

Providing Visions of a Different Life: Self-study Narrative Inquiry as an Instrument for Seeing Ourselves in Previously-Unimagined Places

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Article abstract

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NARRATIVE WORKS
Issues, Investigations, & Interventions

Providing Visions of a Different Life: Self-study Narrative Inquiry as an Instrument for Seeing Ourselves in Previously-Unimagined Places

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In this paper, we share stories of coming to narrative self-study research in graduate studies, and the impact this choice has had on personal and professional directions in ways we could not have imagined when graduate studies were initially embarked upon. Central to self-study narrative inquiry is a focus on life experience as a tool for connection with our own storied pasts. There we find the roots of our present-day perspectives and actions that we can incorporate into our everyday meaning-making, using our emergent understanding to choose present and future possibilities in our relationships.

Carmen's Story

Narrative Inquiry as a Vehicle for Self-Study Research: Past, Present, and Future Selves

As I look back across time, I know I am a person who has received many gifts in my life. Counted dearly among them are mentors, who, over the years, have helped me understand the importance of building a personal epistemology to stand on in everyday life. In my doctoral years, working with Dr. Michael Connelly in Toronto, I engaged in a narrative inquiry process where I wrote about events and situations that connected my past and present and revealed many layers of my own experience to myself. It was under his guidance that I began to learn what Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) note: "Ultimately, the aim of self-study research is moral, to gain understanding necessary to make [personal] interaction increasingly educative" (p. 15). As I have written in the past (Shields, 2005), I entered doctoral study to amass the certain knowledge that I felt I needed in my work with special education educators and administrators, only to be met by a mentor who listened politely and then spoke a few words that instantly struck home for me: "The only person you can change is yourself." That day, my education took a turn inward. I began the ongoing journey to

connect my inner and outer self, the personal and professional in me, to share with others.

Also among my greatest gifts are graduate students who have made their way to my classroom over the years and who, for their own unique reasons, have also decided to take a self-study research journey. Over the past dozen years, through thesis or masters research project work, I have had the opportunity to engage with individuals who have embraced narrative inquiry as a means of seeking the self in their personal and professional lives. They have provided me with a depth of learning that I would not have thought possible, and I know I am changed by every journey I take with students.

I am writing this paper with three former graduate students, sharing the *unimagined places* we occupy in our lives now because, in our own way and for our own reasons, we chose to take a narrative journey in our graduate studies. I have learned that as I meet a new class, I never know who will want to turn their vision inward to, in the words of Annie Dillard (1990), “connect the dots” of their life experience in order to understand their own storied presence in the world.

For me, what began as a research phenomenon has become the gift I use to construct my world. As Atkinson (1995) writes:

A story carries a power that can pull blinders off our eyes. It can teach us something important about life that we had probably forgotten we knew. The act of imposing a narrative framework on the raw material of our lives brings new order and clarity to something somehow familiar to us...It is through stories that symbolic images and universal, timeless themes find their expression. (p. 5)

Thanks to narrative inquiry, my desire for certain knowledge to bring to those uninformed others shifted to my desire to be an inquirer, a poser of questions for myself and others, in order to come to understand past experience as the critical ingredient informing my present vision of the world and my place in it. The marvelous insight provided by self-study work, that we can interpret and re-interpret our own experience across time and situation, has freed me to be something other than a character in a family story or a story of someone else’s view of me. I have left that behind as I have embraced my own personhood and engaged in writing my own, ongoing story. And thus, I have been able to step away from places I was expected to inhabit in my life by tradition and circumstance, to places where no one expected to find me, most of all myself.

Imagined Places

Looking back across time, I can see that my *imagined places* came to me in the midst of living a busy life. I did not have epiphanies or long

range plans as some people do; rather, in the midst of trying to name my own discomfort in my personal or professional life, moments of revelation led me to newly imagined possible solutions to present dilemmas. For good or ill, I have never worried about seeking assurances or certainty on the other side of a decision, which I think now is likely a good thing, because I know that payment is required whether one acts on imagined places or stays in present circumstances. It was thus one October morning when I was twenty-four, I found myself saying to my housemates in rural Nova Scotia that instead of finding a much needed job, I was going to go down to the university to see if I could get in.

Beginning a new path: October 1973.

It was beginning to get cold in the primitive house that four of us rented, which was about twelve miles from town. The fire had to be lit in the morning and I had no experience with lighting fires at that point in my life. I was the one without any source of income and people were beginning to show their annoyance with my lack of monetary contributions to the house. One morning, after the job question had again arisen, although I knew little about university life, having been married young and separated by that time, a previously unanticipated thought occurred to me. The town below us, down the mountain, contained a university: why not see if I could get in? Amidst much laughter, I put on my only attire—jeans and boots—and, asking people on campus where to go, found my way to the registrar's office. I made my request at the main desk, and through an office door the registrar appeared. In his very British accent, he asked me if I knew that classes had been on for six weeks already; I said, "No." He had a kettle in his hand and, I think now that in order to get a better look at what must have been to him an unusual person, he invited me to have morning tea. I didn't know it then, but an interview of sorts ensued and I found myself conditionally accepted as long as my high school marks appeared in ten days. He sent me to a colleague, soon to be a mentor, to help me choose four initial courses. I phoned my parents, who were 1500 kilometers away, and asked for money to take the term. They agreed and, by Christmas, a whole new world had opened up for me. I became a mature student with work to do that I enjoyed. I no longer saw myself as half of a failed marriage.

It was many years later when I read the words of Adrienne Rich (1993), who wrote, "No one who survives to speak new language has avoided this: the cutting away of an old force that held her rooted to an old ground, the pitch of utter loneliness where she herself and all creation seem equally dispersed, weightless" (p. 75). To me, carving out a new life entails a willingness to carve up old visions of self, and in my experience it is both a painful and elating process. I sometimes wonder where I would be today without the *new language* I acquired through the steps of my educational

journey, which began having morning tea with a stranger. What language would I be using now if I had not acted on my imagined new persona?

A revelatory moment: November 1991.

Driving home across a province after yet another workweek away from home on a dark, cold night, my life as consultant: learning disabilities—the only one for a province—appeared to me in new form. For some time I had had a gnawing and negative sense about the seemingly endless demands of my work and life that involved so much travel. Somewhere deep inside, I also felt I did not know enough to meet the demands set upon me. I needed to know more about change in order to support students in their schools and school districts, which were very diverse in their approach to students with learning disabilities. My master's degree had been granted in 1981, which seemed a long time ago. Looking through the windshield, a completely new thought came to me as I drove through the dark: I'll go back to school and get a doctoral degree. Picking up my then very cumbersome car phone, I dialed my husband, and I remember saying: "I could be providing professional development to teachers across this province for the rest of my career, and I may see little change; I need to go back to school." Once imagined, my way forward was clear and I got to work finding out what I needed to do to apply. I left my government job in 1992 and transitioned to a year of full-time lecturing at the same university in my story above, where by then I had taught in part-time graduate education for a number of years. In 1993, we moved to Toronto and I met Michael Connelly. Once again, I found support for a new image of myself, and the text of my life began to be carved anew.

By 1997, when I graduated from the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, I had sculpted myself into something entirely unimagined, both as teacher and as individual. Thanks to Clandinin and Connelly (1991, 1994, 1995; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) I learned many things about curriculum development and my place in it as whole person. As part of my journey over those years, I learned how to share my stories with my BEd students at my Maritime university, and I was slowly able to change how I taught. I learned that we take what we can from a learning experience—each of us—based on past situations, experiences, and events of our lives. I learned we are making up the fiction of our lives as we go forward in time. I count these notions among the treasures of my existence.

View from the present: April 2010.

It is a sunny and beautiful day. I sit at my computer writing this piece in my home in the country. Presently, I inhabit a life I could never have imagined in years past. I live with a man I should not have left behind in the past, thirty-five years ago. I have two daughters in their thirties and a

ten-month-old granddaughter, all of whom shine a light in my life. I am an Associate Professor and Chair of a graduate program: me, of whom no one expected academic success even in high school. In an apparent blink of an eye, I am sixty-one and happy about it. I look back on some of the seminal stories that have had an impact on my life, and made me who I am in the present. I can see the impact of my parents and grandparents, who have passed away; my sister, who is handicapped and has taught me so much about my life; all the years of motherhood with its trials and tribulations; husbands who have come and gone; friends who are no longer here; and friends who are still here. I can see the gift of being able to study and the serendipity of mentors who have appeared when I needed them. I can say I am who I am now because I have studied my own experience and been a seeker of meaning that connects me to my past while I live in the present. From this platform, I look ahead knowing my future will be constructed on the meaning I make from my experience as I go forward. I will continue to re-interpret my stories of experience as I teach and live, sharing with students and those special friends who are willing to re-examine their own lives and who choose to re-interpret their own stories of experience—as I do.

Nancy's Story

My life-roles since I began my journey of narrative self-study have not changed. I am a mother, a partner, a daughter, and a nurse. I am changed, though, as a person. For me, the narrative process has been one of coming to know, a forever journey, that has provided, and continues to provide me, with a richness that is the greatest of gifts: awareness, consciousness, a finding of voice, a capacity for reflexive inquiry, and a coming to know that I am because of my stories.

It has not been an easy process, often a struggle of dealing with the intrusive nature of self-study, the intensity of emotions connected with re-creating story, the vulnerability, and the permission that I felt that I needed to see this type of inquiry not as a narcissistic endeavor, but as an instructive and powerful tool for insight and growth for me as a person and as a professional.

In an earlier time, that uncertainty in coming to understand was shared in an exchange between a teacher and a student. Carmen was my teacher and I, an unsure student.

Carmen, in 2001, wrote,

You are journeying in the whole research process towards becoming your own authority, shifting from the search for the perfect chart, which is the “expert out there” view as a means to an end, to the aha of “it’s up to me how I use the expert knowledge out there to write my own research,” which is the “expert inside” view. . . . You

have work and life stories to share that will enrich others on their learning journey—trust in that as you think about you the researcher. (Personal journal, November 28, 2001)

It was in this conversation, and the many more that have followed since, that I have found names for attitudes and feelings, have been brought to clarity and focus in purpose, and have been given energy and excitement for what I was learning and continued to learn.

Narrative Inquiry as the Instrument for Unimagined Places

And then I began to write the story of the many stories that were my stories. Traveling to those *unimagined places* became my lifelines for understanding. I am a knitter, and in my narrative journey I have come to know that through my art I have chronicled my life and its stories.

In 2002, I wrote,

I will create a sampler, a collection of stitches, intricate in their weave, anchored by the cables, a constant in each of the panels. Beginning with the simplicity of the stocking and garter stitch, I create a combination of strength and texture with the lace of the moss and blackberry stitch. My sampler is my story.
(Novak, 2003, p. 87)

It was a class assignment. The task was to create a description of self without words. I remember the drive home that night, the excitement, and the uncertainty. But what could be me without words; who was I? And then, like so much of my work, my study, my realization and understanding came in a moment of “intuitive spirit” (Pinkola Estes, 1995, p.86) taking charge; I set to work on creating my sampler. The yarn, the stitches, and the pattern I planned with care. The days spent in creating the sampler were all-consuming. The description I shared in class of its representation came spontaneously, unscripted, and the reaction felt in its sharing I remember as overwhelming. And then, the understanding in ways like never before, the importance of needing to choose the strength of a cotton yarn as fibre, and why strong cables anchored the rows of intricate and simple stitches that were the stories of me. In its telling, I came to understand that the story I recounted that evening was my story, and in its making the sampler was as if I was knitting myself together; I had heard my voice—a voice with volume and authority—but it was not a familiar voice. I remember when I finished, feeling the quiet of the room, and then hearing Carmen’s voice offer, in her calm and supportive way, the opening of a door, the familiar refrain of encouragement that I was owning my own story. I heard the words, and from the *unimagined places* drew strength to continue to be brave in my inquiry. It was a time of recognizing new meaning and the connections of my life. I wrote of the importance of the moment later:

I am claiming the sampler as my story, my authority, crossing the threshold of Heilbrun's (1999) place of liminality, "where as women and as creators of literature, we write our own lines and, eventually, our own plays" (Heilbrun, p. 102). I am no longer afraid. (Novak, 2003, p. 89)

In this time, I gained understanding of my woman's way of coming to know, of my development of self, of voice, and of mind. I gained entry into a world of reading that changed my life and perspective; I reflected, I listened, and I storied.

In 2003, I wrote of *Early Patterns* and silenced voice (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger and Tarule, 1997, pp. 23-34):

Its tissue paper wrapping is soft and yields easily to my eager fingers. It is our first gift exchange after a lifetime of years. I feel myself as a young child again, eagerly anticipating, trembling, overcome with the emotions of the moment. Like the relationship that it is, we perform our gift exchange in rooms apart, towns away. Beneath the layers of tissue: the gift, a hand-knit shawl scarf, of lacy weave. Its pattern drapes and shapes over my hands. I examine its every feature, just as a mother explores her newborn's every detail, celebrating connection. I hear my mother's voice, telling me as she did the day of our first meeting, of how she spent the last months of our pregnancy knitting a shawl, hoping that it would travel with me as she delivered me into a world of uncertainty.

My fingers wrap themselves around the fine, intricate stitching. I feel the warmth so long ago lost. (Novak, 2003, p. 58)

I am a child of adoption; in this story and others, I wrote of the stories of my birth and rebirth in finding a mother lost many years ago. I wrote of caring—as a mother, in my way of mothering, and my ability to care as a nurse. I wrote of loss and coming to understand and to know and being awakened.

The Stories of Now

My journey, now in mid-life, is still unfolding, filled with "miles and miles of reconstruction" (Kidd, 1996, p. 227). I, like Kidd, "cannot write an ending as the story keeps forming" (p. 227). In my quiet moments, I come to know that "I am still waking up, still crossing thresholds, still healing, still grounding, and always scraping up the bravery to plant my heart in the world" (p. 227). I take from these moments, and I story. I use such inquiry to continue to learn and move forward.

Brenda's Story

Narrative Inquiry: Learning to Look Inward as a Pathway to Healing

I tried to draw the number 8 using one flowing line. "Don't lift your pencil off the paper," I could hear her saying. We were sitting in rows on the floor; Mrs. Rooks, in her neat jacket and skirt, was calmly overseeing the class from the front. I could not do it. I felt the familiar anxiety: a pit in my stomach reaching up into my chest. And then relief, as Catherine, my 5-year-old friend, reached over and quickly filled my page with 8s, when Mrs. Rooks wasn't looking.

Thirty years later, I was mid-way through graduate studies when I enrolled in an introductory qualitative research methods course. The professor, Carmen, was different from the others. She was unhurried, calm, and speaking about research and life as though they were intertwined. "You have a right to your own story," was a refrain I would hear many times over the next two years. Oh, to know what that story was—to look inward, uncover, recover, bring forward, and restory (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). I had no idea how many stories I had, and how ignoring them simply strengthened their hold. That course marked the beginning of discovery: discovery of self, of strength, and of connection—*unimagined places*.

For years, I had lived a life of endings: being accomplished; being complete; being better. It was never about "just being." It was 1998, and I ran a busy consulting practice, designing and facilitating training programs for leaders in large organizations. Outwardly, I presented a poised and confident image. Inwardly, I struggled with unrelenting anxiety and panic attacks. My choice to pursue graduate studies came from a belief that MED credentials would finally bring my internal and external selves into alignment. I would be better "qualified" for my chosen profession and, perhaps then, I could leave the fear behind.

My story above, from kindergarten, was one of the first I uncovered. Apparently, anxiety has been an almost lifelong companion. Through writing, I re-learned my childhood, understanding experiences and events through new eyes. I saw where the drive for perfection began, and how early events forced a splintering of self. I began life as a compassionate and sensitive child. As an adult, I kept that part hidden, almost forgotten. Trusting a stranger with what had been secret stories was new (Crites, 1971). My final graduate project, *Living an Authentic Life: An Autobiographical Account of a Learning Journey* (Marshall, 2002), wove together multiple threads. Integrating my selves, bringing together the personal and professional, and blending stories across time gave me a new voice; I was awakening.

There was a lot of personal sharing during my graduate classes. At times, the emotion in the room was so thick I wanted to run. Somewhere in my educative journey, I equated silence with strength, and this public outpouring was unsettling. I came to class, participated, but never fully

entered into the circle. Although I could integrate my “selves” on paper, and express deep emotion, I was still struggling to do so in the world. I did not know what I feared, but that need to remain perched just outside the community was strong. I had a brief respite from the anxiety and panic; the strange symptoms disappeared and I almost forgot what they were like.

“I used to think of knowledge as something that happened outside myself. It was something you could look up in a book, memorize, and apply. And then I learned about the power of narrative to transform and bring disparate parts together. My brother died a few months ago. And like the rings on a tree, this new knowledge threatens to sever my soul even as it informs and...”

I dissolved into tears.

It was 2006, I was mid-way through doctoral studies at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto, and once again in a research methods course. Nearly ten years after wanting to run from thick emotion in a classroom, I was crying, choking on words in front of my classmates. There was something in the experience of saying the words in front of witnesses that brought me to tears. Only a few people knew about Brent. He died just days after our first meeting, and coming to class each week was an anchor for me. Annie, a friend who sat beside me all year, placed her hand gently on my arm, a connection—one I needed so much in that moment. And in the days and months, and now years, that followed, I recognize how important connections are. They cannot be made from a distance. They are formed, or rather forged, through adversity, and pain, and coming to know. Learning to connect my Selves through narrative has allowed me to make authentic connections with others. “As chroniclers of our stories, we write to create ourselves, to give voice to our experiences, to learn who we are and who we have been (Cooper, 1991, p. 11).” It was only after I stopped running from my own stories that I could find space to gently listen to the stories of others.

I wrote through the loss of my brother, eventually transforming it into my dissertation (Marshall, 2009). I gathered stories from other bereaved siblings through a series of conversations. For the first time, I did not need to be perfect from the beginning. I could evolve and learn along with my work. My research was an act of love and honour—a learning experience that was truly about life, and not a project to be experienced outside myself. It was not about credentials, or “being better.” It was about “being.”

“If you can, try writing a story about how you feel. Don’t worry about language, or spelling, or whether it’s good. Just try writing and we’ll see where it goes.” And she has. And the stories are emerging, and I am in awe of her courage and strength. Her son died tragically and she’s searching for a way through. Writing is opening channels. She’s never written anything before. I listen, and read, and respond—just as Carmen did for me.

Narrative is now a part of my professional practice as an executive coach. It’s also simply a part of how I live my life—in stories. Every

experience is data; I know that now. I keep emails and notes, knowing that at some point, I may wish to reconstruct these moments. I also understand the power of looking inward, uncovering stories, and seeing how they change in light of present events. Narrative allows me to connect my multiple selves to an integrated whole. My brother's death gave me my research. Narrative gave me a vehicle to integrate this dreadful experience into my life; it also opened the door for connection. I see narrative as a gift to be shared, one that brings people together and creates openings for growth. I look back at my time with Carmen as one of those epiphanal moments where my life took a turn that changed me forever. I am so grateful.

John's Story

Imagining New Identities through Poetic Narratives

A Dream Job

It's 1982.
It's Nova Scotia.
It's a dream job,
here
and now,
rented cars
and a budget,
responsibility
and independence,
proud
and excited,
a survivor,
 and gay,
 and out,
and then,
fired.

Another Dream Job

It's Nova Scotia, again.
It's a new century,
more than a quarter
later.
It's a new here,
and a new now.
It's a new dream job, too.
(Am I still dreaming?
Am I still surviving?)
It's three more degrees—
professional,
graduate,
doctor.
It's more rented cars
and more budgets,
more responsibility
and independence,
more pride
and excitement;
 gay is my MEd research,
 and OUT is a doctoral dissertation.
(Will I still be fired?)

In my Master of Education research (Guiney, 2002), narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 1991, 1994, 2000; Conle, 1999; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Drake, 1992; Shields, 1997) opened up a space for me to tell my stories. Bullough and Pinnegar (2001) were among the guides who taught me how to walk into that space, and walk through it. Narrative inquiry also allowed me to tell the stories of my participants, to weave their stories with my own stories to tell a story, or a selection of stories, about marginalization, exclusion, oppression, harassment, and discrimination. I wanted to tell stories because I wanted to honour the teaching and learning traditions of the community I grew up in. I was also, I would discover later, be drawing on ancestral traditions of storytelling, and in doing so, would be honouring the teaching and learning practices of my ancestors.

Despite my desire to open up a wide and deep space from which stories could emerge and in which stories could be told, the story that is at the center of the first poem above did not find its way into my narrative inquiry. Even years later, when I completed doctoral research using poetic inquiry where I told more of my stories (Guiney Yallop, 2008), that particular story did not find its way into my research. I do wonder why that would happen. Why is it that some stories get told and some do not? Why is this story being told now?

Perhaps what is most striking about narrative inquiry is not only what it makes possible in the moment, but the moments of possibility it opens up. For me, narrative inquiry was a beginning of a journey to finding my whole self. While storytelling was certainly part of that self, being a poet is also an integral part of who I am. Narrative inquiry led me to poetry, and poetry is leading me to a fuller understanding of who I am and how I live, or might live, in the world. I am writing my way back to the places where I felt whole, and I am writing my way forward reclaiming my whole self, with my whole range of experiences.

Whole

I seek it,
as if I'm not it, as if
it might be somehow,
somewhere,
found.

I began graduate studies because, after more than a decade working as an elementary school educator, I wanted to learn more about teaching; and I did learn more about teaching. I also began graduate studies with the intention of doing research that would create a space for conversations about sexual orientation issues in education. I later further clarified that by stating that I wanted to give voice to gay and lesbian students, teachers, and parents. What I ended up doing, however, was writing from my own experiences in schools as a gay child, a gay adolescent, and a gay adult—as

student and as teacher; my research was both a narrative inquiry and a self-study.

For my doctoral program, I knew that I wanted to further explore my stories. This time, however, something else opened up for me. I had written poetry as an adolescent and as a young adult. But my poetic voice, somewhere along the years of teaching, had fallen silent; it had been put to sleep. For my doctoral dissertation, I decided to reawaken the poet (Guiney Yallop, 2005). Among the many things I learned from Carmen when I was doing my Master of Education, was that my studies, while useful for others, were also very much for myself. Cornelia Hoogland (1996), my doctoral dissertation supervisor, reminded me of that whenever I hesitated in trusting my poetic voice. When I opened up my first email from Cornelia, the title of her newest book (Hoogland, 2001) appeared as part of her email signature. The title, *You Are Home*, held a powerful message for me. I was, indeed, home, both as an academic and as a poet.

When I arrived at the end of my doctoral studies, I was surprised to find how much I needed community. Two communities, the poetic community, which I had initially felt not good enough for, and the academic community, which I feel is my spiritual home, became a part of me in previously unimagined ways; I am a poet and an academic (Guiney Yallop, 2011).

While I am still working in Nova Scotia, after six weeks and even after six months, and while it's still a dream job, just after six months I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. And while I'm not new to new identities, this new one—person with cancer—frightened me like no other new identity did. I had a radical prostatectomy on April 14, 2009. Now, I'm a cancer survivor; that's not an identity I had previously imagined either, but once I was diagnosed with cancer, it was the only one I would allow myself to imagine—for long. My way of imagining myself through this experience was to write a chapbook of narrative poetry (Guiney Yallop, 2010).

I went to Newfoundland to spend some time recuperating. During my visit, I discovered that my maternal grandmother was Aboriginal; it seems lots of people knew, except the person who had spent over ten years doing graduate research about his own identity. I am now studying the life and times of Mrs. Mary Harvey (Crocker), my maternal grandmother—an Aboriginal woman who arrived in a small outport community and, rather than being absorbed into a community, or standing outside it, *led the way*. As a midwife, my grandmother was there to help children enter the world, and when people died, she, as was said in Newfoundland at those times, laid them out. As I research my grandmother's life and times, I am, again, coming to a better understanding of who I am. Narrative inquiry opened a space; poetic inquiry is enabling me to dwell in that space. I am becoming who I am as I write myself to an understanding of who I am.

Two Spirits

I am dwelled in.
I am in between.
I am whole
circles
of memory
and place.

As the stories in this paper display, thinking in narrative terms has become a way of life for the writers of this paper over many years now. We go forward from the writing of this piece into the new territory the future provides, knowing we will reinterpret stories told in the past in new ways and use them as we consider places not yet imagined in our present lives.

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