

# Living Narratively: From Theory to Experience (and Back Again)

Clive Baldwin

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Article abstract

On November 3, 2011, Clive Baldwin presented the fourth annual John McKendy Memorial Lecture on Narrative at St. Thomas University. The annual lecture, sponsored by the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative (CIRN), is named for John McKendy, PhD, a member of the Sociology Department at St. Thomas University and one of the founding members of CIRN, who died tragically in 2008. What follows is a transcript of Dr. Baldwin's lecture, with an accompanying film. A list of further reading follows the transcript.



## **Living Narratively: From Theory to Experience (and Back Again)**

Clive Baldwin  
*St. Thomas University*

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Good evening. Thank you for coming. I would like to thank also Bill Randall and Beth McKim and other members of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative for inviting me to give the John McKendy Memorial Lecture. It is, however, with some trepidation that I am here tonight. To be asked to give the John McKendy Memorial Lecture in Narrative is in itself a great honour and I can only hope that I can do justice to that honour in what I have to say this evening. On top of that, there is the list of august speakers who have preceded me who, I fear, have raised expectations in terms of insight, eloquence, and profundity beyond my ability to fulfil. Also, I don't usually have so many people as are here tonight potentially to disappoint

I was first introduced to the joys of narrative in academic life by my PhD supervisor, Tim Booth, who supported and guided me through the production (and re-production) of my thesis on Munchausen syndrome by proxy. In that thesis I explored how narratives of guilt and innocence are constructed and compete in the highly emotive arena of child welfare. I was privileged to be allowed access to the stories of mothers wrongly accused of MSbP abuse. In 2001 I was appointed as a Research Fellow in Health Care Ethics at the University of Oxford—to conduct research into the ethical issues facing family members caring for

a relative living with dementia. For three years I had the privilege of travelling the country listening to the stories of carers—and to be paid for doing so! Last year [2010], I applied for, and was appointed to, the Canada Research Chair in Narrative Studies here at St Thomas. The application process was pretty much “Tell us what you’d like to do for five years”—an opportunity with which one is not often presented. I am indeed fortunate. If this were someone else’s career trajectory I would be most envious.

The subject I have chosen, “Living Narratively,” stems partially from the theme of the forthcoming Narrative Matters conference ‘Life and Narrative’ in Paris in May next year [2012]. That conference will also be an opportunity to meet, I hope, Jerome Bruner whose work I have found both challenging and enjoyable.

In 1987, Jerome Bruner, the eminent psychologist, published a paper entitled “Life as narrative.” In that paper he argued, firstly, that human beings have no other way of describing lived time than in narrative form and, second, that narrative and life copy each other—both, in effect, being the product of thought and reason. This theory of narrative has, if taken seriously, significant consequences for the way we lead (or perhaps should lead) our lives. If narrative and life are to all intents and purposes fused together in a way, it makes no sense to try to separate them (for without one the other ceases to be what it is). The question I want to try to address in the time allotted to me by both schedule and concentration, is “what difference does narrative make in my life and the way I think about myself and others?”

I am going to approach this by exploring three aspects of narrative: first, the relationship between narrative, Self and experience; second, what Charles Taylor calls “webs of interlocution”; and third, the process of thinking with stories. In so doing I am aware that I will be introducing concepts and ideas that are not common currency in everyday life—that’s a nice way of saying “jargon”—and am reminded of the old joke of, “What do you get when you cross a sociologist with the mafia? An offer you can’t understand.” And with that warning—more to myself than to you—let me begin.

### **Narrative, Self, and Experience**

In the academic literature on the relationship between narrative and life we find a number of different but resonant ideas. For MacIntyre, for example, the “good life” consists in the quest for narrative unity, this unity being a long-term continuity embedded within narratives of a

tradition. For Taylor, the narratives by which we constitute our Selves are always framed by “webs of interlocution,” that is, the language (or narratives) that flow around us. For Ricoeur we form our identities through emplotment, that is, the process of bringing causal continuity to temporal sequencing or, in lay terms, imposing a narrative order on apparently chaotic experience. For Bruner and Schechtman, there seems to be no real difference between narrative and life as these are so interwoven that it makes no sense to talk about one without the other.

Opposed to this general standpoint are authors such as Galen Strawson and Alan Dershowitz. Strawson opposes both the idea that life and narrative are virtually synonymous by opposing what he terms the “diachronic” with the “episodic” and the idea that narrative provides an ethical framework. With regard to the first, Strawson argues that diachronic individuals are those who have some sense of themselves over the long-term—both past and future; episodic individuals are those who live more in the present and do not have such a strong sense (if a sense at all) of this continuity of Self. Dershowitz is equally opposed, if less philosophical. His position is that life is not, à la Chekov, a dramatic narrative. He presents Chekovian narrative as comprising nothing that is not relevant or important—if there is a rifle hanging over the mantelpiece in Act One, it will be used in Act Three. Life, on the other hand, is full of trivia—missed phone calls, unremarkable and unimportant conversations, meaningless accidents and happenstance. In Dershowitz’s view, narrative distorts reality.

I have to admit that I have a romantic preference for the diachronic approach—the notion that we have a sense of Self that extends into both past and future is appealing. If experienced, it could act as an anchor in the sea of life. And at various times I have experienced that sense of continuity, that rootedness in a unified life story. But, and it is a big but, the older I get the less I experience the whole of my life in this fashion and the more I find it difficult to hold onto that sense of Self through what is now 49 years and counting.

Of course, this could be simply a mid-life crisis to be resolved by purchasing a sports car and having an affair with one or more of my students. But I doubt it. I am not dissatisfied with my life—indeed, I am of the opinion that I am blessed beyond that which I deserve—professionally in a position that allows me great freedom to follow my interests with little if any supervision by the University administration—at least until I said that—and personally with Patty, good friends, and Jagger, my beloved border collie and the best dog in the world.

So what might account for the loss of diachronicity? First, as I have already mentioned, there is the simple reality that there is just too much to remember. Narratives, like maps, serve to locate us in time and place and to tell a complete narrative would be akin to having a 1:1 scale map. While such a map would take up the same space as the world (and thus be redundant), a complete story would take the same time (or more) to recount as the life it was about. Fortunately, we are blessed with incomplete memory—to remember as Funes the Memorius, in Borges' story, would make life impossible, for we would not only remember and recount the story but would also be required to recount the story of remembering and recounting the story and then to remember and recount the story of recounting the story of remembering and recounting the story until we are overwhelmed.

Thankfully, at some point experience does not get consciously remembered or old remembrances make way for new ones. A sort of personal version of the Larson cartoon in which a pupil in class has raised his hand and is saying, "Excuse me sir, may I be excused, my brain is full." In other words, we forget, or at least cannot wilfully raise to consciousness. And if our Self is made up of stories, to the degree we forget stories there is an impact on our sense of Self. Of course I cannot give you an example of this—for to do so would necessitate me remembering the thing I have allegedly forgotten—but I suggest that it is mostly common sense and it is easily demonstrated by asking you here and now, what you were doing on 13<sup>th</sup> April 1962, at 3 pm in the afternoon. My guess is that most of you do not remember. I don't remember it but I am told that I was being born.

Second, there is the blurring of memory, sometimes to the extent that the blurred memory becomes the reality. I know that I tell stories sometimes that would probably not stand up to forensic examination. But I would be hard pushed to tell you upon such examination what aspects of the story were accurate, embellished or fabricated, as I truly remember the events like this. Narrative theory indicates that we "fill the gaps" left by the telling of stories—and I guess that is what I do even with my own stories. In about 1981-83 (I can't even remember the year), I went to Moscow with my parents. I remember being hauled away at airport security because the security officers had found the bibles I was carrying (it was still against the law to take bibles into the Soviet Union). Now, usually when I tell the story I tell it with more flair and passion—large armed security, lots of shouting at me in Russian, etc. Now all of these make narrative sense but I have no idea anymore whether the security officers were large or whether they shouted or simply asked me questions.

Having forgotten or half-forgotten the historical events, I plug the gaps with things that make narrative sense—the “events” fit with an image of pre-Glasnost Soviet Union security and my bodily memories of fear—living out Spence’s dichotomy of historical and narrative truth.

Third, I know I have changed in significant ways over the years. Looking back I can hardly recognise the person I once was. This isn’t the disconnectedness that the psych industry might want to label as mental illness, merely a recognition that today I no longer believe the things I once did, no longer act in ways I once did, think the things I once did, have the same form of relationships as I once did, live in the same environment as I once did, and so on. Everything that made me who I was at those times is now different. To what extent, then, can I hold to a continuous and continuing Self? It reminds me of the old anecdote: “Ey up, lad, I’ve ‘ad this broom 40 years. It’s ‘ad four new handles and six new ‘eads but it’s the same broom.”

But this doesn’t mean that the episodic view works for me, either, for there are some aspects of life that do remain with me over the years and have the form of long-term, linear, cohesive narratives. Three brief examples. The first of these is a continuity freely chosen. Just over 14 years ago, Patty and I were married. Fourteen years is a relatively long period and as with many marriages, I guess, we have faced our stresses and strains. While these have sometimes been greater than at others, the commitment made in my marriage vows has provided a foundation and a continuity for my narrative of married life and, I expect, will continue to do so for many years (and hopefully decades) to come. In other words, there is a linear narrative that links the past and the future through the present.

My second example is that of my ongoing (though admittedly sporadic) engagement with the Enneagram and what I have learnt or know about myself through that engagement. A continuity through change. Though the origins of the Enneagram are somewhat hazy, it appears to have its roots in Eastern religion, possibly Sufism. The Enneagram is a nine-faceted shape, with each of the nine points representing a different personality space. Each space has its own unique strengths, weaknesses, foibles, and path to development. For example, the Two space is characterised by caring, empathy, appreciation, and affection, but also by the need to please and the need for approval. The Six space is characterised by reliability, hard work, dutifulness, and perseverance, but also by pessimism, defensiveness, worry, doubt, and suspicion. Individuals live primarily in one space but are influenced to a greater or lesser degree by the spaces on either side. Each space has a

direction of development indicated by the arrows and a direction of deterioration, indicated by going against the arrow.

I was introduced to the Enneagram over 20 years ago when I was living in a lay religious community supported by the Jesuits (the Jesuits are another enduring influence in my life). Since then I have worked with it, left it behind, revisited it. Each time I learn something new or at least consolidated something I thought I knew.

In the Enneagram, I occupy the Five space. The Five space is characterised by introversion, theorising, mental activity, hoarding (particularly of knowledge), and so on. Fives need time to prepare, do not like to be put on the spot or asked for quick decisions, and prefer open-ended processes rather than judgement calls. We question our efficacy and role in the world and consequently are happiest (or at least most comfortable) when we are living in our heads, spinning theories and plans that never need see the light of day. This is me to a tee. (And I am very fortunate that much of my job allows me to do just that).

In terms of development, Fives grow when they move toward the Eight, learning how to act in the world, engaging more with the gut than the head. Fives deteriorate when they move toward the Seven, becoming less focused and jumping from one idea to the next. Again, this is me. I am drawn into the world not only by part of my job but also in my relationships that call me to respond in a different way than a typical Five. Those of you who have seen me when I feel pressured and “Seven-ish” will notice a certain mania, an intensity that produces very little, and a more deeply-felt unhappiness that I am not living up to my potential. (Fives also live with the fear that nothing is ever complete enough—a peculiar sort of perfectionism.)

Enough of the self-analysis. The main point I want to make about this is that however I have changed over the last 20 years—and I have indicated a great deal of change—I still locate myself within the Five space, still growing when I move toward the Eight and still deteriorating when I move toward the Seven. The place I move from may be different but the space within which I move is still the same. I recognise myself each and every time I revisit the Enneagram. There is some form of continuity here, but a continuity that is blended with substantial change.

My third example is of continuity imposed. Many years ago I was very much in love with a young woman called Anne-Marie. Sixteen years ago, to this very day, she was killed in a traffic accident, being knocked off her bicycle by a lorry while navigating a roundabout. I still think about her and I still miss her—just as very many people miss people whom they love and from whom they are separated by geography or

death. The continuity here is that the situation can never be remedied; the story cannot change and so is locked into my experience.

So here, in contrast to the episodic argument, are three narratives that provide long-term linearity and cohesion. But they do so in different ways. The first is a narrative which I am committed to making happen; the second is one that remains regardless of change; the third is a continuity that has been imposed upon me and cannot change.

So both diachronicity and episodal modes of being fail to capture my experience. But even if these different experiences could be reconciled within some dualistic model, there are other disjunctions that, I think, cannot. As I think about the various stories that I could tell, I find that there are different stories pertaining to different areas of my life and while these may have some commonalities, they are not easily reconcilable into a single linear, cohesive narrative, nor are they reducible one to the other. They appear, and somehow feel, irreconcilable and incommensurable. Let me, again, take three examples.

First, I am, with all integrity, able to tell a story of a spiritual journey—from growing up in a non-attending Church of England family though myself going to church every week, being part of church life and finding some meaning and place in that, to where I am now: through various expressions influenced by fundamentalism and liberalism; through contact with the Jesuits (living in a lay Jesuit community and then for a short time in a community of Jesuit priests); to being an adult convert to Roman Catholicism, drawn by the Jesuits and the liberation theologians to a sort of romantic Catholicism, desiring a return to liturgical tradition and the discipline of the Latin Mass.

My second story here is one of politics. While, regrettably, somewhat less influential now than in the past, its effects linger on and occasionally leak out into other things I am doing. From my parents I inherited a concern for the underdog—my father was, as an engineer at the Post Office, for some time the Union Rep, my mother a teacher. At high school I was relatively politically aware and I can still remember where I was when I heard the news that Harold Wilson (the last of Labour prime ministers who might even be afforded the epithet of socialist) resigned. By the time I was 17, I was a self-proclaimed Marxist and at University I was active in student and community politics. Leaving college, I joined the Union as soon as I was able and successfully unionised the workplace in my first paid job. Progressively influenced by eco-issues and the polite end of anarchist politics, I became a member of an anarchist collective, joined the food co-operative and skills exchange, and more recently joined the Industrial Workers of the World, the

anarcho-syndicalist union. (Lest you interpret all of this to be more radical than it really is, I offer you the following interpretation of Anarchy in the UK. There is a cartoon, the caption of which is “Anarchy in the UK.” In this cartoon there is one person with a teapot in hand, asking another person, “Would you like some more tea?” with the second person saying “No.”) At various times, I have been supportive of CND, Conscience, the Peace Tax Campaign, the Campaign against the Arms Trade, the Green Party, Friends of the Earth, Greenpeace, Amnesty International, and so on.

The third thread revolves around my mental health. At various times, I have experienced bouts of madness, for want of a better word. These, generally, have been managed by medication (though I’m not a great fan of that) and some individual and group therapy. This history, while sometimes very psychically and physically painful, has also generated a reasonable degree of self-awareness and strength. I have been involved in self-help therapeutic groups and movements—for example, co-counselling (re-evaluation counselling), as well as more idiosyncratic “personal growth” type activities: journaling, spiritual direction, meditation, etc. This thread is not easily subsumed into a linear narrative such as Frank’s restitution narrative; is not as meaningless as his chaos narrative; and only marginally related, I think, to the quest narrative where individuals see such suffering as having or giving a purpose.

These three threads, while each claiming some linearity, are not easily woven into a single story. While there are overlaps—for example, my interest in the Catholic Worker Movement, the works of Jacques Ellul and the Christian anarchists; or the relationship between madness and capitalism as described by David Cooper and more latterly David Smail—these do not bring together the threads of *my* story adequately.

So here we have another image of narrative—that of the patchwork. My mother makes the most wonderful quilts and it strikes me that there is usefulness in this as an image for piecing together different aspects of life. Each panel might represent something different—for example, the panels in the NAMES Project quilt that tell of the lives of individuals while, together, telling a much bigger story—but are sewn together into a pattern that encapsulates the aesthetics of one’s life.

This patchworking is postmodern enough to appeal to today’s academic fashion in narrative—we are, after all, constructed creatures and there is no particularly firm ground in which to root our identities. I have been teaching, recently, about narrative therapy—a form of therapy that aims to re-write the stories of those seeking help in a positive way. In place of a “problem-saturated” story, a new story is constructed, called in

the subtitle of one text, “the social construction of preferred realities.” The problem with this is that there is no reason whatsoever (save personal preference) to believe or commit oneself to the new story, for if it is a social construction then it is no more “real” than the problem-saturated one that was the reason for seeking help in the first place. Our new Self is, in effect, as illusory as our old Self.

A second problem with this image of narrative is that it seems to banish unwanted stories to the netherworld. A quilt pattern is a pattern, not only in what it includes but also what it excludes. The very process of creating a quilt is one of selection—selecting both in and out. And so we need to somehow deal with the issue of contingency. Contingency, or rather narrative contingency, is the notion that the narrative being presented (performed, recounted, whatever you will) could be otherwise. That is, there is nothing predetermined about the course of a narrative; things could always have been different. All narratives are essentially incomplete. Other events, characters, phenomena, thoughts, points of view could have been included but narratives are, by their very nature, selective. Only certain events or experiences get to be storied or narrativised; only certain things get to appear in the story; only certain characteristics of those in the story are described. For example, *Pride and Prejudice* omits any mention of the ninjas and zombies that appear in the fuller version *Pride, Prejudice and Zombies*. Quite why Austen didn't mention the zombies we might never know.

So the image of the patchwork doesn't quite work, either. It is necessarily selective and it does not easily allow for movement between the pieces—what pathway links the non-contiguous pieces? Furthermore, what about those stories that we do not foreground but that lurk in the recesses, in our Unconscious, those we would like to forget (not include in the patchwork), but are part and parcel of who we are? I find myself reaching for another image that can incorporate the links and pathways, that can include distant as well as proximal memories, that allows for chance, and that is more flexible, less organized than that of the patchwork.

This I find in the image of the rhizome. Deleuze and Guattari make a distinction between arborescent and rhizomatic thinking. Arborescent (tree-like) thinking is characterised by linearity, hierarchy, fixity, and deep rootedness. In this way of thinking, the Self is seen as the result of the process stemming from the discovery of the individual in the 11th and 12th centuries and emerging from the Enlightenment possessive individualism of Locke and Hume to a humanistic conceptualisation of Self as individual self-ownership, rooted in that individual's history and

personality, consistent and internally and externally coherent and framed within a socio-legal discourse of rights and citizenship. In contrast, rhizomatic thinking is characterised by non-linearity, horizontal relations, non-centred, anarchic, and nomadic pathways. This image, I think, does not exclude or edit out those constituent parts of the Self that we might not like to present or cannot easily call to mind (as does the patchwork image) but allows for connections to be made throughout the rhizome (albeit, perhaps, indirect ones). We can enter the rhizome at any point, from which we can move to any other point—indicating the relationships between those things that we assemble in constituting our Selves. Thus I can find a pathway, if not a direct line, from those different aspects of my experience that I mentioned above (faith, politics, and mental health). This image also allows for distance in time and memory—the outreaches of the rhizome that are available to use but perhaps are rarely visited or perhaps even forgotten about until something prompts us to tread again that pathway.

The other feature of this rhizomatic thinking that I find helpful is that it can include almost anything in the construction of the Self. For example, Donna Haraway talks of Companion Species and how humans and dogs are mutually constitutive—that is, in their relationships humans and dogs are different to what they would be singly. This sort of thinking finds a wonderful expression in Michael's concept of the *hudogledog*. The hudogledog is an assembly of three actors—the human, a dog lead, and a dog. Together they constitute the hudogledog. Now I am particularly fond of this image because I know that I am different when with Jagger—remember him, the best dog in the world?

When I (Clive) attach the dog lead to Jagger, to all intents and purposes we become different to that which each of us is when not assembled thus. We become the hudogledog CJ. CJ is more instinctual than Clive and more rational than Jagger. CJ is more active and dynamic than the dog lead is on its own. CJ walks differently than either Clive or Jagger: it goes off at tangents that Clive would not; it restrains itself from going where Jagger might on his own. The tension felt around its waist and necks causes CJ to have a different gait than either Clive or Jagger. The hudogledog CJ stops and talks to other people and hudogledogs where the human Clive would not. And whereas Jagger would, given the opportunity, chase every squirrel he sees, the hudogledog CJ does not. The hudogledog CJ is more aware of its surroundings than either Clive or Jagger. It notices cats, cars, smells, and noises more than Clive ever would; it anticipates danger, anticipates the reactions of others, and sets parameters more than of which Jagger would ever see the point. The

hudogledog CJ is more physical, expressive, grounded, and aware of its environment than Clive alone; it is more rational, restrained, and detached than is Jagger alone.

Linked to this is the notion of “lines of flight.” For Deleuze and Guattari, we are in constant state of becoming—lines of flight. We are thus never locked into what we were before, though of course that is part of our line of flight and we are able to determine to a greater or lesser degree what those lines of flight might be. Thus we have queer and crip theory—creating the Self through the constant flux of assembly and disassembly of networks of constitutive actors—in rhizomatic terms, adding to the rhizome in a way best suited to making sense of our experience and Self.

I want now to turn to the second aspect of living narratively I mentioned at the outset: that of webs of interlocution.

Charles Taylor writes of “webs of interlocution”—a term I understand as encapsulating the notion of narrative environment, namely the environment created by the stories we tell about ourselves and others, and those stories told by others about us. These stories, of course, mingle and merge and morph to the extent that all stories manifest, in Bakhtin’s words, “polyphony” and “heteroglossia.” The first of these, *polyphony*, is the notion of a single voice incorporating the voice(s) of others, an incorporation that establishes a dialogic relationship between the voices—we may associate or disassociate ourselves from the voice of the other, but in both cases we are acknowledging the relationship between ourselves and the other. So, in my talk tonight, I have incorporated explicitly the words of songwriters, storytellers, academics, and so on. But implicitly I have incorporated the ideas and words of colleagues and research assistants who have commented on drafts of this text. Though it is my voice you hear tonight, you are also hearing the echoes and resonances of the voices of others.

The second term, *heteroglossia*, refers to the language and ideologies of the social groups to which we belong and on which we draw in constituting our identity—in other words, the language, values, beliefs, and so on that we draw on from others in thinking about and formulating ourselves as individuals. In *Meetings with Remarkable Men*, Gurdjieff weaves the stories of these remarkable men with those of his own journeyings and into the meta-narrative of his spiritual schema. In effect, he depicts the “webs of interlocution” within which he lives.

The image of a web is quite useful here for it indicates both proximal (near) and distal (distant) points and illustrates the links between them. If we imagine that we are at the centre of the web, we can imagine

ourselves surrounded most closely by the stories of our family and friends. Moving outwards, we are surrounded by the stories of our local community, acquaintances, and organisations with whom we come into contact on a regular basis. Still further, we have the stories of community and society; and further still, some of the really grand stories that cut across many societies (though I am not suggesting that these are the only, or necessarily superior ones), such as stories about the individual, scientific progress, democracy, consumerism, or freedom.

The narrative environment in which we live makes it more difficult for some stories to be told than others. For example, growing up, every birthday my brother and I would receive a card and a gift voucher (or some such) from a particular auntie. I don't remember ever meeting this auntie (though I may have), and I certainly have no memory of her being much talked about in the family. Personally, I imagined her to have murdered somebody and living a life on the run. Similarly, a cousin was, I gathered, not a suitable subject of conversation—I later learned, for his “inappropriate” behaviour.

A second example, the British Association of Social Workers, quite rightly, produces a Code of Ethics by which its members (and indeed, social workers more generally) are expected to abide. While I subscribe generally at least to the spirit of the code, there are statements within it that I find curious. For example, Section 4.2 states that: “Social workers will in both their private and their professional life avoid any behaviour likely to damage the public image of social work or bring the profession into disrepute”—the official narrative of the profession being that it is benevolent and benign. On the one hand, we might agree that social workers should be models of conduct. On the other, I do not think that social workers should be constrained from exposing bad practice or publicly exploring the hidden (and not always healthy) curriculum of social work, both of which might adversely impact the public image of social work. For example, I have published a number of articles in which I discuss misdoings of social workers, and in my teaching I discuss the harm that professionalised social work can do. There are, I think, some aspects of the profession, and quite frankly, some social workers, that should be brought into disrepute: not all social work intervention and not all social workers are benevolent and benign—and when it is not I think the profession needs to face up to that.

An example from further out on the web would be what it means, in my case, to be British. I grew up in a country that espoused fair play, tolerance, the stiff upper lip, politeness, self-effacement, orderliness, restraint and moderation in public affairs, self-control, and self-

containment. To tell an alternative story—for example, how Britain destroyed the economies of other nations through colonialism, or how the government is in thrall to multi-nationals and international capital, is to invite opprobrium.

The narrative environment thus encompasses everyday lived experience and the grand narratives so derided by postmodernists. Furthermore, the narrative environment nurtures some stories and is hostile to others. I referred earlier to a piece I wrote about a legal case that went to the European Court of Human Rights. Within that case, there appeared to be numerous attempts by the local authority to prevent full hearing of the evidence, to distort the evidence and the proceedings, and to silence the parents. In my reading of the events and documents, social workers lied; the *Guardian ad Litem* colluded; and the Judge prevented the mother from pursuing cross-examination of key evidence and witnesses, and did his utmost to prevent the parents from appealing his decision. The narrative environment of professionalised social work and the legal system so strongly favoured the local authority that the Judge could absolve the local authority of all wrong-doing. Furthermore, I am prevented by coerced undertakings to the court from telling you certain stories about the actions of the judge in that case. In such a hostile environment, it does not surprise me that violations of human rights took place.

But we not only operate within a narrative environment, but are part of the narrative environment of others. This dual positioning lays on us, I believe, an ethical obligation to take care. When we are invited onto the holy ground of other people's lives/stories, then it is important to remove our hobnail boots. If words have a transformative power, and we are all co-authors of each other's lives through the processes of polyphony and heteroglossia, then we have an ethical obligation to be aware of precisely what we are doing when we tell stories that involve or are primarily about others. In the case I referred to just previously, there was scant regard for this ethical obligation; so intent were the social services at pursuing their predetermined end, that a hostile and factitious web of interlocution was required to justify the removal and forced adoption of the child—in the words of the European Court of Human Rights, “without relevant or sufficient reason.”

How then might we fulfil our ethical obligation demanded by our participation in the webs of interlocution of others? Some guidance, I think, can be found in the writing of Stanley Hauerwas. In “From System to Story,” Hauerwas and Burrell argue that the test of each story is the sort of person it shapes. What effect will our story have on the sense of

Self of the individual about whom we are telling the story and what effect will that story have on others who hear it? In the case I mentioned above, the effect of stories can be traced, at least in part. The fabrication of two events by the social worker, in her first report to court, found a place in the paediatrician's report (reported as fact) interpreted as indicative of MSbP behaviour; the paediatrician's report was accepted *in toto* by the local authority appointed psychiatrist and so on. Stories thus have a life of their own, and if we are to set them in motion, I believe that we have a moral obligation not to deliberately distort or fabricate stories about other people and not to mobilise dubious meta-narratives (such as that of MSbP) that provide a basis for others to compound distortion and fabrication.

That, of course, is a negative obligation. A more positive obligation is that we should try to develop narrative environments that open up the opportunities for narrativity, that give voice to those whose voice is oft times silenced or ignored and that treat competing narratives symmetrically.

In a piece I wrote a number of years ago, I developed the notion of *narrative dispossession*. I defined narrative dispossession thus:

A person (or group of people) is narratively dispossessed when it is not possible to construct a recognisable narrative because of the way recognisable narratives are conceived and the means of constructing such recognisable narratives are denied to that person (or group).

The example I discussed in that piece was the person living with dementia. It was my contention that people living with dementia are narratively dispossessed because others a) fail to recognise non-linear, inconsistent and fragmented narratives as narratives; and b) do not provide the opportunities for people living with dementia to engage in narrative—for example, the very limited opportunities to tell their stories to a receptive and narratively literate audience (I will come back to this notion of narrative literacy). In other words, the narrative environment is hostile to the development of these dementia narratives. I argued there that in order to include people living with dementia in the narrative environment we needed to reconfigure our understandings of narrative agency, consistency and coherency, and emplotment.

If we are to contribute to the creation of a narrative environment that is nurturing rather than hostile, then we need to create the time and space to listen to the stories of others, we need to understand and

encourage different forms of narrativity—that is, enhance our narrative literacy, our ability to tell, listen to, and understand the nature and role of stories in our lives and the lives of others.

A second obligation, I believe, is to create narratively rich environments—ones that extend what can be narrativised and ones that incorporate the widest range of stories. This increases the store of what I call *narrative capital*—and allows us to respond in flexible and creative ways to others. The extent of our narrative capital determines the range of our possible responses and hence contributes to the narrative environment. Here’s an example. A little while ago a colleague and I were going to the York Care Centre, I think it was, and she pointed out a sign that said “Live dogs in transit,” saying that this was a peculiar sign as you don’t see signs saying “Dead dogs in transit,” so you sort-of assume that “dogs in transit” are alive. I responded with a story that one of my research participants told me about social services sending her dead dogs to the canine pathologist via the Royal Mail, duly labelled “Dead dogs.” Yes, indeed, there is a story for every occasion if only we know it.

So the narrative environment I grew up in fostered certain stories and not others. Along the way, I have added to that environment, sometimes deliberately learning new stories, other times just hearing them serendipitously. Others have told stories about me—not always positive or complimentary, sometimes destructive and hurtful stories. And as mentioned above, I am prevented from telling some stories by threat from the legal system. The point here is that I consider myself incredibly fortunate: I have a very rich narrative environment, drawing on stories from various religions, politics, experience, my family and friends, my research, literature, the movies, and so on. And I hope that this environment will continue to flourish.

Now, let me turn, more briefly, to the third aspect of living narratively: thinking with stories. This is a term that Art Frank uses in his book *The Wounded Storyteller*. There, he uses the term to suggest a number of things: first, that we should allow the story to take root, adopt us rather than hearing the story and moving on; second, we should enter the story and act with it; and third, we should follow the lead of the story.

Let me take each of these in turn.

Tony de Mello says that the shortest distance between human beings and Truth is a story. Stories, if listened to and thought *with*, rather than *about*, have the potential to side-step all our rationalisations, our analyses, our preconceptions. It is worth quoting him at length:

It is a great mystery that though the human heart longs for Truth in which alone it finds liberation and delight, the first reaction of human beings to Truth is one of hostility and fear. So the Spiritual Teachers of humanity, like Buddha and Jesus, created a device to circumvent the opposition of their listeners—the story. They knew that the most entrancing words a language holds are, “Once upon a time ...”, that it is common to oppose a truth but impossible to resist a story. Vyasa, the author of the Mahabharata, says that if you listen carefully to a story you will never be the same again. That is because the story will work its way into your heart and break down barriers to the divine.

This way of thinking with stories, of course, requires that we approach them in a particular way (though even if we do not, we cannot guarantee that one or two will not slip through our defences and explode in our heads). This approach to stories is one that requires us to read stories in a search for self-understanding, not as a means of insight into others, and de Mello advises that we read one or two stories at a time and carry them round with us for a while, allowing them to act upon us. This willingness to be changed by the story, or in Frank’s language, to have the story adopt us, is our first way of thinking with stories.

Here is one I particularly like: With the help of a manual of instructions a woman tried for hours to assemble a complicated new appliance she had recently bought. She finally gave up and left the pieces all over the kitchen floor. Imagine her surprise when she got back several hours later to find the machine put together by the housemaid and functioning perfectly.

“How on earth did you do that?” she exclaimed.

“Well, ma’am, when you don’t know how to read you’re forced to use your brains,” was the serene reply.

A second way of thinking with stories is to use story-telling as a means of understanding and resolving problems—to act with the story. In a very interesting article published in the journal *Cultural Dynamics*, Ochs, Smith, and Taylor demonstrate how families resolve problems through co-narration, that is, the joint construction of the nature and resolution of problems facing single or multiple members of the family. It is the hypothesis of those authors that while their data refer to family dinnertime conversations, this process of resolving problems through story-telling is a feature of much of everyday conversation. I am inclined to agree with them—I see this process at work where very often we discuss issues starting with an originating event, with questions asked and

details filled in, with possible narrative trajectories explored (what if ...), developing character through formulation of motivations, desires, and interests, and so on. In other words, we are thinking through a problem by developing a story around it.

A third way of thinking with stories that is related to this but, I think, goes slightly further, is to view narrative as a means of thinking ethically—by taking the story(ies) of those involved and attempting to construct a trajectory for the story based on what (and who) has gone before. In other words, to allow the story to lead us in certain directions. Much of health and social care ethics has focused on the application of principles—particularly, autonomy, benevolence, non-maleficence and justice—rather than focusing on the stories that individuals (and families) bring to that encounter. If these stories are the holy ground of their lives then, I believe, we have an obligation to tread sensitively. We can do this by listening closely to their stories, not just the content but the values embedded within the stories, the form the story takes, the desires for the trajectory of the story, and so on.

In 1985, Roswell Gilbert shot his wife, Emily, to whom he had been married 51 years. Emily Gilbert had, for the last six or seven years, been living with osteoporosis and Alzheimer's. All the things that had once given her pleasure were no longer possible and Roswell Gilbert was of the opinion that Emily's quality of life was such that it was time to act on her wish to die. So he shot her. Twice. He then phoned the police, was arrested and tried and found guilty of murder. At the age of 77, he was sentenced to life imprisonment, and that probably meant life given that the minimum sentence before consideration of parole was 25 years. Technically, legally, I suppose he was guilty. Morally, however, I am less convinced. The story as told by those most intimately involved, Roswell Gilbert and his family, was one of love and mercy, not murder, and this makes a great deal of ethical sense in the context of the Gilbert family, their values, history, desires, relationships, and so on.

Finally, we need to be aware of the work that narratives do in a person's life (including our own). Some stories get repeated time and again, brought out on different occasions. Such stories provide some continuity—some trace of the diachronic perhaps (remember the diachronic, way back when?). But rather, perhaps, these can be seen as anchor points or key stories that appear in any number of assemblies of Self emerging from the rhizome. Indeed, there may be clusters of such stories and when one is activated it brings along with it, or assumes, the others. By understanding the work that narratives do across time we come to understand ourselves and each other in a deeper way.

In conclusion, I am simply going to leave you with two or three of my favourite stories taken from, in turn, Sheldon Kopp's *If You Meet the Buddha on the Road, Kill Him!*, and two from collections of stories by Tony de Mello.

Here's the first. When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews, it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later, when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say, "Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer." And again, the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say, "I do not know how to light the fire. I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient."

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God. "I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer. I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story and this must be sufficient." And it was sufficient.

And the second.

When the guru sat down to worship each evening, the ashram cat would get in the way and distract the worshipers. So he ordered that the cat be tied during evening worship.

After the guru died the cat continued to be tied during evening worship. And when the cat died, another cat was brought to the ashram so that it could be duly tied during evening worship.

Centuries later, learned treatises were written by the guru's disciples on the religious and liturgical significance of tying up a cat while worship is performed.

And finally (and this is slightly adapted, the original involving a priest): A parachutist jumped out of a plane on a windy day and was blown a hundred miles off course by a powerful gale. Then his parachute caught on a tree, so he hung there for hours in the middle of nowhere, shouting for help.

Finally someone passed by. "How did you get up there on that tree?" he asked.

The parachutist told him. Then asked, "Where am I?"

"On a tree," was the reply.

“Hey! You must be an academic!”  
 The stranger was stunned. “Yes I am. How did you know?”  
 “Because what you said is certainly true and just as certainly  
 useless.”

Thank you.

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**Clive Baldwin**, PhD, is Canada Research Chair in Narrative Studies at St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, and was formerly Programme Director of Mental Health and Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Bradford, UK. He is currently working on a number of research projects: on the use of narrative in social and health care, on resilience and narrative, and on transableism (the desire to become disabled). He has published on ethics and technology, ethics and dementia, narrative and law with respect to child abuse, rhetoric in expert reports, and Munchausen syndrome by proxy, and most recently has published *Narrative Social Work: Theory and Application* (Policy Press, 2013), a text for and about social work.