

the stories we live by

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"This wonderful and readable account of the ways in which we use stories across the life cycle and through history provides important new insights into the ways in which we maintain our identity. A compassionate and informed discussion of life-story and life-history, the book will have wide appeal to both students and those working with or studying personality."
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University of Chicago

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"Who am I?" "How do I fit into the world around me?"

is revealing and innovative book demonstrates that each of us discovers what is true meaningful, in our lives and in ourselves, through the creation of personal myths, challenging the traditional view that our personalities are formed by fixed, unchanging characteristics, or by predictable stages through which every individual travels, *The Way We Live By* persuasively argues that we *are* the stories we tell. Informed by extensive scientific research—yet highly readable, engaging, and accessible—the book explores how understanding and revising our personal stories can open up new possibilities for our lives.

Dan P. McAdams, PhD, is Professor of Human Development and Social Policy and Director of Psychology at Northwestern University, where he is also Director of the Center for the Study of Lives. He has published 12 books and over 100 articles, chapters in the areas of personality and developmental psychology.

E GUILFORD PRESS
Spring Street
New York, NY 10012
www.guilford.com

ISBN 1-57230-188-0

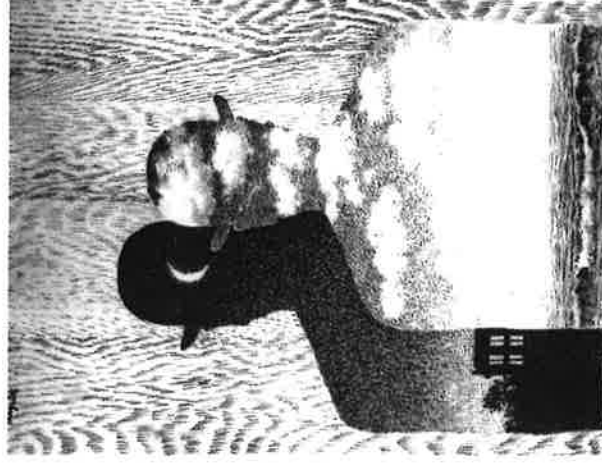


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Design by Andrea Amadio

McAdams

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*the stories
we live by*

**Personal Myths
and the**

Making of the Self

Dan P. McAdams



Guilford

For my mother

Preface (1997)

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The Guilford Press
A Division of Guilford Publications, Inc.
72 Spring Street, New York, NY 10012

Printed in the United States of America

This book is printed on acid-free paper

Last digit is print number. 9 8 7

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

McAdams, Dan P.

The stories we live by: personal myths and the making of the self
/ Dan P. McAdams.

p. cm.

Originally published: New York: William Morrow & Company, 1993.
Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 1-57230-188-0 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Self psychology. 2. Identity (Psychology) 3. Psychology —

Biographical methods. I. Title

[BF697.M164 1996]

155.2/5—dc21

96-49264

CIP



What do we know when we know a person? What do we know when we think we know ourselves? These are simple but profound questions which most people have wondered about in one way or another, perhaps in the context of their most important relationships, or perhaps in thinking about who they are and what makes their lives make sense. These are also key questions for personality psychologists, like myself, who collect and interpret data on persons and generate meaningful scientific theory about the significance of human lives.

The central idea of this book is a disarmingly simple one: in the modern world in which we all live, *identity is a life story*. A life story is a personal myth that an individual begins working on in late adolescence and young adulthood in order to provide his or her life with unity or purpose and in order to articulate a meaningful niche in the psychosocial world. The emphasis in this book is on *how the story develops*, from birth to old age. I offer a lifespan developmental theory of how modern people create identities through narrative, beginning with the origins of narrative tone in infancy and ending with the midlife and older adult's efforts to craft a satisfying ending for the life story by establishing a generative legacy of the self. The theory I present stems from scientific personality research that I have done

Christian because I don't believe the myth. But there are some elements in Christianity that help people go beyond the individual. They bring out a collective commitment. The individual doesn't just stand alone. Part of me likes that a lot.

The part that likes it is the conservative, communal part. Unlike the hippies and the anarchists of the late 1960s, Daniel was never comfortable with the unbridled expression of human individuality. After all, he has been married to the same woman for twenty-five years. He owns a home; he is raising a family; he is saving money for Samantha's college education. He wants her to have all the opportunities that the American middle class can provide. He sees communal merit in traditional Christianity, even though he can't accept it for himself. In Daniel's personal myth, the split between agency and communion subsumes what Daniel perceives to be his dual nature as a liberal at work and a conservative at home.

Agency or communion? Liberalism or conservatism? Work or home? The opposition is always there. In Daniel Kessinger's personal myth, the tension between agency and communion pushes the plot forward. As his identity becomes richer and more integrated over time, Daniel finds that agency and communion confront each other again and again, at increasingly complex levels. Very generative people often seem to face this confrontation, each in his or her own unique way. It is perhaps among those who fashion the best and most enduring gifts for the next generation that we witness the most momentous conflicts between creating and giving, between controlling and letting go, between standing alone and being with others. But it is in these heroic life stories that adults best justify their time on this earth, as mature men and women who can see past their own ends to the beginnings of a better world.

Exploring Your Myth

After she had interviewed a number of people about their personal myths, one of my graduate students told me that I had to see the movie *sex, lies, and videotape*. As an interviewer, she found striking parallels between her own experience and that of the movie's chief protagonist, a young man who videotapes women as they tell him about their sexual fantasies. I found this an odd comment because I don't believe that an interviewee has ever told us about a sexual fantasy. The topic is not part of the standard interview we use.

After seeing the movie, however, I had to agree with my student's observation. In the film, the protagonist encourages women to describe their most desirable sexual imaginings in as much detail as they wish. Should they want to, they may remove some or all of their clothing during the process. The protagonist simply listens and asks an occasional question to help the women along. But he never interferes with the telling. He passes no judgment. He gives no advice. He affirms, but never threatens. What develops is a strange and intensely intimate relationship whose life is no longer than the running of the videotape. Most likely, he will never see the woman again. But for those moments while she is on tape, he listens intently as she discloses things that she has never said before. To be listened to with such intensity, to be accepted unconditionally as the center

of another person's consciousness, even but for a few moments in time—this is what is so appealing to the women on tape. This seems to be what motivates them to tell their stories, to share that which is most private with a man who is a virtual stranger.

And what about the motivations of the protagonist? He wants the intimacy, too. As the women open up, he experiences deep feelings of care and affection. In addition, the tapes are fuel for his own sexual fantasies, as he replays them for his private viewing long after the women have gone home. Until he falls in love with the heroine in the film, the videotapes serve as a substitute for sexual intercourse with women. Indeed, it is tempting to conclude that the videotapes are but a tawdry imitation of life, a technological tool for masturbation keeping the protagonist from relating to others in genuine and healthy ways. But I think that this conclusion is too simple and misses a key point about the quality of experience on tape. The women are not acting; they are being as real as they can be. Their genuine self-disclosures create an emotionally riveting bond between the listener and the teller. It may be a sad commentary on modern life that such moments of sincere disclosure seem so rare, so strange. But here we have them—on videotape. Real people telling the truth through stories as a sympathetic listener takes it in.

As an interviewer leading people through a series of questions about their life stories, I am like the movie's sympathetic listener. I do not pass judgment. I do not offer advice, therapy, or counsel. I try to affirm as much as I can, to help the person clarify and articulate in ways that enable the true myth to be revealed, on tape. Of course, my motivations are different from those in the movie. I interview people to collect data on personal myths. It's all in the name of science, objective inquiry, gaining knowledge about real people's real lives. When I play the tapes back, I am listening with an analytic ear, discerning themes, images, symbols, and so on so that I might construct a portrait of the myth and the mythmaking that characterizes the life.

Yet my students and I cannot help but develop strong feelings of affection and intimacy for the people we interview, and it seems that they form strong feelings for us, as well. At the end of the interview, most people report that the experience of telling their stories was profoundly satisfying and enjoyable, even if they shed tears in the

telling. They often ask not to receive payment for the interview, for they feel that they have already been rewarded by the experience itself. They seem puzzled at times that I, the interviewer, should be so thankful for their participation. They end up thanking me for taking the time to listen. They hope dearly that they did not bore me. The truth is I am never bored, nor are my students. Instead, we feel privileged and a little embarrassed to be given such a sincere self-disclosure—such a precious gift of intimacy. I feel that my daily interactions are rarely as real and as authentic as the interviews I have on tape.

After the interview, people often remark that they found the process of telling their story to be profoundly enlightening. "I learned a lot of things about myself," they may say. "It got me thinking about things I don't usually think about." Although its intended function is to gather data on lives, our life-story interview may also serve to help people *identify* the personal myth that they have been *living* all along. Such an identification may help in the process of *changing* the myth should the person feel that change is required. In this last chapter, I will draw together my personal reflections on (1) identifying, (2) living, and (3) changing the personal myths that shape and give meaning to our lives. My goal here is not to provide you with simple recipes for human happiness and understanding, in the manner of the proverbial self-help book in popular psychology. I sincerely believe that very few people in the world are qualified to tell you (or me) how to live a life, by writing a book. But I also believe that there are useful guidelines to be considered when applying the ideas in this book to your own life, your own personal myth. You may wish to develop your own guidelines as well.

Identifying the Myth

In contemporary modern life, the two most common tools employed to promote the identification of one's personal myth are psychotherapy and autobiography. In certain forms of psychotherapy, the therapist and the client may work together to explore conscious and unconscious domains in the client's life, with the explicit goal of enhancing self-understanding and facilitating personality change.

There are many forms of psychotherapy, but those most closely identified as "talking therapies" or "depth" approaches—typically psychoanalytic, psychodynamic, or cognitive-affective in orientation—are probably best suited for the kind of personal exploration required to help identify one's personal myth. In autobiography (and in such personal memoirs as diaries and journals), a person may self-consciously seek a narrative frame for life. The process of focusing on the life and translating it into words helps the author to identify or construct a coherent view of self, as we saw in Chapter 1 in the cases of Saint Augustine and the novelist Philip Roth.

Beyond these two valuable approaches, there are simpler and less expensive methods you may employ to enhance self-understanding and promote the identification of personal myth. Some of these involve private explorations of your inner life through such methods as keeping track of your dreams, cultivating your fantasy life, thinking through central problems and conflicts, engaging in inner dialogues with your many "selves," paying close attention to your body's rhythms, and so on.¹ While these methods may be extremely useful, my own research underscores the importance of interpersonal *dialogue* in exploring the self. Like certain forms of psychotherapy, the telling of one's story to a sympathetic listener can be extremely illuminating. Unlike a psychotherapist, however, the listener need not be a trained professional. Nor should the listener adopt an advisory or judgmental role. Instead, the listener should follow the role of an interviewer in one of my life-story interviews. He or she should serve as an empathic and encouraging guide and an affirming sounding board.

Who should the listener be? Ideally, the listener should be a friend who has not been instrumentally involved in shaping your life to this point. Both you and the friend should be ready for the intensification of your relationship that such an exploration will produce. Unlike the movie and my interviews, you and the friend are likely to remain in an ongoing relationship in the weeks and years to come. Therefore, your exploration needs to be evaluated in the context of that particular friendship. What will happen to the friendship as a result of such an exploration? How will your feelings about each other change? In some cases, it may be especially enriching for your friend to explore his or her own myth as well. You may wish to switch roles

at times: You become the listener as your friend takes on the role of storyteller. It may also be helpful to tape your exchanges so that you can listen to the proceedings later on and reflect upon meanings and significance. Taping is especially useful should you decide that you wish to take concerted action to change your myth in the future. It's helpful to have a record of what you wish to change before you begin to try to change it.

Other candidates for listener include spouses, siblings, lovers, parents, or even one's adult children. All of these relationships tend to be more complex than the idealized friendship I have described above. Personal exploration in these contexts may be somewhat more dangerous, in that such people are likely to have been intimately involved in the making of your identity in the past. You may be less candid in exchanges with your husband or wife than when talking with a good friend. Still, the value of personal exploration may exceed the potential liabilities in many cases. Not only may the process of exploring the self promote your own identity understanding but it may also enrich the ongoing relationship with a lover, spouse, or family member.

Therefore, in considering who the listener should be, the two most important criteria are probably (1) the nature of your relationship with the prospective listener and (2) the listener's suitability for the role. With respect to the first, you and the listener must feel that such an exploration is appropriate and comfortable for both of you at this point in your relationship. With respect to the second, the listener should be able to take on the kind of enthusiastic, affirming, and nonjudgmental perspective I have described above. In addition, the listener should be familiar with the concept of personal myth. By way of preparation, you and the listener may wish to discuss some of the central concepts I have outlined in this book. These may include the meaning of stories in literature and lives, narrative tone, archetypal story forms (e.g., comedy, tragedy, romance, irony), story imagery, themes of power and love, personal fables of adolescence, ontological strategies, ideological settings, imagoes, changes at mid-life, the generativity script, and the sense of ending in stories.

What should the listener do? As the storytelling process evolves, you (the storyteller) and the listener may develop your own guidelines for dialogue and exploration. To get you started, however, I

would suggest that you follow the interview protocol that I have employed in research into personal myths. The interview typically takes between one and a half and three hours to complete. It may be done in one sitting or two. You may wish to supplement the questions we use with more personally relevant probes. You may wish to skip some of our questions if they seem redundant or irrelevant in your particular case. However you use the interview, you should see it as a tool rather than an end in itself. Ideally, it should prompt you to make further explorations in future dialogues. You should plan to follow up on material that arises in the interview in subsequent discussions with your listener.

(If you prefer not to share your story with another person, you may serve as your own listener. My general experience with this approach is that it does not lead to the kind of intimate and concerted self-disclosure that typically comes out in interpersonal dialogue. But it still may be the right approach for some people—those who find it extremely difficult to talk about themselves with others, or those for whom no suitable listener seems available in their lives. If you think that you fit into one of these two categories, I would still encourage you to make every effort possible to do the exploration through interpersonal dialogue.)

The interview begins with a general question about *life chapters*:

I would like you to begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book. Each part of your life composes a chapter in the book. Certainly, the book is unfinished at this point; still, it probably already contains a few interesting and well-defined chapters. Please divide your life into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as many or as few chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing it into at least two or three chapters and at most about seven or eight. Think of this as a general table of contents for your book. Give each chapter a name and describe the overall contents of each chapter. Discuss briefly what makes for a transition from one chapter to the next. This first part of the interview can expand forever, but I would urge you to keep it relatively brief, say, within thirty to forty-five minutes. Therefore, you don't want to tell me "the whole story" here. Just give me a sense of the story's outline—the major chapters in your life.

The listener may wish to ask for clarifications or elaborations at any point in this first section, though there is a significant danger of

interrupting too much. The listener should be careful not to organize the table of contents for the storyteller by suggesting chapter titles and so on. The first section of the interview is the most open-ended part. Some people will talk for hours here if allowed; others will wrap it up in five minutes. We have found that the most illuminating and cogent responses can be completed between about twenty-five minutes and an hour, so we typically suggest (as you see above) a thirty- to forty-five-minute length. The storyteller's task is to provide a general context for the more particular material to come. While it may be useful to explore important themes and incidents in some detail if they arise at this point, the storyteller should be careful not to get lost in the details of the narrative.

The life-chapters question enables you, the storyteller, to provide your life with an organizing narrative framework. Most people organize their life chapters in a quasi-chronological manner, with earliest chapters linked to childhood. For others, a thematic organization seems to work better. They may have a chapter on relationships, another on school and work, and so on. You may wish to experiment with different organizational formats before settling on one that seems right for you. How you divide things up may be especially revealing of what you consider to be the major benchmarks and developmental trends in your life. In addition, the opening life-chapters question provides an opportunity for the expression of many different elements of the self-defining personal myth. Especially noticeable are narrative tone and imagery. The extent to which a person adopts an optimistic or pessimistic tone in reconstructing the past—the extent to which he or she follows comic, tragic, romantic, and/or ironic forms—begins to become manifest in the organization of life chapters. Both the listener and the storyteller should furthermore pay careful attention to the kind of language employed in this opening section, as a clue to personally meaningful images, symbols, and metaphors.

The second section of the interview moves from the general to the specific by asking the storyteller to describe in great detail eight *key events* in his or her story:

I am going to ask you about eight key events. A key event should be a specific happening, a critical incident, a significant episode in your

7. *An important adult memory:* A memory, positive or negative, that stands out from age twenty-one onward.
8. *Other important memory:* One other particular event from your past that stands out. It may be from long ago or recent times. It may be positive or negative.

I use the term *nuclear episodes* to refer to key events in a person's life story. These rich descriptive accounts provide invaluable information about dominant themes in your personal myth, as well as imagery and tone. Indeed, if I had but one question to ask a person in order to get a quick sense of who he or she is, I would probably ask the person to recall a peak experience from the past. I find that people are most articulate and insightful when talking about particular, concrete episodes in their lives. By contrast, discussions of general trends and abstract formulations are rarely as vivid or revealing of personality or identity. Therefore, you should focus considerable time and energy on each event recalled. Provide as much detail as possible. Work hard to comprehend the significance of the particular moment in the encompassing pattern of your overall life narrative. Be ready to entertain different and conflicting meanings of the same episode. The most significant nuclear episodes are implicitly endowed with the richest meaning networks.

In Chapter 3 and in Appendix 1 and 2, I talk about how the reconstruction of such key events from the past reveals the main thematic lines of agency and communion (power and love) in personal myth. In interpreting these accounts in your own life you should therefore be asking yourself what these episodes say about what you really want in your life. To what extent are you driven by power or love? More important, in what particular ways do your needs for power and love express themselves in the story? You must remember that your accounts of key events reflect autobiographical decisions that you have made. Rather than relate your story as a secretary objectively reports the minutes of a meeting, you have subjectively chosen to highlight specific events in your life as high points, low points, turning points, and so on. And you have chosen to disregard other events. Why does a teacher's simple compliment stand out so boldly in your memory of a very eventful childhood?

past set in a particular time and place. It is helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life that stands out for some reason. Thus, a particular conversation you had with your mother when you were twelve years old or a particular decision you made one afternoon last summer might qualify as a key event in your life story. These are particular moments in a particular time and place, complete with particular characters, actions, thoughts, and feelings. An entire summer vacation—be it very happy or very sad or very important in some way—or a very difficult year in high school, on the other hand, would *not* qualify as key events, because these take place over an extended period of time. (They are more like life chapters.) For each event, describe in detail what happened, where you were, who was involved, what you did, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. Also, try to convey the impact this key event has had in your life story and *what this event says about who you are or were as a person*. Did this event change you in any way? If so, in what way? Please be *very specific* here.

The eight key events are

1. *Peak experience:* A high point in the life story; the most wonderful moment in your life.
2. *Nadir experience:* A low point in the life story; the worst moment in your life.
3. *Turning point:* An episode wherein you underwent a significant change in your understanding of yourself. It is not necessary that you comprehended the turning point as a turning point when it in fact happened. What is important is that now, in retrospect, you see the event as a turning point, or at minimum as symbolizing a significant change in your life.
4. *Earliest memory:* One of the earliest memories you have of an event that is complete with setting, scene, characters, feelings, and thoughts. This does not have to seem like an especially important memory. Its one virtue is that it is early.
5. *An important childhood memory:* Any memory from your childhood, positive or negative, that stands out today.
6. *An important adolescent memory:* Any memory from your teenage years that stands out today. Again, it can be either positive or negative.

Why does the death of your father *not* stand out as the worst thing that ever happened in your life?

The interview moves from key events to *Significant People*:

Every person's life story is populated by a few significant people who have a major impact on the narrative. These may include, but not be limited to, parents, children, siblings, spouses, lovers, friends, teachers, coworkers, and mentors. I want you to describe *four* of the most important people in your life story. At least one of these should be a person to whom you are not related. Please specify the kind of relationship you had or have with each person and the specific way he or she has had an impact on your life story. After describing each of these, tell me about any particular heroes or heroines you have in your life.

The third section of the interview provides an opportunity to describe in greater detail a few people in your life that you have probably already mentioned in the life-chapters and key-events sections. The significant people described may form the basis for the main characters, or imagoes, in your personal myth. Parents, friends, lovers, and so on may serve as prototypes (ideal models) of central imagoes, such as the caregiver, the healer, the warrior, and so on. Heroes and heroines are especially well suited for this narrative role. Or significant people may function to promote or hinder the development of a particular character in your life story. For example, a coach in high school may have encouraged you to work hard on your figure skating, helping you to develop an imago of the athlete. Or an older sister may have hindered the expression of your imago, the maker, through her constant criticism of your artwork as you were growing up. Again, your description of the most significant people in your life represents an autobiographical decision, indicative of the way in which you have defined who you are. You need to ask yourself why you chose the persons you chose, and why you chose to remember them in the way you have.

After spending a considerable amount of time on the past, the interview now moves to the *future script*:

Now that you have told me a little bit about your past and present, I would like you to consider the future. As your life story extends into the future, what might be the script or plan for what is to happen next in your life? I would like you to describe your overall plan,

outline, or dream for your own future. Most of us have plans or dreams that concern what we would like to get out of life and what we would like to put into it in the future. These dreams or plans provide our lives with goals, interests, hopes, aspirations, and wishes. Furthermore, our dreams or plans may change over time, reflecting growth and changing experiences. Describe your present dream, plan, or outline for the future. Also, tell me how, if at all, your dream, plan, or outline enables you (1) to be creative in the future and (2) to make a contribution to others.

Under future script, you are given an opportunity to extend the story into the future chapters that you envision today. This part of the interview provides many different kinds of identity information. Like key events, it is especially sensitive to the revelation of motivational themes in the life story, as you are likely to fashion goals for the future that reflect your basic wants and needs in life. Future script may also provide a glimpse of the sense of an ending. Where is the story going? How will it get there from here? A good story integrates beginning, middle, and ending in terms of a plausible plot. Thus, temporal continuity is a major challenge in personal myth-making. It is at this point in the interview that you are likely to see how your vision of yourself for the future may or may not follow in a meaningful way from how you see yourself in the present and how you now see yourself in the past. Analyzed in conjunction with life chapters and key events future script therefore provides insights into your particular approach to personal historiography. Do you proceed according to a dynastic ontological strategy, with a good past giving birth to a good present and future? Do you adopt a compensatory strategy, where bad leads to good? Does the strategy work well? Does it make for a believable and vitalizing myth?

A third kind of information you may acquire from this part of the interview concerns your characteristic approach to generativity. The section asks you to consider how your plans for the future will enable you to be creative and to make contributions to others. As we saw in Chapter 9, to be generative is to generate (create or produce) a gift of the self and offer it (make a contribution) to the next generation. The best stories from our thirties and beyond incorporate generativity in explicit ways. Mature adults have specific plans about how they are going to make a creative contribution to the next genera-

tion. This is the place in the interview where these plans are typically revealed. Their failure to appear may indicate that this part of the life story requires some concerted work, that this is an area wherein the personal myth may need to be "improved" so as to enhance one's own life and the lives of others.

The fifth section pertains to stresses and problems:

All life stories include significant conflicts, unresolved issues, problems to be solved, and periods of great stress. I would like you to consider some of these now. Please describe *two* areas in your life where at present you are experiencing at least one of the following: significant stress, a major conflict, or a difficult problem or challenge that must be addressed. For each of the two, describe the nature of the stress, problem, or conflict in some detail, outlining the source of the concern, a brief history of its development, and your plan, if you have one, for dealing with it in the future.

By the time you have reached this point in the interview, you have probably touched on one or two significant problems in your life. This section gives you an opportunity to consider two problems, stresses, or challenges in some detail and to outline strategies for addressing them. Information gleaned from this section sometimes involves internal battles between discordant characters in the life story. For example, the imago of the carefree escapist, whose origins reside in happy days of childhood, may find it difficult to flourish in the same story with the imago of the responsible caregiver. Therefore, this section may help to signal points of potential resolution in narrative for the future—issues and conflicts that need to be resolved in successive revisions of your personal myth. Be careful, however, not to overinterpret problems in terms of identity, or to inflate trivial problems into mythic proportions. Many life problems have little to do with identity per se but involve such everyday concerns as getting the car fixed, losing weight, or squabbling with one's boss. These problems may have a major impact on the quality of your everyday life—they may impact on happiness and satisfaction. But they may have little to do with your personal myth per se—that is, the meaning of your life. I will consider the distinction between happiness and meaning later in this chapter.

Moving now toward the interview's conclusion, it is time to consider *personal ideology*:

Now I will ask you a few questions about your fundamental beliefs and values. Please give some thought to each of these questions, and answer each with as much detail as you can. (1) Do you believe in the existence of some kind of God, deity, or force that reigns over or in some way influences or organizes the universe? Explain. (2) Please describe in a nutshell your religious beliefs. (3) In what ways, if any, are your beliefs different from those held by most of the people you know? (4) Please describe how your religious beliefs have changed over time. Have you experienced any periods of rapid change in your religious beliefs? Explain. (5) Do you have a particular political orientation? Explain. (6) What is the most important value in human living? Explain. (7) What else can you tell me that would help me understand your most fundamental beliefs and values about life and the world?

People vary widely in their responses to this section. For some especially philosophical people, this is their favorite part of the interview, and their responses may be quite lengthy. For people differently inclined, these questions may seem especially difficult. Their responses may be shorter and more tentative. I have found that once people realize that we are not simply talking about conventional religion and politics and that they may substitute such expressions as *spirituality*, *ultimate meanings*, *the good society*, and so on, they tend to become more comfortable, and open up more. As the storyteller in this section, you should remember that the ideological setting for your personal myth specifies how your beliefs and values are both similar to and different from those held dear by others. Many people are hesitant to talk about the "different from" part. They are too quick to suggest that what they believe is essentially the same as what they think everybody else believes. When pushed a bit, however, they often reveal understandings and perspectives in personal ideology that are quite distinctive, even unique. You should strive to articulate the distinctive characteristics of your ideological setting without losing sight of the fact that your identity is grounded in a social world wherein certain people share certain values.

The interview's last section asks you to take stock of what you have said by entertaining an overall *life theme*:

Looking back over your entire life story as a book with chapters, episodes, and characters, can you discern a central theme, message,

parts of your life around the myth you have constructed. You have already created, and continue to create, a story to live by. And you have been living by it all along.

Let us, then, consider the process of living the story from both a psychological and a social perspective. What does living the myth do for you? What does it do for society? From the standpoint of the individual's psychology, to live the myth is to provide your life with *meaning*—more so than with *happiness*. This is not to say that a personal myth exists to make you unhappy. Rather, it suggests that a personal myth functions first and foremost to provide life with meaning, unity, purpose. Happiness may follow, but in some cases it may not. From the standpoint of society, to live the myth is to connect to the grand narratives of your social world. Myths are created and lived in a social context. As a social participant, you are responsible for creating and living a personal myth in such a way as to commit your life to the generative agenda of humankind. Without this commitment, identity loses any trace of social responsibility and degenerates into trivia or narcissism.

It is common practice in popular psychology to suggest that all good things come together, in an undifferentiated gold mine of riches. From this popular point of view, to find meaning in life is to be happy, satisfied, fully functional, self-actualized, fulfilled, well-adjusted, mature, free of anxiety, liberated, enlightened, individuated, and saved. It is true that the definitions and connotations of these different terms overlap considerably. But we should also be aware of important distinctions. Indeed, empirical research reveals significant nuances in people's understandings of these terms and shows that for all the overlap, people tend to evaluate their lives on many different dimensions.² No single concept covers it all when you are considering the overall quality of a human life. Each concept is limited and qualified, and no psychological process or product can "do it all."

So it is with personal myths. There are two essential qualifications to underscore here. First, as important as it is, your personal myth is not implicated in everything you do. Much of your everyday behavior has little or nothing to do with your personal myth. What you wear to work, the conversation you have at breakfast, your striving to complete a project on time, an argument you have with

or idea that runs throughout the text? What is the major theme of your life? Explain.

In the research interviews we have done, respondents are often quite insightful at this point in the session. After focusing unwavering attention on their life narrative for two hours or more, they are often able to capture part of the essence or central meaning of the myth in a pithy phrase or expression. In the context of our research, this is the only explicit opportunity that the respondent has to "analyze" the meaning of his or her words. The quick self-analysis at the end of the interview may serve as a springboard for the deeper psychological analyses that my associates and I will perform after we listen to the interview tape or read the transcript. For your purposes, however, the life-theme section provides an opportunity for an initial look back while prompting you to carry on your self-examination in future dialogues with the listener.

Identifying your personal myth should be seen as a life process. It cannot be fully achieved in a single interview. The questions I have posed should get you going. But don't stop with my questions. Plan to meet with your listener again. Follow up on interesting leads of the first interview. Make time to get to know yourself and to share yourself with the listener. The process is enjoyable in itself. And it promises to pay personal dividends in enhancing your understanding of the story you live by.

Living the Myth

The interview should help make conscious and explicit that which already exists implicitly, generally outside of your everyday awareness. I believe that coming to a conscious understanding of the details of your self-defining personal myth can markedly enrich your life and promote your development as a person. It is also a necessary first step in the process of changing your myth for the better. But you do not need to identify your self-defining personal myth—to bring it into full conscious awareness—in order to live according to it. Indeed, whether or not you choose to examine your myth explicitly, you have already been more or less successful in constructing a myth for yourself over the years, and shaping

your spouse, consuming one too many drinks at a college reunion—all of these behaviors and countless more may conceivably be irrelevant for the story you live by. To put it another way, living your story does not mean that your story is your life.

Academic psychologists make an important distinction between "personality" and "identity." Your personality is the entire motivational, attitudinal, and behavioral system that characterizes your adjustment to the world. It is made up of traits, values, motives, and many other processes and constructs. A subset of personality is the concept of identity, which (from my perspective) is the personal myth you construct to define who you are. All of your behavior connects up in one way or another to your personality as a product of traits, motives, and so on (inner personality characteristics) in interaction with your environment (outer situational characteristics). But only those behaviors and episodes in life that have significance for the question Who am I? are connected up with personal myth.

To take an example from my own life, driving to work this morning had nothing to do with my identity. It was not a self-defining act. Nor was the dinner party I attended last weekend, even though I had a very good time. But writing this book *is* implicated in my identity. It is very much a part of my personal myth, for it connects to my ideological setting, my generativity script, and an important imago of mine that we might simply call the professor. In a very real way, I am defining myself as I write this book. I am performing an act with consequences for identity and myth. The act is partly shaped by the myth I have now, and it will partly shape the myth I create for the future. I am sure that you can make the same kinds of distinctions in your own life.

People can drive themselves crazy looking for mythic meaning in everything they do. Life is too big to make everything meaningful for identity. While your unique personality traits may shape many of your daily activities, your identity becomes involved only during those moments or for those behaviors that promise further self-definition. Of course, it is sometimes difficult to know what those behaviors may be. A seemingly trivial conversation with a friend may, in retrospect, turn out to be an essential component of your personal myth, reconstructed later on as a turning point in your life

story. In sum then, you should be aware that life may present many opportunities for living the personal myth, and for creating it anew. You should be ready for them; you should be open to opportunities in everyday life for personal mythmaking. But don't be overly vigilant. You can't make meaning out of everything.

A second qualification concerns the distinction between meaning and happiness. In his recent book, *Meanings of Life*, Roy Baumeister writes:

Being happy is not the same as finding life meaningful, although there is some overlap. Perhaps the best way to state the relation is that a meaningful life seems necessary but not sufficient for happiness. It is possible for life to be meaningful but not happy. The life of a guerrilla or revolutionary is often passionately meaningful but rarely a happy one. The reverse, however, is much less possible: Few people manage to be happy if their lives are empty and pointless.³

Research bears out Baumeister's suggestion. There is a slight tendency for people who report that they are relatively happy to say also that their lives are highly meaningful.⁴ But the tendency is not a perfect relationship. Some people who feel that life is meaningful do not feel very happy. With less frequency, some people who feel happy do not report that life is very meaningful. In the latter case, it may be that some people do not feel that life *needs* to be meaningful. They may be content living in a world that provides them with creature comforts but for which no meaning can be discerned. In any case, personal mythmaking is a major mechanism for making life meaningful. Identity refers to meaning. Living the myth so that life is meaningful, unified, and purposeful may increase the chances of experiencing happiness and satisfaction in life. But it is no guarantee. Happiness is determined by many different forces and factors, some of which are within the person (personality) and some of which are in the environment.

To take it one step further, happiness is only one of many goals in human life. As Americans, we tend to see happiness as *the* ultimate life goal. After all, our nation was founded on the principles of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Our tendency to underscore happiness runs the risk, though, of denigrating other equally worthy pursuits, like liberty for example. If it doesn't make us happy, then

what good is it? we may ask. Why have a meaningful life if meaning doesn't assure happiness? One answer to these questions is to take Baumeister's point to heart: Meaning may not assure happiness, but it increases your chances of being happy. A second answer is to suggest that meaning is a good in and of itself, even if it doesn't directly contribute to your happiness. To justify everything in terms of happiness reduces human life to that of the animals. If the search for meaning is a unique feature of the human species, then it would seem advisable to consider meaning's merits on their own. Our lives are made meaningful by living our personal myths. The better our myths—the more vitalizing and meaningful our stories—the better our lives. Thus, meaning enriches and enhances our time on earth. It gives life a certain quality that happiness itself cannot assure. We should hope and strive to find happiness in the meanings we make through myth. But we would be naive to think that such strivings will always pay off.

It is common practice in popular psychology to place prime emphasis upon the self, over and against the social world. Bookstore shelves are brimming with *self-help* books. The implication is that selves need to be helped. The material and social world is too much for each of us. As individuals, we need support, inspiration, therapy, salvation, and the like. By contrast, books written to "help society" are typically considered to be "policy studies." They fall within the realms of sociology and economics. With few exceptions, they tend not to sell as well. The primacy of the self is equally apparent in the technical writings of research and academic psychology. Some critics have suggested that psychology encourages selfishness while neglecting the social good. In their influential book *Psychology's Sanction for Selfishness*, Michael and Lise Wallach identify what they call "the error of egoism" in psychological theory and therapy. They question whether it is ethical for psychologists to devote so much energy and thought to the glorification and actualization of the individual. They ask, "Should we always be looking out for Number One?"⁵

This is a book about the self, about how selves are made through narrative. A major message of the book, however, is that selves are made in a social context. The stories we live by have their sources within our own imaginations, in our personal experiences, and in the social world wherein we live and tell. Society has

a stake in the stories we make. Not only does the social world contribute material for the construction of our personal myths, but the social world is also the beneficiary and the victim of the myths we live. From the standpoint of society and, indeed, the earth at large, each of us has a responsibility to live a myth that enhances the world we live in. Through our personal myths, we must make commitments to the people we know and love, to those we will never know but with whom we share today our planet's resources, and to those of future generations, the legacies of our collective generative efforts.

From the standpoint of society, then, a personal myth that promotes generative integration is a good myth. In Chapter 9, I suggested that we seek meaningful endings for our personal myths in the generativity scripts we fashion, especially at mid-life and beyond. The generativity script puts into narrative form our yearnings for agentic immortality and communal nurturance. We want to live forever, and we want to be needed. A healthy and humane society requires the enlightened translation of these internal desires into social action and commitment. People like Daniel Kessinger (the community activist), Shirley Rock (the madam turned minister), and Betty Swanson (the T-shirt lady) are living their personal myths in ways that promote the well-being of their social worlds. They have created good stories, and they are living according to them. Their personal search for unity and purpose in life is wedded to larger human struggles, for freedom and equality, for justice and enlightenment, for the progressive development of generations to come, for feeding the poor. As we face a world of shameless inequality and dwindling resources, we would do well to look to Daniel Kessinger, Shirley Rock, and Betty Swanson. Not so we can borrow their stories and make them our own. But so we can emulate their commitment to fashioning stories that bring both meaning to their own lives and hope for a troubled world.

Changing the Myth

How do people change? Literally thousands of books in psychology have been written on this central question.⁶ Many of them speak directly to change in identity, which I construe as transformation in

the personal myth. In presenting a theory of identity as a personal myth constructed in society, I am not aligning myself with any particular approach to psychotherapy, counseling, or any other domain within which people work to change themselves and others. I believe that therapists and counselors of many different stripes might benefit from adopting the literary metaphors and narrative perspectives I have presented in this book. I believe that people who wish to change their own lives would benefit as well, but not because I offer a particular program for change. Instead, I believe that the benefits I have to offer come mainly in self-understanding. In my own work as a researcher, I seek to identify myths rather than change them. This book should help you to identify your myth and to see more clearly how you are living the myth. Identifying your myth is an extremely valuable enterprise in and of itself. You don't need to change anything to be enriched and enlightened about yourself. But should you wish to change your myth, then identifying it is probably the necessary first step.

What is the second step? Unfortunately, neither I nor any other author can tell you this. While certain self-help books provide valuable advice for changing specific problems in your life (e.g., sexual dysfunction, alcoholism, codependency, divorce), identity is bigger, more encompassing, and somewhat more personalized than all of these things. Without knowing what your story is and how you have been living it, I cannot tell you how to change it for the better. The answer can only come from you and through your experience of your own particular world. I can, however, help you identify the kind of positive change that may be required. In general, there are two different kinds of progressive change in personal mythmaking.

The first kind of change is *developmental*. The word *development* connotes growth, fulfillment, maturation, moving ahead. Development is oriented toward the future. If you feel that your myth is stagnant, if you sense that you are not moving forward in life with purpose, if you believe that you are falling behind in some sense with respect to the growth of your personal identity, then what you are looking for is developmental change in personal myth. I have adopted an explicit developmental framework in organizing this book. Each concept in personal mythmaking is linked to a particular

developmental period. For example, narrative tone has its origins in infant attachment; imagery originates in preschool play and imagination; motivational themes may be traced back to the elementary-school years; the ideological setting is laid down in adolescence; imagoes begin to form in early adulthood; the generativity script becomes more salient as we move into mid-life; narrative reconciliation is a challenge for mid-life and beyond. To discern the kinds of developmental changes that are required in your personal myth, you must first determine where you are within the developmental framework I have described.

If you are a young adult eager to fashion a niche for love and work in the world, you may need to explore the ideological setting you have consolidated to determine exactly what your most cherished beliefs and values are, so that they can be personified in the imagoes you are about to create. If you are forty-five years old and your children are about to leave home for college, then you might wish to examine the nature of your generativity script in order to explore ways in which your personal myth can enable you to generate new legacies for the future. In developmental change, you should be dealing with issues that are appropriate to your particular level of psychosocial development. You need to concentrate your identity work on that aspect of your story whose time is ripe—maybe overripe—for exploration and growth, so that you can move ahead in life with meaning and purpose.

Developmental change must be understood in the context of the six developmental trends in mythmaking I outlined in Chapter 4: coherence, openness, differentiation, reconciliation, generative integration, and credibility. The ideal personal myth—the good story to live by—gets high marks for all six of these criteria. But different criteria are more or less important at different stages of life.

The first two criteria—coherence and openness—form a dialectical tension in identity. If a personal myth is too coherent, then it will lack openness. If it is too open, it will be incoherent. Ideally, your personal myth should strike a balance between the two, but the balance is likely to be weighted differently at different points in development. For example, openness is generally to be valued over coherence during adolescence and very early adulthood. The consolidation of an ideological setting and the formulation of early

imagoes require an openness to alternative possibilities in life. Erik Erikson has written that a major problem in identity development during this time is premature foreclosure—a tendency to cut off options in identity exploration and settle, prematurely, for an overly coherent (narrowly self-consistent) story of the self. By contrast, it would seem that the refinement and articulation of imagoes in your twenties and thirties require a good deal of coherence in one's personal mythmaking. At this time, too much openness to alternative ideological, occupational, and interpersonal possibilities may keep you from focusing on the home and work goals through which you articulate the characters in your myth. Whereas foreclosure, therefore, may be a major threat in adolescence, a chronic inability to make even provisional commitments to plans and goals in your twenties and thirties can keep you from formulating the kind of coherent personal myth that this period in the life cycle seems to call for. At mid-life, the pendulum may swing back again to openness as you seek to reconcile the conflicting imagoes that you have created with such care and conviction in your young-adult years.

A similar kind of dynamic may be identified for the criteria of differentiation and reconciliation. A mature personal myth should display many different parts and aspects. It should be richly differentiated. During your twenties and thirties, you may be focused on a number of different character lines in your personal myth. You may be articulating a host of important imagoes in your life story, providing each with greater and greater detail and characterization. During this time, you are probably not too concerned with reconciliation in your life story. In other words, it may be fine and developmentally appropriate to focus on different imagoes and pursuits that are, in some fundamental way, inconsistent with each other. Each of these requires room and freedom to express itself in the fullest manner. At mid-life, however, you may switch your attention in mythmaking from differentiation to reconciliation. Now it may be developmentally appropriate to search for unity and synthesis in the rich and conflicting imagoes you have formulated in earlier years. You may need to refashion the story in a way that brings the different characters together in some manner, or in a way that makes their oppositions even starker, so as to find unity and purpose in the dialectical contradictions of mid-life.

As you move from adolescence through young adulthood and into mid-life, generative integration becomes an increasingly important criterion in personal mythmaking. While coherence trades off with openness and differentiation across the life cycle, generative integration has no worthy "opposite." It simply grows steadily in importance over time. It is a mild but noteworthy problem in identity if a twenty-five-year-old man has found little room in his personal myth for generativity; if he is thirty-five the problem is much more serious; if he is forty-five it is a tragic developmental failing.

Equally steady is the sixth criterion, credibility. But the importance of credibility in myth does not generally increase or decrease across the life span. In other words, whether you are a teenager or retired, the extent to which your personal myth is true to the facts of your life and your world is an important standard of its adequacy. At no point in the life span do we have the psychological or ethical license to create myths that are willful deceptions or fantastical lies. The good and mature personal myth is grounded in social and personal reality. It is what you have created from the real resources you have been given. Mature identity does not transcend its resources; it is true to its context. The myth and the mythmaker must be credible if we are to live in a credible world.

In sum, developmental change moves you forward in mythmaking as you construct, revise, and reconstruct your myth to make sense of new developmental issues and changing life circumstances. Although I have outlined some normative expectations for developmental change across the life span, you should realize that this or any other general sequence may not apply perfectly to you. Every person follows a unique path. You need to determine what is "on time" with respect to your own developmental trajectory. Some people become consumed with generativity issues in their early twenties. Others remain open to alternative ideologies throughout their adult lives. In addition, unscheduled and nonnormative life events can have a major impact on the mythmaking process. The death of a young husband will challenge a widow to remake her myth in ways that do not fit a standard developmental scheme. Winning the lottery can challenge you to change your identity, too.

The second kind of change is *personological*. I refer here to a more

profound and difficult kind of identity transformation that is typically the stuff of intense, in-depth psychotherapy. This kind of change is oriented to the past rather than the future. The goal is not to move forward in development, but to go back and, in a sense, start over. The problem is not that your myth is stagnant. The problem is that your myth is no good. It doesn't work. Perhaps it never worked. Or perhaps it doesn't exist. There is no identity at all, no sense of self.

In personological change, you face the awesome task of creating yourself anew. Going back to Freud, psychoanalysts have urged their clients to explore the primitive, unconscious dynamics of the mind, rooted inexorably in early childhood experience and fantasy. Psychoanalysis aims to create a new self. From the standpoint of my theory of personal myths, the psychoanalytic exploration of the unconscious involves, among other things, the search for new narrative material. I have repeatedly said that even before we conceptualize our lives in terms of narrative—even as infants and young children—we are gathering material for the story we will someday construct. In psychoanalysis, the client symbolically returns to childhood in order to find new raw materials, new resources for the construction of the self. There is no buried identity, no hidden story waiting beneath the surface. We can never go back to the past to find the personal myth that has been waiting for us all along. The stories we live by are made, not found. But, with the assistance of a skilled therapist, we may be able to discover a more suitable tone, better imagery, and long-forgotten motivational themes in order to begin the arduous process of putting ourselves together again.

Let me end by saying that the changes you are seeking in your own identity are most likely developmental, rather than personological, in nature. Developmental change is less dramatic and is ushered in by problems that are somewhat less severe and less complicated than those facing the person who, in need of profound personological change, may feel completely shattered, empty, without narrative form. As in the case of personological change, psychotherapy may be helpful in promoting developmental change, too. But in many cases, it may not be necessary. Many people are able to modify, adjust, and

transform their identities to meet new developmental demands and changing life circumstances in the contexts of their everyday personal and interpersonal lives. They get help in these matters from friends, lovers, spouses, parents, children, ministers, teachers, and even authors of books.