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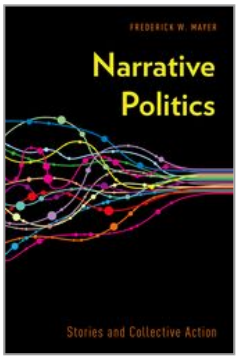

Narrative Politics: Stories and Collective Action
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The Storytelling Animal

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Abstract and Keywords

Humans are, whatever else we are, storytelling, story-consuming, story-enacting animals. Stories are central to our cognition and emotions. Stories imbue our experience with meaning. Our self-stories define our sense of identity. And, to a very great extent, our behaviors are enactments, scripted by the dramatic imperative of the storied lives we lead.

Keywords: behavior, storytelling, memory, cognition, emotion, identity

> *Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end.*
>
> (Aristotle 1947, 634)
>
> *The natural flights of the human mind are not from pleasure to pleasure, but from hope to hope.*

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> Samuel Johnson (1785, 6)

Whatever else we are, we humans are a storytelling animal. As Barbara Hardy has said, we “dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate and live by narrative” (Hardy 1968, 5). So ubiquitous is narrative, though —in our play, our work, and our politics—that it is hard to recognize the full extent and implications of our narrativity. In this chapter, therefore, I explore the psychological implications of our immersion in narrative. I will argue that stories play important roles in cognition, emotion, identity, and, ultimately, action. To understand how narrative serves these functions, however, it is necessary first to have a clear understanding of what a story is. I begin, therefore, with a discussion of the key elements of narrative.

The Narrative Code

What is a story? Few things are more familiar, but perhaps because narrative is so familiar, the concept is surprisingly hard to pin down when we seek to define it. We know a story when we hear one, but defining what is and is not a story is not so simple. No clear consensus exists in the scholarly literature. Structuralists tend to focus on form, defining story largely in (p.54) terms of plot: “Narrative…may be defined as the representation of real or fictive events and situations in a time sequence” (Prince 1982, 1). Moreover, the sequences need to have an overall form, a stance that harkens back to Aristotle’s *Poetics*: “Now a whole is that which has a beginning, middle, and end” (Aristotle 1947, 634). Functionalists, on the other hand, focus less on the structure and more on the functions of narrative, particularly on the interaction between the narrator and the reader/listener and on how narrative is used to construct and convey meaning (Wilensky 1982; Ryan 2006). For functionalists, the boundaries of the category of narrative are determined less by the structure of the text than by the intention of the teller and the apprehension of the listener. A set of instructions on how to build a model airplane might seem far from a narrative, argues David Rudrum, but in the end whether it qualifies as narrative depends on the “use to which the text is put” (Rudrum 2005,

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202). If the instructions are apprehended as a process with a beginning, a middle (with some struggle), and the possibility of a heroic ending, it might well have narrative properties.[1]

For our purposes, it is not necessary to resolve the dispute; a working definition of narrative can include both form and function. Nor is it necessary to determine precisely the boundaries of the category, of what is and is not a "story." It is more useful to focus on the archetypes at its core. Whether or not a description of the Big Bang and the origins of the universe is or is not a story may be ambiguous (Ryan 2006), but there is little doubt that "Little Red Riding Hood" fits squarely in the category. Such a strategy makes it possible to talk about the relative *narrativity* of symbolic constructs, depending on the extent to which they possess certain essential elements.

Before turning to a discussion of the core elements of narrative, let me be clear that I fully recognize the stunning diversity of forms narratives may take in different contexts and different cultures, and the multiplicity of functions narratives may serve. A Hopi creation myth is a long way from Joyce's *Ullysses*. Yet focusing on the common elements rather than on the differences is appropriate. First, just as the extraordinary variety of life arises from a simple and commonly shared genetic code, so the enormous diversity in narrative form and function is made possible by a relatively simple and commonly held narrative code. Second, most of the stories that enable us to make sense of the world, to evoke our emotions, to establish our identity, and to motivate our actions take relatively simple forms. Third, for reasons that will become clearer in subsequent chapters, the stories of greatest importance in collective action are those of popular culture, which tend to take simpler forms and are, therefore, more likely to correspond to core archetypes (Mandler and Johnson 1977). It is no (p.55) accident that scholars of folklore and mythology have tended to think more in terms of commonalities of structure and function rather than of differences (Propp, Pirkova-Jakobsonova, and Scott 1958, Campbell 1968).

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In a Monte Python skit parodying the news, the (faux) newscaster intones in best BBC newscaster voice (I paraphrase from memory), “A man has barricaded himself in his house. However, he is unarmed, and no one is paying any attention.” When I do my (weak) impression of Monte Python’s parody, my students generally chuckle (perhaps they would laugh harder if my impression were better). Why? Because they recognize immediately that this is not a story, at least not a very good one. Monte Python is playing against our concept of what a story is, particularly our conventions for news stories. Missing are the essential elements we expect in a story: plot, character, and meaning.

Plot

Stories have a plot; a sequence of events. A story, however, is not merely events in sequence; otherwise chronologies such as a ship’s log would qualify (White 1980). For Aristotle, as we have already noted, a plot must have an overall form with a beginning, a middle, and an end:

> A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and that has naturally something else after it; an end is that which is naturally after something itself…and with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it. A well constructed plot, therefore, cannot begin or end at any point one likes; beginning and end in it must be of the forms just described.
>
> (Aristotle 1947, 634)

Aristotle called this overall form its *muthos*, the Greek root for myth.

Most modern scholars of narrative have built on Aristotle. For Riessman (1993), stories have an initial *orientation* in which the context (time, place, situation, and participants) is established. There is then a *complicating action*, some event that disrupts the initial state of affairs, and creates dramatic tension. Finally there is a *resolution*, a concluding action in which the tension is resolved.[2] Turner’s “dramatistic method” for interpreting social dramas has essentially the same form: an initial state of affairs, a breach, a crisis, some redress, and

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either reintegration or recognition of a schism (Turner 1974; Turner 1980). For Ricoeur, a plot simply involves a beginning state of affairs, a middle in which there is some reversal of fortune, and either a happy or unhappy ending (Ricoeur 1984).

(p.56) Initial states of affairs tend to be good or bad, desirable or undesirable, just or unjust. Some stories begin with “all is well”: Adam and Eve are in the paradise of Eden; Peter Rabbit is at home with his mother; and Frodo is living happily in the Shire. Others begin badly: the Israelites are enslaved in Egypt; Cinderella is oppressed by her stepmother; and the Ugly Duckling is, well, ugly. Then the complicating action either threatens the desirable state of affairs or offers hope of escaping the undesirable: a snake appears to tempt Eve and Adam; Moses gives hope to his people. Dramatic tension arises from uncertainty about how the story will end. Will Adam and Eve eat the apple? Will Moses and the Israelites escape? There may be many ups and downs along the way, but finally, the story ends in triumph or in tragedy, when, as Mink (1978, 238) puts it, “from the standpoint of the story it’s too late to change”: Adam and Eve are expelled from Eden; the Israelites reach the Promised Land.

Because stories begin with either a positive or negative initial state of affairs and—whatever twists there may be along the way—end either happily or tragically, plots are constructed from four basic prototypes.[3]

Tragedy I: The Fall

In simple tragedy, the plot falls from good to bad, from light to dark, from life to death. Once upon a time all is well (or seems to be). Then something happens (the complicating action) to threaten the positive initial state of affairs and begin the downward movement. The action may head steadily downward, or offer moments of hope that fortunes will rise again, but in the end, the story ends badly. Figure 4.1 provides a schematic illustration of the plot of “The Fall.”

The story of Adam and Eve is archetypal. In the beginning, all is well; Adam and Eve are innocents in Paradise. But then the snake tempts Eve with the apple, and the tale turns on Eve’s choice. We know what follows: Eve succumbs to temptation,

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and then Adam. Innocence is lost. God, furious, condemns them to die and expels them from Eden.

Classic Greek tragedy shares the same plot form. As Aristotle advised, “the change of the hero’s fortunes must not be from misery to happiness, but on the contrary from happiness to misery” (1947, 640). So, too, the great Shakespearian tragedies *King Lear, Macbeth, Julius Caesar*, and the rest all involve the fall of the great.

The simple tragic form provides a template for a great many stories. In popular culture, history, politics, the nightly news, autobiography, and (p.57)

many more contexts, a story of decline is often the vehicle for making sense of things.

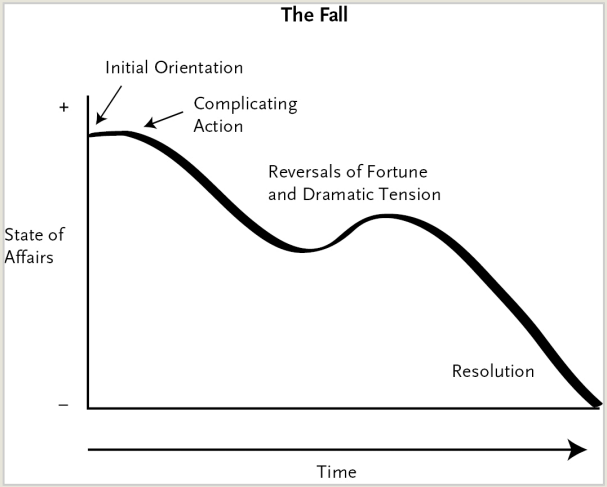

Figure 4.1 : The Fall

Adapted from Frye (1982) and Gergen (2009)

Tragedy II: Dust to Dust

A variant on simple tragedy is the plot that begins with a negative state of affairs, rises for time, but then falls back again to end badly. In the words of Ecclesiastes:

> For that which befalleth the sons of men befalleth beasts; even one thing befalleth them: as the one dieth, so dieth the other; yea, they have all one breath; so that a man hath no preeminence above a beast: for all is vanity.
>
> All go unto one place; all are of the dust, and all turn to dust again” (Ecclesiastes 3:19–20).

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Figure 4.2 illustrates the rise and fall form.
The familiar story of Icarus, who escaped from prison on wings of wax, but then, not heeding the warnings of his father, flew too close to the sun and crashed to earth, is paradigmatic. Perhaps because the rise and fall shape conforms to the arc of a human life our culture holds a vast stock of (p.58)

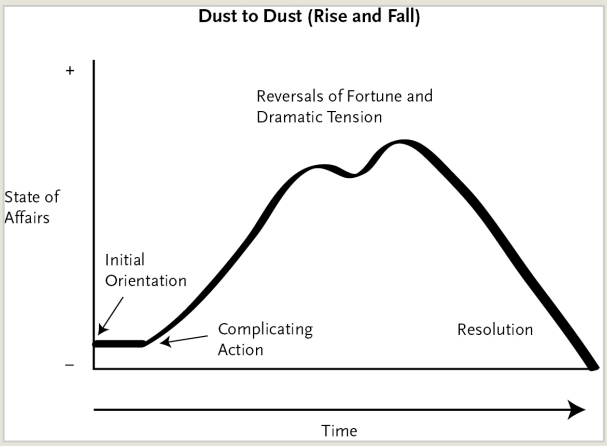

Figure 4.2 : Dust to Dust (Rise and Fall)

such stories, tales of hubris, the vagaries of life, ill-fated love, or the inevitability of death.

Triumph I: Genesis and Exodus

Not all stories end badly. A third possible plot form, therefore, begins badly but ends well, and has an overall upward movement. In these stories the plot moves from dark to light, from chaos to order, from despair to hope, from injustice to justice.

Creation myths generally take this form. In Western culture, the creation story of Genesis is archetypal. “In the beginning… the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the Earth.” Then “God said, Let there be Light, and there was Light, and God saw the light, that it was good.” And so forth for the six days of creation until, after creating man, “God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good.” Creation myths of other cultures display considerable variation, but themes of moving from chaos to order and from dark to light are common, and many share a similar upward arc.

Escape narratives are a second major genre in which the plot moves from bad to good. The archetypal escape narrative is

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Exodus, the story of Moses leading his people out of bondage in Egypt, through many trials in the (p.59)

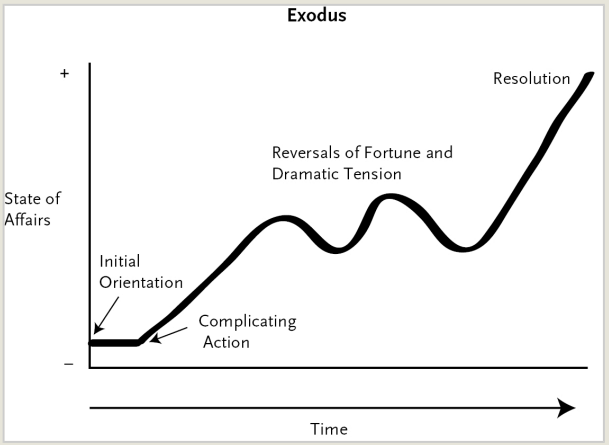

Figure 4.3 : Exodus

desert, to the Promised Land. Rags-to-riches stories such as Cinderella are a variant of the escape narrative. Creation myths, escape stories, rags-to-riches parables, and other forms of the uplifting plots are staples of historical and political narratives, as we will discuss further in subsequent chapters. The popular conception of American history, viewed as a single narrative, moves steadily upward, a story of progress, a march towards freedom. And, in politics, as Walzer (1985) has argued, Exodus holds considerable power over our collective imagination and is, therefore, central to many forms of collective action.

Triumph II: Resurrection

The fourth plot prototype begins with a positive state of affairs, but some complicating action disrupts the status quo and the action plunges downward until there is a reversal of fortune and all ends well. This plot form is the basis of our most sacred myths, our lightest entertainments, and much in between. Moreover, as we will see, it is the form of the stories that move collective action.

Northrup Frye has argued that all fall and rise stories are symbolically about death and rebirth. Some are explicitly so. The death and resurrection of Christ is the archetype, but the Old Testament is replete with (p.60)

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other stories of the same death and rebirth form, of descent to death or near death (symbolically hell) and restoration (symbolically heaven). Jonah and the Whale, Noah and the Arc, Daniel and the Lions' Den, and the Trials of Job: all follow the same pattern. Indeed, the entire Bible can be viewed as a single narrative with an overall fall and rise, in which, symbolically, the resurrection rescues mankind from the original sin of Adam and Eve (Frye 1982).

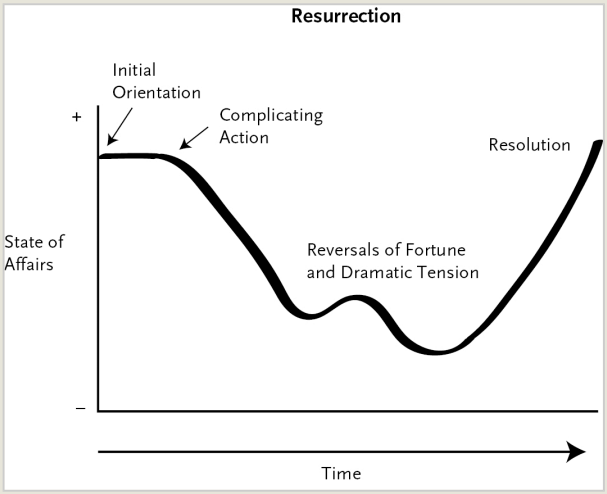

Figure 4.4 : Resurrection

It is hard to overstate the ubiquity or the appeal of the resurrection plot form. Brushes-with-death stories are everywhere in folktales and popular culture. "Snow White, " "Little Red Riding Hood, " and "Hansel and Gretel" all involve rescue from near death. Peter Rabbit faces a near death experience in Farmer McGregor's garden, but escapes and returns safely home. One of the most watched news stories of our time was that of Jessica McClure, a baby who fell into a well and whose rescue gripped America for several days with a nearly perfect version of the resurrection archetype.

Voyage and return narratives require the hero set off on a journey in which he or she must face trials and dangers before returning to restore himself or herself and/or the community. Odysseus leaves home to fight in Troy, but then endures 20 years of trials before he finally returns to set things right in Ithaca. *The Lord of the Rings*, an amalgam of epic tropes and perhaps the most popular story of our time (rivaled now by the Harry Potter series), is an elaborate variation on the same form.

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(p.61) Dragon-slaying narratives are a third variant: Gilgamesh must do battle with Humbaba; David slays Goliath; Saint George kills the dragon; and Beowulf must overcome Grendel, Grendel's mother, and a dragon. In *The Hobbit*, Tolkien's light take on the genre, Bilbo trades wits with the dragon Smaug (although leaving it a more conventional hero to do the slaying) and returns a hero. (Of course, as its not-so-subtle subtitle *There and Back Again* suggests, this is also a journey narrative.) The story of the community threatened by the monster is, of course, also the formula for superhero comic books: Superman, Batman, Spiderman, and others.

This hardly exhausts the genres whose plots follow the fall and rise form. Revenge narratives, such as *The Count of Monte Christo*; comeback stories, such as *The Natural*, in which a fading baseball star recaptures a moment of old glory; and Westerns, in which order is threatened by a gang of outlaws and the lone hero rides in to restore order, all take the same form, as does lighter comedy, from Shakespeare's *All's Well That Ends Well* to the 1950s sitcom *I Love Lucy*. Our absolute favorite sports stories are about victory snatched from the jaws of defeat: the "heroic" buzzer beater, the walk-off home run, or the "Hail Mary." (For my children, growing up as Duke fans, the defining story is the "Hill-Laettner play." Look it up on YouTube.)

The template of fall and rise is the formula for hope. Perhaps this accounts for its great appeal. By coding events in this form, we can believe that the tide will turn, that a new day will dawn, that victory can still be snatched from defeat—indeed, that there is life after death.

Before turning to other key elements of narrative, let me be clear that I am not arguing that all stories fit neatly into one of these four archetypes. Literature often involves plots of enormous complexity, with multiple plot lines, stories within stories, many twists and turns, bittersweet endings, and much more. Moreover, literary stories may play against type and expectation. An ambiguous ending, for example, is bittersweet because we expect resolution to be either happy or sad. But even the most complex plots are built up from or relate to simple elements. In any event, the stories of most importance

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in collective action will turn out to be those that correspond more closely to the archetypes, those that have clear and simple plot lines and, as we will now explore, typecast characters.

Character

Stories have characters, actors who make things happen or to whom things happen. Most stories involve human characters, but almost anything can be a character in stories: countries, animals, robots, viruses, (p.62) ideas, the weather, and so on (Stone 1988). Usually, stories have a protagonist, a main character whose fortunes define, in large part, whether the plot is rising or falling. The term *character* also refers to the qualities of the actors, whether virtuous or venal, clever or dumb, secretive or open, and a host of other possibilities. The variety of character types is in some sense endless, but as with plots, all can be related to a limited number of basic prototypes.

Some characters are relatively passive; they are affected by the fall or rise of the plot but do not cause either.

- *Victims* are characters who suffer misfortune from falling action. Pure victims are innocent, their plight no fault of their own: the maiden taken by the dragon or polar bears starving because of global warming. These are sympathetic characters whose plight invites sorrow and anger, and whose fate we would change if we could.

- *Survivors* and other winners are sympathetic characters lifted by rising action: Cinderella rescued by the Prince or Jessica McClure pulled from the well. Their triumph brings us joy and satisfaction.

The most important characters, however, are agents whose actions drive the plot:

- *Villains* cause falling action: Judas in the Christ story or Hitler in the Holocaust. These are characters from whom we recoil and whose actions trigger anger. Villains are generally depicted as secretive, conspiratorial, greedy, dirty, cowardly, and the like.

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• *Heroes*, in contrast, are agents responsible for rising action: Moses leading his people out of captivity or Lincoln saving the Union. We applaud and thrill to their triumphs. Heroes are generally depicted as open, selfless, clean, brave, and the like.

Of course, not every character neatly fits into these categories. More complex characters have elements of more than one type. As Aristotle observed, “There remains, then, the intermediate kind of personage, a man not preeminently virtuous and just, whose misfortune, however, is brought upon him not by vice or depravity but by some error of judgment” (1947, 640). Indeed, sometimes the drama lies in ambiguity of character. We do not know how *Casablanca* will end because we do not know until the end whether Rick is a rogue who will sell out the Resistance to get Ilsa, or whether, as it turns out, he is a patriot who will do the right thing at great cost to himself.

(p.63) Notwithstanding the infinite variety of character, as with plot, complex characters are built up from and relate to shared expectations about the basic types. As Walter Ong (1982) has argued, stability of character and accordance with type are useful for holding stories in mind. And, also as with plot, in the popular shared stories that will be central to collective action, character tends to be painted with a broad brush, and therefore both corresponds closely to these types and maintains a stable identity throughout the story, so that it is easy to see who the victims, villains, and heroes are.

Meaning

In addition to plot and character, stories have a point; they carry meaning. As Catherine Kohler Riessman has said, “[e] very good narrator tries to defend against the implicit accusation of a pointless story, warding off the question: ‘So what?’” (Riessman 1993, 20). The meaning of a story is distinct from its form, both in its particular telling (*szujet*) and in its underlying structure (*muthos*). Its deeper meaning, or *fabula*, is the more general moral or lesson to be taken from the particular story (Bruner 1986; Kermode 2000). The fabula takes the form, “This a story about what happens when….” In *Peter Rabbit*, it is something like “the world outside is

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dangerous and children should heed the warnings of their parents." The fabula of the Icarus legend is that "dreamers who fly too high get burned and fall back to earth, " or perhaps that "this is what happens to sons who don't listen to their fathers."[4] The meaning of a story relates to the general patterns it reveals about why things are as they are, how the world works, or what should be. As Victor Turner puts it, "[m]eaning is the only category that grasps the full relation of the part to the whole in life…." (Turner 1980, 156).

Bruner has argued that all stories involve moral judgments: "To tell a story is inescapably to take a moral stance, even if it is a moral stance against moral stances" (Bruner 1990, 51). Since plots move from good to bad or vice versa, they inevitably involve evaluation. Some stories, of course, have explicit morals, from Aesop's fables to "The Good Samaritan." In others, the moral is more ambiguous, but as long as we can tell the good guys from the bad, heroic behavior from villainous, there is a moral dimension to the story.

Meaning is not simply located in the text; it is also produced in the minds of those who read or hear it. Stories are told *by* a narrator *to* an audience (even when the audience is oneself). Audiences come to a story with expectations, (p.64) assumptions, worldviews, tastes, and prior narratives. Scholars who focus on reader interpretation tend to emphasize the extent to which we bring our personal schemas to texts, and argue, therefore, that no two people get the same meaning from a story. Yet, as we will explore further in Chapter 6, to the extent that our individual interpretations of stories are enabled by a common narrative code, it is possible to have considerable convergence, and to talk, therefore, about a story's meaning for a community.

A Note on Truth in Narrative

All stories are fictions; some fictions are true. In my discussion of plot, character, and meaning, I have made little distinction between fiction and non-fiction. One of the most striking features of stories is that they have the same features and function in almost exactly the same way whether we believe they are "true" (i.e., non-fiction) or "untrue" (i.e., fiction). As

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the Nobel prize-winning economist Thomas Schelling (1983) once noted in an essay that began “Lassie died last night, ” when we consume fiction by watching a television program such as *Lassie*, part of our brain is aware that no real Lassie has died, indeed that there is no Lassie, only a dog or perhaps several who play Lassie, and yet still we cry. Good fiction can be no less convincing, no less compelling, than non-fiction; indeed, it is often more so (Brock and Green 2000).

Our willingness to accept the premises of a story suggests that we evaluate the truth of narrative not in terms of its precise correspondence with the real world, but in terms of its internal consistency and its conformity with our general conceptions about the way the world works. As Bruner puts it, “We interpret stories by their verisimilitude, their ‘truth likeness, ’ or more accurately, their ‘lifelikeness’” (Bruner 1990, 61).

Of course, some stories cannot be easily characterized as fiction or non-fiction. For some, the stories of the Bible are literature, for others literal truth. From a literary point of view, however, the Bible is myth, a statement which says nothing about whether it is historically true or not. Moreover, the relationship between truth and fiction is complicated. Many a truth has been conveyed by wise fictions.

Stories in Mind

A clue to the centrality of narrative is the extent to which cognitive development and the development of narrative capacity are closely intertwined. (p.65) Almost as soon as children learn language, they begin to tell stories. At an extraordinarily early age, children can hold a coherent sequence of events in mind, identify agency, distinguish between what is canonical and what violates canon, and have something approximating a narrator’s perspective, the key elements of narrative capacity (Bruner 1990). Julie Lynch and Paul van den Broek found that children’s understandings of the conventions of narrative enabled them to make inferences about characters’ goals from minimal clues (Lynch and van den Broek 2007). Children have, as Jerome Bruner (1990, 77) puts it, “the push to construct narrative.”

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Human cognitive development may well recapitulate our evolutionary path. The extent to which we are biologically wired for narrative has long fascinated those who have observed the ubiquity of storytelling. Scholars of mythology and folklore, most prominently Joseph Campbell, fascinated with the psychology of Freud and, especially, Jung, saw in the common structures of myth a reflection of the fundamental structure of the human mind. For Campbell, “the symbols of mythology are not manufactured; they cannot be ordered, invented or permanently suppressed. They are spontaneous productions of the psyche, and each bears within it, undamaged, the germ power of its source” (Campbell 1968, 4). Until recently, this line of thinking had largely fallen out of favor, as evolutionary biology and the humanities parted ways, but there is now a growing literature that reconnects the two.

The main insight of this scholarship is a recognition that the human brain and human culture have co-evolved. The neurobiologist Terrence Deacon (1997) has argued that language and the brain co-evolved, the cognitive neuroscientist Steven Pinker (1994) that we have an evolved “language instinct, ” and the evolutionary biologist Mark Pagel (2012) that we are “wired for culture.”

Several scholars have made an explicit connection between our narrative capacity and human evolution. Merlin Donald (1991) has argued that there is good reason to believe that the evolution of a biological capacity for narrative separated proto-humans from modern humans. In Donald’s analysis, the break came with the shift from “mimetic” culture, in which our ancestors lacked both the anatomical and intellectual ability to use language as a symbolic system, to “mythic” culture, marked by the ability to speak and to use symbolic language. For Donald, the essential purpose of this new linguistic capacity was to enable narrative. Sociobiologist E. O. Wilson has written that “[t] he mind is a narrative machine, guided unconsciously by the epigenetic rules in creating scenarios and creating options. The narratives and artifacts that prove most innately satisfying spread and become culture…. The long-term interaction of genes and culture appear (p.66) to form a cycle, or more precisely a forward traveling

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evolutionary spiral…" (Wilson 2005, ix). Biologist and anthropologist David Sloan Wilson summarizes a great deal of contemporary literature on the centrality of narrative to human behavior with the observation that

> people embark upon evolutionary voyages of their own, individually and collectively, arriving at new solutions to modern problems. Furthermore, these evolutionary voyages rely fundamentally upon stories in the creation of new and untested guides to action, the retention of proven guides to action, and the all-important transmission of guides to action from one person to another. In short, stories often play the role of genes in non-genetic evolutionary processes (Wilson 2005, 35).

Whatever its genesis, though, our narrative capacity is at the heart of what it means to be human. To be human is to share a common code of narrative, a basic template of plot forms and character types, and a common way of interpreting the meaning of stories. Furthermore, it seems that we use this tool constantly, that we live storied lives. The question, then, is what work this tool of narrative might be doing. The answer is quite a lot indeed, starting with its psychological functions in mind, in enabling and structuring cognition, in triggering emotion, in forming our sense of identity, and, ultimately, in motivating and scripting our actions.

Cognition

How we move from the cacophony of raw stimuli that bombard us to ordered understandings of our experience is truly remarkable. Narrative turns out to be a powerful cognitive tool. By translating experience into the code of story—with plot, and character, and meaning—we make the unfamiliar familiar, the chaotic orderly, and the incomprehensible meaningful. Narrative is central to many aspects of our cognition, among them how we remember, how we form understandings, and how we imbue our experience with meaning.

Remembering

I begin with memory, because all cognition is so fundamentally dependent on the structures already held in mind. "Great is the power of memory, a fearful thing, a deep and boundless manifoldness, O my God, and this (p.67) thing is the mind, and

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this am I myself, ” said St. Augustine (Augustine 1853, 196). Even what we perceive is immediately determined by what is already “in there.” As Lev Vygotsky observed, “I do not merely see something round and black with two hands; I see a clock” (Vygotsky 1978, 33). And higher-level cognitive tasks such as forming understanding of events and comprehending their meaning are even more dependent on structures already held in mind.

Narrative is fundamental to memory. A first point is that we seem to remember stories better, and the better the story, the better we remember it (Thorndyke 1977). What we remember of childhood, our first job, family vacations, or school sporting events are the good stories (Kotre 1995). Teachers can help students remember a point better by telling a story to illustrate it (Noddings and Witherell 1991; Green 2004). Not everything we remember is a story, of course. With effort and practice we can remember other symbolic constructs such as lists, formulas, and names, but rote memory is harder and often needs to be aided by mnemonics, some of which have narrative properties.

A second point has to do with the relationship between schemas and narrative. As we discussed in Chapter 3, much of our memory is schematic, not literal. What is little recognized in the literature on schemas, however, is the extent to which many of our schemas are constructed by narrative. There is some irony here in that one of the seminal papers for modern schema theory, which has largely ignored narrative, is David Rumelhart’s “Notes on a Schema for Stories” (Rumelhart 1975). Rumelhart’s insight was that the schema of the story is a code in which a great deal of information can be stored in a single, familiar, structure. The story schema, therefore, is an excellent device for schematization about other things.

That many of our schemas are established by narrative is clearest when we think of categorical schemas such as stereotypes. The lumberjack schema of a tough, beer-drinking, flannel-shirt-wearing figure is established by the stories we tell about lumberjacks and the parts they play or could play. (Of course, we also know how to mock the stereotype, as in the Monty Python sketch in which apparently meek fellows

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sing “I’m a lumberjack and I’m OK.…”) So, too, our schemas for liberals and conservatives, for politicians and soldiers, for corporations and unions, and for all the other actors in the political landscape are established by the stories we tell about them, stories that establish the character of such actors. The narrative basis for other types of schema may be less obvious, but schemas for even complex concepts such as “appeasement” are established through stories about Chamberlain’s deal with Hitler at Munich and other such tales of dealing with bullies (McDonough 2002).

(p.68) The relationship between narrative and memory goes deeper still. As Bartlett (1932) first demonstrated, memory turns out to be less an act of recall than an act of reconstruction. In one of his most famous experiments, Bartlett evaluated subjects’ abilities to recall a story that had been read to them. Over time, elements were both lost and gained. With each recalling, the stories became more coherent, “better” stories, with a clearer plot, more distinct characters, and heightened drama. Bartlett demonstrated that we most readily recall our “attitude” towards past events, not the actual events. We then construct a story whose point or meaning justifies our remembered attitude. What we remember, it seems, is the story that “should” have happened, not what actually did.

John Kotre (1995) discusses the famous case of John Dean, key witness in the Watergate hearings, who remembered so clearly and portrayed so vividly in his Congressional testimony the damning discussions he had had with President Nixon in the Oval Office. But when, eventually, tapes of these conversations became available, Dean’s memory was shown to be quite faulty. Why the distortion? Because what Dean remembered was the “meeting as it should have been” (Kotre 1995, 51).

Understanding

At the core of cognition is the transformation of raw perception into categorized, ordered, and comprehensible mental constructs. We are the species that looks at the stars and sees Orion the hunter. Humans do not merely experience; we seek to understand our experience, to make sense of it. As

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Suzanne Langer has said, “Man can adapt himself somehow to anything his imagination can cope with; but he cannot deal with Chaos” (quoted in Geertz 1973, 99).

It is no accident that the word *narrative* derives from the same root as knowing, from the Latin *gnarus* and ultimately from the Proto-Indo-European root *gnō* (White 1980). When we tell a story about the world, we take the disorder of reality and put it in the comfortable code of narrative: the familiarity of plots with beginnings, middles, and ends; of recognizable characters like heroes and villains; and of clear cause and effect. As Mink puts it, “the cognitive function of narrative form…is not just to relate a succession of events but to body forth an ensemble of relationships of many kinds of a single whole” (Mink 2001, 218). To say “I understand” something, therefore, comes very close to saying “I can tell a story in which it makes sense.”

(p.69) In part, understanding is about recognition and categorization, about fitting the new into something familiar. To *know*, though, often means more than categorization and association; it may also be to explain. When something happens, it’s not just the *what* that concerns us, it’s also the *why*. Unless we can explain, we cannot predict, and an unpredictable world would be a dangerous world indeed. When we see a bolt of lightning and hear a clap of thunder, we want to explain it, whether that explanation is that the gods are angry or that we have just witnessed the discharge of electrical energy stored in cumulonimbus clouds.

Causal explanation is a central function of narrative. In stories, events are consequences of circumstance and agency: gods are capricious, villains cause downfalls, heroes save the day. By putting our experience into stories, inevitably we are explaining *why* things happen. Usually, causality in the narratives we construct reflects our prior schemas about how things generally happen, schemas that are themselves artifacts of meta-narratives. Those with conspiratorial casts of mind tell conspiracy stories; those with negative schemas about government or politicians tell stories of incompetence or corruption; and so forth. The relentless codification of causality in narrative makes predictable an otherwise

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unpredictable world. As Ricoeur put it, “To make a plot is already to make the intelligible spring from the accidental, the universal from the singular, the necessary or the probable from the episodic” (Ricoeur 1984, 41).

Stories are particularly important for explaining the unusual. From infancy humans attend more closely to strange noises, new tastes or smells, and changes in routine. As we develop, our attention to the non-canonical is reflected in our storytelling. This is why stories are so often about events that disturb, surprise, frighten, or exhilarate. The usual is, literally, unremarkable. Through stories, however, we reconcile the unusual with the normal and explain the apparently inexplicable. When we put events in narrative form, we are saying, “Here is a potentially problematic action that becomes quite sensible within this set of circumstances” (Bennett 1997, 81).

The conventions of narrative enable us to infer a great deal from relatively little. Stories invite us to connect the dots. Bruner gives the example of the following simple dialogue:

> “Where’s Jack?”
>
> “Well, I saw a yellow VW outside of Susan’s.”

(p.70) Immediately the mind leaps to various narrative possibilities. Jack must be visiting Susan. Why doesn’t the narrator say it outright? Is there something illicit in the visit? And so on (Bruner 1986, 27).

Umberto Eco argues that as we read or hear a story, we actively participate by writing a tentative “ghost chapter” in which we fill in missing elements of the story and anticipate the future course of events: “G iven a series of causally and linearly connected events *a…e,* a text tells the reader about event *a* and, after a while, about event *e,* taking for granted that the reader has already anticipated events *b, c,* and *d*” (Eco 1984, 214). Rukmini Bhaya Nair (2002, 215) demonstrates how this works with a very simple traditional Bengali story.

> *A tiger.*

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A hunter.

A tiger.

Just six words, but immediately the mind goes to work to fill in the blanks. In the beginning there is a tiger, a dangerous animal. A hunter arrives, the adversary of the tiger, presumably to kill the tiger. But, somehow, the tiger turns the tables on the hunter and prevails. The story has a complete plot, characters, and an ironic point.

Of course, with the ability to make large inferential leaps and to construct narratives from minimal facts comes the risk of false inferences. History is replete with widely believed falsehoods in which narratives connected the dots in wildly wrong ways. False but firmly held beliefs among some that Barack Obama was born outside the United States, that Jews were behind the World Trade Center attack, and that climate change scientists are perpetrating a hoax are all products of our propensity for spinning complete tales from few "facts," or perhaps no facts at all—tales that don't so much fit the facts as that fit with narrative schemas already in mind.

Creating Meaning

Humans are not satisfied with just making sense of experience; we want to know its deeper *meaning*. As Roland Barthes put it, the mind "ceaselessly substitutes meaning for the straightforward copy of events recounted" (quoted in White 1981, 2). As we have discussed, the meaning of *meaning* is elusive. Here what I am interested in is the sense of the word when we say, "yes I know what happened, but what does it *really* mean?" The (p.71) meaning of an event relates to its more general implications, its ultimate consequences, and the larger, more universal, narrative of which it is an episode.

Stories, as we have discussed, always have a point, a *fabula*, that relates to the larger, more universal patterns revealed by particular events. The meaning of the story "The Tortoise and the Hare" is not that "this turtle defeated that rabbit," it is that "slow and steady wins the race." When we construct stories to interpret our experience, therefore, we imbue that experience with meaning: "By using narrative form we assign meaning to events and invest them with coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure" (Gudmundsdottir 1995, 31).

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Our search for meaning begins early in life. Gudmundsdottir (1995) describes an experiment by Michotte (1963) involving young children who were shown a collection of geometric shapes moving at random. Immediately, the children invented a story about what was happening: "T he experiment with geometric figures involved progressing from something almost meaningless to a form endowed with meaning" (Gudmundsdottir 1995, 34). The habit of constructing stories to make experience meaningful, to move from the particular to the more general pattern it reveals, is deeply engrained. The meanings of the nightly news stories about the drunk driver involved in a fatal accident, or of a gang member pulling a knife in school, or of the politician accepting a bribe, are not in the particular, but rather in the general consequences of drinking and driving, the behavior of gang members, and the corruptibility of politicians. And, as we interpret these incidents, we also "demand that sequences of real events be assessed as to their significance as elements of a *moral* drama" (White 1980, 20, italics in the original). The point of the stories about drunk drivers, gang members, and politicians is not just that this is how such characters behave, but also that their behavior is wrong.

It is interesting to note the close parallel between the meaning-making function of narratives and the role narratives play in memory. As Shore puts it, "[t] he experience of something new becoming meaningful is similar to the experience of remembering something long-forgotten but recovered in memory" (1996, 326). Both making meaning and remembering are acts of narrative construction, an effort to put experience in the form of a story that must be or have been. And the meaning-making function of narrative is in some sense the mirror image of its sense-making function. When we use narrative to make sense, we are constructing a particular story on the basis of our general worldview. When we use narrative to make meaning, on the other hand, we are reinforcing our general worldview through the particular.

(p.72) Emotion

Humans not only think, we also feel. We love and hate, hope and fear, rejoice and grieve, pity and envy, lust and recoil, and

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much more. Although our emotions clearly color our thinking and affect our behavior, there is little consensus about how this works. Indeed, there not even agreement on a list of emotions. As Theodore Sarbin reports, “Aristotle identified fifteen [emotions], Descartes six, Hobbes proposed seven. McDougall also offered a list of seven. More recently, Plutchik identified eight primary emotions, Tompkins nine” (Sarbin 2001, 218). There are almost as many schools of thought about the nature and function of emotion. The *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in answering the question, “What are emotions?” concludes that they “might be physiological processes, or perceptions of physiological processes, or neuro-psychological states, or adaptive dispositions, or evaluative judgments, or computational states, or even social facts or dynamical processes, ” or all of the above (de Souza 2013).

The relationship between emotion and narrative is not emphasized in the psychological literature. Yet emotion is closely related to narrative. Certainly stories can trigger emotion, a phenomenon with which we are all familiar. But before turning to the question of how stories evoke emotional responses, on which the next chapter will focus, here I want to suggest that our emotions are in some ways inseparable from narrative, that they are, as Sarbin has called them, “narrative emplotments”: “I nstances of emotional life, shame, guilt, anger, pride, and other so-called “emotions, ” are more parsimoniously construed as narrative plots” (Sarbin 2001, 217). Love, then, can be defined as a deep desire that another’s story end well, hate that a villain gets his just reward, anger a response to a narrative of injustice, fear that a sympathetic protagonist’s (or one’s own) story may end badly, and hope that it might yet end well. In this line of thought, emotions are affective stances coded by narrative in the mind.

The reason stories trigger emotion, therefore, is that they so closely simulate how we process all emotions. But the relationship between narrative and emotion could and likely does also go the other way: emotions prompt us to construct stories that justify and explain our feelings. When we are angry at someone, for whatever reason, we are more likely to construct stories that justify that emotional stance, more likely to accept negative stories about that person, and more likely

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to recall stories that cast the person in a bad light. Conversely, when we love, we construct, accept, and remember positive stories. What appears to be going on here is that we are constructing the story whose point reinforces our affective stance. This phenomenon can be seen clearly in conflict situations in which narratives (p.73) of other are used to justify fear and hatred. In the Jim Crow South, for example, stories about rapes by black men (Dittmer 1977), or in 18th- and early 19th-century America, about savage acts by Native Americans (Slotkin 1973), were vehicles for justifying racist attitudes and actions.

The foregoing discussion of affect and narrative has treated emotion as something quite distinct from cognition, which is consistent with what was once the dominant approach in psychology. However, there is a growing body of literature demonstrating how emotion and cognition interact (Forgas 1995; Mayer and Salovey 1995; Lerner and Keltner 2000; Forgas and George 2001, Dunn and Schweitzer 2005; Forgas 2008). Bower and Cohen document the impact of emotion on memory, perception, judgment, and thinking: “A person’s feelings act like a selective filter that is tuned to incoming material that supports or justifies those feelings” and “affect what records they can retrieve from memory” (Bower and Cohen 1982, 291).

Whether emotion assists or distorts cognition is a matter of some debate. On the one hand, we know that emotion can cloud reason, which is why it has often been viewed as something to be overcome. On the other hand, emotion can assist cognition by directing our attention and storing in memory only those things that are truly important (de Sousa 1987). George Marcus and colleagues apply this line of thought to political reasoning, arguing that emotions enable us to attend to politics only when needed, and that “emotion and reason interact to produce a thoughtful and attentive citizenry” (Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000, 1). This seems too sanguine, however. Emotion, while functional in many respects, can also be quite dysfunctional. Like many evolved characteristics that are adaptive in some contexts—our taste for sweets, for example—the impact of our emotions on cognition can be maladaptive in others, most notably when

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false narratives trigger inappropriate emotional responses, and vice versa.

Identity

Humans seek not only to understand, not only to find meaning, but also to know who we are and to locate ourselves in the world. To ask, “Who am I?” is a basic human impulse. Narrative is a fundamental tool for establishing our identity. That our experience of our own life is “storied” has been explored by many scholars, among them Erving Goffmann (1959), Alasdair MacIntyre (1981), Dan McAdams (1997), Theodore Sarbin (2001), and Jerome Bruner (2004). As Bruner puts it, “we become the autobiographical (p.74) narratives by which we ‘tell about’ our lives” (Bruner 2004). When called upon to answer “Who are you?” to another, or “Who am I” to oneself, the answer is always a story.

Identity requires, first, self-awareness: the ability to see oneself, not a simple proposition. As Mead put it,

> The individual experiences himself as such, not directly, but only indirectly, from the standpoints of other individual members of the same social group or from the generalized standpoint of the social group as a whole to which he belongs. For he enters his own experience as a self or an individual not directly or immediately, but only insofar as he first becomes an object to himself just as other individuals are objects to him or are in his experience; and he becomes an object to himself only by taking the attitudes of other individuals toward himself within a social environment or context of experience and behavior in which both he and they are involved.
>
> (Mead 1934, 203)

Self-awareness, therefore, requires adopting the position of another with respect to oneself.
Narrative is particularly well suited to this task. When we tell a story about ourselves, we cast ourselves as actors in that narrative and see ourselves as others might. As David Carr puts it, “We are constantly striving, with more or less success, to occupy the storyteller’s position with respect to our own

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lives” (Carr 1997, 16). By situating our actions in story, we put them in a form that can be understood by others, as well as by ourselves (Goffman 1959, Taylor 1992). The development of self-awareness in children appears to be enabled by learning to tell stories about themselves. When children are very young, parents and other caregivers tell stories about them in their presence. By the age of three or so, children begin collaborating in the telling (Miller, Potts, Fung, Hoogstra, and Mintz 1990). This, then, is the beginning of the autobiographical narrative capacity of our mature lives.

Stories do more than create self-awareness, they also establish what kind of character we are. As Kotre puts it, “The work done by our autobiographical memory system is aimed at establishing the main character in our story” (Kotre 1995, 120). Particular stories stand out in memory. Some are pivotal in the plot of our life story. We remember the discovery of a talent that would lead to our future success, the break that got us started on our career or (less happily) began the downward slide. Alcoholics will often remember their first drink (Kotre 1995, 211). Other stories are remembered because they seem to reveal the essence of our character. Kotre tells the story of a man who has skimped on scuba diving equipment. When it fails during a (p.75) dive, and he thinks he is drowning, the incident becomes emblematic of the larger pattern of his life: “‘I’ve been a tightwad all my life and now I’m going to pay for it’” (Kotre 1995, 120).

Our autobiographical memory is at once episodic and coherent. The particular stories of our life can be arrayed into a more or less coherent single narrative. Together these stories establish our character through the roles we have played in the drama of our life to date, and, importantly, define the roles we might appropriately play in the future. Often we cast our self as the hero of our personal narrative, as the agent responsible for our successes and triumphs. If MacIntyre is right that human life is a “narrated quest, ” then it seems we are intent on being the hero of that epic (MacIntyre 1997, 257). Not all life stories are triumphant, of course. The story may be tragic—of potential never reached, opportunity squandered, or failure in work or love. In these tragedies, typically, we cast ourselves as the victim and not

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the villain. “I could have been a contender, ” bemoans Marlon Brando in *On the Waterfront*. Of course, there are innumerable variations on the hero and victim archetypes, but these do seem to be extremely common basic orientations, as Goffman found in his work on mental illness:

> If the person can manage to present a view of his current situation which shows the operation of favourable personal qualities in the past and a favourable destiny awaiting him, it may be called a success story. If the facts of a person’s past and present are extremely dismal, then about the best he can do is to show that he is not responsible for what has become of him, and the term sad tale is appropriate.
>
> (Goffman 1976, 248)

We are constantly at work revising and improving our life’s narrative. Like Bartlett’s subjects in his memory experiments, details that detract from the story fall away and new details are added, all in service of improving the narrative line. Particular events are transformed into generic and timeless stories, often introduced by the phrase “We used to…” When the autobiographical system has done its job, we are left with a kind of mythologized autobiography. “As maker of myth, the self leaves its handiwork everywhere in memory, ” writes Kotre (1995, 117). Among the functions of our self-mythologizing is the ability to see our lives as a coherent whole (McAdams 1997). By narrativizing our autobiographies we inevitably give meaning to them. Such is the nature of stories; they have a point. The stories of our life, therefore, not only answer the question “Who am I?” but also enable us to see our lives as meaningful.

(p.76) Autobiographical narratives also serve to maintain a sense of continuity of character, a sense that we are the same person over time. For Douglas Ezzy, “A narrative identity provides a subjective sense of self-continuity as it symbolically integrates the events of lived experience in the plot of the story a person tells about his or her life” (Ezzy 1998, 239). Maintaining our character’s integrity appears to be of considerable psychological importance. Paul Ricoeur notes that there are two common meanings of the term “identity, ” one of which we have been discussing, the other of which is “sameness” (Ricoeur 1991, 73). Both turn out to be important.

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We want to establish not only who we are, but also that we are the same person over time. Integrity of character makes us more predictable to others and to ourselves, and thereby simplifies the problem of knowing what to do.

Maintaining our life narrative is a constant challenge, rarely a settled matter. Our life stories are often fragmented, commonly threaten to change or disappear, and very often are still unfolding. As a consequence, "[n]arrative identities are very much in-process and unfinished, continuously made and remade as episodes happen" (Cam 1985, quoted in Ezzy 1998, 247). Indeed, there is always the threat that we will lose the narrative thread altogether, and with it our sense of identity and purpose in life. We are, therefore, always at work constructing the stories that tell us who we are and what the point of our life might be.

Acting

By now, it is no doubt abundantly clear where I am going with this argument: much of human behavior is acting. The word *acting* has multiple meanings in common use, as Victor Turner has explored (1974, 102). It is sometimes synonymous with unselfconscious behavior (driving to work, for example). It can also mean the pretense of appearing to do one thing, while actually doing another (feigning innocence when caught with our hand in the cookie jar). But the sense in which I want to use acting comes closest to that of performance on stage, acting in its dramatic sense.

The metaphor of life as drama has a fine pedigree that goes back at least to Shakespeare: "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players" (Shakespeare 1998, 151). For Bruner, "W hen we enter human life, it is as if we walked on stage into a play whose enactment is already in progress—a play whose somewhat open plot determines what parts we may play and towards what denouements we may be heading" (Bruner 1990, 34). The stage metaphor suggests that we are not just audience but players in and, perhaps, authors of the story of our lives.

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(p.77) MacIntyre’s concept of an “intelligible act” and Bruner’s similar concept of an “act of meaning” provide useful starting points for making sense of the proposition that much of human action is narrative enactment. MacIntyre argues that for an act to be intelligible to others and to ourselves, it must be possible to say what it is that we are doing.

> To identify an occurrence as an action is in the paradigmatic instances to identify it under a type of description which enables us to see that occurrence as flowing intelligibly from a human agent’s intentions, motives, passions, and purposes. It is therefore to understand an action as something for which someone is accountable, about which it is always appropriate to ask the agent for an intelligible account.
>
> (MacIntyre 1997, 247)

An action is intelligible if we can tell a story in which it makes sense given the character of the actor and the circumstances in which she finds herself. Similarly, for Bruner, an “act of meaning” is an action for which we can tell a meaningful story. The crucial point is that humans do not just use narrative to make our actions intelligible or meaningful; we act in ways that *are* intelligible and meaningful, that make sense in some narrative. We anticipate that we will be held to account by others or by ourselves to explain what it is we are doing. To act intelligibly or meaningfully is to anticipate the need to justify one’s actions through story.

But there is another sense in which, as Bruner puts it, “[t] he Self as narrator not only recounts but justifies” (Bruner 1990, 121). We are not only interested in being understood, we also care about being approved of, about being able to say that we did the right thing. As I have argued, narrative almost inevitably carries with it a normative undertone, a moral stance. When we enact narrative, we just as inevitability seek to cast ourselves as acting appropriately, legitimately, and morally. And as with intelligibility, we not only use narrative to justify our actions, we act in ways that can be justified by a story in which our character did the right thing. We anticipate the moral of the narrative in which our actions will be interpreted, anticipate being held to account for the moral implications of our actions.

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The narrative integrity of our autobiographical ambitions demands certain actions and precludes others. Our sense of self, the leading character in the dramatic sweep of our lives, lays out those behaviors that are explicable, meaningful, and justifiable given the circumstances in which we find ourselves. Not that we aren't tempted and that we don't fail, but we can nonetheless be called to conduct that maintains the integrity of our character in the narrative we are writing. As Jon Elster (1989, 201) has (p.78) commented, "If one can say to oneself: 'I am not the kind of person who yields to temptation, ' it becomes easier to resist."

And there is yet one more way in which our actions are driven by the dramatic demands of narrative. We can be driven by the desire to script a happy ending and to cast ourselves as the hero in the epic of our lives. For some, life as MacIntyre put it, is a "narrated quest" in which they long to play the hero so much that they will act the part. Why climb Mount Everest? Because it is, in dramatic terms, an epic battle of human against nature, of life against death, and because reaching the summit is the ultimate dramatic triumph. In the words of one climber, "I thought I saw in the vision of success [on the mountain] a wonderful meaning to life—my triumph over the gross materialism in which our civilization as I knew it had been plunged" (Ortner 1999, 37).

We are moved to act by the dramatic imperatives of our personal narratives. Not all of our actions are so motivated—we are, after all, also creatures of calculation and habit—but we are also, fundamentally, enactors of stories, deeply desirous that our life story ring true, that it will cohere, that it will have a point, and that it will end well. And, as we will explore in the next chapter, because we are the storytelling animal, we can be called to act by the stories told to us.

Notes:

(1) . To be clear, not every causal statement is a narrative. Statements of the form "carbon dioxide emissions lead to global warming" do not meet the minimum requirements of narrative.

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(2) . Riessman draws on Labov (1982), who contends that a (fully formed) story has six structural elements: (1) an abstract, in which the substance of the narrative is summarized, “this is a story about…”; (2) an orientation, in which the initial context is established, “Once upon a time…”; (3) some complicating action, the sequence of events which create some dramatic tension; (4) a resolution, a final action in which the tension is resolved; (5) a coda, in which the perspective returns to the present; and (6) an evaluation, in which the significance of the action and the attitude of the narrative are clarified.

(3) . Other taxonomies are, of course, possible. Booker (2004), for example, argues that all stories fall into one of seven basic plots. Several of his plots are variants of the same basic plot structure in my taxonomy.

(4) . Some narratologists use the term *fabula* differently, as equivalent to *muthos*. See Bal (1985).

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