Writing a True Story: Memory, Narrative, and the Experience of Writing

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October 5, 2022
[https://www.ffos.unios.hr/activities-post/writing-a-true-story-narrative-truth-and-the-experience-of-writing-a-lecture-by-dr-robert-p-yagelski/]

. . . with the passage of time you will always find yourself imagining that you might have said this or that, even believing that you actually said those words, so that what one narrates often becomes more real than the actual events narrated, however difficult it may be to put real events into words . . . [José Saramago, *Baltasar and Blimunda*, p. 128]

[slide 2]

I would like to talk to you today about writing true stories. I would like to talk about the importance and the challenge of trying to write true stories about our experience in the world—about ourselves, about each other, about the past. In this talk, I will explore the complicated relationships among writing, narrative, memory, and truth and examine the role of storytelling in our efforts to find some kind of purpose or truth in our lives.

Ultimately, this talk is about our need to tell true stories. And so I would like to begin with a story.

[slide 3] This story is about my cousin Madeline Szerafinski White. Madeline was a lifelong teacher and a tireless activist for racial equality and social justice. She was also a Catholic nun, known as Sister Mary Marlene. She served the Church as a nun for

nearly twenty years, in Africa and the U.S., before she left the convent so that she could continue her activism on behalf of racial equality. I have always considered Madeline a role model. I say that because I have known very, very few people who have lived such a morally principled life of selfless service to others in need. She devoted her entire life to the cause of promoting equality, justice, and love. I have always felt that hers was a truly remarkable life, a significant and meaningful life.

Let me brielfy share with you the most important things I know about Madeline's life.

Madeline as born in 1932 in a small town in the state of Pennsylvania in the northeastern United States. **[slide 4]** She was the daughter of my great-uncle Stanley, which makes her my second cousin. She was born into a devout Catholic family of Polish immigrants who came to the U.S. in the early 1900s to work in the coal mines in Pennsylvania. At the very young age of thirteen, Madeline was sent away to a Catholic high school to become a sister in the Bernadine Franciscan Order. In 1950 she graduated from that school and took her vows as Sister Mary Marlene. It was at that time that she began her lifelong career as a teacher.

In the mid-1960s, she was sent to Liberia in west Africa to teach in a Catholic mission school there. After two years, she contracted malaria, and she returned to the U.S., where she was assigned to teach in a small Catholic school near Washington, D.C. While there, she became an active and vocal supporter of the American Civil Rights Movement, which was at its most intense during those years—in the 1960s and 1970s. Along with a few of her like-minded colleagues, she tried to incorporate Black history

and social justice issues into the curriculum at her small parish school, and she pressed the school and parish leaders to better serve people of color. She also requested that she be sent back to Africa to continue teaching in the mission school there. Her vocal advocacy for civil rights and racial equality led to conflicts with her superiors, who tried to censor her efforts. She was an earnest and devout young white woman who was advocating tirelessly for people of color, for equality and justice, at a time when the U.S. was experiencing intense racial conflict and social unrest. Her activism on behalf of Black people eventually prompted her superiors in the church to send her to a retirement home for nuns in an isolated rural area in the state of Connecticut, where, presumably, she would be out of the way and would present no threat to the established order. But Sister Marlene, my cousin, refused to be silenced. Instead of reporting to the retirement home as instructed, she left the convent after twenty years of service. Her decision to leave the convent must have been one of the most difficult moments of her life. It caused a scandal in my conservative Catholic family, who had idolized her for her life of devotion as a Catholic nun, and it dramatically changed the course of her life.

After leaving the convent, Madeline returned to Washington, D.C. and began teaching in an urban public school, where she was the only white teacher on the school's staff and where her students were mostly black and living in poverty. There, she met and fell in love with a black man, Earle, whom she married in 1977. Her marriage to Earle was another extraordinary act of devotion that worsened the conflict with her family and resulted in her estrangement from many of her family members, especially her mother, my Great Aunt Sophie, who disapproved of Madeline's marriage.

Aunt Sophie made it clear that no family members should attend Madeline's wedding. Only four members of Madeline's family did attend her wedding: I was one of them, along with three of my cousins; all four of us were in our twenties at the time, and we were among the few white people at her wedding, which was held at the home of one of Earle's relatives in Washington, D.C. Attending her wedding was one of the most important acts of my own life.

A few years later, Madeline's dying father would tell his wife that it was time to welcome Madeline's husband, Earle, into the family. After that, Madeline's extended family—my family—embraced Earle, who became a fixture at holiday celebrations and family events and who was dearly loved by so many of us in the family. **[slide 5]** During those years, roughly from the late 1970s through the 1990s, Madeline continued to teach. She also sponsored many young students from Liberia, where she had taught in the Catholic mission school, so that they could study at universities in the U.S. Eventually, she helped establish an association to support these students. When she retired in the early 2000's after 53 years of teaching, hundreds of people attended her retirement celebration to honor her and to thank her for her selfless efforts to help them gain a better life. And when she died in 2016, only a few months after her beloved Earle died, her funeral was a stunning celebration of her life, attended by many people whose lives were touched by her love.

This is the basic story of Madeline's life that I have told for many years. To my mind, it is a story of a very special person who devoted her life to serving others, who never wavered from her righteous path despite the suffering she endured, who lived

according to her beliefs in equality and justice and God's love. This is also a story of a woman who was a product of her extraordinary, turbulent times—the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—yet she was ahead of her time in significant ways. She entered into an interracial marriage long before such mariages became common in the United States. She was a warrior in the American Civil Rights movement and a lifelong advocate for people who have historically been marginalized and persecuted in American society, and she pursued these goals at a time when the Vietnam War was raging and American cities were shaken by riots that were sparked by racism and police violence, a time when the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. tore at the very heart of the U.S. as a nation. Through all of it, she continued to fight against hatred and racism and to promote tolerance and love—at great risk to herself.

I hope this brief version of her story helps you see why I believe that Madeline was one of the most remarkable people I have ever known. For many years I have wanted to write this story about her. Her life, I have always believed, was special. It emerged from some of the most significant moments in the social, cultural, and political history of the U.S. in the latter half of the 20th century. The story of her life, therefore, is inseparable from momentous historical developments in the past century that have affected all of us. And at the same time, she forged a distinctive path in the midst of that history. She lived a life that mattered to so many others, even though she suffered for her devotion to the cause of racial justice and for her love for a Black man and his people. Moreover, after devoting two decades of her life to the Catholic Church as a

Bernadine nun, she left the convent so that she could continue to serve others in ways that she believed were consistent with her Catholic faith and with the message of love preached by Jesus Christ. In my view, that is a remarkable act of commitment to her most fundamental moral beliefs. She was an extraordinary person whose life of devout service made the world a better place—a more just, equitable, tolerant place.

That, at least, is the story of Madeline's life as I have known it for most of my adult life. But as I began writing this story about five years after she died, I discovered that despite the great impact Madeline had on so many people and despite how much she was loved and admired by her family, very little factual information about her life seemed to be available. Everyone seemed to know these big facts of her life that I have shared with you today, but few people seemed to know specific details, such as when she met Earle, when she left the convent, how long she spent in Africa, or even the name of the Catholic school where she taught for so many years. More important, no one seemed to have answers to the biggest questions about her life. For example, did she want to be sent to the convent at the very young of age of thirteen? Or was that her mother's decision? What was her life as a Catholic nun like? Why did she want to return to Africa to teach in the mission school there? **[slide 6]** And most important of all, why did she leave the convent? She was a devout Catholic for her entire life, and she devoted her life to the Church as a nun for more than two decades. Why, then, would she leave the convent? How did she come to that decision? Was that life-changing decision a repudiation of her vows as a Catholic nun? Or was it a reflection of her sincere commitment to the principles of equality and justice and love for her fellow human

beings? In other words, was her decision to leave the convent a truly selfless act of faith, a reflection of her sincere belief in God and Christ's message of love? For me, these questions are at the heart of Madeline's story, but those who knew her and loved her seemed unable to answer them. And I am writing her story to try to find answers to these important questions.

Now, I am sharing this story with you because I believe Madeline's life mattered, and if we can understand the significance of this one remarkable life, then maybe we might better understand the meaning of our own individual lives and of human life in general. Madeline's life, it seems to me, is one answer to the fundamental question of the purpose of human life and of how we should live together. In other words, her life embodied some kind of truth, and I want to try to write a story of her life that captures that truth.

But as you know, the matter of telling a true story—telling a story that conveys some kind of truth—is not straightforward. The relationships among narrative, writing, and truth are complicated. And the complications increase when we consider that the stories we tell about ourselves, about our lives, are based on memories that are themselves complicated and often uncertain, inaccurate, and unreliable. So for me as a writer and a scholar, the question becomes, How can I write a true story about Madeline and the impactful life she lived, when this matter of truth and storytelling is so vexed and uncertain? More generally, how can we write stories that capture the truth of our lives?

In his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, Ernest Hemingway famously described the strategy he used to when writing became difficult for him: **[slide 7]** "All you have to do is

write one true sentence," Hemingway wrote. "Write the truest sentence that you know. . . . And then go on from there" (p. 22). That's what I aim to do in writing Madeline's story. And in trying to write one true sentence after another, I hope to find my way to some kind of truth about her life and my own—and maybe about yours. But as a scholar, I am also interested in understanding storytelling as an act of truth-seeking, and I am especially interested in exploring the role of writing in this process. **[slide 8]** In other words, is the act of writing itself also an act of truth-seeking? Ultimately, then, writing this story about Madeline is really about the great project of seeking the truth we all need in our lives by trying to write true stories about those lives.

But how we know what is true? How can we determine whether a story or even a single sentence is true? To put it differently, how does one find truth in writing?

In posing that question, I am not referring exclusively to Great Writing such as Hemingway's; rather, I am referring to the kind of writing I am doing as I try to tell Madeline's story—the kind of writing so may of us do as part of our efforts to confront the challenges of living our lives. I see this kind of writing as an act of inquiry into our experiences in the world, an inquiry into our own lives and the lives of those we know, inquiry into what we know (or believe we know) about those lives in this moment. I submit to you that the act of writing is central to this effort to understand ourselves and this moment we are living in. If there is truth to be found—or made—in writing, I suspect it lies in the act of writing itself, in the experience of writing-in-the-moment. I'm guessing that Hemingway knew that. He never really explained how he knew when he wrote a

true sentence. He never defined a true sentence. Maybe that's because *the truth lay not in the sentence but in the experience of trying to write that sentence*.

Let me emphasize this point, because it is central to my analysis of storytelling as truthtelling—and it has been the focus of my own scholarly work for the past decade. **[slide 9]** I am making the claim that the *act* of writing—the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment—can have a profound and even transformative impact on the writer's sense of self as a being in the world. **[slide 10]** In this regard, writing is as much an ontological act as it is a communicative or epistemic act. What this means is that the experience of writing is an experience of *being*, and therefore it can be transformative for the writer, regardless of the nature of the text the writer produces or what happens to that text afterwards.

It might be, therefore, that it is this experience of writing—of *telling* a story by writing it—rather than the product of the writing—that is, the text of the story itself—that really matters in any search for truth in writing. **[slide 11]** In other words, it might be that truth lies in the act of writing a story, not in the story itself.

The theoretical rationale for such a claim encompasses phenomenology, poststructuralist theory, and posthumanist theory as well as empirical research on the effects of the experience of writing on the writer's social, psychological, emotional, and even physical well-being. Such an analysis is extremely complicated and beyond the scope of my talk today. But I will summarize it briefly here.

Poststructuralism and phenomenology have demonstrated that language cannot capture the totality of our experience of ourselves in the world. Language can only

represent a part of that experience, inevitably transforming or rendering that experience in our quest to make meaning of it. Therefore, our experience and the meaning we make of our experience through language are not the same thing. Writing, as a visual representation of spoken language, as a physical manifestation of the spoken word, **[slide 13]** which phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty beautifully defined as "embodied thought," can never be the thing written about. A text is always a representation of a thing or phenomenon or idea and thus always something other than the thing or phenomenon or idea itself. That is not to say that writing to produce a text is without value. Quite the contrary. Writing is a powerful tool for figuring out and sharing what we know, what we believe, and what we accept as true. And the texts we create through writing can convey truths that are shared across time and space. **[slide 14]** But as the philosopher Jacques Derrida and other poststructuralist theorists have demonstrated, the text produced by an act of writing can never contain the thing it is about. It is a rendering of that thing—a representation of that thing that is transformed by the effort to make meaning of it.

More recently, posthumanist theory, such as the work of physicist Karen Barad, has illuminated the embodied nature of language and knowing, such that we can understand the experience of language—including written language—as separate from the products of language, including texts. **[slide 15]** According to Barad, "That reality within which we intra-act—what I term agential reality— . . . is not a fixed ontology that is independent of human practices, but is continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions" (104). In other words, our very *being* and the reality within

which we exist are continually constituted through our ongoing intra-actions, which involve language. **[slide 16]** Within Barad's formulation, writing is a specific "material instantiation of language" (108)—and thus a different kind of phenomenon from speech—that results in different kinds of intra-actions with different effects. Thus, the self that emerges in an act of writing—which is not fixed, not *a priori*, and not separate from the act—is not necessarily the same self that emerges in a spoken utterance. Nevertheless, a self does emerge in that act of writing-in-the-moment. The specific embodiment that is writing—the "material instantiation of language," in Barad's terms—has the potential to constitute a self. In this sense, the writerly self is always in the process of becoming. It is in this sense that writing is an ontological act, an act of being.

Within this theoretical framework, what matters for my purposes today is to acknowledge the significance and potential impact of the *experience* of writing. If a text is not the thing it is about, neither is a text the same as the experience of writing it. **[slide 17]** The text cannot contain the *experience* of writing that text. The text and the experience of writing it are not the same. This story I am writing about Madeline—that is, the text I will produce that will tell her story—can never convey to a reader the whole of the experience I have as I write that text. Moreover, what that text might mean and the meaning of the experience I have as I write that text are not the same. In this sense, the text can only be a fragment of a truth, a partial representation of what might be true; **[slide 18]** the text—the story—cannot contain all of what we know or believe to be true *in the moment*. We must seek that truth, I have come to believe, in the experience of writing itself.

So my experience of writing Madeline's story must contain part of whatever truth I find in that story. But the matter is yet more complicated, because storytelling itself—that is, narrative—can be a complex and fraught exercise. On the one hand, narrative is integral to how we make sense of our lives and our experience of ourselves as beings in the world. In a famous essay, literary scholar Barbara Hardy wrote that "storytelling plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives": **[slide 19]** "In order to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future" (p. 5). Or as the influential educational psychologist Jerome Bruner famously wrote, **[slide 20]** "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (p. 4). In short, telling stories helps us live our lives. Storytelling seems to fulfill an unavoidable human need to make meaning of our lives.

At the same time, storytelling is wrapped up in our complex and problematic efforts to find *purpose* in our lives. Philosopher Crispin Sartwell has challenged what he sees as Western culture's obsession with narrative, which he believes arises from "a mania for the teleological ordering of time and of the lives that take place in time" (p. 8). **[slide 21]** He rejects the use of narrative "in the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience" (p. 9). The kind of storytelling that Sartwell rejects fulfills a basic human need to find meaning in existence, and we all do it all the time. But Sartwell sees more harm than good in using narrative to find meaning, to *make* meaning, in part because "narratives themselves fail of coherence" (p. 16): **[slide 22]** "Every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into

the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative. Every narrative is just as plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness." In other words, when held up to scrutiny, the stories we tell to make sense of our lives, to give coherence to our experiences, to show meaning in those experiences, fail to do so. They are constructions that impose order and meaning where none exists. Just as poststructuralism reveals that a text is the not same as the thing it is about, Sartwell argues that the story of a life is not the life itself. It is a representation of that life. And, ultimately, a false one at that.

More fundamentally, Sartwell questions "whether human experience and human life are meaningful" (p. 10). Narrative, he believes, is a tool we use to create meaning that isn't there. Most people I know would reject Sartwell's rejection of meaning. They would dismiss the idea that human life has no meaning. For most of my life, I would also have rejected Sartwell's position on this most important question. But now I think Sartwell might be right. We tell stories to construct meaning where it might not exist, to make order from chaos. We need to find meaning in events in our lives—in the traumas and the good fortune we experience—events that otherwise seem random and meaningless and without explanation, because we fear the unknown, we fear the apparent capriciousness of suffering, we fear the abyss. So we tell stories that give meaning to what might in fact be meaningless and by doing so we alleviate our most basic fears.

It may well be that Sartwell is right about the potential danger of the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of the inevitable chaos and suffering that is

life. But it might also be that there is genuine value in the effort to make meaning, even if that meaning is a construction and an illusion. **[slide 23]** It might be that the *act* of storytelling, rather than the stories we tell, is meaningful in ways that Sartwell values—that is, as an act of living in the moment. *This* moment.

Sartwell himself suggests as much. He proposes that we embrace our being in the world and “stop struggling to reduce everything to means which we can annihilate into ends” (p. 124). **[slide 24]** In this embrace of the absence of purpose, Sartwell finds hope: “What’s hopeful about our entrapment in the human, conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality and of historical time, is precisely that it is a delusion” (p. 132). If we could only accept that language is not what makes humans special but is merely—and brilliantly—“a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth,” if we could let go of the need to impose order on the world, then “we could learn to let the world be.” That, Sartwell believes, “would be a lesson of love” (p. 133).

[slide 25] Writing—the act of writing-in-the-moment, the experience of writing at the moment of writing—can, I have come to believe, be a way to let the world be and to simply *be* in that world, to express love, to find hope in our existence together, even as we seek a transitory truth that enables us to do so. In other words, I share Sartwell’s vision of radical acceptance of the here-and-now; like him, I want to resist the impulse to use narrative as a way to impose order on a universe that resists it, to create meaning that isn’t there. But I also want to retain what seems most necessary and hopeful about our human need to tell stories to make sense of our lives.

I see no contradiction in the seemingly paradoxical rejection of narrative and the embrace of storytelling, for it is in the moment of storytelling, of writing our stories, that we exist. And in that moment we might find a momentary truth, which might be all we need. That's why I am writing this story about my cousin Madeline.

As I suggested earlier, writing this story has raised some challenging questions about how we remember and tell our stories about ourselves: fundamental questions about memory and truth. I would like to explore these questions by telling you a little more about my cousin Madeline and what I know—and what I am coming to know—about her life and the truths I might find in her life.

My most vivid memory of Madeline is a very old memory. **[slide 26]** It was Christmas Day, 1971, and at the time, Madeline was still Sister Mary Marlene; she was still a Catholic nun. She was visiting our home for Christmas dinner along with 25 or 30 other relatives. That big dinner was part of our family's tradition, a happy, raucous gathering to celebrate the holiday with the extended family. At some point that evening, I went into the living room, where I saw Sister Marlene standing in the middle of the room near our large, extravagantly decorated Christmas tree. She was facing a half dozen or so male elders of my family, including my father and her father, all of whom were seated, with their glasses of beer or whiskey, on the sofa and chairs around the Christmas tree. I did not know what was happening, but it quickly became clear that this was not a happy holiday conversation. It was, instead, an intense discussion. An argument, really. There were angry, raised voices instead of holiday laughter. I listened from the stairs that led to

the room as Sister Marlene, who would have been in her late 30s at the time, calmly but confidently refuted these family elders, who were criticizing the American Civil Rights Movement and, in particular, people of color. In my memory, Sister Marlene looked dignified and even sacred as she stood there in the long brown robes of her severe nun's habit, which revealed only her face from brow to chin and cheek to cheek, her hands folded at her waist, a large crucifix dangling from a chain around her neck. She spoke calmly but firmly on behalf of Black people, and she defended the Civil Rights movement as right and good and consistent with Christ's message of love for others. My elder male relatives seemed to be arguing against equality and tolerance and love; instead, they were opposing Christ's message. It didn't make sense to me.

I was thirteen years old.

Today, more than half a century later, I remember that image of Sister Marlene, my cousin Madeline, on Christmas Day as a kind of tableau representing the endless struggle against racism and bigotry to which she devoted her life. In my mind, that image of her defending equality and justice conveys the courage she displayed in pursuing a life of service to others and suffering the disapproval of the family she loved. It is, perhaps, my most important memory of her. And the more I revisit that memory, the more significant that image becomes: Sister Marlene, on Christmas Day, the very embodiment of Christ's message of love for others, confronting the prejudice and hatred of her very own loved ones. That memory is central to my story about Madeline as a courageous, devoted, and selfless advocate for love and tolerance and justice. And my memory of that moment becomes even more important considering that it was just a

short time after that moment on Christmas Day in 1971 that Sister Marlene left the convent. She left after nearly twenty years of devoted service, I have always thought, because she had determined that staying in the convent would actually prevent her from continuing her service to the people who most needed it. In other words, leaving the convent was the only way she could continue to do God's work of love for those in need. In view of that momentous and seemingly contradictory decision to leave the convent, my memory of that moment in my family home on Christmas Day, 1971 seems even more significant. The truth of that memory, however, is perhaps a bit more ambiguous.

Memory is a tricky thing. The stories we tell about our lives rest on our memories of past experiences. But those memories are neither static nor reliable; they are a function of our present selves, which are shaped by both past and present and by how we look at the world now, which in turn shapes how we remember and understand the past. Addressing the challenge of writing about our past experiences, **[slide 27]** writing scholar Jane Bessette points out that memory is "dynamic and unstable, at odds with our attempts to grab hold of it in writing and make it permanent as a foundation for understanding our present selves." **[slide 28]** Bessette emphasizes "the slipperiness of our perceptions of the past: the ways in which changing present circumstances reconfigure our sense of what happened" (p. 80). This is old news, of course. We all have had the experience of sharing memories with others who remember the same event very differently. And it is well established in neuroscientific and psychological

research that memory is malleable and therefore notoriously unreliable. [FOOTNOTE: cite relevant studies: Loftus; Gardner; Howe and Knott; Nash]

This instability of memory becomes problematic when we are trying to tell true stories that rely on memories of our past. **[slide 29]** Bessette asserts that "writing the past cannot be understood in terms of truth, except in Joan Didion's sense of a subjective truth: the 'truth of how it felt to me'" (Bessette, p. 80). In this regard, writing about the past involves the same fundamental problem of navigating the choppy waters of subjectivity and trying to identify *truth* as something more than mere opinion when all we seem to have available to us is some sort of subjective reality. **[slide 30]** If we cannot write objectively true or even reliable accounts of our past experiences, as Bessette argues, what does it even mean to try to write a true story based on our memories of those past experiences? How can I write a true story about Madeline when I can't even claim that my own memories on which I am basing that story are accurate or true?

This problem becomes even thornier when we consider the complicated relationship between memory and narrative. **[slide 31]** Psychology researcher Robert Nash argues that "our memories are only ever as reliable as the most recent story we told ourselves" (Nash). And those "recent stories" are themselves unreliable because they are a function of belief, ideology, culture, and various social forces that shape our sense of identity and our perspectives on our experiences. Moreover, narrative shapes memory. In other words, we create, store, access, and share our memories ***as*** stories, and by doing so we impose a narrative structure on them, which shapes—or *re*shapes—them. To put it differently, our memories are not neutral mental shapshots or videoclips

of our past experiences; rather, our memories are a function of the evolving stories we construct about those past experiences. Our memories are adapted to and by the stories we tell about the experiences we remember. **[slide 32]** As Nash puts it, remembering is itself "an act of storytelling."

This role of narrative in memory is, I think, another manifestation of Sartwell's "teleological order": not only does *telos*—that is, our need to believe that our lives have purpose—drive the stories we construct about our lives, but narrative—that is, the meaning we impose on experience by constructing stories that assign purpose to our experience—shapes and gives meaning to our memories of past experience. Interestingly, cognitive research seems to provide empirical support for Sartwell's claims about the powerful role narrative plays in how we understand ourselves as beings in the world and how we conceive of the meaning of our lives. **[slide 33]** The "narrative hypothesis," which has been widely influential in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, holds that narrative is "not only a prominent form of human communication but also a fundamental way to represent knowledge and to structure the mind" (Szilas, p. 133). This hypothesis has been the subject of scholarly debate, but whether or not *all* knowledge is ultimately a function of narrative, as some scholars have argued, the problem of memory in the stories we tell one another about who we are and what we have experienced means, I think, that we must tread lightly when it comes to determining the extent to which those stories are *true* and what that "truth" might mean. For my purposes here, the question becomes something like this: **[slide 34]** How does

the instability and unreliability of the memories of Madeline (mine and others') around which I am constructing this story affect the *truth* of the story I am writing?

To pursue this question further, let me return to my memory of Christmas Day, 1971. **[slide 35]**

The centerpiece of the Christmas celebration in my family was the Polish Catholic tradition of Wigilia (which we pronounced *vah-lee-ah*), a solemn but joyful meal held on Christmas Eve that began with the ritual sharing of blessed wafers called *opłatek*. For most of my life, that special ritual on Christmas Eve was the highlight of the year. It was somehow central to my sense of identity. Wigilia, which involved only my immediate family, was an intimate ritual that was full of love and the happy mystery of a traditional Catholic Christmas. The joy of the tradition extended into the next day, Christmas Day, when members of my extended family all came to my grandmother's home to share Christmas dinner. After the solemnity and familial intimacy of Wigilia on Christmas Eve, dinner on Christmas Day always felt big and loud and fun, and 1971 was no exception. Which made that moment in my parents' living room that year all the more striking. Tension, conflict, argument—especially about political or social issues—were never part of Christmas in my memory. So it was disconcerting and confusing for me to witness Sister Marlene, this special person who seemed almost holy in my thirteen-year-old eyes, having to defend the humanity of people of color and justify her advocacy for equal rights in the face of the obvious bigotry and racial animosity of my own family members, whom I loved and respected. Although I only vaguely understood what they

were arguing about, I knew that my father and my uncles and elder cousins were wrong and Sister Marlene was right. I somehow sensed that she occupied the moral high ground, that she—not they—represented the moral values that were the foundation of our Catholic faith, the same values that were being celebrated on that holiday that marked the birth of Jesus Christ, who, I learned in my Catholic school classes, exhorted his followers to help those who lived in poverty and those who were sick and those who were shunned and those in despair. As I understood it at the time, Sister Marlene was living Christ's message and doing His work. The elder members of the family with whom she was arguing, as best I could tell, were not.

In my memory of that moment—which might have lasted five or ten minutes or one or two hours, I'm not sure—Sister Marlene never raised her voice or became emotional, despite the blatant expressions of racism and ignorance and bigotry that I recall being made by these men she loved, men who did, as I recall, express anger and did become emotional and made racist statements. In my memory, Sister Marlene remained calm and steadfast in her advocacy for the people whom her relatives were demonizing and dehumanizing. In my memory, she was standing, there in that beautifully decorated living room on that most special of Catholic holidays, for good.

That is what I remember about that moment on Christmas Day in 1971.

I have shared this memory with several of my family members and others who knew Madeline—including a few who, I am certain, were there in 1971—and none of them can remember that specific moment in my parents' living room. None of them remembers that significant moment, which for half a century has been central to my

view of Madeline as a courageous and righteous advocate for love and justice. But they all believe it happened.

Does it matter whether my memory of that moment in 1971 is accurate? **[slide 36]** More important, can I still write a true story about Madeline, even if my memories are not themselves true?

Answering that question requires acknowledging varied and complicated roles that storytelling plays in our lives, from the foundational stories that define our religious, cultural, and national identities to the personal stories that define our individual racial, ethnic, gender, familial, professional, regional, and related identities within those broader contexts. To some extent, all these stories rely on memory. For example, the story of the founding of the U.S. rests on shared memories of specific events, such as the settling of Plymouth, Massachusetts by Europeans in the 17th century or the abolishment of slavery by President Abraham Lincoln's Emancipation Proclamation in 1863, events that are understood as integral to the existence of the U.S. as a nation-state and to the identity of its citizens as Americans. The memories of such events might be contested, but they are nevertheless the foundation for these important shared stories we tell about who we are. But the stories we each tell about our own individual lives rest on personal, idiosyncratic memories—what developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson has described as "autobiographical memory" (Nelson, p. 125).**[slide 37]** These memories, according to Nelson, serve "as a vehicle for self-expression and definition." She argues that the different kinds of stories we tell—personal stories as well as those larger cultural stories—are functionally and structurally related. In other words, we should understand

our individual autobiographical stories within the larger contexts of culture, history, geography, religion, politics, ideology, etc. **[slide 38]** As a result, according Nelson, "it is necessary to see the relation between memory as an individual function, its role in the phylogenetic scheme of adaptation, and narrative as the medium of share memories, collective memories, and fictional creations" (p. 125). For Nelson, that set of relationships regarding the various functions of our different individual and collective memories raises the question of "the role of narrative in the composition of autobiographical memory, and whether authobiographical memory exists in a raw, non-narrative form."

In exploring this question, Nelson traces the development of storytelling as both a cultural and individual phenomenon associated with the rise of the idea of individualism in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries as a perspective that "permeated the institutions and practices of society" (p. 128). She argues that narrative is not, as Bruner and others believed, an inherent form of human thought but rather **[slide 39]** "a cultural invention, one that may be adopted by individuals in organising their own autobiographical memories" (p. 129); moreover, the extent to which individuals adopt narrative as a tool for understanding varies across cultures and historical periods. Particularly intriguing in Nelson's analysis is the apparent effect of sharing a memory on the memory itself. In imposing a narrative structure on a memory in order to share it with another person, the teller inevitably creates a kind of "distancing" from the event or experience being remembered and therefore does not "re-experience" the remembered event in a way that some scholars believe is essential for creating an

autobiographical memory (Nelson, p. 130). **[slide 40]** "Whereas the meaning for the individual resides in the re-experience, the imposed narrative is a way of establishing shared (not idiosyncratic) meaning" (p. 130). This "narrativising" of the memory, which is a way of sharing the memory, also can change it—and affect the "re-experiencing" of it.

My own experience in trying to write this story about Madeline can serve to illustrate Nelson's analysis. The "shared" memories of Madeline that my family members and I have might differ in their details, but in the act of telling each other our individual memories, we establish a shared memory as members of Madeline's family. In the process, our individual memories might change. Moreover, our individual memories are likely to reflect who we are now rather than what actually might have happened in the past. For example, my sense that my family elders in 1971 were advocating racist views is inevitably shaped by my perspective now in the year 2022 as a sixty-four-year-old man who recalling that moment 50 years ago. Today, I see myself as a tolerant and fair-minded person who embraces the ideals of inclusiveness and tolerance and justice—the same ideals I associate with Madeline; my memory of that moment is a reflection of my current self and my current views rather than an accurate description of what happened then. My memory is also inseparable, according to Nelson, from the shared (and contested) stories we Americans tell about our history, the Civil Rights Movement, and race relations in the U.S. In other words, how I remember that moment in 1971 is shaped by the shared cultural stories of race relations in the U.S., which in turn shape my own perspective on my past as well as on the present.

Given these layers of complexity, there is no way for me to determine definitively what happened in my parents' living room on Christmas Day in 1971. But it doesn't really matter. What seems true is that, at some point in my past, I witnessed Madeline defending her beliefs in racial equality against family members who held different views. And that moment occurred during a particularly fraught period in the history of American race relations, which shaped my family's history as well as our individual memories of the moment. At the same time, my memory of what happened on Christmas Day in 1971 seems important in the context of my story about Madeline as a lifelong opponent of racism and advocate for racial equality. In other words, this story I am telling about Madeline shapes and lends significance to my memory of that moment in 1971. That moment is constructed—or reconstructed—through this very act of storytelling. **[slide 41]** At this moment, as I tell this story in 2022, that moment in Christmas of 1971 exists in this act of storytelling—not as a separate, autonomous event or fact. It cannot be otherwise.

All of which is to say that I am constructing—or trying to construct—a certain kind of truth by writing this story of that experience fifty years ago that is based on memories that are brought into being and shaped by this act of writing, this storytelling, which itself must inevitably be part of that truth, whatever it might be. In other words, the line between the truth—such as it is—and the telling of a story that is supposed to convey that truth isn't always so clear. I'm not sure the two are separable. **[slide 42]** Thus, this truth I am trying to find emerges in this act of writing this story at this moment.

For the purposes of this project, then, it might not matter how much of this story "really" happened as I am telling it here or whether the specific details of my memory of that day are shared by others who might have been there. Nelson might point out that our individual memories differ because autobiographical memory is "imaginitive"—that is, "based on past experience re-imagined (or reconstructed) to fit the present and future circumstances" (p. 130) of the individual doing the remembering. We are all different individuals inevitably remembering the same event differently. I can live with that. Our individual memories of the "same" events can differ and still all be true. The point is not accuracy but meaning.

[slide 43] Nelson would also emphasize the extent to which my memories of Madeline and those of my relatives who knew and loved her are inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which the experiences we are remembering took place. Madeline and Earle's wedding took place in the late 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement was still redefining American society and altering attitudes about race. No doubt each of us is sharing—and thus reshaping—these memories in the context of our experiences with and feelings about significant recent events, such as the Black Lives Matter movement in the past decade and the protests around the world after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020 and related current developments. How we remember our past, as I've already noted, is a function of our present selves, which is shaped by these recent events and the way others portray and react to them. Madeline's story as I am telling it is inextricably entwined with those developments, which are part of our shared memory.

Writing in 2003—well before this current era of fake news, social media influencers, and the insurrection in Washington D.C. on January 6th, 2021 that, one might argue, was energized by competing stories about American democracy and identity—long before all of these developments, Nelson highlighted the importance of understanding autobiographical memory within cultural and historical context. In contemporary American culture, she argued, autobiographical memory is particularly important, “because, in the light of the vanishing mythic or fictional models that instruct individuals how they are to live their lives, lives must be individually composed” (p. 133). It seems to me that Madeline’s own story derived its truth from such “mythic models”—in particular, the stories that reflect Catholic theology as she embraced it and the collective stories of historic change and social justice that energized the Civil Rights Movement—in ways that my own story has not been driven by similar shared mythic narratives, which are now under attack in the current political climate in the U.S. Nelson sees the need to establish an autonomous self in American society as greater than ever; **[slide 44]** therefore, “autobiographical memory is more important to the individual today in both its social and personal functions” than might have been true of previous generations (p. 134). Autobiographical memory in the U.S. today, according to Nelson, is necessary for “maintaining identity within a somewhat fractured community.” It may well be that these memories and the story I am trying to tell on the basis of them are a reflection of this need that Nelson has described to maintain identity at a time and in a society in which doing so has become fraught and challenging. In that regard, my memories of Christmas 1971 are part of my own evolving story about who I am as both

an individual with my own history and as an American who is part of that nation's history, which is now so vigorously contested. We see the very same dynamic playing out elsewhere today: in Russia, in Hungary, in Myanmar. **[slide 45]** The need to tell true stories is as pressing as ever.

But in the end, I don't really know whether this story I am telling is true. If Nelson is right, then my memories have been narrativized, their "truth," such as it is, a function of the story I am telling. So as I am writing this story, I am still trying to negotiate among conflicting and changing memories—my own and those of my relatives and others who knew Madeline—and information I am gathering that is related to those memories, such as dates and similar "facts." In part, that's why this act of writing about these memories and trying to tell this story is, I believe, essential. At this moment, the writing feels true. And as I remember Madeline—and try to understand her life in the context of the social and political turmoil that she experienced in the U.S. during her lifetime as well as the turmoil we are all experiencing today—I feel an urgency to tell her story, to find the truth we need. And in this moment as I am writing this story, it is all true. **[slide 46]**

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