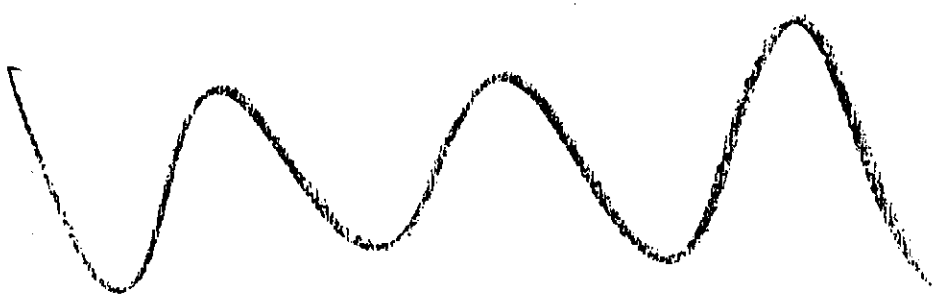
THE STORIES WE LIVE BY

Personal Myths and the Making of the Self



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For my mother

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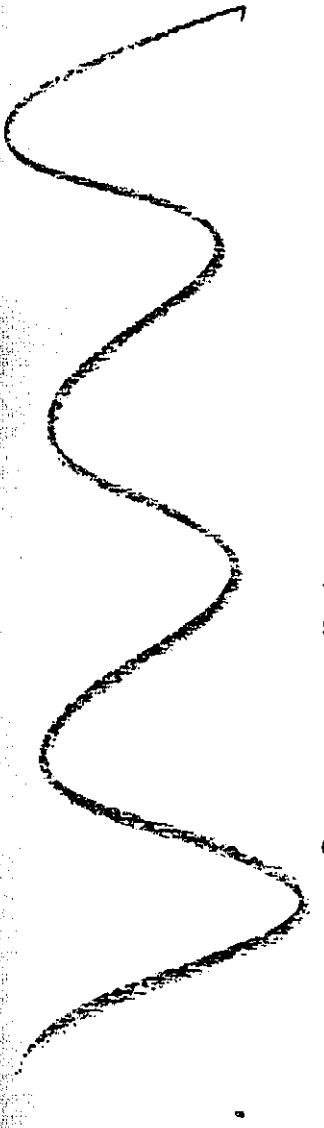
PART I

Making Lives into Stories



This is what fools people: a man is always a teller of tales, he lives surrounded by his stories and the stories of others, he sees everything that happens to him through them; and he tries to live his life as if he were telling a story.

—*Jean-Paul Sartre*

God made man because he loves stories.

—*Elie Wiesel*

CHAPTER 1

The Meaning of Stories

At the age of thirty-five, Margaret Sands made a two-thousand-mile pilgrimage across the country with her teenage daughter in order to break into an abandoned chapel and "rip the place apart."[1] The two of them scaled a Cyclone fence surrounding a former Catholic boarding school for girls. Margaret's daughter pried open a window, squeezed through it, and ran around to the back of the building to open a door and let her mother inside. Twenty-five years had passed since Margaret left the school. Everything looked smaller to her now, but the smell was a familiar one she had always associated with primitive loathing and fear.

Margaret brazenly pushed her way to a place no women had been allowed—behind the altar. She kicked the walls and punched the pulpit and the pews. She made blasphemous gestures to the cross and the icons. With her car keys, she carved out two rough inscriptions on the chapel's great wooden doors: "I hate nuns" and "They beat children." Then, she calmly told her daughter, "We can leave now."

After visiting relatives and old friends, Margaret drove back to Chicago having accomplished a mission of extraordinary personal significance. What for others might be an act of petty vandalism was for her a sacred ritual grounded in a personal myth—a tragic and heroic story of "a wasted life," in Margaret's words, but one that

affirms hope, progress, and the promise of triumph in the face of a neglecting and abusive world.

I heard this story because Margaret volunteered to participate in a social-science research study in the fall of 1986. I ask people to tell me the stories of their lives because I believe their verbal accounts hold the outlines of internalized personal myths. I know that not everything people tell me is important, and that some of what they say may function merely to make them "look good" in my eyes. I also know that there is much that will remain untold, no matter how successful our interview and how intimate our rapport.[2] But an individual does not suddenly invent a personal myth in the course of an interview. The myth is there all along, inside the mind. It is a psychological structure that evolves slowly over time, infusing life with unity and purpose. An interview can elicit aspects of that myth, offering me hints concerning the truth already in place in the mind of the teller.

Margaret's interview is filled with accounts of the dramatic events in her life. Amid the many poignant and frightening scenes, the numerous villains, and one or two heroines, I listen closely for the self-defining myth—the kernel of the narrative that I believe most clearly characterizes her identity as an adult. The myth itself is embedded in the complicated series of accounts. It is the *central* story behind the various episodes she tells me.

She begins her interview with the same kind of solemn resolve I imagine it took to walk up to the altar and defy her Catholic past. "I was born on July 21, 1941, in San Diego, California, and at age forty-five, I do not believe very strongly in my foundation as a human being." Margaret tells a story about foundations, weak and strong, the hidden and indispensable support structures that lie at the base of human lives.

According to her personal myth, childhood failed to provide Margaret with a foundation steadfast enough to sustain her growth and assure her happiness. At the very end of her two-hour interview, Margaret concludes, "You can't tamper with a foundation and have expectations about being a fulfilled human being." Still, she seeks to undo some of the damage wrought on her own life by giving her daughter what she never had. If she cannot repair the fissures within her own soul, she can at least provide a strong enough foundation to

enable her child—a child she once almost gave away—to have a chance to become stable, happy, and fulfilled in her own life. Margaret's suffering and Margaret's gift are inextricably linked in her personal myth. *Because* she hurts so much, she tries to shield her daughter from the same pain.

"The setting was set for stress before I was born," Margaret remarks. Her mother was a beautiful, brilliant, and hopelessly naive writer and actress when she married a heavy-drinking opera singer nineteen years her senior. She was upper-middle-class and "half Jewish." He was Protestant and had been married once before. Her parents strongly opposed the marriage, but she found the man dashing and sophisticated. The two planned to achieve stardom in Hollywood.

Margaret remembers little from the first four years of her life, but knows her parents divorced when she was four and a half years of age. At that time, Margaret's mother decided to take up a new career in real estate, and on the advice of a local priest, sent her daughter to an elite Catholic boarding school. Thus began a chapter of life Margaret calls "The Institutionalization of a Human Being—Age Five to Ten," the five horrendous years that destroyed her foundation. While she received a good academic education, Margaret reports that she was regularly beaten, abused, and humiliated by the nuns. During these years, her mother also suffered from serious illnesses, including recurrent respiratory problems. "She had a hole in her lungs; her foundation was also not very good," Margaret remarks. Because of her illness, she was rarely able to visit her daughter. "I was imprisoned for five years; I was abandoned and left with pathetic old women; those years have haunted me ever since."

Margaret remembers with crystal clarity the day she was released from boarding school. Her mother's health had improved, and they journeyed back to Chicago to live with Margaret's grandparents. To Margaret's horror, her mother passed up the good local schools in the heavily Jewish neighborhood where they now lived and sent Margaret to another boarding school. Margaret describes the second school as a "dumping ground for street people and incorrigible youth. . . . I was abused by the other kids. They stole my record collection. They stole all my things." After a year and a half, she ran away from the new school. She ended up in downtown Chicago at

a Walgreens drugstore. She ate a bowl of chili at the lunch counter before calling her mother on the pay phone and threatening to never come home again if not released from the boarding school at once. "I blackmailed her," Margaret says, at the age of twelve. This was the first major showdown in Margaret's life, and she prevailed.

Margaret expresses considerable anger and bitterness about men and women in authority during her childhood years, including neglectful neighbors, hypocritical teachers, and the abusive nuns. She substitutes pity for conscious rage, however, when considering her own mother. She sees her mother as a hapless victim, whose fragile health and weakened will composed *her* own faulty foundation. While the nuns abused her and the children stole her belongings, Margaret seemed to be headed for the same helpless fate. But adolescence and young adulthood herald an emerging assertive self, a "hell-raiser," as Margaret describes it. Unlike her mother, "I'll give it all. Whatever I do, I know I will always leave a mark."

If the drugstore phone call was the first concrete indication of Margaret's defiant self, her confrontation with an adoption agency marks a second and even more significant victory. Unmarried, twenty-one years old, and pregnant, Margaret was pressured by family and friends to give her baby up for adoption. Once the baby was born, she agreed to house the baby in a private agency for two weeks, after which time she would sign the adoption papers. But when the time came, she could not sign them. The agency officials furiously tried to convince her to go through with the plan, but Margaret would not give in. She screamed at the authorities to give her baby back to her. They cursed her and tried to humiliate her, but finally had to relent. Again Margaret prevailed. "This determined an awful lot of the rest of my life," she says.

That life has revolved around relationships with her daughter and her ailing mother. She has been a caregiver for both of them. Margaret has never married, though she and her daughter's father for a time claimed to be married in order "to keep up appearances." She has been sexually involved with a few men and at least one woman in the intervening years, but she has carried on these "affairs" in secret as a way of keeping them from occupying center stage in her personal myth. Relationships based on long-term sexual and intimate commitments require a firm personal foundation. Margaret will

never have this, she insists. The only commitment she can possibly sustain, therefore, is to her daughter—the commitment to care and foundation building that defines her adult strivings.

In 1970, "my mother died in my arms," she says, after suffering a sudden heart attack at home. Sixteen years later, Margaret still cries when she speaks of her mother. Her daughter graduated from high school and moved out on her own a few years ago, planning to pursue a career in one of the helping professions (as a nurse or social worker, for example). Margaret feels that she is still working to provide her daughter with the firm foundation she never had.

Professionally, Margaret has worked as a magazine editor, office manager, and sales representative. Her political interests were galvanized by the women's movement in the 1970s, and she did a great deal of volunteer work for various women's organizations during that time. While she now fears that her future seems too hazy, she would eventually like to make a substantive contribution in the area of "women's health." This would probably require her to return to college and obtain, at minimum, a bachelor's degree. Most American women, even one possessing the extraordinary determination Margaret displays, would not find it feasible to retool for a new career in their late forties. It is difficult to predict precisely what Margaret's next move will be within the narrative framework she has established for her life.

The psychological tests we administered to Margaret suggest that she consciously regards herself as a nontraditional woman who has defied the cultural stereotypes of femininity in order to make a strong mark on her world. On a measure of "sex roles," she describes herself as especially "independent," "aggressive," and "individualistic," adjectives typically associated with cultural stereotypes of masculinity.[3] On a more subtle measure of psychological motivations, however, Margaret reveals an extremely strong *need for intimacy*—a desire to engage others in warm, close, and sharing interaction. Women typically score somewhat higher than men on intimacy motivation, but even by women's standards Margaret's score is very high.[4] Her score on the *need for power* is surprisingly low, suggesting that for all her conscious insistence she is aggressive and individualistic, she is not strongly driven by concerns for individual power in her life.

Margaret has provided her life with unity and purpose by creating a tragic personal myth about her struggles to undo a horrible past through assertive action and gentle caring. The story contains many setbacks and failures, but at least she seems to recognize two significant achievements. First, she has provided her daughter with the foundation she never had. Second, she has taken her symbolic revenge on the nuns. Desecrating the chapel may have been the first important step in recasting her personal myth in self-fulfilling terms. But we can see that more mythmaking needs to be done.

From the standpoint of her own psychosocial development, we might suggest that Margaret devote her considerable creative energies to the enterprise of rebuilding her identity, to take into account the fact that she has helped build another's identity—her daughter's. Now that her daughter has moved away, Margaret may find that she has time in her life to repair her own foundation, this time from a position of relative strength. Her story shows that she can persevere. She is not the fragile innocent her mother was. She is a hardened survivor who has transcended her circumstances.

Margaret needs to reformulate the narrative of her life so that the story better recognizes her heroic achievements. This might enable her to reach a reconciliation with her past, and propel her forward with energy and direction toward a future she would be proud to create. I believe that hers will always be a tragic myth. But it may become a myth that will inspire others and, indeed, inspire Margaret herself, to find deeper satisfaction than she ever could have imagined possible that lonely afternoon at the Walgreens lunch counter, when she was poised to take control of her life for the very first time at the age of twelve.

What Is a Story?

My six-year-old daughter knows what a story is. She is not, of course, able to give me a formal definition that would satisfy an academic, but she knows a story when she hears one. When I read to her two different unfamiliar passages, five minutes in length, one a folktale about a boy with magical powers, and the other a set of instructions for a children's game, she has no trouble identifying the first as a story. The second—also written to be interesting and

entertaining to children—she says, is "something else," and "not as much a story." In six years she has already developed a sense of *story grammar.*[5]

She expects, as we all learn to expect, that a story will have certain consistent features. First we know that a story has a *setting* of some kind, which we normally discover early on. " 'Twas the night before Christmas, when all through the house . . ." immediately locates us in a time and place, preparing us for a Yuletide story. "Once upon a time in a faraway place" tells us the most important thing about the setting is that it is out of the ordinary. Not all stories develop their settings—while some evoke vivid associations of particular times or places, others move briskly through the where and when to get to the main action. Where the setting is ambiguous, a story may seem confusing or disconcerting. Samuel Beckett exploits this effect in *Waiting for Godot.* The setting for this story is a blasted landscape beside a road and a single tree. Such a setting could be anywhere, and casual references to the Eiffel Tower and some prior catastrophe lead us to the jarring conclusion that the location may be in a devastated Europe. But Beckett's provision of such a limited context within which to place events is unusual. His play violates some of our assumptions about the structure of stories in a way my six-year-old (and I suspect many of us) may not fully expect or appreciate.

A second expectation is that a story will have human or humanlike *characters.* At the beginning of a story, until something happens, a character exists in a kind of equilibrium. Before anything happens, we will often learn certain basic things about the character, such as what he or she looks like, how old he or she is, and so on. Eventually, there is an *initiating event.* In a well-known fairy tale, the mother sends Little Red Riding-Hood off to take care of her grandmother, and the action of the story begins. The initiating event motivates the character to make the *attempt,* the effort to attain a certain goal. The character intends to reach the goal smoothly, but inevitably a Big Bad Wolf (or his equivalent) is waiting along the path.

When Little Red Riding-Hood meets the wolf, the "plot thickens." In terms of story grammar, we see that the attempt leads to the *consequence.* The wolf is the consequence of Little Red Riding-Hood's attempt to carry the cakes to her grandmother. Her *reaction* is to divulge the location of the grandmother's cottage. Now the grand-

mother is also in danger, and our expectations for the story extend forward to future episodes in which the two main characters will face each other down. Little Red Riding-Hood intends to carry the cakes, but the wolf intends to eat her. Their differing intentions will necessarily bring them into conflict.

Each episode of a story may be seen as a sequence of the elements I have just described. An initiating event leads to an attempt. The consequence gives rise to a reaction. One episode follows another, each containing the same structural sequence.[6] Episodes build, and the story takes form.

Within this basic structure, there are by now innumerable literary devices and conventions to enhance a story's mounting tension, and enrich the ways in which different episodes relate to each other. For example, an author may use flashbacks to inform us halfway through a story that our middle-aged hero was abandoned by his parents shortly after birth. Through the use of shifting perspectives, an author may relate the same events through the competing points of view of different protagonists or observers. Trivial early events may foreshadow momentous later ones.

As tension builds across the many episodes of a story, we experience a desire for an eventual resolution. Aristotle proposed that the tension increases to a climax, a high or turning point in the drama. What follows soon afterward is the solution of the plot, called the *denouement.*

In Little Red Riding-Hood, tension mounts as we move through the woods to Grandmother's house, where the wolf, in Granny's nightgown, awaits the girl. The first-time listener feels suspense and curiosity—two indispensable emotions in a good story.[7] The wolf eats the girl and falls asleep. A woodsman arrives, and chops open the wolf's stomach to rescue the little girl and her grandmother. Following this climactic event is the denouement. Amazingly, the wolf is still sleeping. The woodsman fills the wolf's empty gut with boulders. When he wakes, the wolf falls down dead from the weight. Little Red Riding-Hood returns home, and with her return the story ends. The ending brings us back to the place of the beginning, but Little Red Riding-Hood has changed—as have we.

If you pay close attention to the kinds of things you hear and say in a normal day, you may be surprised to learn how much of your

experience involves stories. Watching television, we observe an endless series of stories in a multitude of forms. Situation comedies from *I Love Lucy* to *Roseanne* are structured as relatively simple stories with well-defined settings, initiating events, attempts, consequences, and reactions. The comic climax is followed by a rapid denouement. After a commercial break, a brief upbeat conclusion brings the story "home" again.

Serials like *All My Children* and *L.A. Law* consist of a series of overlapping and intersecting stories. The writers of these shows do not want to resolve everything in the course of a single episode. They hope to keep viewers interested over a series of shows by extending plots, and sustaining their tensions, from one week to the next. Even game shows and nightly news reports are structured, to a certain extent, like stories.[8] We watch an episode of a game show to see who, in the end, will win. Many news items are presented as ministories, each with a setting, characters, and plot. Less obviously, the anchormen and anchorwomen, the sportscaster, and the weather expert take us on a narrative journey and then return us home "safe and sound" with upbeat human-interest stories or lighthearted commentaries at the very end of the newscast. They hope to leave us smiling, resolved, and more likely than before to return to the program again.

Beyond our TV viewing, we encounter all kinds of stories in everyday social activities. We tell them to friends, acquaintances, and strangers. We hear them at the office, in classrooms, at home, while shopping, playing, eating, and drinking. We dream stories, or at least we make sense of dreams by casting them in a narrative form. We confer upon the world and our conduct in it a storied quality.

The Narrating Mind

Human beings are storytellers by nature. In many guises, as folktale, legend, myth, epic, history, motion picture and television program, the story appears in every known human culture. The story is a natural package for organizing many different kinds of information. Storytelling appears to be a fundamental way of expressing ourselves and our world to others.

Think of the last time you tried to explain something really

important about yourself to another person. Chances are you accomplished this task by telling a story. Or think of an especially intimate conversation from your past. I suspect that what made the conversation good was the kind of stories that were told and the manner in which the stories were received. Indeed, much of what passes for everyday conversation among people is storytelling of one form or another. This appears to be so pervasively true that many scholars have suggested that the human mind is first and foremost a vehicle for storytelling.[9] We are born with a narrating mind, they argue.

Imagine our ancient ancestors at day's end, in that ambiguous interlude between the victories and defeats of the daylight and the unseen dangers and deep sleep of the dark. Home from the hunt, or resting at the end of a day's foraging for food, providing for the young, and preserving the tribe, our primordial forebears sit down together and take stock. Before night falls, they tell stories of the day. They pass the time by making sense of past time. They tell of their experiences to entertain and enlighten one another and, perhaps, on occasion, just to stay awake. E. M. Forster, the novelist and essayist, once speculated:

> Prehistoric man listened to stories, if one may judge by the shape of his skull. The primitive audience was an audience of shock-heads, gaping round the campfire, fatigued with contending against the mammoth or the woolly rhinoceros, and only kept awake by suspense. What would happen next?[10]

Stories told at day's end create a shared history, linking people in time and event as actors, tellers, and audience. The unfolding drama of life is revealed more by the telling than by the actual events told. Stories are not merely "chronicles," like a secretary's minutes of a meeting, written to report exactly what transpired and at what time. Stories are less about facts and more about meanings. In the subjective and embellished telling of the past, the past is constructed—history is made. History is judged to be true or false not solely with respect to its adherence to empirical fact. Rather, it is judged with respect to such narrative criteria as "believability" and "coherence." There is a narrative truth in life that seems quite removed from logic, science, and empirical demonstration. It is the truth of a "good

story." In the words of one writer, this is a form of truth with which our ancient ancestors were intimately familiar:

> No one in the world knew what truth was till someone had told a story. It was not there in the moment of lightning or the cry of the beast, but in the story of those things afterwards, making them part of human life. Our distant savage ancestor gloried as he told—or acted out or danced—the story of the great kill in the dark forest, and that story entered the life of the tribe and by it the tribe came to know itself. On such a day against the beast we fought and won, and here we live to tell the tale. A tale much embellished but truthful even so, for truth is not simply what happened but how we felt about it when it was happening, and how we feel about it now.[11]

The psychologist Jerome Bruner has argued that human beings understand the world in two very different ways.[12] The first he calls the "paradigmatic mode" of thought. In the paradigmatic mode, we seek to comprehend our experience in terms of tightly reasoned analyses, logical proof, and empirical observation. In the second, "narrative mode" of thought, we are concerned with human wants, needs and goals. This is the mode of stories, wherein we deal with "the vicissitudes of human intention" organized in time.

Masters of the paradigmatic mode try to "say no more than they mean."[13] Examples are scientists or logicians seeking to determine cause-and-effect relationships in order to explain events and help predict and control reality. Their explanations are constructed in such a way as to block the triggering of presuppositions. Theoretical constructs do not encourage differences of opinion; instead, a theory proposes an unambiguous objective truth. Such a theory can be tested, and either supported or disproven. Vague formulations are of little use to paradigmatic thinkers, as there is no rigorous method available to test the relative truth of a vague idea. Much of our educational training reinforces the paradigmatic mode.

For all of its power and precision, however, the paradigmatic mode is a strangely humbler form of thought than story making. It is not able to make much sense of human desire, goals, and social conduct. Human events are often ambiguous, and resistant to paradigmatic efforts to understand them. By contrast, good poets and novelists are masters of the narrative mode. Their stories are espe-

cially effective when, in Bruner's words, they "mean more than they can say."[14] A good story triggers presuppositions. We have all had the experience of comparing with a friend what we "got out" of a good movie, play or novel, only to learn that the two of us have read or understood the same story in very different ways. This is part of the fun and value of stories, for they give us differing ideas and opinions around which to have conversations and arguments. Good stories *give birth* to many different meanings, generating "children" of meaning in their own image.

In the narrative mode of thought, we seek to explain events in terms of *human actors striving to do things over time.* I might attempt to explain a friend's unusual behavior in terms of what I think he wants in life and why he has been unable to get it. My account may go back in time to frustrations he experienced three years ago with his wife. To understand him, I say, you must know the story I am going to tell. Similarly, we must hear the story of a troubled childhood to understand why one thirty-five-year-old law-abiding woman drove two thousand miles to desecrate an abandoned chapel.

Human experience is storied because of the way most of us comprehend such human actions as being organized in time. Indeed, our characteristic perspective on time may be most responsible for our fascination with, and aptitude for, stories. The philosopher Paul Ricoeur writes that "time becomes human time to the extent it is organized after the manner of narrative; narrative in turn is meaningful to the extent it portrays the features of temporal existence."[15] What Ricoeur means is that human beings tend to comprehend time in terms of stories. As time passes, events happen. But events do not happen randomly—actions lead to counteractions; attempts, to consequences. For many of us, time seems to move forward, and through its forward trajectory human beings change, grow, give birth, die, and so on. There is development and growth as well as death and decay.

When we comprehend our actions over time, we see what we do in terms of a story. We see obstacles confronted, and intentions realized and frustrated over time. As we move forward from yesterday to today to tomorrow, we move through tensions building to climaxes, climaxes giving way to denouements, and tensions building again as we continue to move and change. Human time is a storied affair.

Stories That Heal

We are drawn to stories for many reasons. Stories entertain us, make us laugh and cry, keep us in suspense until we learn how things will turn out. Stories instruct. We learn how to act and live through stories; we learn about different people, settings, and ideas.[16] Aesop's fables and the parables of Jesus suggest lessons—some simple and some profound—about good and bad behavior, moral and immoral ways of conducting our lives, dilemmas concerning what is right and what is wrong. Stories help us organize our thoughts, providing a narrative for human intentions and interpersonal events that is readily remembered and told. In some instances, stories may also mend us when we are broken, heal us when we are sick, and even move us toward psychological fulfillment and maturity.

The psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim wrote eloquently about the psychological power of children's fairy stories.[17] Bettelheim believed such tales as "Jack and the Beanstalk" and "Cinderella" help children work through internal conflicts and crises. When a four-year-old girl listens to the story of Cinderella, Bettelheim suggests, she may unconsciously identify with the heroine's frustration and sadness and her eventual triumph. Similarly, a child may identify with a male hero like Jack, who faces the menacing giant but eventually outwits him and escapes much the richer and wiser. The protagonists of these stories are unassuming children, like the listeners. Their deeply felt fears and concerns match closely the unconscious fears lurking in the hearts of children.

In Bettelheim's view, the fairy tale speaks softly and subtly to the child, promoting psychological growth and adaptation. The fairy tale encourages the child to face the world with confidence and hope. Cinderella and Jack live happily ever after. Wicked stepsisters and ogres are punished in the end. Things have a way of working out, even when they look terrifying.

As adults, we may identify just as strongly with the protagonist of a story, experiencing episodes vicariously and emerging from a narrative encounter happier, better adjusted, more enlightened, or improved in some way. In his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People,* Rabbi Harold Kushner tells many true stories

of pain and heartbreak he has witnessed.[18] The book has been a great comfort to many people. Good friends whose baby was stillborn have told me Kushner's book helped them deal with their grief. They identified strongly with the author, who was motivated to write the book after his own son died at an early age. Kushner reports that the stories helped *him* too. By collecting and considering the tales of grief and suffering he had encountered in his years as a rabbi, he was able to piece together his own shattered life.

Simply writing or performing a story about oneself can prove to be an experience of healing and growth. A good autobiography puts a life into story form, complete with setting, characters, recurring themes and images, and the self-conscious reconstruction of human time through narrative. One famous autobiography, among the first in Western history, was written by Saint Augustine (A.D. 354–430). His *Confessions* is a retrospective self-analysis written to regroup and recover from what he described as a "shattered" and "disordered" state of mind. By composing the story, Augustine was able to construct a unified view of himself and his place in God's creation. With this new vision of himself, he was able to return to his life with direction and purpose.[19]

Many men and women have tried to do what Augustine did, with varying degrees of success. There are many reasons to write an autobiography, but one commonly expressed is the desire to accomplish some kind of meaningful personal integration. Often the writer begins because life circumstances urge this kind of synthesizing project. Perhaps there is finally ample time to look back, or perhaps there is a deeper need, as Augustine felt, to tell the story and find some salvation or solution to an impending life crisis.

The novelist Philip Roth writes, in his brief autobiography, *The Facts,* that he is seeking to "depathologize" his own life, after years of confusion and trouble.[20] Roth attempts to distill from his own complex past the stark truisms—"the facts"—concerning how he came to be a writer. He describes this process as a clearing away of the many fictional stories he has created in order to get at a single and simple tale in which to believe. The task is tricky and perhaps ill-advised, as Roth discovers during imaginary conversations with Nathan Zuckerman, the fictional hero of a series of Roth's novels. Zuckerman claims to be more a part of Roth than Roth is himself. "This is what you get in

practically any artist without his imagination," Zuckerman says. "Your medium for the really merciless, self-evisceration, your medium for genuine self-confrontation, is me."[21]

Perhaps Roth agrees with Zuckerman that "the facts" are not enough. He gives his chapters titles like "Joe College," "Girl of My Dreams," and "All in the Family." Apparently, Roth finds that once he strips away the self he projects onto characters like Zuckerman all he is left with is cliché. Clearing away his fictional stories leaves Roth with trite stereotypes and pedestrian plots. Roth's autobiography turns ironic and self-mocking, as the storyteller comes to doubt the validity of the story he tells. Yet the whole process seems to be somewhat enlightening, as well as entertaining. We feel that we *do* learn something important about Roth, and that he, too, has discovered something about himself. He seems to have made modest progress toward his goal of depathologizing his life.

The healing power of stories arises as a major theme in certain forms of psychotherapy, whose explicit therapeutic goal is the depathologizing of life. The development of a coherent life story is a major goal in these therapies. The analyst and the client seek to construct more adequate and vitalizing stories about the self.[22] One scholar writes, "Human life is, ideally, a connected and coherent story, with all the details in explanatory place, and with everything (or as close to everything as is practically possible) accounted for, in its proper causal or other sequence." Similarly, "illness amounts at least in part to suffering from an incoherent story or an inadequate narrative account of oneself."[23]

Some psychological problems and a great deal of emotional suffering stem from our failures to make sense of our lives through stories. Therapists help us revise our stories, and produce a healing narrative of the self. The process may produce a triumphant transformation, of the kind Saint Augustine enjoyed. Or progress may be slower and less obvious, as Roth found in his own attempt to heal himself.

Myth and Story

Some stories gain wide acceptance for their ability to communicate a fundamental truth about life. These stories are incorporated into

the culture of a particular group of people. Such stories may be deemed sacred, and we reserve for them the term *myth.* In religious societies myths are believed to *embody* primordial characteristics of reality, and thus are distinguished from legends or other less sacred forms of stories. Traditional myths concern transcendent beings, such as gods, spirits, and larger-than-life nobles and heroes like Oedipus.[24]

Myths incorporate archetypal symbols that remain viable today if our imaginations are active enough to make us conscious of, and curious about, our origins and our destiny.[25] Myths capture a given society's basic psychological, sociological, cosmological, and metaphysical truths. A society's myths reflect the most important concerns of a people. By giving narrative form to a diverse collection of elements, they help to preserve the society's integrity and assure its continuity and health.[26]

What myths traditionally have done on the level of culture, a personal myth can accomplish for a human being.[27] A personal myth delineates an identity, illuminating the values of an individual life. The personal myth is not a legend or fairy tale, but a sacred story that embodies personal truth.

To say that a personal myth is "sacred" is to suggest that a personal myth deals with those ultimate questions that preoccupy theologians and philosophers. Many social commentators argue that Americans and Europeans live in a demythologized world; many of us no longer believe in an orderly universe governed by a just God. In the midst of this existential nothingness, we are challenged to create our own meanings, discover our own truths, and fashion the personal myths that will serve to sanctify our lives.

Despite the demythologized world Margaret Sands faces, she never gives up in her struggle to find unity and purpose in her life. She must wrench meaning out of the many difficult years of her past and her uncertain prospects for the future. Bitterly rejecting all organized religion, Margaret calls herself a "flaming agnostic." Yet she often prays to her dead mother and grandmother. The two occupy a sacred space in Margaret's life, as central figures in her personal myth. Her epic pilgrimage to the California chapel was a sacred ritual for her; by cursing the church she was able to affirm her own goodness and the sanctity of her own life. She is becoming able

to express, in deed and word, what she believes to be true, good, and beautiful, and to vilify what is, for her, evil and profane.

Fashioning a personal myth is not an exercise in narcissistic delusion, or a paranoid attempt to establish oneself as God. Instead, defining the self through myth may be seen as an ongoing act of psychological and social *responsibility.* Because our world can no longer tell us who we are and how we should live, we must figure it out on our own. The making of a personal myth is a psychosocial quest. As mature adults we are all challenged to structure our needs for power and for love, and to fashion a myth within the social and historical context to which we are ethically and interpersonally beholden.

How Does the Myth Develop?

Even as infants, we gather material for our personal myths. The gathering occurs spontaneously and unconsciously, for the most part, as influences of all kinds come to shape our expectations about life and myth. Before children even know what a story is, they find themselves engaged in experiences that will have an impact on the stories they will someday encounter and construct.

In their first relationships of love and trust, infants develop unconscious attitudes about hope and despair. Babies learn the first unconscious lessons about how the world works and how human beings can be expected to behave. An infant's relationship with mother and father is likely to influence the long-term development of a myth's narrative tone. Every personal myth has a pervasive narrative tone, ranging from hopeless pessimism to boundless optimism. For Margaret Sands, the general tone is pessimistic, as she seeks meaning and purpose within a narrative couched in insecurity and framed in tragic terms.

Preschool children collect the central images that someday will animate their personal myths. Arresting images make stories memorable to children of this age. The plots of many stories may be too hard to grasp *in toto,* but preschoolers remember the images. Four-year-olds make sense of their experience in terms of the emotionally charged symbols and images they collect—representations, for instance, of home and school, mommy and daddy, God and the devil,

Snow White and the Wicked Witch of the West. While much of this early imagery passes into oblivion as children grow up, some significant images and representations survive into adulthood and are incorporated into the personal myth. We catch a glimpse of self-defining imagery in Margaret Sands's return to the chapel. The religious icons and symbols from her childhood are invested with deep feelings of loathing and regret.

As children begin formal schooling, they develop increasingly logical and systematic thought, and they come to appreciate stories as thematically organized wholes. They recognize that story characters are striving to reach certain goals over a period of time. From stories, as well as from other sources, school-age children begin to establish their own motivational patterns. Goals and desires are consolidated into stable dispositions centered on the needs for power and love. These patterns of desire will ultimately be reflected thematically in their personal myths. Motivated by a strong desire for intimacy, Margaret has constructed a personal myth that underscores caregiving and helping others. Yet she is still quite ambivalent about establishing long-term intimate relationships with friends or lovers.

We first become self-conscious mythmakers in our late-adolescent years, when we confront head-on the problem of identity in human lives. The adolescent begins by consciously and unconsciously working through an ideological setting for the myth—a backdrop of fundamental beliefs that situates the story within a particular ethical and religious location. Therefore, the transition from adolescence to young adulthood is an especially significant phase in the development of human identity. A fundamental challenge of mythmaking in adolescence and young adulthood is to formulate personally meaningful answers to ideological questions so that one's identity can be built on a stable foundation. People tend to establish the ideological setting in late adolescence and very early adulthood, and for most the setting remains relatively intact and constant for the rest of their years. Margaret's hardheaded agnosticism provides an ideological setting for her personal myth. It remains today an unquestioned backdrop for the plot of her story.

Young adults in their twenties and thirties concentrate their mythmaking energies on the creation and refinement of main characters. Our myths and our lives are generally too complex to be populated by a single main character. Myths draw their characters from an individual's imagoes, which are internalized complexes of actual or imagined personas. Many personal myths contain more than one dominant imago, as central protagonists within the self interact and sometimes conflict in the making of identity. We see a vivid example of this in the narrative tension between Margaret the caregiver and Margaret the hell-raising rebel. Indeed, the richest and most dynamic personal myths are populated by a number of conflicting and elaborate imagoes. Integrating and making peace among conflicting imagoes in one's personal myth is a hallmark of mature identity in the middle-adult years.

All good stories require a satisfying ending. As we move into and through our middle-adult years, we become increasingly preoccupied with our own myth's denouement. Yet all of us are profoundly ambivalent about the sense of an ending. Few of us are eager to die. Mature identity requires that we leave a legacy that will, in some sense, survive us. Many individuals, at this stage in their lives, refashion their myths to ensure that something of personal importance is passed on. As we see in Margaret's story, a child may come to represent the transmission of something good within the self into the next generation.

As the great mythologist Joseph Campbell has written, "It has always been the prime function of mythology and rite to supply the symbols that carry the human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back."[28] Like the religious and cosmic myths that humankind has created across the ages, a personal myth can carry forward something about humankind that is worth preserving and improving. The stories we create influence the stories of other people, those stories give rise to still others, and soon we find meaning and connection within a web of story making and story living. Through our personal myths, we help to create the world we live in, at the same time that it is creating us.