**LIFE STORY PROJECT:**

To be a person is to have a story to tell. -- Isak Dinesen

This course is advertised, in part, as a “workshop.” The idea is that we will not only talk about meaningful lives, but actually work on enhancing yours (with all due modesty). We will approach this task, in part, by completing what I am calling a “life story project.” Your task will be to write series of exercises, stories and reflective essays that, taken together, will constitute a mini-autobiography. This project will (hopefully) help you develop a deeper understanding of your life and a more coherent and intentional approach to the living of that life.

This project rests upon the work of many recent thinkers who suggest that there is a link between the narrative structure of our lives and its meaning. Narrativity has become influential in many fields of study over the past few decades. It is particularly influential in developmental psychology, positive psychology, sociology, and other fields within the humanities. Dan McAdams is a central figure in this movement and we will be relying on his work and the work of others in this field to guide our explorations.

We will approach this project in stages. First, I will ask you to read a series of articles that will orient you to the field of narrative study and positive psychology. These academic readings will be interspersed with guided writing assignments that will help you to begin telling your own life story. Ultimately, I will ask you: (1) to organize, collect and hand in all of your autobiographical and reflective essay materials, and (2) to write a second-order reflective essay on all of the material that you have developed. If all goes well, the result will be significant and “meaningful.”

Your “Life Story Project” will contain:

1. A “This I Believe” essay,
2. A Stephen Covey inspired “mission statement,”
3. A mini-Autobiography, and
4. A second-order reflective essay on parts 1-3.

The 2nd order reflective essay is an essay where you get to articulate your understanding of the relationship between having a life story and having meaning in your life. This is the place where you should reflect BOTH on your understanding of the articles that I assigned to you on this topic AND your experience with completing parts one through three of this project. This reflective essay should be at least two pages long.

The above listed elements of your “life story project” are to be collected and bound in a thin report folder. Although not required, students are encourage you to embellish your project with photos and other images in the style of the “scrapbooking” craft. You can do this project on paper or in a digital format that is appropriate to the goal of sharing the content with, at a minimum, me. This project will account for 30% of your overall course grade.

Autobiographical Prompts

By

Dr. Nim Batchelor (with credit to Dan McAdams)

Below you will find a series of prompts that invite you to:

A. Set the scene for your life story

B. Describe some key or important scenes from your life, and

C. Describe some of your thoughts about the future evolution of your life story

When put together, these components will constitute a “mini-autobiography.”  This is not merely a random collection of stories; rather, you are being asked to describe some stories that connect with your core values or with episodes that shape your sense of self or your sense of meaning.  For this assignment, I am inviting you to collect your responses to the following prompts into a binder.  To facilitate my grading process, I would ask that follow the sequence of the prompts in the organization of your project.

**A. Setting the scene:**

* Demographic facts—who are your parents, siblings, and other family that you grew up around?  Where and when were you born?  Were you adopted?  Did both of your biological parents raise you?  What is your race and ethnic heritage?  What religion (if any) did your parents practice?  What was your parent’s level of income and wealth?
* Early childhood circumstances—briefly outline the circumstances of your early childhood life.  That is, those life circumstances that shaped you (let’s say between the ages of 3 to 10).  These would be the structure and circumstances that were determined by others before you had any say in shaping the circumstances of your life.
* Early formative circumstances—before we get to some of your specific life episodes, I’d’ like for you to set the scene a bit more.  So, between the ages of 10 to 18, where were you?  What were your educational institutions? (Home schooling counts as an institution.)  Who were the most significant adults in your life during this time? Describe your relationships with your siblings?  What was the general character of your social relations? (Think “Breakfast Club”—were you a “jock”, or “a princess”, or “a geek,” etc.?)  What were your primary activities?  Did you earn money?

**B. Key Scenes or Meaningful Episodes:**

I want you to think of your life as if it were a novel or perhaps as a series of interconnected short stories.  You can imagine yourself as being the central character of these stories.  As it happens, more recently, you are beginning to be the primary architect or author of these stories as well.  As I go through each day, I am constantly reminded of episodes from my past.  When I think about a topic, there are specific scenes, memories, life lessons that pop into my consciousness.  Some of them show up rarely, but some of them recur more frequently than I might expect.  I want you to focus on those stories.  Alternatively, think about when you are chatting with a new friend and you are trying to get to know one another better.  What are the stories that you tell about yourself?  Which one’s pop into mind?  Your new friend raises a topic and as they are talking, your say to yourself “Oh, that reminds me of when XYZ happened to me.”  That is the story that I want you to capture.

The prompts that I offer below should function as memory triggers.  Although it is often the case that the first story that comes to your mind will be the best one, you should linger over the prompt until two or three candidate stories come to mind that are responsive to the prompt.  If you have the time, write up all of them.  But if you are pressed for time, then you should select the one that has come to your mind more than once in the recent past.  The frequency of an involuntary memory is a signal of its significance.

I would like you to focus in on a few key scenes that stand out in the story of your life. This life-story exercise is organized around the idea of critical events or episodes. An event or episode is a specific happening that occurs in a particular time and place. It is most helpful to think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life that stands out for some reason. Examples might be a surprise birthday party that your friends threw for you on your 18th birthday, a particular conversation with your friend in November of last year, or your reactions to learning that someone close to you died one summer day in 1996.

Your last summer’s vacation and a difficult week at work, by contrast, are not events because they occur over an extended period of time, even though they may be very important to you. Thus, your vacation would be more like a series of events than an event per se. We want you to concentrate on single events, rather than on a series of events or an extended period of time.

            Consider a key scene to be a moment in your life story that stands out for a particular reason – perhaps because it was especially good or bad, particularly vivid, important, or memorable.For each of the following prompts, write about an event that more or less fits with what the prompt is asking.  Where it is possible and relevant, your event descriptions should include:

1. When did the event occur? (How old were you?)

2. What, to the best of your recollection, happened during the event?

3. Who was involved in the event?

4. What were you thinking, feeling, and wanting during your experience of this event?

5. Perhaps, most importantly, what is it about this event that led you to list it as an important event in your life story? What does this event say about who you are, who you were, who you might be, and how you have developed over time?

**1. PEAK EXPERIENCE (HIGH POINT)**

Many people report occasional "peak experiences." These are generally moments or episodes in a person's life in which he or she feels a sense of great uplifting, joy, excitement, contentment, or some other highly positive emotional experience. Indeed, these experiences vary widely. Some people report them to be associated with religious or mystical experience. Others find great joy or excitement in vigorous athletics, reading a good novel, artistic expression, or in love or friendship. A peak experience may be seen as a "high point" in your life story -- a particular experience that stands out in your memory as something that is extremely positive. Please describe below in some detail a peak experience that you have experienced sometime in your life. Make sure that this is a particular and specific incident (e.g., happened at a particular time and in a particular place) rather than a general "time" or "period" in your life. Please write about exactly what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this event is significant, and what this event says about you and your personality.

**2. NADIR EXPERIENCE (LOW POINT)**

A "nadir" is a low point. A nadir experience, therefore, is the opposite of a peak experience. Please think about your entire life. Try to remember a specific experience in which you felt extremely negative emotions, such as despair, disillusionment, terror, profound guilt, shame, etc. You should consider this experience to represent one of the "low points” in your life story. Even though this memory is unpleasant, we would still appreciate an attempt on your part to be honest and straightforward and to provide us with as much detail as possible. Please remember to be specific. We would like to know what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why the event is significant, and what the event says about you and your personality.

**3. TURNING POINT(S)**

In looking back on one's life, it is often possible to identify certain key "turning points" -- episodes through which a person undergoes substantial change. Turning points can occur in many different spheres of a person's life -- in relationships with other people, in work and school, in outside interests, etc. We are especially interested in a turning point in your understanding of yourself. Please identify a particular episode in your life story in which you underwent an important transition or change with respect to your understanding of yourself. It is not necessary that you consciously saw the event as a turning point when it actually happened. Rather, what is important is that you now see this particular event as a turning point in your life. If you feel that you have experienced no dramatic turning points in your life, then describe a particular episode in your life that comes closer than any other to qualifying as a turning point. Please describe what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why this experience is significant, and what it may say about you and your personality.

**4. CONTINUITY**

In the last response, you described an experience in which you underwent an important change in your understanding of yourself. Now we would like you to focus on an opposite kind of experience. In this case, we are interested in a particular experience that affirms some way in which you have remained the same over time. In other words, rather than focus on an experience of change, we want you to consider a moment in your life story in which in some way you demonstrated a sameness or continuity in your life. Think back on your life in the recent past (e.g., the last two years or so) and choose a single event or experience that you believe illustrates something within you that is stable and unchanging. This event should reveal a pattern in your life that occurs again and again. For instance, you may find that over the course of your life you tend to react to a threat from authority by getting angry at someone you love. This was most recently evidenced, say, in an event in which your boss at work criticized your performance and you subsequently went home and yelled at your spouse for a minor oversight. Or more positively, say, a recent conversation with a new friend may have been very similar, in content or form, to many previous conversations you have had when making friends, even as a child. Thus, this conversation would illustrate a thread of continuity or sameness in your autobiography. Therefore, please choose a recent event in your life that illustrates a pattern of sameness and continuity. Please describe the event in detail. Tell us what happened, when it happened, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, why the event is significant, and what the experience may say about you and your personality.

**5. MORALITY**

Throughout life we learn lessons about what is right and what is wrong, what is good and what is bad. As children, we are taught about morality at home, in schools, in churches, and so on. As we get older, we may struggle with questions of right and wrong. We may worry about the extent to which our lives are good and the extent to which we do the right thing. We may experience guilt or shame when we do something that violates our own or others’ standards. We would like you to consider a particular episode in your life in which you faced a moral issue in some way. This could be an episode in which you engaged in an immoral act of some kind, were taught a moral lesson, wrestled with a moral dilemma, or made a decision to behave according to new moral standards -- or any other life episode that connects to morality in some way. Please describe the event in detail, tell us what moral issue was involved, and say a word or two about what impact this event has had on you.

**6. WISDOM EVENT**

Please describe an event in your life in which you displayed *wisdom*. The episode might be one in which you acted or interacted in an especially wise way or provided wise counsel or advice, made a wise decision, or otherwise behaved in a particularly wise manner. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you and your life?

**7. DECISION**

Our lives are punctuated by events in which we must make an important choice or decision. You have probably made at least one or two important decisions in your life. Indeed, every day we are faced with many minor decisions -- we have to decide what to wear in the morning, what to have for lunch, etc. Important decisions, on the other hand, may affect the course of our lives, as in deciding whether or not to marry a particular person, what occupation to pursue, what to believe in, etc. Please consider the most important decisions or choices you have made in your life. Describe in detail a particular event in your life in which you made an important decision. Please tell us what the decision was and why it was an important one. As usual, tell us what happened in the event, when the event occurred, who was involved, what you were thinking and feeling, and what the event says about you and your personality.

**8.  RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL OR MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE.**

Whether you are religious or not, many people report that they have had experiences in their lives where they felt a sense of the transcendent or sacred, a sense of God or some almighty or ultimate force, or a feeling of oneness with nature, the world, or the universe. Thinking back on your entire life, please identify an episode or moment in which you felt something like this. This might be an experience that occurred within the context of your own religious tradition, if you have one, or it may be a spiritual or mystical experience of any kind. Please describe this transcendent experience in detail. What happened, where and when, who was involved, and what were you thinking and feeling? Also, what does this memory say about you or your life? Alternatively, if you are not religious or “spiritual”, describe a story that captures your life as an atheist or humanist or naturalist.

**9. CONTRIBUTIONS**

This is a multi-part prompt.  It is asking about a variety of kinds on contributions that you might have made during your life.  Try to write one story for each of the prompts in this section:

* What is the biggest difference that you’ve made in another person’s life?
* What is the biggest contribution that you’ve made to an organization?
* What is the biggest contribution that you’ve made to society?

**10. CHALLENGES**

This is a dual prompt, i.e., it asks that you write two related episodes.

* First, what is the most significant or difficult obstacle that you were successful in overcoming?  This would be a time when you took on something that you had some reason to doubt whether or not you could really do it, and yet at the end you (or others) were surprised at your hidden abilities and your success.
* Secondly, what is the biggest challenge that you seriously took on and yet you fell short of achieving?  The idea in this second part of the prompt is to probe where you might have learned about the limits of your skills or abilities.  Sometimes this happens due to becoming over ambitious.  Or perhaps, you backed away from doing something because you could see that it was beyond what you could reasonably expect.

**11. SKILLS OR ABILITIES**

What skill or ability have you worked long and hard at developing?  What—if anything—can you do (routinely) that would awe a beginner or even quite a few skilled people?

**12. SOCIAL NORMS**

This is another multi-part prompt.  Please write a story for each of the following points:

* In what way are you most comfortable being *like* most everyone else?  That is, what part of you is most comfortable with conformity to social norms?
* In what way are you most comfortable being *unlike* most everyone else?  That is, what part of you is most comfortable with being avant-garde, iconoclastic, rebellious, counter-culture?

**C. FUTURE SCRIPT**

It is not, of course, possible to tell stories about what has not yet happened.  On the other hand, the story of your life is not yet complete.  The following prompts do not invite you to tell stories.  Rather, you should respond to these in more of an essay style.

1. Life Theme-- Looking back over your entire life story with all its chapters, scenes, and challenges, do you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the story? What is the major theme in your life story? Please explain.

2. Descriptively—Imagine that you are a literary critic and that you take on the task of analyzing the “character” that is described in the novel or set of short stories offered above.  How would you describe that character?  Is the central character of these stories a hero?  A villain?  A victim?  A trickster?  What are this character’s primary motivations?  What are this character’s primary values?  What is really important to this character?  Does this character “have it together” or is this character “lost”?  You get the idea.  Spend a bit of time describing the motifs and tendencies in the character that is you.

3. Future/evaluative intentions—So, as the author of your life, you have choices to make.  Describe those aspects of your “character” that you cherish and prize and that you endorse and hope and expect to continue enacting in the upcoming scenes of your life story.  On the other hand, describe those aspects of your “character” that you intend or hope to change.  What are the domains of growth or maturing or learning that you hope and plan on taking up?  What is the natural narrative extension of the life that you have led thus far?  Are you comfortable with that prospective future OR do you intend to undertake changes to yourself, with respect to those with whom you interact, or with your communities so as to create a different and perhaps more meaningful future?

Life Story Project

As you know, I’ve been prompting you to do elements of this project on a daily basis. I want to clarify what I want or expect from you at the end.

As I pointed out on the Moodle site, your project needs to include the following elements (organized and handed in—in the order specified on this list):

As a reminder about the sequence of the various elements of the life story project, here is an outline:

* This I Believe Essay
* Covey Inspired Mission Statement
* SETTING THE SCENE:
  + Demographic facts
  + Early childhood circumstances
  + Early formative circumstances
* KEY SCENES OR MEANINGFUL EPISODES:
  + PEAK EXPERIENCE (HIGH POINT)
  + NADIR EXPERIENCE (LOW POINT)
  + TURNING POINT(S)
  + CONTINUITY
  + MORALITY
  + WISDOM EVENT
  + DECISION
  + RELIGIOUS, SPIRITUAL OR MYSTICAL EXPERIENCE.
  + CONTRIBUTIONS
  + CHALLENGES
  + SKILLS OR ABILITIES
  + SOCIAL NORMS
* FUTURE SCRIPT
  + Life Theme
  + Descriptively
  + Future/evaluative intentions
* Comprehensive reflective essay

Most students simply write a response to each of the promts, then they staple them together in a single packet, and they hand that in. That is fine. If you want to put all of this into a folder that has a cover and a back, that would be great too. Some students decide to have some extra fun, and they “scrapbook” this project. Neat!! Some figure out a way to do this project in and electronic format. Again—neat!! So long as the content is present, I am open to whatever form you wish to provide for it.

Keep in mind that it is the reflective essay where you need to pay close attention and do your best work. This is because it is that essay which will be the primary basis for my grading this work. As I mentioned in class one day—I will be assessing this project based on two criteria: (1) is it complete and done with serious intent, i.e., does it contain all of the elements and does it seem to have been done with good effort, seriously, and with some integrity and quality, and (2) are you able to relate the experience of doing all of this autobiographical work TO the intellectual and theoretical materials that we’ve covered in class. This is where I am asking you to think about and comment upon the relationship between the theoretical claims about narrativity (from, for example, articles like Habermas and Bluck, McAdams, Fischer, and Robert Adams) and your own sense of whether spending time creating a life story is something that does or might enhance one’s sense of meaning. What do you think about the relationship between the two strands of this course? Why would a person think that they are linked and mutually supportive? What reasons do you have for either rejecting or accepting that suggestion? If it worked for you (or even if it did not), is that odd or to be expected? Show me in this final essay that you are able to engage with these sorts of considerations at both the theoretical level and the experiential level.

Your projects are due Tuesday, start of class.