter than dungeon-light, and the dank, cold grey stone room is slightly warmer than dungeon-cold.

Instead of each imago propped silently and awkwardly up against the dungeon walls, they sit on the circular stone bench inside the room, facing the Artist. The Artist is also sitting, preparing to tell a story. The rest of the characters are facing him. He could be a someone about to tell a campfire story to his curious friends. He could be a story-collector sharing stories with a group of leaders who want to understand how to make sense of their leadership lives.

The Artist says, "We had stories about how the world works and about ourselves. We loved our stories. They were like maps. They helped us find our way.

"But a storm took us to a place where our old maps didn't work. It was difficult to give up our old world. It was difficult to give up our old maps. They were good maps. It was a good world.

Looking at the Pleaser, he states what he feels is a fact. "It was hard for you when we lost the maps. You were our map-maker".

The Pleaser looks back at the Artist. Behind his eyes his mind is processing, but he isn't afraid. With a light, clear voice he says, "I wanted to do a good job for us. But I didn't know what to do when all my usual strategies didn't work. I panicked". He stops for a second, breathes a few long breaths.

"Remember", he says, "I am at my best when I love. I am happiest when I lead with love. Remember that".

He turns to the Warrior. "Because of me, you couldn't master yourself", he says. He isn't apologising. He is stating what he feels.

The Warrior isn't usually expressive. When he is calm, he speaks quietly and deliberately. When the mood takes him, he roars. At the moment, he is calm.

He says, "There is a saying. 'Never give a sword to a man who can't dance'. I have my sword. You can help me to dance".

The Pleaser, who thinks he needs a name change, smiles. In the archetypes he is called the Lover or the Friend. He prefers the Friend. "Help me to become stronger and I will help you dance".

The Friend says to them all: "I made maps to get along with people. These are good maps. They were very good maps when we moved from country to country and it was important to fit in. They were good maps when he needed to be a good youngest brother, a good believer, a good worker. I think we need new maps". It sounds like a confession.

The Monster and the Pleaser both smile a bit sadly, thinking about how their energies vied for a voice on the internal stage: *Fight?! Flee?! Freeze?! Or please? Or love?* What necessary and insufficient maps we have created, they think.

The Artist turns to the Dreamer and the Wound. He says: "Sometimes we make maps that help us to look away from the things that scare us. These are good maps too. But sometimes we need maps that take us towards the things that scare us". The Dreamer and the Wound, always together, close their eyes, opening themselves up to the secrets they carry and the depths they contain. The Dreamer looks older than he used to. He might be growing up.

"Sometimes we need maps to understand who we are, and why we are that way. And maps that help us understand who we want to be, and why we want to be that way". The Wound and the Dreamer exhale, and their warm breath brushes over the others in the room.

Looking at the Dreamer and the Wound, the Artists says, "Thank you for waiting for us to learn your language. Thank you for helping us to make new maps".

They are smiling. It's the first time I see them smiling.

The Artist says, "I am happy we are making new maps".

Mapping the territory between intrusive and intentional narratives

At this stage of the inquiry I was able to construct my own map of the territory between intrusive and intentional story-making. See below for an illustration of the narrative map that emerged from the inquiry (and see Part One for Calhoun and Tedeschi's original version).

Looking at the territory through a narrative-making lens, I could imagine the trauma journey as one that starts when established inner narratives and the established hierarchy of inner narrators are destroyed. Different clinical approaches have different names for these narrative-destroying experiences, but all agree that narrative destruction is both psychologically devastating and can lead to important personal growth.

Growth happens when wiser narratives replace the ones that were destroyed. Replacement is difficult, however, because our unconscious narrative-making mechanisms don't always create growth-ful stories in the panic that follows the destruction of our old stories.

We can overcome narrative panic by telling our stories as honestly as we can, even if they are confused stories, by understanding the inner narrators from which our stories come, and by exploring why these inner narrators might be telling the stories they are telling.

This process is helped by a self-therapeutic gaze that searches for meaning rather than for truth, that is kind and positive, and that balances belief with the possibility of multiple meanings or layers of meaning. It is also helped by telling the stories that lie just in the periphery of our imagination, by including the imaginary in our story telling, and by paying attention to what images and themes our imaginations bring into our narrative world.

The wiser stories that emerge from this work between intrusive and intentional narrative-making integrate our experiences honestly. They are perhaps more complex

and less naive than the stories we had before; but, they are also stories that might enable us to imagine ourselves as stronger than we once were, to imagine new possibilities, a new value in our lives and in our relationships, and perhaps even to imagine a deeper sense of our spirituality (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2014).

In Part Four, I turn to Transformation. Transformation is the fourth stage of therapeutic work in depth psychology. In the context of this inquiry, transformation is more than just having reimagined my inner narratives and inner narrators. An important objective of the inquiry was to navigate the journey into a new career. Transformation meant launching that career. It meant being a good enough facilitator of leadership development work that I could support myself and my family with that work. It really meant somehow becoming someone who could work with executives on their personal growth, using their stories as the territory for exploration. Imagining myself guiding executives into this territory was frightening. Transformation meant making sense of my fear.

Who I thought I was

'Me Pre-trauma'
'My assumptive world'
Existing hierarchy of core narratives
Existing hierarchy of inner narrators

Narrative destruction!

'Seismic event' (PTG)
'Urgent experience' (existential psych.)
'Nuclear event' (narrative psych.)

Narrative reflex!

Panic! Intrusive, automatic rumination (PTG)
Loss of trust in core narratives & in imagination's meaning-making capability
'who do I need to be to fit in so that I am safe?'
vs 'how do I become a more honest version of me?'
Black-&-white narratives
Incomplete narratives
Useful fictions

Narrative exploration & self-therapy

Gaze of hermeneutics of suspicion (Ricouer) & balance between belief and skepticism (Andrews): intentional rumination (PTG)

As-honest-as-possible story of the experience = relief from panic, catharsis, emergence of possible frames

Confession

Education

Interpretation

Exploring source of narrative reflexes (managing risk, culture, survival, anxiety, self-development in a social context)

Identifying inner narrators, their shadows, the dominant & the underdeveloped, & the quality of the relationships between them. Imagining new relationships.

Re-imagining who I am (and want to become)

Development of self-therapeutic relationship, becoming own secure base (attachment theory)
Emergence of post-trauma growth indicators: 'more complex narrative, increased wisdom' (PTG)
'More vulnerable but stronger' (PTG)

Part Four
Narratives in-Between

A few months after I was fired, Rox, Antoine and I travelled from Switzerland back to Ottawa to spend time with my father. It was the third summer after Mom's passing.

We took advantage of our trip back home to go canoe-camping for a few days in Algonquin Park. Algonquin is a huge and sprawling land of forest and lakes three hours by car northwest of Ottawa. I had happy memories of camping there in my youth, sometimes with friends, a couple of times with Dad, and once with Dad, my brother, and my brother-in-law.

Going to Algonquin meant stepping away. It meant pitching a tent near the shore of some lost lake and jumping in the canoe at daybreak, while there's still mist on the water. It meant relaxing under the shade of the pines and birches or reading a book in the tent if it rained. It meant campfires at dusk and paddling as close as we can to the moose who come out to feed in shallow water. There are bears and wolves, as well as moose in Algonquin Park, lots of them, but they stay out of the way if proper precautions are taken. Algonquin has a touch of danger to it as well.

A trip to Algonquin also meant preparation. Mom would've normally managed the packing up of meals and snacks and organising the gear. In her absence, I cheated. I arranged for an outfitter at the east entrance of the Park to have food and gear ready for us when we arrived. We rented our canoes from the same outfitter, which saved us the trouble of having to tie down the family's two beautifully battered old *Chestnut Prospectors* on top of my Dad's Jeep. I arranged for the outfitter to boat-taxi us out to a campsite on the far end of Opeongo Lake, the Park's largest lake. I would normally stay away from big water, but I wasn't sure what Rox and Antoine would think about portaging between lakes to access the Park's interior and I didn't want us to set up in tourist territory. Opeongo's southern tip almost touches Route 60, the two-lane road that bisects the park, and it is close to the park's east entrance. It was easy to access but still big enough to take us away from the day-trippers. It was not quite wild, but also not quite safe.

I don't remember exactly what I was thinking when we drove up to the Park. I must've been feeling the fresh wounds of my departure from work. I suppose I was angry, or maybe defiant. My legal case was strong. There seemed to be a good chance of a polite settlement despite the games that the other side played. Maybe I was still getting used to the feeling of our old home in Ottawa without Mom in it.

We stopped for a coffee outside of Renfrew on our way up to the park and I remember asking the girl behind the counter what was new in town. The best she could come up with was that a second *Tim Hortons* coffee shop had opened up, thereby doubling the town's access to horrible coffee and tasty donuts.

I do remember our first night at the campsite. We were safe and warm and cosy in the tent, a few metres from the shore. Our food pack was hanging from a nearby tree, out of the reach of hungry bears.

Antoine and Rox were asleep in minutes. But I couldn't sleep at all. I was hyper-awake, tossing and turning in my sleeping bag as if something in my spirit was being called into the darkness around us. I felt surrounded by ghosts. I felt haunted. It *was* haunting, especially at 2 o'clock in the morning when a couple of loons out on the water started calling to each other. Their long and lonely wails could have been banshee cries echoing over the lake.

After that first haunted night in Algonquin Park, I began to think about how I was reacting to being in spaces that felt as if they were between two ways of being, at the edge of something but not quite somewhere else.

I began to notice that I was having strange emotional reactions to these types of spaces. On our travels, I had started to make a habit of visiting local churches so that I could light a candle for Mom, and noticed that I often choked up afterwards, when I sat down in a pew to take in the atmosphere. This happened sometimes on planes and trains, when I was on my way from one place to somewhere else. Ashridge, where we held our doctoral workshops, was especially unsettling. I almost never felt comfortable in my skin amongst its old buildings and ancient gardens. I felt like a provisional version of myself, where only my awed and raw Dreamer had a home on my inner stage.

These in-between spaces felt like more than physical spaces. I felt in-between in a thousand different ways – in between narrative worlds and ways of telling the story of my leadership experience. I was also in between an old version of myself and some new version. I was in between my old career as a business leader, executive and designer of leadership development programs and a new career working first-hand with executives on their growth in the territory of their own stories. I was on the journey of sorting out who and how I needed to be to do this work. The space I was starting to explore with the executives in my care felt like *middle-of-the-night Algonquin Park* space, deep and mysterious and a little dangerous. When I started to develop my facilitation and teaching practice, I felt on edge, as if I were taking us into sacred territory for which I was not a qualified guide. Every time I stepped into the territory, I felt as lonely and nervous as I had on that night we spent at the edge of Algonquin's wilderness.

I began to wonder if an alternative primary frame for my leadership experience might be the frame of being in-between. I didn't want to erase the story's old headline of mobbing and trauma and 'rape of the soul'. I didn't want to diminish its importance. I *did* want to see if another frame might open up new interpretations, or methods for exploring the territory. I also wanted to see what would happen if I started to imagine my leadership practice as a practice of taking executives into in-between.

To explore these curiosities, I turned to what anthropology, religion and psychology had to say about the space between.

The space between

According to anthropologist Van Gennep, each time we make a significant transition in our lives we take an important step into in-between space. These transitions are common. He writes:

> Transitions from one group and from one social situation to the next are looked upon as implicit in the very act of existence, so that (our life) comes to be made up of a succession of stages with similar ends and beginnings: birth, social puberty, marriage, fatherhood, advancement to a higher social class, occupational specialization, and death. For every one of these events

there are ceremonies whose essential purpose is to enable the individual to pass from one defined position to another which is equally well-defined (Van Gennep, 1960, p. 2).

Van Gennep describes life's transitions as having three stages, the preliminal (with rites of separation), liminal (with rites of passage) and post-liminal (with rites of incorporation or settling into a new way of being) (Van Gennep, 1960).

The world's wisdom traditions have similar points of view about life's transitions. Hinduism divides life into four stages, from *being a student*, to *becoming a householder*, on to *retirement*, and finally to a final stage in which one "neither hates nor loves anything" (Smith, 1991). Ideally, according to Hinduism, one passes smoothly from one stage to the next and is wary about staying too long or becoming trapped in one. "A playboy of twenty-five may have considerable appeal but spare us the playboys of fifty" (Smith, 1991, location 1214).

Psychologists have identified their own stages of development in life, and their own discomforts associated with passing from one stage to the next. Erikson's eight stages of psychosocial development follow human development from birth to death, with each step along the way coming with its own crisis. As humans age, according to Erikson, the nature of their psychosocial struggles shifts. These shifts include *trust* versus *mistrust*, *autonomy* versus *shame and doubt*, *initiative* versus *guilt, industry* versus *inferiority*, *identity* versus *role confusion*, *intimacy* versus *self-absorption, generativity* versus *stagnation* (a stage associated with the ages 35-65), and *integrity* versus *despair and disgust*. Generativity versus stagnation, the stage in which I was in during the inquiry, is concerned with nurturing future generations, the absence of which, Erikson claims, results in the aging adult treating himself as if he were his only child (Erikson, 1980).

In narrative psychology, McAdams describes the changing role of imagery in the self-myths we create as we pass from childhood to adolescence. Childhood imagery forms the foundations for our later myths. Late childhood sheds light on particular motives and themes for our myth-making. Adolescence brings ideological forms and foundations, and adulthood "makes life into myth" (McAdams, 1993, p. 91). At each

stage, the emerging myth-maker must make sense of herself through her self-narratives.

In-between space is disturbed space. Turner writes that "during the intervening 'liminal' period, the characteristics of the ritual subject (the 'passenger') are ambiguous; *he passes through a cultural realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming stage*" (Turner, 1969, p. 94, italics mine).

Liminal space is also deeply confusing, ambiguous, and disorientating. Turner writes:

> Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of the sun or moon.
>
> … Their behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complaint. It is as though they are being reduced or ground down to a uniform condition to be fashioned anew and endowed with additional powers to enable them to cope with their new station in life (Turner, 1969, p. 95).

Describing patients in his therapeutic practice who are going through important transitions, depth psychologist Murray Stein writes:

> In liminality, a person feels at a loss for steady points of reference. When the established hierarchies of the past have dissolved and before new images and attitudes have emerged fully, and while those that have appeared are not yet solid and reliable, everything seems to be in flux ... Angst is the mood of liminality. A person is ambivalent and depressed, and this is punctuated by periods of enthusiasm, adventure, and experimentation. People go on living, but not quite in this world (Stein, 1998, p. 20).

These descriptions of liminal space helped me understand why it might have been so difficult for me to step out of my old job into a new career. I needed form. Liminal space is formless. Tribal life replaces temporarily absent narrative form with the appearance of form through ritual and ceremony (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1969). Organizational life isn't always so wise.[28]

Both Van Gennep and Turner note that in liminal space, ritual and the participation of elders in the ritual process provide a sense of safety for the person going through the rite (Van Gennep, 1960; Turner, 1967, 1969). I didn't have the rites or rituals to lead me through this space. In my experience, organizations typically let transitioning executives sort it out on their own.

Reframing the story: a wiser narrative

Peterson's work on in-between takes anthropological, theological and psychological concepts of liminality into the mythological world. His research explores how our imaginations interpret the psychological forces at play in our lives using myth. According to mythology, our lives are lived in the space between the forces of order and the forces of chaos (Peterson, 1999, 2018). The drama of chaos-versus-order plays out through three powers: the disruption of chaos, the stability of order, and the ability to navigate between the two through exploration.

Peterson describes order as either protective or tyrannical (like imagoes and archetypes, chaos and order have their light side and their shadows). Peterson writes:

> Order… is explored territory. That's the hundreds-of-millions-of-years-old hierarchy of place, position and authority… Order is tribe, religion, hearth, home and country. It's the warm, secure living-room where the

---

[28] I looked for form in a couple of popular ways of thinking about in-between journeys. Neither of them were helpful. Kübler-Ross's five stages of grief claimed that *acceptance* came after periods of *denial*, *anger*, *bargaining* and *depression* (Kübler-Ross, 1969). Joseph Campbell's hero's journey suggested that my transition could be framed as a *departure* (a call to adventure, leaving behind the old way of being), an *initiation* into another way of being, and a *return* (Campbell, 1949). Campbell describes the hero as a multitude of possibilities, with the ability to emerge in the form of a warrior, a lover, an emperor, tyrant, a redeemer of the world, and a saint (Campbell, 1949, pp. 315-364). I was intrigued by the possibility that every member of my imago family might be living its own heroic story, or that the family itself might be heroic together, but I wasn't sure what to do with the process. Kübler-Ross's usefulness disappeared when I noticed that I could easily live all five stages of her process in no apparent order on any given day. The order implied in the process did not resemble my experience.

fireplace glows and the children play. It's the flag of a nation. … Order is the public façade we are called to wear, the politeness of a gathering of civilized strangers, and the thin ice on which we all skate. Order is the place where the behavior of the world matches our expectation and our desires; the place where things turn out the way we want them to (Peterson, 2018, p. 36).

In my case, order was a job title and a tidy career and a sense of success in a well-defined role, in a well-known organization. Order was being known and respected. It was yearly bonuses and being long enough in the system to understand (I thought) how it worked. Order was years of service, feeling valued and valuable. Order was organizational culture and organizational purpose. Above everything, order was the story I told about myself in the organization that made sense and that I understood.

Peterson describes chaos as "The unknown or unexpected or novel (that) appears when plans go wrong: when behavioural adaptation or interpretive schema fails to produce what is desired or to predict what occurs" (Peterson, 1999, p. 150).

Chaos is the domain of ignorance itself. It's unexplored territory... It's the foreigner, the stranger, the member of another gang, the rustle in the bushes at night-time, the monster under the bed, the hidden anger of your mother, and the sickness of your child. Chaos is the despair and horror you feel when you have been profoundly betrayed. It's the place you end up when things fall apart; when your dreams die, your career collapses, or your marriage ends. It's the underworld of fairytale and myth, where the dragon and the gold it guards eternally co-exist. (Peterson, 2018, pp. 35-36).

In my story, chaos is the lost job, the shattered identity, the set of beliefs that were invalidated by experience. Chaos was colleagues who said they would support but didn't, promises made by our leaders that weren't kept, old community values eroding under the pressure of corrupt players. Chaos was the realization that different sets of rules apply to different levels in the hierarchy, the horrible understanding that sometimes bad behavior is encouraged rather than punished. Chaos was especially the terrible fear that whatever I had built up over so many years in the organization might

not mean much outside of its gates. And it was the lack of narrative order that Sparkes and Smith identify as one of three narrative responses to traumatic spinal cord injury (Sparkes and Smith, 2013. Restitution narratives and Quest narratives are the other two narrative responses).

Peterson place a third power into the liminal space between order and chaos. This power mediates the endless tension between the comforting but potentially suffocating forces of order and the destabilizing but possibly creative forces of chaos. He describes this third power in mythological terms as "the exploratory process" (Peterson, 1999, p. 176).

Exploration turns the unknown into the known. It is necessary for personal growth because it fills the space between the obsolete old strategies and the emerging new ones. "When we explore", Peterson writes, "we transform the indeterminate status and meaning of the unknown thing that we are exploring into something determinate – in the worst case, rendering in nonthreatening, non-punishing; in the best, manipulating and/or categorizing it so that it is useful" (Peterson, 1999, p. 61).

Later in his work he describes the process of exploration as a heroic process:

> The hero is a *pattern* of action, designed to make sense of the unknown; he emerges, necessarily, wherever human beings are successful. Adherence to this central pattern ensures that respect for the process of exploration (and the necessary reconfiguration of belief, attendant upon that process) always remains *superordinate to all other considerations, including that of a maintenance of stable belief* (Peterson, 1999, p. 185).

Other researchers refer to exploration in liminal space as "taming the monsters of doubt" (Hawkins and Edwards, 2013); doubt being the central characteristic of the experience of leaving behind old narratives and constructing new ones. Hawkins, Edwards and Peterson all refer to exploration as the creative act of meaning-making out of chaos so that we can create a new order. Exploration is the process of searching into the emptiness left over when old narrative structures have been destroyed. It leads us to new and better story-maps. The liminal space between Calhoun and Tedeschi's intrusive and intentional narratives is exploration space.

Peterson's work helped me to imagine my story as a story of unexpected chaos shattering a previously ordered narrative structure. I appreciated this reframing because it helped me to imagine that the skills I developed to deal with the chaos of trauma might be useful in the on-going negotiations between order and chaos in my daily life.

I also appreciated its usefulness as a frame for leadership development work. Leadership might not always be traumatic, but it is regularly chaotic. Leadership development might be imagined as exploration in the liminal space between order and chaos. I started to think that post-trauma growth work is really work about how to use the chaos of profound destabilization as territory for exploration that leads to growth.

Exploring narratives in-between

The first time I stepped into the territory of narratives 'in-between' with a group was during the last workshop of the doctoral program. Three of us who were part of the group designing the workshop decided to include a session on what we called "writing the soul". My classmates Katherine and Paul and I hoped to facilitate a collective exploration of the raw narrative space that we had stumbled into in our inquiries. It was our way of practicing confession.

To start the session, Katherine read an example of what she came to call her "autobiofiction". Paul read some of his poetry. I read the story of how I carried my Mom up the stairs of our old family home once cancer had taken away her mobility. We were firmly in *mythos* territory, although we didn't have the language at the time to articulate it that way.

After we read our pieces to the group, we asked each of our classmates to write out a meaningful story that they could share with someone else in the group. We then asked them to choose a line or two from their stories that they could write on a piece of paper. We put all the pieces of paper in a basket and then each of us randomly chose one to read out to the group. Once the piece was read, it was tacked up against one of the walls in the room.[29]

---

[29] Note that I have kept the language, spelling, and punctuation as it was in the original writing.

It was not difficult to bring people into their stories. The lines that they shared felt full of meaning. Here are some examples of the fragments we offered up for anonymous sharing with the rest of our classmates.

I breath deep into my chest and feel a pain, a gulp, a sob, an emptiness that has no specific place, no specific form. At times, it engulfs me, overwhelms at others a small dark tenderness, a scar from a long healed wound, the ache of a missing limb. It is at the end of a deep breath… a small dark space where I hold my loneliness and my shame.

Something has shifted between me and my father, not that he knows it, I think! Something has shifted between me and my father; I wonder if he knows it? Should I tell him?

Rain spots the prayer book page
The mumbled Kaddish
A tree, an earth pile, a spade, the thud of soil on the wooden lid
The coffin. We turn to leave
My nephew lingers, I look back
Seeing him, staring into his grandfather's grave, further puzzled by who he was, who he is,

---

Perhaps,
what if:
Our shame
And the shame
Of others
Burning;
Undeserved;
Is there:
Warding off darkening
Beings and things
Is there:
Us a?,
On fire,
A blaze!
Is there
To light
Our trail:
Homeward

I can't do this

Please

Not tonight

But it is time

We struggle in our own private hells touching our soules only for fleeting moments
You wait for me to save you with my love
I wait for you to save me with your grace
And we swirl around, twisted in our longing and belonging, tethered to our own rocks
in our own hells, knowing in our hearts love will set us free
Shackled in our own chains
I reach out to you
As you do too
Desperately trying to reach each other
Our fingers on the verge of touching.

In those days i often dreamed of being able to fly. It wasn't without effort: I really had to 'flap' my arms up and down, faster and faster, really give it all and then, only when I really thought I could not give anymore, not try any harder, only then, I would rise up to the sky, leaving the danger behind me

---

The elderly black gentleman calmly reaches across the legs of the corpse to extract the chosen pack of meat from the fridge. Unconcerned. Death in the fridge, death propped up against it. Life goes on…
He looks ready to be our next client. No disrespect in his actions, just a quiet acceptance that death is a part of life. Maybe he knows his time is not far off! Wheezy cough. Smoker. His fingers are yellow

---

Little feet they were, round and juicy, always dangling from your short chair. Your feet now? Well, at least they are attractive feet, strong and graceful despite their almost visible aroma.
Even you might turn me in or at the least look at me sternly if I was to sit and worship at your feet. They were once mine, you see, my tiny playthings, there for my hands to knead and my nose to smell and they never failed to dry a tear, bring a smile and a grateful moment.

I always want to change, move, walk away. There is an impatience in me that comes when things don't go the way I want them to go. When I meet disappointments, failures, criticisms, negative feedback, my first reaction is always: let's quit, run

away, get out of here. This I don't like, I don't tolerate, I don't longer want to be part of. Why do I run away? Did I run away?

I noticed it in your eyes, you changed,
You stepped away in a world I could not follow you.
You made an effort, you shared that this is your biggest fear.
The fear of disappearing as you.

Go on the left again, he says
And I know. His cheek has been bruised by that out of shape air.
And now he's just making sure he felt what he felt.
Just making sure.
The noose is tightening.

The memory comes back – Is how after my mother and sister's death, the week after their car accident, I came back to my piano lesson and didn't play.
For some months – I believe between January and the summer – I didn't play.
I simply went to my piano teacher, had my toastie and chocolate, and went back to school.
It wasn't spoken about, although this may more be a loss of memory which I suffer from thinking back of this time. But a friend of the family remembers how the teacher let them know.

I remember how touched I was during the exercise. I remember how private so many of our shared fragments seemed to be. It is sad to read them now because so many of them are about suffering. Every time I read them, I feel like I am in the Dreamer's and Wound's raw and sad underworld.

I remember the mood in the room at the time of the exercise. We were treading on sacred ground. I wondered if telling my story of carrying Mom upstairs had ambushed some of my fellow inquirers, if it was unfair to take them into this territory without better protection. But they were all free to write what they wanted. And we'd been exploring deep ground together for almost two years.

I remember how touched I was when afterwards a couple of my classmates told me that I was a good writer, and that I should write novels. Maybe our session on writing the soul was the first time that my emerging Artist said what the Dreamer and Wound needed to say.

There was a quality of connection through our collective confessions. There was something about sharing stories about our humanity that brought *mythos* into our work.

It's a comment I often get when I work with executives on their stories. Even if they all have jobs at the same company, even if they feel vulnerable to each other, and even if we make a point of inviting them to share only the stories they want to share, given the opportunity, many of them choose connection. Many of them say after the exercise that they would never have believed that they could become so close to one another so quickly. It seems the more honest the confession, the deeper the connection.

Also, I remember how emotionally charged I was preparing for our Ashridge session and delivering my part of it. Our collective goal was to bring our classmates into deeper writing territory. My personal goal felt like a plea for help and attention. Something in me wanted to say: "These are the things that matter! This is territory that counts"! Maybe I was still trying to sort out why we were playing such stupid games at work when each and every one of us was trying to make meaning out of our underworld stories.

During that session, it took a while for the Dreamer the Wound to relinquish their spots on my inner stage. It felt raw for most of the time that we were in the territory. I felt about as vulnerable as I have ever felt.

Transformation, in the narrative sense

As meaningful as our time together in soul-writing felt, I still wanted to make sense of how I could best guide people in my care into the soulful territory of inner narrative. The purpose of the inquiry was to help me be my own therapist and to turn that experience into a practice of helping leaders through their own transitions.

The rawness of the space intimidated me. On the one hand, I felt it *had* to be raw to be meaningful. On the other hand, I felt that I needed to be the wise elder, or the expert companion that anthropology and psychology believe are useful guides in transitional space. How could I be a secure base for others if I felt so off-balance in the space myself?

My first attempts at working with executives in leadership development programs were not promising.

When I joined a new organization that was active in the leadership development space, and was asked to start leading executive development programs, I quickly noticed that being in front of a group of people who I imagined were successful, demanding, and judgmental was difficult for me. It felt like my Dreamer and my Wound, both so activated by my recent work experiences, were surrounded by classrooms of threatening Warriors.

I remember being asked to deliver a session about leading teams to a group of executives in San Francisco. Because I didn't believe in the material I was supposed to deliver, I stumbled. The client said that I didn't have enough of an "edge" and I wasn't invited to return. I wondered what it meant to have an "edge"? Did it mean knowing more than the participants? Did it mean taking a position of authority over them? Did it mean dominating them in some psychological way so that they were nervous and so that I felt safe?

Also, I remember taking over the directorship of a complex leadership development program with modules delivered in different parts of the world and visits to unusual companies in unusual places and feeling that I was working in territory that was highly stressful, incredibly demanding, and absolutely uninteresting. Nothing in the program (it seemed to me) would make any difference to the quality of leadership coming from the participants. I struggled with how to understand myself in my work. I struggled with how to commit myself to work that I didn't think mattered.

If the step into my new career was a step into chaos, my first attempts to bring order into my thinking began when I settled on a set of beliefs about the work I was doing. These beliefs came from the exploration that I've described in this inquiry. I thought of them as beliefs about *knowledge*, about *space*, and about *care*.

By *knowledge* I mean the way I think about my role in the learning process. I also mean the way I deal with my points of view about leadership and leadership development.

I couldn't claim to be an expert in narrative work. I did not imagine myself as a keeper-of-knowledge. I did not imagine that the point of work in the narrative underworld was to give people answers to the questions about who they are and who they wanted to become. It was more honest to think of myself as having developed some hard-earned points of view about how to grow through narrative exploration, and that these viewpoints might be helpful to the leaders with whom I was working. I had learned to pay attention to what captured my imagination, to balance belief with skepticism, to imagine myself as a theatre of inner narrators, to explore my narratives through different psychological lenses. Each one of these lessons might be useful for others. But they weren't *the truth*. They were ways of thinking that helped me be a secure base for leaders who wanted to grow and didn't force me into playing the role of the expert with answers. The only knowledge that mattered was the knowledge that the leaders with whom I worked might gain about themselves through their own narrative work. Even that knowledge could be held lightly given the endless different lenses through which we can interpret ourselves.

Framing myself as an experienced explorer with ideas about how to derive meaning from experience through narrative made an enormous difference in how I developed my practice. It freed me from the need to think of myself as the expert guru. It helped me to think of myself as a facilitator of self-exploration. I imagine that even though I might be a kind of mountain guide, everyone is their own mountain range. I have useful ideas about exploring and climbing mountains, but they are not my mountains and I am not doing the climbing.

I had learned to pay attention to space when working with leaders. By space I mean how we work in our in-between territory together, but also how we enter into that territory and exit from it. I experience space as having three dimensions: the physicality of it (where we locate ourselves when we explore our narratives), the temporality of it (the length of time we explore), and the way we fill it (what we choose to do with our time in that space).

Each of these three dimensions brings complex choices. For example, we can choose to step into our narrative work in a mysterious and deep physical space (Ashridge, for me the equivalent of an almost empty church, quiet and dark between services, sitting firmly between the underworld and the overworld), which might allow participants to

more easily access their dreamers and wounds. It might also make them so vulnerable that their first steps into narrative territory are too deep and too shocking. Or, we could choose to work in a client's corporate offices, recognizing that the sterile surroundings might lead to sterile story telling.

My experience has been that the most interesting explorations have occurred where nature is close, where the space has its own stories, and where our environment is structured enough to make it not quite Algonquin Park territory. Feeling in-between but not unsafe is helpful.

We also choose how much time to spend in narrative work. The more time we have, the more space we have to understand our stories, to understand who is narrating them under what sorts of influences and possible manipulations, and to reimagine our stories with curiosity and an eye for reinterpretation and growth. I began my practice imagining that I would only engage in narrative work if I had many months with the participants to do the work of narrative exploration. This belief was incorrect. What matters most is not the time we have, but rather making sure that we are realistic with what we can do with that time. I am happy to work with leaders for one or two years on deep narrative transformation if they are available and committed. I am just as happy to work with a group for half a day on the fundamentals of narrative thinking. Even in half a day, we can tease out important ideas about narrative mechanisms in a meaningful and usually playful way. The driver of what we do with the time we have is the need to be ethically responsible to the leaders in our care. We can't push them into their narrative underworlds and then walk away.

This leads me to my beliefs about *care* in narrative work. I have already mentioned how attachment theory and theories about the nature of the therapist in clinical work guided my thinking about how I should care about myself during my self-therapeutic world. There were lessons in the therapeutic world about unconditional positive regard, encouragement and empathy. Turned inward, these were powerful lessons about how I should relate to myself and my inner characters through the process of self-exploration. I believe that I need the same quality of care regarding the people with whom I work. It isn't difficult for me to do this given how prominent my Dreamer and my Wound are on my inner stage when I am engaged in the work, but I notice that I constantly remind myself how important it is to care about the work and the people I

work with. Not because I feel like I am in danger of not caring, but rather because conventional leadership development focuses on transferring knowledge, not on caring about the stories that leaders are living and that they want to live. Caring comes easily, although at an emotional cost. The reminders feel like a caution against turning narrative work into the kind of money-making volume gig that I saw so much of in leadership development in my former career.

There are other beliefs that help me order myself in the chaos of the work. They were also developed through the inquiry's exploration.

I believe that our imaginative reflex is an imperfect meaning-making mechanism. It is subject to all sorts of psychological and cultural forces. These forces turn experience into story according to their own mysterious rules. Their stories may help us, or they might not. In trauma, they may create black-and-white stories that help in the immediacy of our experience, but which fail us over time. Stories that once protected us might prevent us from growing.

Also, I believe that understanding imagination as a story-making mechanism helps us engage with our stories creatively. We aren't bound by ideas of truth in our stories. We are bound only by the artistic task of distilling meaning from them, understanding that one story may contain many layers of meaning – all of which are true in their own way and all of which hold their own fictions. Creative re-interpretation is the essence of growth through narrative exploration.

Kiesinger explains the value of reinterpretation when she writes about exploring the dynamic between her and her father in her story of childhood abuse (see Part One). She writes:

> Reframing our story in ways that empower rather than victimize does not mean that we deny painful or abusive experiences, nor does it mean that we excuse others for the ways they have hurt or violated us. What it does mean is that we proactively examine and assess the stories we tell about our lives and experiences. We ask such questions as:
> - Does this story serve me well?
> - As a central character in my own story, how do I depict myself in relation to those with whom I have close relationships? Do I see

myself as an active agent in these relationships or a passive victim?

- How can I reframe my story in ways that allow me to see the main characters in my life with empathy – in ways that help me see them as the complex people they are?

- How might I reinvent the story of my life in ways that give my life new meaning and purpose (Kiesinger, 2002, pp. 107-108)?

Meichenbaum's exploration of the importance of inner narrative in post-trauma growth shows that the shape and tone of inner narratives have an enormous influence on whether trauma will be a destructive or a constructive event. Meichenbaum writes about what he calls the Constructive Narrative Perspective (CNP), an approach that moves the narrator from victim to constructor. He writes that growth is characterized by imaginative reinterpretation of experience:

- Seeking, finding, reminding, and constructing benefits for oneself and others.

- Establishing and maintaining a future orientation with altered priorities.

- Constructing meaning, a coherent narrative, and engaging in special activities or "missions" that transform loss into something good that will come out of it (Meichenbaum, 2014, p. 363).

Meichenbaum explains that "The experience of PTG (Posttraumatic Growth) is more than the ability to engage in nonnegative thinking and the coping activities that help to nurture and maintain constructive narrative. Posttraumatic growth is the experience of positive change that occurs as a result of a struggle with highly challenging life crises" (Meichenbaum, 2014, pp. 362-363). Both researchers mention the importance of multiple lenses and multiple methods for seeking, finding, and constructing meaning.

Our imaginations can guide us towards deeper meaning if we pay attention. By noticing what captures our imagination we can to identify the low-resolution material in our narrative worlds that needs to be brought into higher resolution if we are to grow. First person action researchers note the importance of this *paying attention* skill. Marshall pays attention to "assumptions I use, repetitions, patterns, themes, dilemmas,

key phrases which are charged with energy or that seem to hold multiple meanings to be puzzled about, and more. I work with a multi-dimensional frame of knowing; acknowledging and connecting between intellectual, emotional, practical, intuitive, sensory, imaginal and more knowings" (Marshall, 2001, p. 433). In narrative work, we pay attention to what captures our imaginations. Where imagination is captured, there is space to explore.

Finally, I believe that telling our stories imaginatively is the essential ingredient to growth.

Ann and Barry Ulanov describe imagination as the saving function that prevents us from falling into despair when we try to bridge the gap between the conscious known and the unconscious unknown: "If we can fall imaginatively, we do not literally have to fall apart. Imagination can save our lives" (Ulanov and Ulanov, 1991, p. 21).

Azar Nafisi, a professor of English literature, describes story-telling as fundamental to life: "Stories are not mere flights of fancy or instruments of political power and control. They link us to our past, provide us with critical insight into the present and enable us to envision our lives not just as they are but as they should be or might become… It is a way of perceiving the world and relating to it" (Nafisi, 2014, p. 3). She also acknowledges the power of storytelling on managing our liminality: "In telling a story, we impose order on chaos, the narrative is always more coherent, more 'logical' and structured than the mess of life…" (Nafisi, 2014, p. 45). She believes this facility for immersing ourselves in the imaginative protects us against those who would impose a certain order on us (including, I imagine, the manipulation that might take place in business when leaders are pushed within certain limiting boundaries of accepted behaviours):

> How can we protect ourselves from a culture of manipulation, where tastes
> and flavours are re-created chemically in laboratories and given to us as
> natural food, where religion is packaged, televised and tweeted and
> commercials influence us to such an extent that they dictate not only what
> we eat, wear, read and want but what and how we dream. We need the
> pristine beauty of truth as revealed to us in fiction, poetry, music and the

arts: we need to retrieve the third eye of the imagination (Nafisi, 2014, p. 17).

Some researchers view the imagination and the imaginal as a portal into other worlds in which we can access vital sources of wisdom. Corbin writes about the three worlds of sense, of intelligence, and of dream. Each has its own method of interpretation:

> To these three universes correspond three organs of knowledge: the sense, the imagination, and the intellect, a triad to which corresponds the triad of anthropology: the body, soul, spirit – a triad that regulates the triple growth of man, extending from this world to the resurrections in the other worlds (Corbin, 1964).

According to Corbin, imagination is the only entry into the world of the mythos. Imagination mediates between the "intelligible" and the "spiritual" worlds (Corbin, 1964).

It was imagination that allowed me to play with the fiction of my old foundational narratives and to free up possibilities for what I might become. It was imagination that brought the Orca in my dream to life and gave it meaning. It was imagination that attributed meaning to the novels and works of art that captured my imagination during my transition. Exploring imagination enabled me to shift its story to one that was less bitter and more helpful, just as it led me to other fictions that helped me understand what was most soulfully important in my life. Imagination helped me conceive of an inner family of imagoes. Imagination populated that family with fictional characters that helped me organize my sense of myself into a new coherence and that enabled me. Through an act of imagination I conceived of the Dreamer and the Wound, not as imagoes to be disowned but rather as soulful characters in my inner drama who kept me always within reach of what was really, truly meaningful to me in my conception of my life, of the world, and of the mysteries that surround me. They were the direct connection to the raw realities of life, the vulnerabilities, the chaos always just around the corner.

How might I tell the story of the leadership transition with a new, growth-ful imaginative lens? What is the wiser version of the story that might demonstrate my

own version of growth after trauma? The new primary frame of being in-between, on the threshold of adventure and growth, helped me to rewrite the story.

When I accepted the new leadership role, chaos stepped into my narrative structures. In the face of this new experience, my narratives were driven by primal reactions to the threat of chaos.

Narrative inquiry helped me derive new meaning out of this chaos. Different forms of narrative played different exploratory roles. Scattered and unstructured narrative helped me turn towards the impact of chaos/trauma on my ability to tell a coherent story. Narrative driven by emotion hinted at both the temptation to look for false order, but also to understand the different characters within me that were most affected by the journey into chaos. These narratives were especially helpful in diving deeply into my inner dissonance to understand which parts of myself were at war with one another.

Imaginative narratives helped me create a new way of understanding the dominant energies within me at the time of the transition. They helped me understand the role each of these characters played, and the state of relationship amongst them. Imagination helped me create a way of thinking about my self that was credible (to me), helpful, and above all soulful.

Imagination was indispensible in my search for meaning, the most essential skill required to make order out of chaos. Existential psychology names the ability to have meaning in life as one of the great cures for life's anxieties. Depth psychology views it as a way to reorient oneself in the later stages of life as a different sense of meaning becomes more important with the passing of youth. Frankl describes a commitment to a greater meaning beyond oneself as the saving force in the face of unimaginable tragedy. Peterson writes:

> Meaning is the ultimate balance between, on the one hand, the chaos of transformation and possibility and on the other, the discipline of pristine order, whose purpose is to produce out of the attendant chaos a new order that will be even more immaculate, and capable of bringing forth a still more balanced and productive chaos and order. Meaning is the Way, the path of life more abundant, the place you live when you are guided by

> Love and speaking Truth and when nothing you want or could possibly
>
> want takes any precedence over precisely that (Peterson, 2018, p. 201).

The meaning I wrestled from the experience was the meaning of a new purpose, a fresh sense of the difference I wanted to make in the remaining 15 years of my career and in the second half of my life. It was a certainty about what I didn't want to do and who I didn't want to be. The story of mobbing and trauma in leadership was also a story of shaking off the old, rusty shackles and breathing deeply into the many stories of who I could become. It was all also a story about being in-between.

Quality and ethics in clinical/narrative inquiry

Stories Transitions is a clinical inquiry. It explores self-narrative for personal growth. It is intended to help leaders who have experienced profoundly destabilizing events in the course of their leadership. It is also intended to inform how leadership development practitioners can help leaders wrestle meaning out of these events.

Two quality lenses guided the research.

The first lens was shaped by current academic conversations about quality in action research, in first person action research, and in autoethnography.

McNiff and Whitehead provided general criteria for judging a knowledge claim in action research with their translation of Habermas' work on quality in public discourse into the action research world (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009; Habermas, 1991). Their claim that action research quality can be judged by the extent to which it is *understandable*, *honest*, *sincere*, and *culturally/socially appropriate* helped me form four similar quality criteria: (1) are the claims I am making in *Storied Transitions* clear, comprehensible and evidently important for my practice; (2) do I disclose openly what has been helpful and harmful to me in self-therapy, and am I honest about when I notice that I have an urge to be dishonest; (3) am I expressing and living a sincere desire to bring what I learn through my self-practice into my leadership development practice so that it serves healthier leadership, healthier organizations and a healthier world; (4) do I demonstrate a sufficient understanding of the social, political, cultural and academic worlds in which my research takes place?

Marshall's recent writing on doctoral-level first person action research added additional academic quality criteria to the list. Marshall describes doctoral-level first person action research as (Marshall, 2016, appendix B):

- conceptually rich
- well located in understandings of appropriate literature(s) and theories
- aware in relation to research paradigms and appropriately located
- methodologically well-grounded
- grounded in sustained 'fieldwork' of some appropriate kind
- critically reflective in relation to all aspects
- making theoretical and methodological contributions

Yet another academic conversation about quality came from autoethnographic research. It is important to note that I do not claim that my work is autoethnographic. Autoethnography comments on or critiques culture through personal experience. I explicitly did not conduct this inquiry to comment on the culture of the organization within which my drama occurred. I conducted it to see if I could grow out of a challenging work experience.

Despite my claim that the work isn't autoethnographic, quality discussions in autoethnography were a third helpful academic lens through which to judge the work, for three reasons.

First, my turn towards inner narratives as source material for self-therapy came after reading early autoethnographic work in which authors claimed therapeutic value from autoethnographic writing (Bochner and Ellis, 2002). It seemed important to explore this claim.

Second, while my inquiry was not conducted to comment on the organizational culture within which I worked, I can't honestly claim that my difficult leadership experience was detached from that company's culture. The entire work could rightfully be judged as a comment about what happens when leaders with a certain value set clash with more powerful leaders with a contrary value set. I *am* commenting on their culture, even if the work wasn't primarily for that purpose.

Third, an essential part of the work explicitly wrestles with the culture that governed and guided the cast of characters that dominated my inner stage during the experience. My inner narrators behaved according to a certain culture. Changing this culture was

an important contributor to the work's therapeutic benefits. I may not have focused the work on critiquing corporate cultures, but a great deal of it was dedicated to changing the culture in which my inner narrators operated. Autoethnography concerns itself with external cultural characteristics. My work took a similar critical approach to what I thought of as my inner culture.

Richardson and St. Pierre described the abundance of ethnographic approaches to writing over fifteen years ago (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2005). In that work, Richardson includes four criteria for judging quality in ethnographic writing: *substantive contribution to an understanding of social life*, *aesthetic merit*, *adequate self-awareness on the part of the author*, and *the writer's ability to move the reader emotionally and intellectually*.

Sparkes' recent examination of quality in various autoethnographic forms includes different evaluative approaches according to the category of autoethnography they are meant to judge. Since there are many categories (Sparkes lists 15: *analytical autoethnography, black feminist autoethnography, collaborative autoethnography, interpretive autoethnography, psychoanalytic autoethnography, etc.* (Sparkes, 2020)), there are likewise many approaches to judgment. Sparkes provides examples of the quality standards different authors use to evaluate different types of autoethnographies, ranging from *authentic and trustworthy data, ethics towards the self and others* and *scholarly contribution* as useful standards for judging analytic autoethnography, to *abundant and concrete details*, *structurally complex narratives*, *emotional credibility* and *a story that moves me, my heart and my belly as well as my head* for evocative autoethnography, to *partiality, reflexivity and citationality and personal storytelling as an obligation to critique* for performance autoethnography (Sparkes, 2020, citing Chang (2016), Bochner and Ellis (2016), and Holman Jones (2005) respectively).

All these criteria might be helpful for the task of judging writing that is meant to critique society through the personal experience of it. In such efforts, understanding the experiences and stances of the person critiquing society is essential to judging the quality of their criticisms.

The task of clinical inquirers who are turning their inquiring lenses inward for therapeutic reasons is different. This inward turn led me to add my second quality lens. As Schein states, the most important question for the clinical inquirer is: "*does it help*?"

For those of us who want to integrate what they learn through their self-work into a practice to help others, an additional question is: "*does what helped me help others too*"?

To answer these questions, I had to understand not just *what* helped but *how* it helped and *why* it helped. Arriving at conclusions to the questions of *how* and *why* was a critical measure of quality, in part because I was uncomfortable bringing the lessons from my self-therapeutic work into my leadership development practice unless I had thoroughly explored their meaning.

For example, Stein writes about the momentary relief that comes from confession (Stein, 1995). I experienced this relief when I 'confessed' my leadership experiences by writing about them. I might have been tempted to take the act of confessing into my leadership development practice safe in the knowledge that confession brings relief. Understanding *why* confession brings relief, however, was essential for my own growth and for my use of confession in my practice.

The psychology of confession, however, doesn't provide an obvious answer.

Some clinicians claim that confessional relief is the result of the detachment from stories that comes from writing them down (White and Epston, 1990; White, 2007; Denborough, 2014). Trauma clinicians might claim that relief comes because writing our stories reengages the executive function that has been lost because of trauma (Van der Kolk, 2014). Other clinicians would argue that writing out stories of trauma is a healing act of regaining personal agency when agency has been ripped away because of a traumatic experience (McAdams, 1996; Duffy and Sperry, 2012, 2014). Still others would claim that writing out the story of a traumatic experience is a necessary step in post-trauma growth's journey from intrusive narrative to intentional narrative (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, 2014). Writing a story, even a confessional story, is an intentional act.

Stein would argue that above all, confessional relief is temporary relief. It is temporary because in confessing, the patient believes that he or she is transferring responsibility for finding an answer to a therapeutic challenge to the therapist (Stein, 1995, 1998). From the therapist's perspective, the confessor's relief is short-lived because growth only comes through the hard work of exploration that should follow confession.

A similar challenge of interpretation was present in my early black-and-white writing. In most of my early stories I framed my leadership experience as one in which I was the good person fighting against evil people. The framing was unconscious but stark. My sense of it was that it helped and hurt at the same time. Once I understood that such framing might have been the result of an instinct to protect my narrative world, I also understood that a protective narrative instinct might not be growth-ful. From a therapeutic perspective, protection and growth are not the same outcome.

I share Sparkes' caution that lists of quality standards can mislead us into thinking we have put solid boundaries around uncomfortably amorphous territory (Sparkes, 2020). Sparkes echoes Umberto Eco's belief that we use lists to try to give form to the formless because when we have form, we feel a comforting sense of security (Eco, 2009). My experience with narrative work is that it defies strict form. Part of the challenge of narrative work for personal growth in the wake of a destabilizing experience is that formlessness is the opposite of the narrative order we might seek when the previous order has been destroyed.

I believe that *Storied Transitions* must be judged according to how it tells the story of navigating this formlessness. My own critical eye on the work was shaped by a series of questions that I asked myself while I progressed through the work. These questions were prompted by my desire for academic quality and practical, positive therapeutic outcomes:

- **Are my claims to knowledge clear and have I supported them adequately in the text?**

  This question felt like an important quality baseline. I believed that meeting the quality criteria implied in it would be simple, but it was in some ways the most difficult test of quality. To answer the question, I had to do the hard work of wresting meaning out of my experience so that I could distill knowledge out of it. As Van Der Kolk writes, trauma sabotages our meaning-making mechanisms. It rips clarity away from our existing narratives and makes it difficult to formulate coherent replacements (Van Der Kolk, 2014).

- **Is the work honest?**

  This also felt like a simple question in the early days of the inquiry, but the question of honesty has multiple layers. Quality meant asking myself: *When am I being dishonest with myself and what purposes does my dishonesty*

serve? I began to take the dishonesty of my narrative fictions as manifestations of unconscious narrative mechanisms, some of which might be trying to serve me well, and some of which were preventing me from growing. The dishonesty of my black-and-white narratives are a useful example. They were important protective narratives, but it would have been difficult for me to grow through the exploration if I'd stopped it at the level of, *I am good, and they are bad*.

- **In the process of wrestling with experience to derive meaning from it, am I exploring not just what actions led to positive outcomes but also asking, with a healthy skepticism, *why* these actions led to positive outcomes?** The critical test of quality in my practice has been the extent to which I have been able to interpret my narratives with skepticism (Andrews, 2014), with a *mythos* gaze searching for alternative meanings rather than a logos search for truth (Armstrong, 2009), and with the hermeneutics of suspicion in mind (Ricouer, in Andrews, Squire and Tamboukou, 2013). This interpretive doubt was essential to the exploration that followed after confessional relief abated. It was also the instinct that led me to look at my narratives through the lenses of multiple schools of psychology. I was cautious about putting all my interpretive eggs in one basket.

The fourth and final quality criteria that guided *Storied Transitions* was the criteria of ethics in narrative exploration. Here I aligned with Bochner and Ellis, who comment on the need for a "demanding standard of ethical self-consciousness" (again, as a quality standard for evocative autoethnography, quoted in Sparkes, 2020). Sparkes includes the approaches of other autoethnographic researchers in his summary of ethical standards, most of whom refer to the need for care in the representations of others and the stories of others in autoethnographic work. He refers to Chang's appeal that autoethnographers "follow ethical steps to protect the rights of self and others presented and implicated in the autoethnography," the concern of Bochner and Ellis that autoethnographers "show concern for how other people in the teller's story are portrayed," and Holman Jones' desire that autoethnographic work "enact an ethical obligation to critique subject positions, acts, and received notions of expertise and justice within and outside of work" (from Sparkes, 2020). Marshall refers to actions research's need to pay "rigorous attention to issues of power, participation and

equality…I have some right to tell *my* story, with due care for others involved" (Marshall, 2016, italics in the original). McNiff and Whitehead emphasize the same concern for how others are represented in action research: "A key aspect of demonstrating critical engagement is to show awareness of ethical considerations, which involves care for the wellbeing of the other. This means that you have to extend basic courtesies to all participants, such as inviting them to be involved, promising confidentiality as appropriate, and ensuring them of your good faith at all times (McNiff and Whitehead, 2009, pp. 130-131)."

I wrestled with three ethical questions in my research and in my practice.

The first question of ethics concerned my representation of other players in my leadership drama. Here I struggled with the need to tell my stories as I experienced them while showing the courtesy and basic care for others in my stories that Marshall, McNiff and Whitehead mention above. I wondered if the therapeutic usefulness of certain stories might depend on my sense of honesty in my depiction of certain people.

I managed the tension of honesty and therapeutic usefulness versus care for others in by disguising the characters in my stories so that they are unrecognizable to casual readers and to those who played peripheral roles in the drama. They might recognize themselves, but not many other readers would be able to identify them.

I also openly admit that the stories I write are products of unconscious narrative mechanisms. They are fictions, in this sense, meant to serve unconscious narrative purposes. They are therapeutically interesting not because they tell accurate stories of the people in my drama, but rather because they give me an opportunity to understand how my own narrative mechanisms behaved.

Finally, I turned towards a deeper ethical consideration towards others than simply portraying them in a positive light. I often wondered how my adversaries would react to the ways in which I portrayed them (*if* they read my stories, and *if* they recognized themselves in them). I suspect that they would have their own stories to tell about my inadequacies and all the ways in which their behaviour was justified. But perhaps some of my narratives might be uncomfortable for them, and perhaps in this discomfort there might be room for their own exploration and growth. It is possible that my deepest ethical duty to the main players in my leadership drama is to tell them honestly how I

experienced them, and to invite them to explore that story for the sake of their own development.

The second question of ethics concerned my responsibilities towards myself as I conducted the inquiry and as I shared its results with others.

I struggled with how to know if I was sharing too much of my explorations with others. It wasn't clear to me how my reputation might be affected if I shared my psychological challenges and personal frailties openly, or where to draw the boundaries between what was useful to share and what was damaging. The question of damage was a particularly difficult one, since it wasn't always immediately clear in my emerging narrative practice what was helpful and what was damaging. It often seemed to me that was felt helpful at first was actually damaging, and what felt damaging at first opened up a path to growth.

Wrestling with this ethical consideration of self-care eventually took the form of a special sensitivity towards what I shared. While I started my writing and sharing with an interesting naiveté that I think came from a desperate hope to be understood, I chose to boundary this document with stories that I was able to explore helpfully. I kept other explorations to myself. Two curiosities helped me make these choices: 1. Does sharing this story help me communicate my emerging process of self-therapy through narrative exploration; and 2. Am I comfortable with the outside world taking these stories and using them for their own purposes or perhaps misinterpreting them?

My third question of ethics concerned (and continues to concern) my consideration of the people with whom I work in my leadership development practice. I struggle most with two questions that came from my own narrative practice.

First, I noticed in my narrative work that the stories I wrote established a sort of dominance of meaning. For example, long after I wrote the story of my mother's death and had explored it through multiple interpretive lenses, I noticed that my abiding memory-sense of her was that she was sullen and sad. When I thought of her, I had a heavy sense of grumpiness and anger. I was disturbed by this sense, because her life and my life with her had countless joyful, peaceful, caring and loving moments.

It occurred to me that the heaviness of my memory of her came from the fact that I wrote about her as she was during the months before her death. During this time, she was understandably sullen. My writing of her as she was in these low moments seemed

to have elevated how she was at that time in my narrative sense of her. I have had to work hard to counterbalance this heaviness with more joyful memories. It's a slow process given how much effort I put into making meaning of her death, but it feels like an important step to putting a joyful nuance into my memories of her.

I recognize that asking the people with whom I work to tell their stories might elevate the meaning they make of these stories in their narrative hierarchy. I address this risk by discussing it openly and honestly with my clients. I also address it by making sure that we put extra effort into exploring whatever lightness we can find in particularly heavy stories. This rewriting of stories is a common and helpful practice in narrative therapy (Denborough, 2014; see also the clinical practices of narrative interpretation described by White, 2007, and White & Epston, 1990).

Second, I recognized that in my practice I am inviting successful and typically well-functioning leaders to explore their narratives and narrative mechanisms. Exploration means curiosity and a willingness to question. Questioning implies a willingness to doubt and deconstruct. The definition of trauma, however, is the involuntary deconstruction of core narratives (see Part One of this work, especially Janoff-Bulman, 2014, and Epstein 2003)). In a sense, I might be inviting the leaders with whom I work to question the narrative constructions on which their past psychological stability has depended. Inviting them into a *mindfulness of being* through narrative exploration might be inviting them into difficult psychological territory. As I started to work with leaders on their narrative worlds, I asked myself often, 'what right do I have to ask these people to question their constructs?'

I have a list of responses to the question. None of them is satisfactory, but together they help me wrestle with the ethical questions of walking with leaders through the territory of their inner narratives.

One response is that I invite them into the territory. I don't demand it of them. I ask them to step into the territory as much as they feel comfortable. This feels like a necessary approach, but it also feels false. Acknowledging that the territory exists can be enough to pull people into it. I imagine a happy participant in one of my programs arriving with the expectation of a few days of stressless lecturing on leadership being jolted into the territory of terrible childhood memories. In my imagination, this feels like an ambush.

Another response is that clinical experience suggests that stepping into the territory voluntarily is less painful than being forced into it by experience (Peterson, 1999). In our work, I am offering the possibility to build muscles that might help clients to work effectively with the inevitable unexpected tragedies in life and leadership that will come their way.

This response feels true and false at the same time. Despite the utility of working with our narrative mechanisms, the possibility of enticing people into territory that they might not be able to navigate is still risky. Who am I to take those risks on their behalf?

I've come to deal with the ethical territory through a combination of honesty and support. I am honest with what narrative territory can bring to leaders who want to grow. I am just as honest with the risks. I am also honest that while we can explore the territory together, sometimes it is more appropriate to engage in clinical work. This is especially true when the territory hints at deeper vulnerabilities rather than voluntary development. I notice that many of my clients, from CEOs to high potential leaders, are already on the clinical path.

Finally, I make sure to design support into our exploration. Most of my work takes place over months, even years. I am careful not to abandon clients in the territory once we have stepped into it together.

I confess that I still wrestle with the ethics of narrative work in leadership development. It feels more like an art than a science, and it often feels like I am an amateur artist. My sense is that the best starting point with the work is always a radical honesty regarding its benefits and risks.

Contribution

Storied Transitions furthers our understanding of leadership as a potentially traumatic experience. While there is some research into the psychodynamics of leadership (see the work of Kets de Vries, especially 2003, 2019, for a clinician's perspective on the psychological dangers of leadership) and additional research on the traumatic effects of mobbing (Duffy and Sperry, 2012, 2014), there is little inquiry into the ways in which leadership can traumatize, in a clinical sense. *Storied Transitions* brings research on mobbing and on other forms of trauma into the realm of leadership. It suggests that leaders who find their core narrative structures destroyed through their

experience of leading have stepped into trauma territory (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, 2014; Janoff-Bulman, 1992, 2014).

The introduction of trauma into leadership positions the task of leadership as not just something for which skills must be learned, but also an occupation that comes with psychological hazard. It allows us to ask questions about what kinds of leadership events are likely to be experienced as traumatic, about how trauma manifests itself in a leader's behaviour, and how organisations can ensure that their cultures minimize the possibility of trauma. In my thirty years of work in leadership development and long membership on the Boards of two industry bodies, I have not once heard faculty or business school representatives discuss leadership in terms of trauma. *Storied Transitions* helps to remedy this omission.

Storied Transitions also contributes to our knowledge of post-trauma growth. Calhoun and Tedeschi position the journey from intrusive narrative to wiser intentional narrative as the heart of personal growth after profoundly destabilizing experiences (Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013, 2014). The literature on how to navigate this journey is sparse. The journey I have described in *Storied Transitions* begins to fill in that gap. *Confession*, the act of telling your stories, even and especially if they are intrusive, brings them into higher resolution and exercises agency over them. It enables us to find a primary frame for our stories through which we can begin to understand them. *Interpretation* enables us to understand which inner narrators control our inner theater and helps us to imagine what a healthier rebalancing of our characters might look like. *Understanding* encourages us to understand the many unconscious mechanisms that might be writing our stories for us, sometimes destructively, sometimes protectively, and sometimes in pursuit of profound personal growth. Here the active use of imagination - imagining different worlds and different personal identities, working with the themes and images that capture one's imagination, wrestling with the imaginative process of bringing unconscious narrative and narrative-making mechanisms into consciousness - can be a crucial part of the process. In my practice, melding the imaginative with the real, as I did in writing "Safe on a Ledge" and "The Fallen Tree", helped me to engage my imagination in the narrative reconstruction process without losing a sense of grounded-ness in reality. *Transformation* is what happens when our exploration of our trauma leads us to a new headline for the story

of our time in-between who we were before our traumas and who we can imagine being once we've grown through them.

The four messy stages of this process fill in some of the gaps between intrusive and intentional narratives. In all four stages, the active use of imagination - imagining different outcomes, imagining nuanced changes in how I can behave, imagining that I inhabit a world that is slightly (or perhaps significantly) different than the one before I stepped into in-between - helps introduce new, healthier and wiser narrative structures into the space where old structures have died.

Storied Transitions' final contribution is to the world of leadership development. Early in the text I mention talking to the global head of leadership development for a global consumer goods organization about a program he was creating for the organisation's senior executives because "so often we promote people into senior roles and they fail catastrophically because we don't support them." By this he meant, they fail at tremendous psychological cost to themselves. In my current practice I work with leaders who are often confused by their circumstances: the CEO who can't understand why Board members are sabotaging his success; the 20-year veteran whose long and successful service works against him in the eyes of a new CEO in search of 'fresh blood'; the young, ambitious leader who has high aspirations for her career and a sneaking suspicion that some of her old beliefs are guiding her behaviour in ways that she doesn't like. These leaders and leaders like them can benefit from deep, imaginative exploration of their narratives and narrators, their framing beliefs and narrative-making mechanisms, so that they grow into leaders with a more profound understanding of who they are and of what matters to them. They might be a little less willing to place authorship of their stories in the hands of the organisations in which they lead.

Epilogue
A walk in the woods

M and E are walking through the forest in the hills behind M's house, where he and his wife often go to get away from life's busy-ness. He loves the little pathways that wind this way and that through the trees and the bush. Some of these paths give access for cutting and clearing of the forest. Others make their way without such purpose, maybe made by deer looking for food, or by snowshoers trampling down the brush during the winter season.

As they walk, they can hear the snow crunching beneath their boots. He loves the snow, too. He loves it especially this time of year when the Spring sunshine promises a fresh blooming in the coming weeks. For now, the ground is white, but it won't last long. Already in the bare patches he can see the purple willow-herb pushing up through the wet carpet of pine-needles and leaves.

He once brought E to a writer's institute not far from here, where a few years ago some rich family had decided to honour the memory of their dead son, a writer, with a haven for writing. It was the most unusual space, modern architecture and timeless novels from all cultures and corners of the earth lining four long thin wooden floors, all brought together to create a space of unimaginable beauty. He wrote "It Doesn't Work" there. He imagined that all the authors whose spirits were welcomed in the space gave him company. He wanted E to see the liminality of it.

This time, though, they walk in the threshold space of nature. They trample along, with M feeling more or less confident that he knew where he was going. He and his wife have gotten lost along these trails more than once. Best not to repeat those performances.

"Why nature"? E had asked as they were putting their boots on back home.

"It's fitting space to close the tale, don't you think"? M answered. "It's *mythos* territory. We can slip off the cloak of who we think we need to be, and just talk".

M has already told E about his new beginnings. Last week he announced to the organisation in which he's worked for the past five years that he will leave so that he

can set up his own practice. He wants to focus, and to build something that will outlast him. He wants to spend the next five or ten years bringing the idea of growth-through-crisis to the leadership development world. He's nervous about this new adventure, yet another transition, but also excited. There will be more time to write. More time to explore different ways of working with executives and their organisations on awareness and humanity and growing, all using the threshold space between unconscious intrusive narratives and wiser conscious narratives. M mentioned to E that he will call his practice *Summit*, because the name brings together all the hope and exhilaration and hard work that he experiences when he explores the beautiful liminal mountains in the nearby Alps. It's a fitting confluence of transitions, this handing in and defending of his thesis just as he steps out of the corporate world so that he can spend more time putting what he has learned into practice. The time is right.

He thinks about his work just over the past two weeks and is reassured that the world is ready. There is the CEO who describes the pain of his unsupportive Board as a recent trauma. Until now, all of his bosses have been encouraging and helpful. M established a narrative practice with him so that they could author some wiser narratives about the Board and his relationship with it. There are the participants in a leadership development program who spent four days exploring their unconscious narratives with him and two of his colleagues so that they might start building intentional narratives about where they've come from, who they are now, and who they would like to become. Yesterday, there was the young leader who feels he might have been promoted too early and is anxious about how he shows up amongst his new peer group. "Maybe we could use this promotion as a way to explore who you want to be," M suggested. "Do you want to do that?" The executive looked excited and nervous at the same time.

Now, out on the snow, heading towards the restaurant at the col where they will meet with the family for a fondue, surrounded by towering trees and with not another soul in sight, E asks her final questions. She has a few more curiosities to explore before this journey is over.

E: Tell me about your practice. Then tell me about you.

M smiles, thinking that what he is about to say will sound a lot more organised than it really is.

M: I use the methodological steps I developed through the inquiry, leaving aside all my flailing about at the beginning. Remember the steps?

E smiles up at him as if to say "Maybe I do, maybe I don't. Tell me".

M: Remember that confession is telling our story as honestly as we can, in whatever forms helps us detach and explore. Interpretation is wrestling some initial meaning out of them. Understanding is diving deeper into the forces that might be shaping our interpretation. Transformation is using that deeper understanding to open up our imagination to new frames and wiser interpretations.

For me, confession was telling the stories of my confusion, my anger and my fear. It was finding the primary frames of mobbing and trauma. Interpretation was imagining that these stories came from different inner narrators who were struggling with themselves and with each other. Understanding was exploring the unconscious forces that might have been fuelling my narrators. Transformation was reimagining a primary frame that enabled me to interpret my stories through the lens of liminality rather than trauma. The trauma frame was an important beginning, but liminality nudged me towards growth.

I use all these steps in my process, whether I'm working with a single leader or a team or a group of executives. All of the work is designed to help the participants explore their stories and perhaps shift the ones that are preventing them from being who they would rather be.

M thinks about the CEO-to-be who recently talked to him about how he struggles with the widening gap between the Warrior the organisation wants him to be and the Nurturer he wants to become. M sees this tension often when he asks participants to select themselves into Warrior, Sovereign, Nurturer and Magician archetypes. When they've settled themselves into their respective corners of the room, he asks them: *Are you there because that is who you imagine you are, or because that is where you think your organisation wants you to be*, *or because that is who you want to become*? The conversations that follow are rich and uncomfortable. So much rides on how they manage that tension.

He understands how many of the people he works with have well-established narrative hierarchies that give them solids belief systems and a strong foundation with which to take on the many challenges of leadership. He doesn't see that his role is to destroy

these hierarchies. His role is to help the people with whom he works understand that they can be reimagined, just in case external circumstances or internal desires destroy them.

M: It isn't difficult to lead the executives with whom we work into *mythos* space. We bring them there when we ask them to explore their stories about their most meaningful experiences, about people who have shaped them, about a book or movie, or song that touches them. Some struggle to walk through that door but most accept the invitation.[30]

M looks down at his feet while they walk, watching them sink into the trodden snow of the path that leads through the forest and up to the col. It's funny how such spaces bring the Dreamer to the surface.

M: Last week I had a conversation with an executive I've been working with for almost a year. We were at the end of our scheduled sessions. What was meant to be a one-hour talk turned into a much longer discussion because just as we were finishing up, I started to understand that what was really troubling this executive was that he didn't want to feel lonely anymore. He is a big guy, quick to smile, gruff. But he is lonely. We talked a lot about how he could use his leadership work to connect humanly to people. He is such a Warrior, but he wants to nurture. Not just at work. With his family too. Especially with his family.

E: It sounds like you are having some meaningful conversations.

M: I hope so. They are usually such wonderful people. I spoke with another executive over the phone the other day and at the end of the discussion he thanked me. He asked me how we were able to so quickly dive into such topics as personal meaning in leadership and his ability to be someone he truly wants to be, not only for the company but for his growing kids. What a privilege.

E: What are you noticing about the work?

M: Many of the executives I work with are living their own version of important transitions. The younger ones are balancing promotions with family life, and many of these leaders are women. Quite a few of them are firmly in 'second half of life' territory. They are wondering where meaning is going to come from now that they've solved the money issue. It is interesting to watch them process the idea of leaving behind the structures they know – the title, the organisation, the order – in order to move into something else. Order is tremendously seductive. I

---

[30] We usually begin our work with some version of the narrative exploration processes suggested by McAdams (1993), Denborough (2014) or Peterson (see www.selfauthoring.com). All three suggest writing about experiences, events, beliefs and values. I usually turn to McAdams' protocol because it emphasises life chapters, events, experiences and memories, all of which are easy to access.

know. It took the murder of some old ordering narratives for me to turn towards growth.

A common practice is to have them reflect on, and share, their stories, usually in small groups. I often help them prepare in advance by asking them some questions about their narratives. We give them some time when we are together to put together their stories, and then we share them. The intimacy of a small group is important. And the process we use is important too. We usually ask a participant to share his or her life narrative over 15 minutes or so, making sure to describe wonderful moments and moments of difficulty. We ask them to write their story out five or ten years into the future, just to make sure that we engage their imaginations in a future-authoring process. After they finish, we ask them to listen in to a conversation that the rest of the group has about what we've heard and what it might tell us about the participant's strengths and values and sources of meaning. We wrestle meaning from their stories, just so that they can hear other possible interpretations. Then we invite the storyteller back into the conversation. It's deep and wonderfully connective to explore these types of stories together. It's helpful to show how stories can be interpreted through different lenses.

E: Is it dangerous?

M: We always make sure to stress that participants should only share what they are comfortable sharing, but this is a false invitation in some ways. By introducing the idea of narrative exploration, we automatically send imaginative reflexes to the stories that capture our imaginations. Trauma has a way of capturing our imaginations. That is why it is trauma.

Recently, I have started to set aside more time for debriefing these sessions so that we can offer some guidance about how to interpret stories and especially what to do with difficult stories. This is an important way to bring people who might have fallen into their imaginations climb out of them. It gives me an opportunity to answer questions and share some of the important concepts in narrative exploration with the group. I can talk about how old traumas can shift our minds into predator mode and that predator mode isn't nuanced. I talk about the post-trauma growth lessons about narrating ourselves out of predator mode.

E: Meaning?

M: Separate yourself from your stories. You are not them and they are not you. Ruminate intentionally on the stories that have captured your imagination. Imagine which characters have been writing your most important stories. Imagine how those stories would change if the characters grew, individually and together. Imagine how your Artist character shows up at her best. Imagine how you would need to grow so that she could show up a little more frequently. So

she could show up even under times of great stress. All of the clinical practices I've explored reinforce the idea of looking at your narratives from a distance, with curiosity, to distil deeper meaning from them.

E: How does that work for you?

M: I was lost after I left my old workplace. I felt the same tension that my clients sometimes feel. I didn't know who I was, or who I wanted to become. I *did* know that I needed to get a job quickly, so I felt like I needed to please. And I had such a hard time telling people who I was. I stumbled badly introducing myself a few times. It was dreadful. It's terrible to lose confidence in your own stories. It's horrible to not trust your own imagination. Trauma does that.

Every step of the inquiry helped me to free my narrative-making imagination so that I could use it to imagine new stories. Even the early advocacy stories made sense in light of narrative imagination in post trauma growth. Advocacy might not *be* inquiry, but it can certainly be part of inquiry if it is how your imagination is trying to fill emptiness with meaning. Imagination abhors a vacuum. Advocacy implies purpose.

E: I'm curious about how your work pivoted once you started to understand that your imagination's interpretive power included a talent for creating fictions. Don't you think that's interesting? Isn't it interesting to think about where reality stops and where fiction begins?

M: It's interesting to imagine that the mind is always filling in the blanks of meaning with made-up stories. It's interesting to imagine that the imagination works in certain ways in the context of trauma, and that its protective narrative mechanisms might inhibit growth. How strange we are.

E: Tell me more about the pivot. And then tell me about what it meant for your practice. Is that OK?

They are alone on their path. M can see where the snowshoers have left their tell-tale marks in the snow. He can see the dog-paw traces along the side of the path. He glances up from the snow to get his bearings. It looks familiar. They aren't lost.

M: Remember that the work on inner fictions came after I took an imaginative approach to understanding why I was so angry after Rox told me her story of having polite conversations with two of my old enemies. By that time my narrative practice was strong enough for me to notice the comforting lie of a unidimensional story. I wanted to explore the black-and-white of the lie. By that time, I could.

The imago work was a way of using my imagination to break out of the limited world it had brought me to during my leadership story. It was an intentional act. It helped me interpret the experience differently.

E: Say more…

M: I began to imagine that I was suffering from an inner theatre that was dominated by one character. I needed a new balance. My pain was the pain of that destruction and reconstruction. Because the story was painful, I wanted clarity. When I understood that false clarity excluded the narrative nuances that might help me grow, I was able to interpret events with more creativity. When I look for possibilities rather than for truth, I'm freer to explore rather than defend.

E: "You will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

M: It's funny that you are quoting from religious text. Those fictions have had an enormous influence on my life. One story from my Catholic upbringing was that good behaviour would be rewarded. What a different story from what the evolutionary psychologists might say. Their story is that we are animals much like any other animal and that life is a struggle to survive against all odds long enough to procreate and nurture the next generation. In the first story, our struggle is to regain a paradise that we destroyed. In the second story, we fight against disease, predators, each other just so that the next generation can repeat the struggle. I grew up with the first story. I wish I could still believe it.

E: How do you trust any story, if you believe they are all fictions?

M: Fictions contain meaning. Like myth contains meaning. There's a story in the Old Testament about Jacob wrestling with an angel while he spends a night by a river. Jacob is on his way home to try to reconcile himself with the family he has abused over the years. Jacob wins the fight, and the angel changes Jacob's name to Israel, which means 'contends with God'. I like that story because it describes the inherent struggle of extracting knowledge from the unknowable. It's a *wrestle*. I like that the chosen people in that story are the people who wrestle with God. They don't *understand* God, or *worship* God, or even *obey* God. They wrestle with Him. How beautiful and hopeful is that?

E: Can you tell me more about how you explore narratives in your practice?

M: We are careful with how we treat the space. We might explore stories about our most wonderful experiences, or about times we have learned through difficult times in our lives. But we always debrief the experience. Participants can dive deeply into the exercise and we need to make collective sense out of it. We have a conversation about what was surprising, helpful and uncomfortable about the

work. This conversation enables me to talk about how to deal with the possible traumas that participants may be holding.

E: What do you tell them?

M: I tell them that these stories sometimes dominate our internal theatre, that we should pay special attention to who inside of us is narrating them, and if a different version of it might come from a different internal narrator. I talk about the helpfulness of just writing out the story as an act of agency and intentional rumination. We often do some quick work on internal characters before we get to the story-telling exercise, so participants will have already worked a little with the idea of having different narrators in their inner theatre. I also talk about how understandable it is that our narrative reflex turns to black-and-white interpretations during times of high stress, but that if they are able to imagine some colour in the story, they might find ways to grow. Here I often talk about how the challenge of leadership can be, above all, a laboratory for their own growth. And I let them know that I'm available at any time to talk off-line about their experiences.

E: What do you notice about the process? What works? What doesn't work? How do you experience it, as the facilitator?

M closes his eyes. To answer honestly, he needs to describe how raw he feels when he facilitates the work, and how long it takes for him to recover. To treat the material in the right way, he feels a strong ethic about bringing his *mythos* characters into the room. The Dreamer and the Wound are necessary players on this stage, but they are raw characters. They are sensitive to the meaning and experiences of others. In recent months he feels that the Artist is becoming strong enough to carry them both. When his struggle for engagement with the world after his leadership battles was still fresh, he wondered about how much of the Monster and Pleaser should show up in his work. He's happy that they step off stage in these moments of facilitation.

He also notices that as his Artist forms more fully, the Dreamer is morphing. He isn't sure how this imago change is significant, but he knows that it is.

M: Many participants say they have a different level of connection after the exercise. People will often say to a colleague whose stories they've just heard something like "I've been working with you for 15 years but now I actually understand you". My hypothesis is that the *logos*-privileged world of work makes it difficult for us to gain a quality of knowledge of ourselves and of each other that *mythos* affords.

We also hear that people think about their stories in new ways after the work. I can see them processing the possibility of rewriting some old and imbedded stories once we've had a chance to take an imaginative look at them. I imagine that they are rethinking some of the old stories on which they might have unconsciously constructed their fictions. It's nervous territory, I think. It takes a while. We usually have some time and ideally some individual coaching to hold and to explore the processing.

In some cases, there are old traumas that announce themselves while we work. These moments are important. When they show up, we sometimes suggest therapy. Sometimes we work through it with the participant in our individual sessions.

One last comment before we finish this thread. Remember that the Dreamer and the Wound are how I imagine two parts of myself that have the deepest access to my underworld. Remember how I described the Dreamer as a raw character? How the development of the Artist has enabled the expression of this young Dreamer without the emotional devastation? There's a relation between this character and trauma. One clinician writes about the existence of what he calls the *Borderland* between our overly scientific and rational Western world and the more mysterious natural world. He might mean the mysterious world of some essential part of *our* natures. He describes the hyper-sensitivity of people in his clinical practice who spend a lot of time in this Borderland, how they live the pain of this split with nature as if it exists within them. He calls this a sacred world because of its importance to the evolution of our consciousness.

People who live often in this world – *Borderland people* – often think of their traumas as sacred experiences. Trauma brings them into this painful, mournful but deep and rich world, this other consciousness that thirsts for *mythos* engagement with life. Trauma is a portal into the Borderland.[31] My character-connections to the *mythos* world might be activated by trauma, they might need to articulate themselves through another character, but according to at least this clinician's work they access a deep way of knowing *because* of trauma. Maybe that's where growth-through-trauma comes from. It comes because trauma forces us to look for meaning elsewhere.

E: What else did you notice?

---

[31] Bernstein, 2005. Bernstein's practice includes patients who struggle to live in an overly rational world and are drawn to the natural one. According to Bernstein, clinical practitioners often misjudge their struggles and attempt to 'solve' them through rational means. Recognising that helping Borderland personalities (Bernstein's term) means engaging them with *mythos* rather than *logos* is key to the success of his clinical work. In the meantime, when patients who experience the Borderland are asked if they would give it up to relieve some of their anguish, "the answer is an unqualified no. Painful as these Borderland experiences are, they feel very important, they feel sacred, they feel like something I even long for. They were and are so very much more than simply an antidote to despair" (Bernstein, 2005, p. 96).

M: I've noticed that imago work is fascinating. It takes no time at all to get executives into rich discussions about how they show up in their leadership and what this might say about the ways they've contorted themselves to fit with who they imagine they have to be. I love the discussions that come out of that work. But I caution participants to be careful with how they treat their inner-characters. One woman I worked with recently mentioned to me that she wanted to kill her inner "little girl". The woman was a wonderfully human, expressive and competent CFO who didn't like how this little girl was so often intimidated by the big and serious adults around her. After she made the comment we talked for a long time about the ways in which this so-called little girl might have helped her in her life. What is her deeper meaning beyond how she shows up in shadow form? The value isn't in judging. The value is in understanding and nurturing. It was a wonderful conversation.

E: What else?

M smiles. There are many small conversations and emerging practices that he could talk about. It is such interesting work, bringing the spirit of *mythos* into the normally *logos* space of leadership development. He is not sure that most organisations are ready for it. He has noticed many interesting tensions in leadership development space. Leadership development professionals are often caught between the desire to have happy participants who will say nice things about them and the desire to have meaningful impact. When they are courageous enough to push for impact, they usually want it in the form of making their executives more skilled instruments of the business. They are not so eager to help participants develop their ability to challenge the business to be more human, more ethical, more courageous, more demanding of its leadership. A large part of his practice was having discussions with leadership development professionals about what it might mean to include *mythos* work in their developmental practices. It was going to take some time.

M: I've noticed a technical thing about the interplay between narrative and culture. It's interesting. Kets de Vries' work on psychological well-being sheds interesting light on the emotional and psychological damage that can come from mismanaging the balance between personal authenticity and cultural conformity.[32] We suffer psychologically when we don't pay enough attention to our authenticity.

---

[32] Kets de Vries (2003). Kets de Vries explores how organisations attempt to control the emotions of their employees in Chapter Four: *Dead souls: understanding emotional illiteracy*.

Even more interesting is the interplay between recent narratives and older narratives. When I was under peak stress during my leadership transition, the old stories that captured my imagination were: *I was the youngest child! I hated being invisible!* and *We moved around all the time! I always needed to fit in!* as if these were adequate descriptions of the entirety of my incredibly rich and largely happy childhood. I'm fascinated by the ways in which today's imagination interprets yesterday's stories, and the ways in which today's imagination is shaped by yesterday's stories. There's more work to be done here. I had an amazing breakthrough just last week with a senior executive who told me that he wanted to add some colour to the "story of him" between the ages of ten and eighteen. The old black-and-white bullying headline didn't work for him anymore. It was a wonderful narrative shift.

M looks ahead at the path winding its way between the trees ahead. He sees that it is about to take a steep turn downhill and to the right. It's a familiar bend in the trail that tells him two things: They aren't lost, and they are maybe ten minutes from the restaurant at the col. Fondue awaits. So does his family, and, if they are lucky, so does Karin, the wonderful warm, tattooed and free-spirited waitress who always seems so happy to see them. If Karin isn't on one of her frequent trips to India, she'll be there to serve them their favourite bottle of white wine without waiting to be asked.

M: I have three more things to cover before we get to the restaurant E. One is only a little serious. The other two are more important.

E: Tell me.

M: I'd love to write an article called "Leadership and Death". I've already talk to K about writing it together.

E's eyes open wider, and she smiles up at him. Her expression says "*really?*".

M: Yep. So many clinical practices work with the role the inevitability of death has on our narrative structures. Avoidance of death. Dealing with the anxiety of death. Murder in the inner-theatre. Murder of important dimensions of the self in the name of fitting in. Death is the ultimate step into the unknown, isn't it? Did you know that threats to one's competence increase the accessibility of death-related thought?[33] That in depth psychology a metaphoric death actually occurs in midlife because that is when our psychological structures go through profound transformation? Organisational life provides us with so many ordering

---

[33] The idea of death proximity comes from the work of Pyszczynski, Greenberg and Arndt on terror management theory (2012). Their research indicates that psychological structures protect us against death-related concerns. When these structures, which include belief in personal competence, are violated then death becomes more present.

mechanisms to avoid thinking about the impact the reality of death has on leading a meaningful life. What if leadership development could help us deal with these themes? Wouldn't that be incredible? Wouldn't it be difficult? "Leadership development and dealing with your mortality"! Quite a program title, don't you think?

E smiles as if to say *yes, this would be difficult indeed.*

M: Also, you asked me about me. About how I am doing.

It feels like there is too much territory to cover. M decides to stay away from the details of how the global trauma of COVID-19 has made organisations so much more willing to discuss mental health, anxiety, stress. He thinks about the many webinars he has been asked to deliver to clients, one recently for 350 senior leaders, about the possibility of growth through the COVID-19 experience. He always draws on the principle lessons of growth through trauma. It's all good work. But the inquiry is about his experience developing a self-therapeutic practice to grow through a painful leadership challenge. *Let's stay with what's personal,* he thinks.

M: Inner narrative work is not *happily ever after work*. Am I much different now? Part of me doesn't think so. My Dreamer still shows up with all his empathetic rawness. I still have some of the same narrative reflexes. The same responses to triggers that have me behaving in ways that I don't like and don't want. The same moments of immaturity. Not long ago I had to work alongside some of the Kingdom's Aristocrats: I held my ground against their obvious attempts to set me up to fail, but I still felt the sense of threat.

But that's not the point, M thinks. This narrative work is *nudging* work. It is small explorations and experimentations. It's a tweak in a thought process, or a strengthening awareness of captured imagination, or a triggered inner narrator. He remembers once taking a trip to Chamonix and catching the long telepherique ride up to the top of the Aiguille de Midi, a tourist site perched on a sharp rock outcropping at almost 4,000 meters of altitude. Mountaineers use the station as the starting point for many of the classic Alpine climbs. He would become intimately familiar with the station when he started his own climbing career, but on this first trip he had no plans to venture into that unknown. Quite the opposite. As he took pictures of the surrounding peaks on one of the tourist platforms, he noticed a couple of climbers scrambling over the barrier and onto the safety of the platform. He wandered over to see what route had brought

them there. He saw that to get to the platform, the climbers had walked along a razor-thin snow ridge, with deadly drops on either side. M remembers looking at that thin white ridge and thinking, *I could never, ever do what they have just done*. But, a few years later, after the mountains had captured his imagination and Chamonix had become his playground, he remembers coming to the end of that same route as part of a relaxed training day in preparation for much more demanding routes, without giving it a second's thought. What he had imagined was impossible had become real, without him noticing. One small nudge at a time. That's how he feels about imagining and reimagining story on the journey between intrusive and intentional rumination. *One small narrative nudge at a time.*

M: Have I passed Schein's quality test of a positive outcome to clinical inquiry? I am not broken. I function. No lasting scars prevent me from managing my way through life. I suffered none of the worst of the outcomes of mobbing that Duffy and Perry described when I first started to explore the topic. No suicide. No lasting depression. I've emerged from the worst of it a different person in ways that I like.

Have I grown?

I think about the leadership development practice I've built over the past five years and I think, yes, I have grown. I've grown into a person who has strong points of view about how leaders can use the challenges of leadership to grow into the people they want to be. I'm a skilled enough practitioner that I'm in the process of stepping out of the organisation I've worked through over the past five years so that I can set up my own practice and dedicate myself to working with leaders and their organisations through their transitions. I spent most of last week helping the CEO of a large company work on the narratives that might help him deal more effectively with a disappointing Board. Not as an expert, but as a guide.

He smiles, thinking, *I never, ever thought I would be able to do what I do now. But here I am, with a successful practice, about to launch my own company, thanks to one small nudge at a time.*

M: Every one of post-trauma growth's claim to positive evolution after trauma applies to me.

I do feel more vulnerable to life's difficulties, but I also understand my strengths better.

I have developed a better life philosophy, and wiser priorities. I would even say that my spiritual life has matured. I'm more comfortable with my ability to be in the unknown of that territory.

And I would certainly say that my relationships have shifted. With Rox, with Antoine, at work, with clients. I am more comfortable in my skin with all of them. I'm more at peace with myself, and therefore more at peace with all of them.

All of that is in place. All of that needed to be in place before I was strong enough to launch my own leadership development practice dedicated to helping leaders grow through their transitions. And all of that came through the confession, interpretation and education that led to my wiser narratives and wiser narrators.

Which brings me to you.

E's eyes widen again. She looks up at him with a curious frown.

M: You asked me who you are. I don't know. But I know *why* you are. You are who I needed to help me understand all of my inner narrators. If they are cast members in my inner theatre, you are how I have learned to be a competent director. You accompanied me along the way.

Post trauma growth research says that expert companionship is a necessary ingredient in the journey. [34] My question was, before I become an expert companion to others, could I become one to myself? In some ways that has been the main task of the inquiry.

Expert companionship means facilitating the growth process. Calhoun and Tedeschi describe themselves as companions who offer some expertise in nurturing naturally occurring processes of healing and growth. Companionship comes first. Simply being there is already helpful. But other skills are helpful as well: listening, providing context, noticing possibility, choosing the right words are all part of expert companionship. All are necessary to distil growth-ful meaning from the experience.[35]

So, my question was, how could I start to become my own expert companion?

---

[34] See especially Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013.
[35] Calhoun and Tedeschi, 2013. See Chapter Two: "Facilitating posttraumatic growth through expert companionship" for a summary of what expert companionship means in a clinical context.

My own body psychotherapist was a good first example. His main contributions to helping me stave off burnout during the transition were a curiosity, an encyclopaedic knowledge of therapeutic practices,[36] and fearless questioning.

Carl Rogers' observations on what contributes to a growth-ful relationship between clinician and patient were essential. Rogers writes about how critical the quality of that relationship is. He writes frequently about the usefulness of what he calls unconditional positive regard, which he summarises simply as "I care" (and not "I care *if*…").[37] Peterson's suggestion that we "treat (ourselves) like someone we are responsible for helping" draws from Rogers' work, although for Peterson helping yourself is less about unconditional positive regard and more about defining a sense of meaning in your life.[38]

M glances over at wonderful E. "I know I haven't answered your question yet. I'm coming to it, I promise".

E doesn't look bothered.

M: Yalom also helped. His writing on the relationship between therapist and client was a mini-Bible of short stories on what brings quality into therapy. I dived into his thoughts on empathy, support, genuine concern, the data contained in lies, transparency, disclosure, resistance, watching out for sources of anxiety, even on ways to approach dreams.[39]

M looks up and notices that they are just about to enter the clearing that leads to the main road over the col. On the other side of the road is the restaurant, his family, their wine, and eventually their bubbling cheese fondue. Time to close. Time to open.

M: You are the conversations I have in myself so I can have meaningful conversations with others. I had no idea how to do this when I first started. All my attempts to work on myself in a *logos* way were empty. My imagination found you in *mythos*. You are a spirit in me that helps me explore. You are the expert companion I needed to develop in my inner cast of characters so that I bring them all into a functioning unity again. A wiser functioning unity than they were before.

---

[36] He had recently written and published a 748-page exploration of the field of body psychotherapy (Heller, 2012).

[37] See Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 14 in Rogers, 1961 for detailed definitions of unconditional positive regard. Rogers mentions *positive affective attitude, an outgoing positive feeling without reservations or evaluations, acceptance, safety-creating*.

[38] Described in Chapter Two of Peterson, 2018: "Treat yourself like someone you are responsible for helping"

[39] See Yalom, 2002 for *Yalom's guide to effective therapeutic relationships*.

As they walk these final snowy steps to the road, M remembers some of his early experiments with writing out inner conversations. It turns out that it's a popular practice in narrative therapy.[40] His first attempt was written as a rambling conversation with an inner demon at a local Starbucks. His second attempt was an imagined conversation with a fictional mountain guide on a climbing route he did in the French Alps years ago. In both cases he imagined the person and place before he imagined the conversation. In the case of E, he imagined the person first. Place and conversation followed. This shift was important. He had to let the character come up before he could play with how to engage with her.

He noticed that like his imagoes, E defies high resolution definition. He doesn't pay attention to that now. What matters is how she works with him. She is an excellent listener, prober, companion. He doesn't know why she is a she. He doesn't know why she is E. He knows simply that she is E. She can't be anyone else.

As they walk up to the road, M turns to E, who turns towards him. The parking lot of the restaurant across the road is mostly empty, but they are early. Soon it will be full of cars. He sees Rox's car and knows that she and Antoine are inside, maybe chatting with Karin, keeping their table warm. No doubt the restaurant's resident dog will come by for table scraps at some point, and the 100-plus-year-old parrot they have in an open cage hanging in a corner of the main room will silently watch the hustle and bustle of feeding and chatting and laughing, as it always does.

M leans in and hugs E, who hugs him back, smiling warmly. "Thank you", he says. He can feel the tears well. *Liminal space*, he thinks.

Thank you.

---

[40] See Denborough, 2014; White, 2007.

"It Doesn't Work (A Useful Fiction) - Part Two"

The man doesn't know it at the time because all his questions are like spider-webs, catching his thoughts and carrying them in different directions, but when he steps out of the Kingdom that day he steps into an adventure.

There are nights during the adventure when he is cold. He huddles in a small cave on his own as the storms howl outside. He sometimes feels that the disappointments in the world around him are too heavy to bear. When the Wizard and the King are asked by the magistrates to explain why they exiled the man, they write, "because he was so terrible that he put us all in danger". The man wonders what happened to them that they can tell such a story.

Some of the Aristocrats offer to help but only one or two mean it. One Aristocrat who witnesses what is happening tells the man bravely: "What they are doing is wrong, I am here for you", but the next day when they meet the Aristocrat says: "I mustn't talk to you about what they are doing". The man wonders why the Aristocrat is so suddenly afraid.

Another Aristocrat tells him emphatically, "Nobody cares. Nobody cares what is happening to you". The man is deeply disappointed. He once thought that this Aristocrat was a wise man. Years later when they meet by chance, the same Aristocrat says, "The problem was that you expected us to take care of you". The man thinks, but doesn't say, "The problem was that I expected you to behave honourably".

He is disappointed, as well, when the Kingdom's leaders become even more aggressive towards him once he leaves. He hopes for a polite departure but the King and his gang act as if they want to make the man's departure as painful as possible. During those moments, when the man imagines that they enjoy inflicting pain, he returns to his fantasy of meeting the hyenas on his ground, where their biting and hiding can be met with a ferocious response.

He is sad that he can't say good-bye to the people of the Kingdom, but the King forbids it.

Mixed in with the storms, though, there are moments of nourishing rain. Some things happen during the months after he leaves the Kingdom that give him hope.

Some of the Aristocrat hyenas also leave the Kingdom, and the man likes to think that maybe they weren't untouched by the fight after all. When the time comes for the King to serve another term, a new King is chosen instead. This choice makes the man happy and sad at the same time. He is happy that maybe the world sometimes works as he hoped it would, even if it took longer to work than he would have liked.

Along the way the man meets a queen who smiles and dances through storms. He meets another kind of Wizard who sticks his arms deep in mud, as far as they will go, and says "Let's play". The man is grateful for their lessons.

He is also grateful for an old friend in the Kingdom who stands by him despite the cost. This friend shows him that human connection is possible, even at work, even if it hurts. The man thinks that this friend is a truth-teller because he lives in a way that helps others live better. Once when they meet and drink and talk about how the man was kicked out of the Kingdom, the man sees tears in the truth-teller's eyes.

The man also finds new people in the people who are already close to him. His wife asks him questions and leads him carefully into the dark territory of the leopard. With her big brown eyes, she tells him that some things might not stay but what matters most will. His stepson becomes taller and stronger during the troubled time. The man watches and learns and opens up a space to grow gracefully because his stepson grows gracefully too.

Searching for answers to the terrible 'what's next?' question takes him to a place that comforts him like a cult, but he leaves its sticky embrace and soon he finds a new place that helps him become a teacher and a healer and a guide. He likes learning how to be these things.

The man begins to feel a strange gratitude to the Wizard and the King, to the Aristocrats and to all the Kingdom's people because he knows that he could not have become any of this if he were still in the old Kingdom.

The man loves the mysteries that open up as he begins to try to answer all of his many questions. He searches for answers that might make sense to him. Or might help him to be able to not make sense.

Bibliography

Andrews, M. (2014). *Narrative imagination and everyday life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Andrews, M., Squire, C., & Tamboukou, M. (Eds.). (2013). *Doing narrative research* (2nd ed.). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Armstrong, K. (2006). *The great transformation: The beginning of our religious traditions*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Armstrong, K. (2009). *The case for god*. Toronto: Knopf Canada.

Barkow, J. H., Cosmides, L., & Tooby, J. (Eds.). (1992). *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Bernstein, J. S. (2005). *Living in the borderland: The evolution of consciousness and the challenge of healing trauma*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Bochner, A. P. & Ellis, C. (Eds.). (2002). *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics*. Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press.

Boothroyd, R. (2018). *Warrior, magician, lover, king*. Cleveleys, Blackpool: Sovereign Books Ltd.

Bowlby, J. (1988). *A secure base*. New York: Routledge.

Bridges, W. (2001). *The way of transition: Embracing life's most difficult moments*. Cambridge, MA: Perseus Publishing.

Bruner, J. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. London: Harvard University Press.

Bruner, J. (1991, Autumn). The narrative construction of reality. *Critical Inquiry, 18*.

Bruner, J. (2002). *Making stories: Law, literature, life*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Buss, D. M. (2004). *Evolutionary psychology: The new science of the mind* (2nd ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Buss, D. M. (Ed.). (2005). *The handbook of evolutionary psychology*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Buss, D. M. (2005). *The murderer next door: Why the mind is designed to kill*. New York, NY: The Penguin Press.

Calhoun, L. G. & Tedeschi, R. G. (Eds.). (2014). *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice*. New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Calhoun, L. G. & Tedeschi, R. G. (2013). *Posttraumatic growth in clinical practice*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces*. New York, NY: MJF Books.

Campbell, J. (Ed.). (1971). *The portable Jung*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Cashman, K. (2008). *Leadership from the inside out: Becoming a leader for life* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Cashman, K. (2012). *The pause principle: Step back to leap forward*. San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler Publishers, Inc.

Charan, R., Drotter, S. J., & Noel, J. L. (2001). *The leadership pipeline: How to build the leadership-powered company*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Chodorow, J. (Ed.). (1997). *Jung on active imagination*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Clandinin, D. J. & Connelly, F. M. (2000). *Narrative inquiry: Experience and story in qualitative research*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Corbin, H. (1964). *Mundus imaginalis, or the imaginary and the imaginal.* Paper first delivered at the Colloquium on Symbolism, June 1964. https://hermetic.com/moorish/mundus-imaginalis

Crossley, M. L. (2000). *Introducing narrative psychology: Self, trauma, and the construction of meaning*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

Dawkins, R. (1976). *The selfish gene*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Denborough, D. (2014). *Retelling the stories of our lives: Everyday narrative therapy to draw inspiration and transform experience*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Dotlich, D. L., Noel, J. L., & Walker, N. (2011). *Leadership passages: The personal and professional transitions that make or break a leader*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Douglass, B. G. & Moustakas, C. (1985). Heuristic inquiry: The internal search to know. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 25*(3), 39.

Drake, D. B. (2015). *Narrative coaching: Bringing our new stories to life*. Petaluma, CA: CNC Press.

Duffy, M. & Sperry, L. (2012). *Mobbing: Causes, consequences, and solutions*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Duffy, M. & Sperry, L. (2014). *Overcoming mobbing: A recovery guide for workplace aggression and bullying*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Eco, U. (2009). *The infinity of lists*. New York, NY: Rizzoli.

Edinger, E. (1972). *Ego and archetype*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc.

Ellis, C. & Bochner, A. P. (2000). Autoethnography, personal narrative, reflexivity: Researcher as subject. In N. Denzin & Y. Lincoln (Eds.), *Handbook of qualitative research* (2nd ed., pp. 733). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Epstein, S. (1984). Controversial issues in emotion theory. *Review of Personality & Social Psychology,* (5), 64.

Epstein, S. (2003). Cognitive-experiential self-theory of personality. In T. Millon & M. J. Lerner (Eds.), *Comprehensive handbook of psychology, volume 5: Personality and social psychology* (pp. 159-184). Hoboken, NJ: Wiley & Sons.

Erikson, E. H. (1958). *Young man Luther: A study in psychoanalysis and history*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Erikson, E. H. (1980). *Identity and the life cycle*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Frankl, V. E. (1959). *Man's search for meaning: An introduction to logotherapy*. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster.

Freedman, J. & Combs, G. (1996). *Narrative therapy: The social construction of preferred realities*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Frenier, C. & Hogan, L. S. (2013). Engaging the imaginal realm: Doorway to collective wisdom. Collective Wisdom Initiative http://www.collectivewisdominitiative.com/papers/frenier_imaginal.htm

George, B., McLean, A., & Craig, N. (2008). *Finding your true north: A personal guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Giroux, H. A. (2014). *The violence of organized forgetting*. San Francisco, CA: City Lights Books.

Goffman, E. (1959). *The presentation of self in everyday life*. London: Penguin Books.

Goffman, E. (1967). *Interaction ritual: Essays in face-to-face behavior*. Piscataway, NJ: Transaction Publishers.

Goffman, E. (1974). *Frame analysis: As essay on the organization of experience*. Lebanon, NH: Northeastern University Press.

Goffman, E. (1981). *Forms of talk*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Goldsmith, M., & Reiter, M. (2007). *What got you here won't get you there: How successful people become even more successful*. New York, NY: Hyperion.

Greenleaf, R. K. (1977). *Servant leadership: A journey into the nature of legitimate power and greatness*. New York, NY: Paulist Press.

Habermas, J. (1991). *Communication and the evolution of society* (T. McCarthy, Trans.). Cambridge: Polity Press.

Habermas, J. (2018). *Philosophical introductions: Five approaches to communicative reason*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Haidt, J. (2006). *The happiness hypothesis*. London: Arrow Books.

Haidt, J. (2012). *The righteous mind*. London: Penguin Books.

Haidt, J., & Lukianoff, G. (2018). *The coddling of the American mind*. New York, NY: Penguin Press.

Hannah, B. (1981). *Encounters with the soul: Active imagination as developed by C. G. Jung*. Santa Monica, CA: Sigo Press.

Harari, Y. N. (2011). *Sapiens: A brief history of humankind*. London: Penguin Random House.

Harding, M. E. (1947). *Psychic energy: Its source and its transformation*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

Hawkins, B., & Edwards, G. (2013). Managing the monsters of doubt: Liminality, threshold concepts and leadership learning. *Management Learning, 46*(1), 24.

Heifetz, R., Grashow, A., & Linsky, M. (2009). *The practice of adaptive leadership*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business Review Press.

Heller, M. C. (2012). *Body psychotherapy: History, concepts, methods*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Henderson, J. L. (1990). *Shadow and self: Selected papers in analytical psychology*. Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications.

Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery: The aftermath of violence – from domestic abuse to political terror*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Hillman, J. (1996). *The soul's code: In search of character and calling*. London: Bantam Books.

Hillman, J. (1999). *The force of character and the lasting life*. New York, NY: Ballantine Books.

Hollis, J. (2005). *Finding meaning in the second half of life: How to finally, really grow up*. New York, NY: Gotham Books.

Holmes, J. (2001). *The search for the secure base: Attachment theory and psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (1992). *Shattered assumptions: Towards a new psychology of trauma*. New York, NY: The Free Press.

Janoff-Bulman, R. (2014). Schema-change perspectives on posttraumatic growth. In L. G. Calhoun, & R. G. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice* (pp. 81). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Johnson, R. A. (1986). *Inner work: Using dreams and active imagination for personal growth*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Johnson, R. A. (1991). *Owning your own shadow: Understanding the dark side of the psyche*. New York, NY: HarperOne.

Joseph, S. (2011). *What doesn't kill us: The new psychology of posttraumatic growth*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Joseph, S., & Linley, P. A. (Eds.). (2008). *Trauma, recovery and growth: Positive psychological perspectives on posttraumatic stress*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Jung, C. G. (1933). *Modern man in search of a soul*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace & Company.

Jung, C. G. (1953). *Psychology and alchemy*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1956). *Symbols of transformation* (R. F. C. Hull, Trans.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1968). *The archetypes and the collective unconscious* (Second Edition ed.). Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1974). *Dreams*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Jung, C. G. (1989). *Memories, dreams, reflections* [Erinnerungen Träume Gedanken] (R. Winston, C. Winston, Trans.). New York, NY: Vintage Books.

Jung, C. G. (2009). *The red book: A reader's edition* (M. Kyburz, J. Peck & S. Shamdasani, Trans.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd.

Jung, C. G. (1968). *Man and his symbols*. New York, NY: Dell Publishing Co., Inc.

Kalsched, D. (1996). *The inner world of trauma: Archetypal defenses of the personal spirit*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kalsched, D. (2013). *Trauma and the soul: A psycho-spiritual approach to human development and its interruption*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Kets de Vries, M. (2003). *Leaders, fools and imposters*. New York, NY: iUniverse, Inc.

Kets de Vries, M. (2019). *Down the rabbit hole of leadership: Leadership pathology in everyday life*. Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland, AG.

Kübler-Ross, E. (1969). *On death and dying*. New York, NY: The Macmillan Company.

Larsen, S. (1996). *The mythic imagination: The quest for meaning through personal mythology*. Rochester, VT: Inner Traditions International.

Levine, P. A. (2008). *Healing trauma: A pioneering program for restoring the wisdom of your body*. Boulder, CO: Sounds True.

Lips-Wiersma, M., & Morris, L. (2011). *The map of meaning: A guide to sustaining our humanity in the world of work*. Sheffield: Greenleaf Publishing Limited.

Marshall, J. (2001). Self-reflective inquiry practices. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *Handbook of action research* (pp. 433). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Marshall, J. (2016). *First person action research: Living life as inquiry*. London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Marshall, J., & Mead, G. (2005). Self-reflective practice and first-person action research. *Action Research, 3*(3), 235.

Marshall, J., & Reason, P. (2008). Taking an attitude of inquiry. In B. Boog, J. Preece, M. Slagter & J. Zeelen (Eds.), *Towards quality improvement of action research:Developing ethics and standards* (pp. 61). Rotterdam: Sense Publishers B. V.

May, R. (1977). *The meaning of anxiety*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

May, R. (1983). *The discovery of being: Writings in existential psychology*. New York: W. W. Norton & Company.

McAdams, D. P. (1993). *The stories we live by: Personal myths and the making of the self*. New York: The Guildford Press.

McAdams, D. P. (2012). Narrative identity. In S. J. Schwartz, K. Luyckx & V. L. Vignoles (Eds.), *Handbook of identity theory and research* (Volume 1: Structure and Processes ed., pp. 99). New York, NY: Springer.

McCann, I. L., & Pearlman, L. A. (1990). *Psychological trauma and the adult survivor: Theory, therapy and transformation*. London: Brunner-Routledge.

McLagan, P. A. (2013). *The shadow side of power*. New York: Changing World Press.

McNiff, J., & Whitehead, J. (2009). *Doing and writing action research*. London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Mead, G. (2011). *Coming home to story: Storytelling beyond happily ever after*. Bristol: Vala Publishing Co-Operative Ltd.

Mead, G. (2014). *Telling the story: The heart & soul of successful leadership*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Meichenbaum, D. (2014). In L. G. Calhoun, & R. G. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth research and practice* (pp. 355). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Moore, R. L., & Gillette, D. (1990). *King, warrior, magician, lover: Rediscovering the archetypes of mature masculine*. San Francisco, CA: Harper San Francisco.

Morgan, G. (2006). *Images of organization*. London: Sage Publications, Inc.

Nafisi, A. (2015). *The republic of imagination*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Neimeyer, R. A. (2014). Re-storying loss: Fostering growth in the post-traumatic narrative. In L. G. Calhoun, & R. G. Tedeschi (Eds.), *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: Research and practice* (pp. 68). New York, NY: Psychology Press.

Neumann, E. (1969). *Depth psychology and a new ethic* [Tiefenpsychologie und neue Ethik] (E. Rolfe, Trans.). New York, NY: G. P. Putnam's Sons.

Papadopoulos, R. K. (Ed.). (2006). *The handbook of jungian psychology: Theory, practice and applications*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Peterson, C., & Seligman, M. E. P. (2004). *Character strengths and virtues: A handbook and classification*. New York, NY: American Psychological Association and Oxford University Press, Inc.

Peterson, J. B. (1999). *Maps of meaning: The architecture of belief*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Peterson, J. B. (2018). *12 rules for life: An antidote to chaos*. Toronto: Random House Canada.

Pfeffer, J. (2018). *Dying for a paycheck*. New York, NY: HarperCollins.

Pinker, S. (1997). *How the mind works*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company.

Pinker, S. (2002). *The blank slate: The modern denial of human nature*. New York, NY: The Penguin Group.

Polkinghorne, D. E. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Pyszczynski, T., Greenberg, J., & Arndt, J. (2012). Freedom versus fear revisited: An integrative analysis of the dynamics of the defense and growth of self. In M. R. Leary, & J. P. Tangney (Eds.), *Handbook of self and identity* (2nd Ed., p. 378). New York, NY: The Guilford Press.

Raff, J. (2000). *Jung and alchemical imagination*. York Beach, ME: Nicolas-Haye, Inc.

Rendon, J. (2015). *Upside: The new science of post-traumatic growth*. New York, NY: Touchstone.

Richardson, L., & St. Pierre, E. A. (2005). Writing: A method of inquiry. In N. K. Denzin, & Y. S. Lincoln (Eds.), *The sage handbook of qualitative research* (p. 959). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Riessman, C. K. (2008). *Narrative methods for the human sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, Inc.

Rogers, C. (1961). *On becoming A person: A therapist's view of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Company.

Romanyshyn, R. D. (2013). *The wounded researcher: Research with soul in mind*. New Orleans, LA: Spring Journal Books.

Rothschild, B. (2000). *The body remembers: The psychophysiology of trauma and trauma treatment*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Ltd.

Rothschild, B. (2010). *8 keys to safe trauma recovery: Take-charge strategies to empower your healing*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company Inc.

Schein, E. H. (2008). Clinical Inquiry/Research. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd Ed., p. 266). London: SAGE Publications Ltd.

Singer, J. (1972). *Boundaries of the soul: The practice of Jung's psychology*. New York, NY: Doubleday.

Smith, H. (1991). *The world's religions: Our great wisdom traditions*. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, Inc.

Smith, J. A. (Ed.). (2015). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications Ltd.

Smith, J. A. (Ed.). (2015). *Qualitative psychology: A practical guide to research methods* (3rd Ed.). Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc.

Sparkes, A. C. (2002). Autoethnography: Self-indulgence or something more? In A. P. Bochner, & C. Ellis (Eds.), *Ethnographically speaking: Autoethnography, literature, and aesthetics* (p. 209). Oxford: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc.

Sparkes, A. C. (2018). Autoethnography comes of age: Consequences, comforts, concerns. In D. Beach, C. Bagley & S. Marques da Silva (Eds.), *The wiley handbook of ethnography of education* (First Edition ed., pp. 479). Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Sparkes, A. C. (2020). Autoethnography: Accept, revise, reject? an evaluative self reflects. *Qualitative Research in Sport, Exercise and Health, 12*(2), 289.

Stein, M. (1983). *In midlife*. Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, Inc.

Stein, M. (Ed.). (1995). *Jungian analysis*. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing Company.

Stein, M. (1998). *Jung's map of the soul*. Peru, IL: Open Court Publishing.

Stein, M. (1998). *Transformation: Emergence of the self*. College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press.

Stein, M. (2003). *In midlife*. Putnam, CT: Spring Publications, Inc.

Stein, M. (2006). *The principle of individuation: Toward the development of human consciousness*. Wilmette, IL: Chiron Publications.

Stone, H., & Stone, S. (1989). *Embracing ourselves: The voice dialogue manual*. Novato, CA: Nataraj Publishing.

Strenger, C. (2011). *The fear of insignificance: Searching for meaning in the twenty-first century*. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan.

Tooby, J., & Cosmides, L. (1992). The psychological foundations of culture. In J. H. Barkow, L. Cosmides & J. Tooby (Eds.), *The adapted mind: Evolutionary psychology and the generation of culture* (p. 19). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Turner, V. (1967). *The forest of symbols: Aspects of ndembu ritual*. Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press.

Turner, V. (1969). *The ritual process: Structure and anti-structure*. London: AldineTransaction.

Turner-Vesselago, B. (2013). *Writing without a parachute: The art of freefall*. Bristol: Vala Publishing Cooperative Ltd.

Ulanov, A., & Ulanov, B. (1991/1999). *The healing imagination: The meeting of psyche and soul*. Einsiedeln: Daimon Verlag AG.

Van Der Kolk, B. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. New York, NY: Penguin Books.

Van Gennep, A. (1960). *The rites of passage: A classic study of cultural celebrations* [Les Rites de Passage] (M. B. Vizedom & G. L. Caffee, Trans.). Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press.

Van Manen, M. (2014). *Phenomenology of practice: Meaning-giving methods in phenomenological research and writing*. Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, Inc.

Von Franz, M. (1970). *The interpretation of fairy tales*. Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications Inc.

Watkins, M. (2003). *The first 90 days: Critical success strategies for new leaders at all levels*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

White, M. (2007). *Maps of narrative practice*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

White, M., & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc.

Wicks, P. G., Reason, P., & Bradbury, H. (2008). Living inquiry: Pesonal, political and philosophical groundings for action research practice. In P. Reason, & H. Bradbury (Eds.), *The SAGE handbook of action research: Participative inquiry and practice* (2nd Ed., p. 15). London: Sage Publications Ltd.

Wright, R. (1994). *The moral animal – why we are the way we are: The new science of evolutionary psychology*. New York, NY: First Vintage Books.

Wright, R. (2009). *The evolution of god*. New York, NY: Little, Brown and Company.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Basic Books.

Yalom, I. D. (1989). *Love's executioner: & other tales of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Perennial Classics.

Yalom, I. D. (1999). *Momma and the meaning of life: Tales of psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Perennial.

Yalom, I. D. (2002). *The gift of therapy: An open letter to a new generation of therapists and their patients*. London: Piatkus Books Limited.

Zweig, C., & Abrams, J. (Eds.). (1991). *Meeting the shadow: The hidden power of the dark side of human nature*. New York, NY: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Penguin.