

# Narrative Identity and the Redemptive Self: An Intellectual Autobiography, with Occasional Critique

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Article abstract

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**SPECIAL ISSUE:  
NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL  
TRANSFORMATION**

**Narrative Identity and the Redemptive Self: An  
Intellectual Autobiography, with Occasional  
Critique**

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In this intellectual autobiography, I trace the development of the idea of narrative identity as manifest in personality and developmental psychology. As far as my own work in this area is concerned, the story begins in the early 1980s when my students and I struggled to understand the meaning of Erik Erikson's concept of identity. Early work on a life-story model of identity aimed to situate the concept within the rapidly transforming field of personality psychology, first articulated as an alternative to the ascending conception of the Big Five traits. Eventually, I turned my attention to the redemptive life stories told by highly generative American adults, as my understanding of narrative identity came to be more fully contextualized in culture and history. While hundreds of nomothetic, hypothesis-testing studies of narrative identity have been conducted in the past two decades, the concept has also proven useful in the realm of psychobiography, as illustrated in my case studies of the redemptive life story constructed by the American President George W. Bush, and in my research into the strange case of President Donald J. Trump, whose most striking psychological attribute may be the near total absence of a narrative identity.

**Keywords:**  
*identity, psychobiography, life story, personality psychology*

As a new assistant professor at Loyola University of Chicago in the summer of 1982, I taught a graduate seminar on self and identity. Early in the course, the students and I read chapters from Erikson's (1963) *Childhood and Society*. We puzzled over the meaning of Erikson's concept of identity. We all loved

the idea, but we had a hard time describing what the idea was. It seemed so vague and abstract. I asked the students: If you could see an identity, what would it look like? A house with many floors? An archaeological site with buried artifacts? A circus with three rings? A winding path in the forest? Or what about, as Epstein (1973) suggested, a theory in a person's head, complete with axioms and hypotheses? Alas, we never hit upon a metaphor that fully conveyed what we thought Erikson might have meant.

In the months following, I kept posing the question to myself, as I read Erikson's (1959) *Young Man Luther* and tried to tease out the main criteria of an Eriksonian identity. Imagine a psychological form that integrates your reconstructed past, experienced present, and anticipated future; that explains who you are and how you came to be; that integrates your different social roles to provide your life with a sense of sameness and continuity; and that situates you, as a young person, in the adult world of work and love. What would that form be?

Well, it might be . . . a story! Yes! That made intuitive sense to me, even if Erikson never said it. Identity might be an internalized and evolving narrative in the person's mind that begins to take shape in adolescence and young adulthood when people begin to assume the psychological position of self-as-author. It might be a story with a setting, scenes, characters, plots, and themes. Identity might be a story that changes over time, for sure, but which also aims to convey continuity amidst the change. The story might explain how a person changes and grows and become something different over time, but through a series of events (plot) that make narrative sense (coherence) to those others (audience) who witness its performance or, more directly, hear it told in bits and pieces in everyday conversation and in more formal settings like first dates, college admissions essays, and job interviews.

My thinking was shamelessly grandiose back in the fall of 1982. I imagined that everything that Erikson ever wrote about the concept of identity could be recast in narrative terms. Like a Talmudic scholar or a psychoanalyst embarking upon the interpretation of dreams, I felt that I had unique insight into the hidden meanings of Erikson's words. Back then, I would not have been happy, therefore, with the term "narrative identity," because it suggests that there are other kinds of identity, too! I wanted it all to be about the story. Accordingly, the first step in the development of what was to become the concept of narrative identity in personality and developmental psychology was the articulation of what I began to call a life-story model of identity.

## Personality Psychology and the Life Story Model

In *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story* (McAdams, 1985; see also McAdams, 1993), I proposed that what Erikson called an identity is really an inner story or personal myth that integrates a person's life in time (past, present, and future) and social space (the manifold roles a person plays in society). Like a Victorian novel, the story is organized into life chapters and punctuated by key scenes like high points, low points, and turning points (what I called nuclear episodes). The life story is situated in a context of value, belief, and assumptions about how the world should work, or what I called an ideological setting. The protagonist of the story is the self, but the self comes in different personified guises (what I called imagoes), which often track social roles or self-stereotypes (e.g., Dan-McAdams-the-professor, Dan-McAdams-the-father, Dan-McAdams-the-streetwise-guy-from-Gary-Indiana). Imagoes interact, conflict, and play off against each other in the story, which often moves the plot forward. The story has an envisioned ending, too, or what I called (with a nod to Erikson again) a generativity script. It is an ending that ideally gives birth to new beginnings (my offspring, my legacy, something I will leave behind). With respect to the story's content, thematic lines of agency (power) and communion (intimacy) run like strong currents through the text. With respect to structure, one may speak of variation across life stories in narrative complexity.

In its original form, the life story model drew selectively from (1) the psychoanalytic tradition (e.g., Steele, 1982), including the object-relations theorists (Guntrip, 1971) from whom I borrowed the idea of the imago, (2) early-1980s ideas from the humanities and qualitative social sciences on the interpretation of texts (e.g., Elsbree, 1982; Hankiss, 1981; Ricoeur, 1970), and (3) the personological tradition in personality science (Murray, 1938), which championed the study of lives (White, 1981). The third influence was especially prominent in my intellectual life because I identified first and foremost as a personality psychologist. We personality psychologists examine the most consequential individual differences in psychological functioning. Therefore, the research agenda I laid out in *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story* provided extensive guidelines on how to code life story interview texts for important variation in thematic lines, narrative complexity, and so on. I simply assumed that people "have" intact life stories, in the same way that they "have" personality traits like extraversion/introversion, and I ploughed ahead to measure individual differences in the stories they tell, linking those differences quantitatively to other important features of people's psychological makeup.

In looking back now on this early work, I marvel at the fecundity of my first book and the naivete. Nearly all the ideas that have animated my intellectual life over the past three decades debut somewhere in *Power, Intimacy, and the Life Story*, though often inchoate and implicit. The concepts and methods introduced in the book eventually generated a wealth of life-narrative research in many different subfields of psychology and in other disciplines, as well. But in some ways, the book's reach exceeded its grasp. For example, my attempt to delineate 12 different types of imagoes by crossing the orthogonal dimensions of agency and communion and drawing from ancient Greek myths was a bit too clever, you might say, and too formulaic to capture the messiness and complexity of lived experience. (I sensed this problem even while writing the book, but I could not stop myself.) Moreover, my early thinking tended to reify life stories, as if they were fully formed tales tucked neatly in the head. I knew that life narratives were shaped by interpersonal relationships and by cultural forces, but I tended to downplay that reality. I was, after all, a personality psychologist, committed to unveiling structures in the mind and showing how these internal factors influence human behavior.

As a personality psychologist, I was also committed to quantification and the rigorous testing of hypotheses and for this, I offer no apologies. My colleagues and I eventually developed reliable coding systems for assessing variation in key life-narrative themes, such as agency, communion, redemption, and contamination. Several studies have shown that variation on these themes predicts psychological well-being, mental health, and many other important life outcomes, even after accounting for the effects of powerful personality traits such as extraversion and neuroticism (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016). But some researchers who are skeptical of statistical testing in life-narrative research, and especially those strongly influenced by a post-modern sensibility, have no use for findings like these. Some have told me that coding stories for themes strips away the nuance and context, while reducing rich text to sterile numbers. Toward the end of his illustrious career, Ted Sarbin felt this way. In his edited volume, *Narrative Psychology*, Sarbin (1986) aimed to persuade psychology that narrative could be a new root metaphor for the entire discipline. He was a hero of mine. When he once served as a discussant for a conference panel I was on, it was quite disconcerting, therefore, to hear Ted lambast my work as a fool's errand and a step backwards in the study of life stories. In the talk I had given just before his remarks, I made the fatal mistake of augmenting my case examples with a few correlation coefficients.

The opposite problem presented itself in my home discipline of personality psychology. In the eyes of many colleagues, studying life narratives seemed like nothing more than a romantic quest. How would you ever do science

with stories? But gradually, the idea gained some traction. By the mid-1980s, the field of personality psychology was emerging from a long war that pitted trait theorists against the situationists. Beginning with Mischel (1968), the situationists argued that behavior is so specific to environmental conditions that internal dimensions like traits have almost no relevance. But research in the 1980s was beginning to prove them wrong, as more and more studies showed that individual differences in trait scores are (1) surprisingly stable over long periods of time, (2) strongly associated with aggregated behavioral trends across situations, and (3) highly predictive of important life outcomes such as happiness, success, divorce, and mortality. To top it off, personality psychologists began to rally around the idea that dispositional traits fit within a five-factor model, or what we now call the Big Five (Goldberg, 1990). With newfound confidence in the validity of personality variables writ large, researchers began to express interest in the internal factors beyond traits that might also be subsumed within the gamut of personality factors such as life stories. Beginning with McAdams (1995), I argued for a tripartite conception of personality, combining traits, motivations, and life stories. In its current form, the model suggests that personality itself encompasses three lines of development over the life course: (1) from infant temperament to the formation of enduring dispositional traits (the person as social actor), (2) from early theory of mind to the articulation of life values and goals (the motivated agent), and (3) from early autobiographical memory to the construction of internalized life stories in the adult years, or what we now call narrative identity (the person as autobiographical author) (McAdams, 2013). Today, the actor/agent/author model provides an integrative framework for the psychological study of whole persons (McAdams & Dunlop, 2022).

### **The Role of Culture and Context: The Redemptive Self**

Early in my career, I worried that life stories might lead me into intellectual oblivion. There is no guarantee, after all, that what a scholar studies will ultimately catch on with anybody else, so I was smart enough to keep my day job as a conventional personality researcher. In the 1980s, I continued the line of empirical research that I had begun in graduate school, examining individual differences in intimacy motivation (e.g., McAdams & Powers, 1981). In the 1990s, my students and I turned our attention to Erikson's (1963) concept of generativity, developing and validating self-report scales to assess individual differences in midlife adults' concern for and commitment to promoting the next generation (e.g., McAdams & de St. Aubin, 1992). Our measures of generativity proved to be useful

for other labs, as an impressive empirical literature on individual differences in generativity began to accumulate. A major theme in this literature is that generativity is a hard thing to do! Many challenges present themselves to the midlife adult who dedicates their life to parenting, teaching, mentoring, leadership, and other pursuits aimed at making a positive difference in the lives of young people, and thus committing the self to the promotion of future generations (de St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004). As the research on generativity continued, I came to see that if you want to be a generative adult, you need a good story.

When I moved to Northwestern University in the 1990s, I began to study the life stories of highly generative midlife adults. My students and I recruited teachers who had won awards for excellence in their profession and local volunteers in the Chicago area who contributed hours each week to community service. We administered self-report scales of generativity to our research participants and then conducted lengthy life-story interviews with each. We compared the stories they told us about their lives to those told by demographically similar adults who scored in the moderate range on our generativity measures. We eventually broadened our scope to include hundreds of community adults, varying widely in generativity and other psychological variables of interest. We recruited many African American adults to assure some racial diversity in our samples.

Through a series of qualitative case reports and quantitative studies, my students and I began to discern the outlines of a general narrative script that many (though by no means all) highly generative adults tend to follow in their life narrative accounts. Their stories often begin with childhood scenes that juxtapose two contrasting themes: (1) I enjoyed an advantage early in life (was lucky, fortunate, chosen for distinction) and (2) I witnessed suffering, pain, oppression, or the like in the lives of people around me, or in the world in general. Think of the juxtaposition like this: I was blessed, but others suffered. Or, I am the gifted protagonist who journeys forth into a dangerous world. As protagonists come of age in these kinds of stories, they develop strong and steadfast values, sometimes linked to religion and other times grounded in a clear social ideology, that situate the plots of their lives in a clear ideological setting. Bad things happen in the lives of these protagonists, as is the case in all life stories. But often, good things follow the bad, or else negative events lead to insights about the self, or lead to growth, recovery, advancement, liberation, or some other redemptive meaning in the life narrative. As they look to the future chapters in their ongoing stories, highly generative adults tend to imagine that they will continue to engage in prosocial activity and pursue prosocial goals going forward. Taken together, the five themes I have articulated above early advantage, suffering of others, moral steadfastness,

redemption sequences, and prosocial goals comprise an overall life-narrative pattern, which I call the redemptive self (McAdams, 2006). This is the kind of story that, according to our research, highly generative midlife adults often tell about their lives, or to be more precise, tend to approximate more closely in their life narrative tellings than do, on average, less generative adults (McAdams, Diamond, de. St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams & Guo, 2015).

Why might highly generative adults tend to tell redemptive stories about their lives? At least two reasons come immediately to mind. First, the motivational dynamic set up by the first two themes in the story early advantage and suffering of others hints at a moral challenge for the protagonist, which may provide the author a narrative justification for generative striving. Your story tells you that you are fortunate while the world is in pain. It would follow, therefore, that you might wish to give something back to the world in gratitude for the blessings you have enjoyed. Second, the theme of redemption itself reminds you that bad things have often happened in your life, but good things typically follow. You have overcome adversity. You have grown in the wake of loss and defeat. Generative adults know that their generative efforts may fail: Children may disappoint; students may reject you; your candidate may lose the election; your efforts to leave a positive legacy may seem to be stymied. But if your story also tells you that short-term setbacks pay long-term dividends, that redemption often occurs if you wait long enough, then you may be better positioned, psychologically speaking, to keep hope alive in the pursuit of generative goals. If you want to be a highly generative adult, therefore, a redemptive life story is a good psychological resource to own.

Around the year 2000, I presented initial findings on generativity and redemptive life stories at a conference in the Netherlands. During the question-and-answer period, a lady in the front row said something like this: “These are very interesting results, Professor McAdams, but these stories, well, they sound so American!” Feeling a bit defensive, I made a weak argument about how turning negatives into positives seems like a rather common theme cross culturally. On the flight home, however, I concluded that she was probably right. There was indeed something American about these stories. Not surprising, you might say, given that the storytellers were predominantly Euro-American and African American midlife adults. I subsequently threw myself into the study of American history and culture, with emphasis on literary history and American autobiography. In *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By* (McAdams, 2006), I examined the cultural origins of redemptive life stories in American history and heritage, American autobiographies and myths, Hollywood movies, Sunday sermons, American self-help books, and many other sources. Building on the work of Hammack (2007),



Freeman (2011), and McLean and Syed (2015), among others, I eventually came to see the redemptive self as a master cultural narrative in American society. It is a story about how to live a good life at midlife in America, a story that many Americans recognize and aspire to. It is also a story that exerts a hegemonic influence in life-narrative construction, a story that can squeeze out rivals that might work better for those people whose lives depart from conventional norms, expectations, and timetables (McAdams, Logan, & Reischer, 2022). The Dutch lady in the front row turned me into a cultural psychologist. I came to see culture as providing the psycho-literary menu for narrative identity. We each sample off the menu, appropriating images and themes that seem to capture our own lived experience, as we take on the challenge of self-authorship, which, at the end of the day, is really co-authorship, creating stories that are ultimately derived from authorial sources that are too many and too diverse to name.

### **Narrative Identity and Psychobiography**

The intellectual enterprise that has grown up around the concept of narrative identity within the fields of personality and developmental psychology has rejuvenated what Gordon Allport (1937) long ago described as the idiographic approach for studying persons that is, the in-depth study of individual cases (Runyan, 1982). An early example was William Nasby and Nancy Read's (1997) case study of Dodge Morgan, an American adventurer who completed a series of psychological measures before, during, and after he sailed solo around the earth. Exploring Morgan's personality from several different angles, Nasby and Read (1997) applied both the Big Five conception of personality traits and the life-story model of identity to interpret the data in their case. With respect to narrative identity, they showed how Morgan's understanding of himself, conveyed in many different psychological venues, revealed striking parallels to Joseph Campbell's (1949) myth of the hero. Inspired in part by the emergence of the concept of narrative identity in several different fields, Ruthellen Josselson and Amia Lieblich (1993) launched a book series, which eventually became an intellectual movement, on what they named the narrative study of lives (e.g., Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams, 2003; McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). They conceived of the narrative study of lives as a wide-ranging interdisciplinary effort to write, interpret, and disseminate life stories, with the broad goal "to uncover, describe, and interpret the meaning of experience" (Lieblich, 1997, p. xi). The elaboration of the concept of narrative identity also helped to promote qualitative methods in psychological inquiry more

generally, as evidenced in the establishment of the American Psychological Association's journal, *Qualitative Psychology* (Josselson, 2014).

Featuring the qualitative study of the individual case, psychobiography refers to the application of psychological research and theory to interpreting the lives of notable figures from history (Schultz, 2005). My own psychobiographical explorations have examined narrative identity in the lives of four American presidents: George W. Bush (McAdams, 2011), Barack Obama (McAdams, 2015), Donald Trump (McAdams, 2017, 2020), and Joe Biden (McAdams, 2022). The cases of Bush and Trump provide especially interesting insights regarding the stories people construct to make sense of their lives.

In *George W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream* (McAdams, 2011), I explored Bush's decision, carried out in the spring of 2003, to launch a pre-emptive invasion of Iraq. The purported reasons for the invasion included (1) finding the weapons of mass destruction that many in the Bush administration believed were being hidden by Iraq's leader Saddam Hussein, (2) deposing Hussein as leader, and (3) establishing a democratic government in Iraq. But what were the possible psychological dimensions of Bush's decision? I began my analysis of Bush by considering his psychological traits as a social actor. Going back as far as the letters his father wrote about his first-born son at age two, George W. Bush was described by all who knew him friends and foes alike as enthusiastic, cheerful, energetic, and socially dominant. Throughout his life, Bush displayed the classic features of a supreme extravert. He was relentlessly optimistic and sociable on nearly every social stage he ever encountered, from his boyhood days in Midland, Texas through his time at Andover, Yale, the Texas Air Guard, and Harvard Business School, and up to his adult years as a businessman, governor, and president. He was also very low on the Big Five trait of openness to experience. Indeed, historians' ratings of all the American presidents going back to George Washington show Bush as near the top on extraversion (with Bill Clinton and Theodore Roosevelt) and at rock bottom on openness to experience (Rubenzer & Faschinbauer, 2004; Simonton, 2006). Consistent with nomothetic research on these dispositional traits, high extraversion and low openness predisposed President Bush to approach the problem of Iraq as a highly energized, optimistic, and confident actor on the world stage. His traits made it more likely that he would act in a swift and supremely self-assured manner. He would be bold and aggressive, and he would never doubt that the decision he made was the right one.

After 9/11, the president found a straightforward way to channel his boundless energy and confidence into the achievement, as a motivated agent, of one of his most cherished life goals to defeat his beloved father's greatest enemies. It is

difficult to overstate the visceral hatred that George W. Bush felt toward Saddam Hussein. The animus was largely driven by the Bush family's belief, well supported by evidence, that Hussein had ordered an assassination attempt of the first President Bush (George W. Bush's father) in the early 1990s. By overthrowing Saddam Hussein, then, the second President Bush could protect America and her allies from weapons of mass destruction, he reasoned, while simultaneously accomplishing a personal motivational agenda. Invading Iraq to overthrow Hussein found ideological justification, moreover, in the peculiar brand of conservative values George W. Bush developed as an adult, which combined the evangelical spirit of compassionate conservatism with the neoconservative vision of fostering freedom around the world. Invading Iraq represented much more than merely defending America (and his father) against a terrible foe. In George W. Bush's mind, it was just as much a noble war of liberation.

The president's action traits and his agential goals and values ultimately dovetailed with the story he authored for his own life. George W. Bush struggled throughout his 20s and 30s to develop a satisfying and meaningful story for his life, a narrative identity that would provide him with a sense of unity and purpose. He finally succeeded sometime around his 40th birthday, after settling into a series of generative commitments in life, experiencing a religious transformation, and pledging to give up alcohol for good. The redemptive story he formulated for his life at midlife was a classic American tale of atonement and recovery through self-discipline (McAdams, 2006). Reflecting the time-honored conservative tendency to reclaim a glorious past, his redemptive story depicts a prodigal son who recaptures the sobriety, goodness, security, and freedom he enjoyed long ago, once upon a time, in a remembered and imagined paradise named Midland, Texas. The construction of his redemptive life narrative the process of making the story and the content of the story he made follows closely the empirical findings from nomothetic research on political conservatism and life stories (McAdams & Albaugh, 2008; McAdams et al., 2008).

Consistent with research on generativity and the redemptive self (McAdams, 2006), George W. Bush's redemptive story for his life proved to be a valuable psychological resource. The story focused him on the generative life aspirations that ultimately landed him in the Texas governor's mansion and the White House. But after 9/11, George W. Bush made a critical authorial move: He began to project his own redemptive story onto America. If he could overcome the chaos of his young adulthood years and recover his own goodness and freedom through self-discipline (and God's help), so too would America (God's chosen nation) recover from the devastation of 9/11 and overcome a tyrant who had

wrought chaos on his own people, and in the process export goodness and freedom to the world. As the author of a personal narrative identity that was to become, in the author's mind, the story of his nation, George W. Bush knew in his bones that the story must end happily. No matter how many setbacks the Iraq War would present, the author was convinced that the mission would ultimately be accomplished, victory would be assured, and freedom and goodness would be restored. He knew this all because that is how his own life story had worked out. As inspiring as his own redemptive story proved to be for Bush's personal struggles with identity, the very same story prevented him, as President, from considering alternative strategies in American foreign policy. In the end, George W. Bush became the prisoner of the same kind of story that had once liberated him, with fateful results for America, Iraq, and the world.

The story for President Donald J. Trump could not be more different, for Trump has no story. Whereas Bush ultimately found himself to be trapped in his own highly redemptive life narrative, Trump has never constructed an inner narrative redemptive or otherwise to make sense of his life in time. The episodic man, he is a person who lives outside of time, outside of story, even if he can invoke heroic stories in the minds of his followers (as captured in his political slogan, "Make America Great Again"). In *The Strange Case of Donald J. Trump: A Psychological Reckoning* (McAdams, 2020), I argue that Trump has no narrative identity at all, or at best, he has a starkly depleted one. Trump does not see himself as a developing person who moves through time. The past has no purchase on him, and the future has no pull. Instead, he lives in the exuberantly combative moment, fighting like a boxer to win the round, fighting furiously as if it were the last round he will ever fight (McAdams, 2017). The moments the rounds, the episodes, the discrete scenes that would comprise a story if he had a life story do not add up. They do not build in his mind to form a plot. The protagonist of this non-story never changes, never learns anything, never carries anything forward from one scene to the next. He is instead a "stable genius," to quote one of Trump's favorite self-attributions (Fritze & Collins, 2019). Like the main character in the movie *Memento*, Trump wakes up each morning with something akin to a blank slate. But unlike the movie, Trump does not suffer from retrograde amnesia or any other kind of purely cognitive deficit. This is not about dementia, for Trump has always lived his life this way, chosen to do so, it seems. He can remember yesterday, but yesterday is irrelevant except insofar that it can help him win today.

Trump's episodic approach to life frees him from the moral and normative conventions that constrain other human beings. It does not matter to Trump if what he says today blatantly contradicts what he said yesterday, or what

he will say tomorrow. Critics can claim that Trump lies constantly (which is true), but “truth” for Trump is purely transactional, just like his relationships with people. What is true (or good) for Trump is what works to win the current episode. If saying “A” helps him win on Monday, then “A” is true. If saying “non-A” helps him win on Tuesday, then “non-A” is true. Both cannot be true, you say. But Trump does not consider the contradiction to be important; indeed, he may not even see the contradiction because for Trump, truth is episodic, as is life more generally.

Trump’s total embrace of the moment has always worked to his advantage, both in business and politics. For instance, his episodic nature gives him tremendous authenticity in the eyes of his millions of devoted fans. When they encounter Trump at a rally or watch him at a news conference, they know that he is ALL HERE NOW. He is not hiding anything. He is not planning the future or trying to stay consistent with the past. Even if every sentence that comes out of his mouth is a falsehood, he is telling it the way it is right now, in the moment, what he believes he needs to say to win the moment. It is shameless. It is primal. Unexpurgated, unmediated, completely divorced from doubt or reason or the need to be consistent and truthful in the long run, Trump erupts with what currently captures his consciousness, the unfiltered expression of his wholehearted embrace of the moment. Like an impulsive, angry child. Or a wild beast.

The argument I make for the absence of a narrative identity in Trump’s personality makeup draws from many different incidents in his life and many different sources (McAdams, 2020). Going back decades, journalists and biographers have expressed repeated frustration in their inability to elicit from Trump any kind of introspection or psychological commentary on his own life (e.g., D’Antonio, 2015; O’Brien, 2005). Trump talks about himself constantly, but never in narrative terms. Instead, he brags about achievements or proclaims his greatness. He attributes wonderful traits to himself strength, courage, intelligence, power. As a social actor, he is a winner. He has never lost. He has never made a mistake. But for all his talk, Trump never delves beneath the surface; he rarely goes back in time; and he rarely projects very far into the future. He is not introspective; he is not retrospective; and he is not prospective. Unlike any president in modern times, he has virtually no sense of history, and he absolutely never talks about things like “posterity” or “legacy” or how “future generations” will look back upon the America of today. Donald Trump is no more able to speak in this exalted register a favorite form of discourse for presidents like Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama than he is to express empathy for the suffering of other people.

Writing for *The New Yorker* in the 1990s, Mark Singer spent a great deal of time with Trump urging him to reveal his inner self. “What are you thinking

about when you shave in the morning?” Singer asked. “What are the private feelings you keep to yourself?” The questions made no sense to Trump. He could not answer them. Singer was forced to conclude that Mr. Trump has achieved something remarkable and utterly strange in human life: “an existence unmolested by the rumblings of a soul” (Singer, 2011). Tony Schwartz, who was Trump’s ghostwriter for his first book, *The Art of the Deal*, remarked that “Trump didn’t fit any model of human being I’d ever met.” He remembers almost nothing from his childhood, Schwartz said. “There is no private Trump” (Mayer, 2016). Reporting on Trump’s acceptance speech at the 2016 Republican National Convention, a *New York Times* journalist wrote: “After 40 years in the public eye, Mr. Trump decided on Thursday night that he was not interested in revealing himself to America with disarming tales of his upbringing, hard-earned lessons from his tumultuous career or the inner struggles masked by his outward pomposity.” In what was, at that point in his life, the most important speech he had ever given, Trump passed up the chance to “plumb his personal life and career for the kind of anecdotes that would turn him, in the eyes of his doubters, from a cartoon into a flesh-and-blood human being” (Barbaro, 2016).

Trump is not interested in casting himself as a flesh-and-blood human being. In his mind, he is more like a superhero. Shortly before he assumed the presidency, Trump told a group of advisors to think of everyday in the White House as a television show in which he vanquishes his rivals (Meacham, 2017). The sentiment is consistent with what Trump once described, in an interview for *People* magazine, as his philosophy of life: “Man is the most vicious of all animals, and life is a series of battles ending in victory or defeat” (D’Antonio, 2015, p. 154). For Trump, each day is a singular battle. But the successive battles do not build to form a readily defined war, the kind of war that has its own narrative arc, with clearly defined foes, stable alliances, clear issues of contention that drive antagonists apart, and the prospect that someday it will end the war will be over, and we will look back on it and understand it as a story, as part of history. Instead, life is endless warfare, with no progression or direction. You fight furiously to win the day. You go to bed. And then you wake up to start it all over again. This is how Donald Trump has always lived fully immersed in the combative here-and-now, living and fighting outside the flow of narrative time and history, the omnipotent I AM who never changes, never develops, but who simply IS.

## Conclusion

In this 40-year retrospective, I have described how discussions my students and I had in a graduate seminar in the summer of 1982 eventually led to a program of research and scholarship focused on the concepts of narrative identity and the redemptive self. The story begins with my obsessing over the meaning of Erik Erikson's (1963) concept of identity. Identity is a story, I proposed, like a Victorian novel in the mind. The fully elaborated life-story model of identity (McAdams, 1985) eventually morphed into the more delimited and precise conceptualization of narrative identity, which refers to a person's narrative understanding of how they became the person they are becoming (McAdams & McLean, 2013). What I tended early in my career to reify as a self-contained mental structure turns out to be as much a cultural product as an achievement of the self. Narrative identity is a psychosocial construction. As autobiographical authors, we draw from a vast array of cultural sources to translate our lived experience into narrative form. The stories are co-authored in a community of storytellers. Our life stories give us meaning and purpose, but the meanings they give are not always the best for our well-being. Certain master cultural narratives may constrain and oppress life possibilities, especially for minoritized and economically disadvantaged people. And in some cases, it may feel as if our stories are foisted upon us, rather than constructed with authorial intent.

The redemptive self may qualify as a master cultural narrative in American society. On the positive side, empirical research consistently shows that highly generative American adults tend to conceive of their lives in redemptive terms. Redemptive stories may prove to be valuable psychological resources in motivating and justifying a caring, productive, and generative life, especially in the midlife years. By featuring a gifted moral agent who aims to transform suffering into positive gain for self and others, life narratives that resemble what I call the redemptive self can be a force for psychological and societal good (McAdams & Guo, 2015). That said, the same kinds of stories can sometimes prove to be self-righteous and naïve. In the case of the American President George W. Bush, the redemptive story he constructed for himself in early midlife helped him to achieve his generative life goals. But in the end, the same story may have contributed to his launching in ill-advised and ruinous war.

The case of Bush may hold a cautionary tale as applied to my own intellectual journey. As a young man, Bush desperately sought to find a sense of meaning and coherence in his own life. Once he latched onto the redemptive self, he never let it go. In a weirdly parallel sense, my own development as a

psychologist suggests, in retrospect, a similar dynamic. As a graduate student in personality psychology during the late 1970s, I despaired at the intellectual chaos and anomie that seemed to characterize my chosen intellectual field. At the height of the situationist critique, many empirically minded psychologists came to believe that there is no such thing as personality. If behavior is always a function of the immediate situation, then there can be little that is stable and coherent in the self. The idea that we are mere automatons who react reflexively to the social demands of the moment has always seemed deeply wrong indeed idiotic to me. Without denying the power of situations, I have always held to the idea that different people react differently, even to the same situation. Therefore, when personality psychologists began to rediscover the power of dispositional traits in the mid-1980s, I exulted in their victories. Traits suggested some degree of distinctiveness and coherence for individual persons. Importantly, so did life stories. Determined to find coherence in people's lives, I found the idea of narrative identity to be especially simpatico with my own intellectual inclinations. The existence of life stories proves that lives are more-or-less coherent. And proves that people seek to make their lives into temporally coherent wholes. I latched onto the concept of narrative identity, and I never let it go.

But then along came Donald Trump. He is the strange case that completely defies the rule a man nearly devoid of any inner coherence, living outside of time and story. But Trump is extreme, I believe. He may even be a psychological one-off. Putting him to the side for a moment, I must still concede that, after 40 years of research and thinking about life stories, people's narrative identities are rarely as neatly formed as Victorian novels. There is coherence, for sure. But not typically as much as you find in *Middlemarch* or *David Copperfield*. People have multiple and often discordant stories in their minds, tailored for specific narrative situations. Stories are performed in discursive spaces. As such, narrative identity may be less like a well-formed novel and more like a collection of loosely related short stories an anthology of the self. The different stories are related to each other; they share recurrent themes, favored plots, and repeated characterizations. They provide a modicum of coherence in any given life, more in some cases and less in others. As a psychologist preoccupied with coherence ever since my graduate school days, I tend to detect and reveal the similarities across the different stories. I am very good at finding the coherence and discerning the recurrent patterns. I recognize the disconnects and contradictions, too, but throughout my career I have tended to gloss over them, as I tend to gloss over the many instances in which situational variables may trump traits in the prediction of behavior. We pick our spots and niches as psychologists, and as storytelling human



beings. Since the fall of 1982, I have continued to focus my energy on the synthetic and integrative features of life stories. Other scholars have taken narrative in different directions, and their work may sometimes serve as a critique to my own. Still I stick with this idea: Like Erikson's original concept of identity, stories bring meaning and purpose to human activity. They help to unify and provide coherence to people's lives. That has always been the key insight for me, shaping my work in ways that go beyond even my conscious control.

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