

# The End of the Story? Narrative Openness in Life and Death

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Volume 9, Number 2, 2019

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1076530ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076530ar>

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Publisher(s)

Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative, St. Thomas University

ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Randall, W. (2019). The End of the Story? Narrative Openness in Life and Death. *Narrative Works*, 9(2), 152–170. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1076530ar>

Article abstract

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## OUTSIDE THE BOX

### The End of the Story? Narrative Openness in Life and Death

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In this 2019 John McKendy Memorial Lecture,<sup>1</sup> Dr. William Randall discussed how few topics intrigue us more than death. Yet few topics are more taboo—not unlike aging, with which, in many people’s minds, it can seem synonymous. But just as a narrative perspective on aging enables us to envision its more positive potentials in terms of meaning, wisdom, and spirituality, so a narrative perspective can shed a more redemptive light on death, presumably the final event in the story of our lives. Drawing on insights from psychology, gerontology, cosmology, theology, and literary theory, Dr. Randall used the concept of *narrative openness* to entertain alternative and ultimately enticing ways of storying the so-called end of life. [Video link.]

#### **Keywords**

Narrative, death, aging, meaning, wisdom, spirituality

I’d like to start by paying homage to three special people: John McKendy, who died eleven years ago last week, and in whose honour this lecture has been established; my mother, Emma Randall, who turned 98 today; and my dear friend, Bob Miller, who left this life on October 27th.

This time of year, poised between Hallowe’en on the one hand and Remembrance Day on the other, our thoughts incline naturally toward death—its horror, its honour, our fear of it, and our fascination

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<sup>1</sup> On November 7, 2019, Dr. William Randall presented the 11th 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, who died tragically in 2008. He was a member of the Sociology Department at St. Thomas University and one of the founding members of CIRN.

with it, too. Death is at once a depressing topic, a taboo topic, and an intriguing topic. It is certainly a topic of added interest to me personally, ever since my father passed away in 2017, on the first day of spring. I was with him when he did. It was an odd, yet powerful, experience for which I'll be forever grateful.

As a narrative gerontologist I'm interested both in aging and in stories. Stories tend to have beginnings, middles, and ends, while aging, alas, is traditionally viewed in negative terms as, effectively, the end of the road, as a "narrative of decline" (Gullette, 2004, p. 28), a downward drift to decrepitude and death. So then, I thought to myself, why not kill a few birds with one stone and begin weaving together several strands of thinking that, for quite some time, have been swirling around inside my head.

I stress the word "begin." Apart from a few pages that Beth McKim and I devoted to death in our book *Reading Our Lives* (2008, pp. 254–260), this is my first serious, and very preliminary, foray into territory that I in fact traversed on automatic pilot during my years as a parish minister, when I was dealing with death, directly or indirectly, on a weekly basis—whether it was visiting folks in hospital, assisting them or their loved ones in coping with their mortality, or speaking about them at their funeral.

As a narrative gerontologist, I look at aging through a narrative lens, which enables us to conceptualize the subtler and more complex "inside" of aging, and to see the more positive potential of aging as regards things like meaning, wisdom, and spirituality. Looking at death through a narrative lens can help us see it, too, in a more positive light. With that in mind, I'd like to explore four broad themes with you this evening: endings in stories, death in life, narrative openness in life, and narrative openness in death.

Before I begin, three quick disclaimers. First, the perspectives I'll be advancing in this talk are not meant to reflect those of others in the Gerontology Department. Second, they concern the concept of death in general, not the process of dying, which is of course part of life. And, third, this is not a funeral oration. I'm not pretending to speak to those of you who might be mourning the deaths of particular loved ones, whether those deaths be timely, untimely, terrible, tragic—whatever. That said, if what I say affords you some comfort in your grief, if it reduces the *sting* of death a little and helps you feel more at home in the universe overall—if it helps you experience more "stillness," as Gary Kenyon (2016) would say—then so much the better.

### Endings in Stories

The counterpart to death in life, I'm proposing, is the ending in a story. We expect a story to have a beginning, a middle, and eventually an end, if not necessarily in that order—as can be the case with detective shows, which in a sense start at the end with a murder that's been committed and look back to the beginning, to who did the dirty deed and why. But whether it's a whodunit, a novel, or a movie, we expect “the story” (whatever exactly that phrase means) to, at some point, draw to a close.

Let's take the Netflix series *Shetland* (Kane, 2013–), which I was addicted to this past summer. One episode picks up threads from previous episodes to carry the main storyline a wee bit further, while one season picks up themes from previous seasons and carries the *Shetland* storyworld as a whole that much further still. As viewers, though, we know that we are not ultimately in the realm of “The Never-Ending Story” and that the series must, at some point, wind up.

Back in September, I knew there was only one episode left in the final season that Netflix has available to view (there are 5 seasons in total). So, I kept putting off watching it for nearly a week because I couldn't bear no longer having the *Shetland* storyworld to crawl back inside of at the end of my day, to enjoy the chemistry between the core characters and to savour the scenery—ah, the scenery! That storyworld felt so comforting that I didn't want the feeling to end. In viewing each episode, my “sense of an ending,” as Frank Kermode (1966) describes it, was intensifying, yet I wanted to delay that ending as long as I could.

A story needs a sense of an ending for it to satisfy aesthetically, which brings us to the topic of soap operas.

While I've never been much for daytime soaps, like *Days of Our Lives*, which my mother watched faithfully until her macular degeneration made TV watching not so pleasurable anymore, I confess to having been addicted to prime time soaps like *ER* or *Nashville* in much the same way as I have *Shetland*. Yet in each case, endings in any final sense were perpetually postponed, even if each spring brought the much-touted season finale to afford us a provisional feeling of catharsis to tide us over the summer.

Postponed indefinitely or provided on a provisional basis, our sense of an ending lends an intensity to our experience of every episode, and within every episode, of every event. Seasons, episodes, events—all are pervaded by the deep-seated sense that this is leading somewhere and

that the current scene could therefore matter, maybe hugely, in the end. In the case of *Shetland*, I'm talking about my sense that the world of the story as a whole would eventually wrap up. And when it did, I was "in-between stories," as theologian Thomas Berry (1987) would put it (p. 187), and entered a state of mourning almost, until at last I found another series to crawl inside of. That said, somewhere in the back of my brain lurks the sense that, out there off of Scotland's northern coast, Detective Inspector Jimmy Perez and his colleagues are still traipsing around the wilds of Shetland solving crime.

That's the thing about endings in stories. They're never truly final. Take a fairy tale, the kind that begins with *Once upon a time* .... Even though the words "The End" come at, well, the end, they're commonly preceded by a phrase like "And they all lived happily ever after," which implies that there is actually no end at all: rather, more of a beginning.

Postmodern literary theorist J. Hillis Miller (1978) argues that the whole idea of endings in fictional texts is, in fact, highly ambiguous. "The notion of ending is inherently 'undecidable'" (p. 3), he writes in an article entitled "The Problematic of Ending in Narrative." "No novel can be unequivocally finished," he says, "or for that matter unequivocally unfinished" (p. 7). He goes even further, dragging beginnings and not just endings into the mix: "No narrative can show either its beginning or its end. It always begins and ends still *in medias res*" (p. 4), or "in the midst," to use Kermode's (1966) phrase. Miller's point is intriguing. In other words, there is always a time *before* the "once upon" and a time *beyond* "the end" in the realm of "happily ever after," and both times constitute the open-ended boundaries of the tale. But there is another way to look at this business of beginning-less-ness and end-less-ness.

We arrive at the last word on the last page, and in that sense The Book grinds to a halt, but not The Story. For any novel worth its salt will afford us no end of things to think about and no end of themes to talk about in the book club we may belong to. The story's "meaning," if you like, is indeterminate, open-ended. As a result, writes Miller (1978), "it's impossible to tell whether a given narrative is complete" (p. 5).

Completion can be mistaken for conclusion, yet a book can conclude without the story that it hosts being remotely complete. The term "closure" is therefore relevant as well. Arabic fiction scholar, Ibrahim Taha (1998–1999), distinguishes between two types of closure: *closed* and *open*. Closed closure, he says, is characterized by "well defined ... solutions to all the questions and problems" that the story has raised (pp. 4–5), and "leaves no room for more questions." As in many

detective novels, once we find out whodunit, that's all we need to know. End of story. Open closure, on the other hand, is "the absence of answers and solutions to questions and conflicts" introduced in the story (p. 5).

Instead of open closure, literary scholar Gary Morson (1994) employs the term "aperture" (pp. 169–172), instead. Discussing Tolstoy's novels *War and Peace* and *Anna Karenina*, both of which were written in installments, he says that:

In neither work is there ever a moment when all threads are tied together and ... the impression of completeness is offered.... Closure was to be replaced by aperture. A work that employs aperture renounces the privilege of an ending.... There will be no final ending, only a potentially infinite series of relative closures, each encouraging a provisional assessment made in the knowledge that it will have to be revised. (pp. 169–170)

So then, to cut a long story short, the very concept of endings in stories is enigmatic, and indeed all the moreso when it comes to the stories we might write about ourselves—to autobiographies, that is. "No autobiography is completed, only ended," writes narrative psychology pioneer, Jerome Bruner (2002, p. 74), muddying the waters all the more. As simultaneously the author, narrator, and protagonist of that version of the story of my life that comes to the fore in the course of telling it, I write about my life not from beginning to *end* but, in a sense, from the end to the beginning.

In an article with that phrase as its title, Jens Brockmeier (2001) reflects on the weird nature of "autobiographical time." An autobiography, he says, "is a story that is simultaneously about the past, the present, and the process in which both merge; and it is about the future as well, about the future that starts in the very moment the story is told" (p. 250). An autobiography, he explains,

is an account, given by a narrator in the here and now about a protagonist bearing his name who existed in the there and then. And this is only how it starts. Usually, when the story terminates (in the present, a present that looks into the future), the protagonist has fused with the narrator: I tell a story about someone who in the course of this story turns out to be me, the I who has been telling this story all the time. (pp. 250–251)

### Death in Life

Switching from endings in stories to death in life, death in general, I would propose, is also an ambiguous concept.

In a book entitled *The Field*, science journalist, Lynne McTaggart (2002), outlines research at the cutting edge of numerous scientific disciplines that points to the existence of a “Zero Point Field” underlying our physical universe. At the heart of all things, in other words, is *no* thing at all. Or rather, “in the space between things,” says McTaggart, there is “an ocean of microscopic vibrations ... a heaving sea of energy ... one vast quantum field” (p. xxviii). The narrative of nature that prevails in many people’s minds, however, is one in which the universe, with its billions of galaxies and zillions of stars, its dark matter, its black holes, and its vast, interstellar spaces, is deemed to be devoid of meaning, of purpose, and (except on our precious blue planet) of life. Contrary to that narrative, though, says McTaggart (2002), there is “a life force flowing through the universe” (p. xxviii) within which “everything [is] connected to everything else like some invisible web” (p. xxvii). “At the very undercoat of our being,” she says, “all of us connect with each other and the world” (p. xxviii).

On the topic of death in particular, and drawing on researchers such as Robert Jahn of Princeton University and Fritz-Albert Popp of Marburg University, McTaggart lends scientific credence to the idea “that individual consciousness doesn’t die”; indeed, “consciousness may live on after we die” (p. 195). As Popp describes things, “when we die we experience a ‘decoupling’ of our [unique] frequency [of vibrations] from the matter of our cells.” Thus, says McTaggart, “death may be merely a matter of going home or, more precisely, staying behind—returning to The Field” (p. 196).

In a more restrained manner, bio-gerontologist Leonard Hayflick (1994) argues that when we look at life from a strictly scientific perspective, the dividing line between our individual existence and that of the cosmos as a whole is, well, non-existent, and so by extension is the line between life and death. In a section entitled “How old are you—really?” from his eminently readable book, *How and Why We Age*, he states:

Most of the cells present in our body today were not present five or ten years ago.... The cells themselves consist of smaller units called molecules ... [and] all of your molecules ... are composed of

... atoms, most of which have been the same since our planet formed.... We are really composed of billion-year old atoms; we might actually claim to be immortal. In that sense, we are all billion year olds no matter when we were born.... The atoms in our bodies may have been part of the body of someone else long since dead.... When we die our atoms will dissipate into the environment, and some, perhaps, will become part of another human in a continuing pattern of recycling atoms.... This is the only scientific basis for believing that we, the living, represent a form of reincarnation. (pp. 17–18)

In her fascinating book, *The Quantum Self*, physicist Dana Zohar (1990) echoes Hayflick: “My body is made of atoms that were once stardust and will one day find their home again amongst distant galaxies” (p. 133). But Zohar goes beyond the level of atoms to that of the sub-atomic realm and offers us a phrase that captures what Hayflick, Popp, and McTaggart are all pointing to. It is “quantum immortality” (pp. 123–124).

So then, within the quantum field the line is fine indeed between animate and inanimate, or between life and non-life, to say nothing of the lines between matter and energy or time and space. But let’s zero in for a moment from the cosmic level and the quantum level alike and talk about death on a personal level.

Death in life is additionally enigmatic due to the fact that, just as when we follow a story in a book or on the screen, we are always *in medias res*—between the end of our life and its *beginning*: a concept that is equally enigmatic, as in fact it is in fiction too (see Said, 1975; Richardson, 2009). When, in fact, does “my life” begin? When I’m born, or before that, when Dad’s sperm met Mom’s ovum, or before that, when Granddad’s sperm met Grandma’s ovum and my mother got her start in turn? And so on and so on, back and back, ad infinitum.

J. Hillis Miller (1978) reflects on certain stereotypical ways of ending works of fiction—for example, with a marriage between the central characters or the death of one of them instead. As for the latter, he writes: “Death, seemingly a definitive end, always leaves behind some musing or bewildered survivor,” for example, “[the] reader of the inscription on a gravestone” (p. 6). In fact, death, he proposes, is “the most enigmatic, the most open-ended ending of all.” “It is the best dramatization of the way an ending, in the sense of a clarifying telos, law, or ground of the whole story, always recedes, escapes, vanishes. The best



one can have, writer or reader, is [Kermode's] '*sense* of an ending'" (p. 6).

Our death, it can be argued, is not ultimately part of our life. Our dying, yes, and we can only hope that it won't be long, drawn out, and painful. But our death, no. That said, our *sense* of death, which tends to intensify as we advance in years, can be a marvellous stimulus to *review* our life, as psychologist Erik Erikson (1950) first proposed, with gerontologist Robert Butler (1963) close behind with his perception of life review as a naturally occurring impulse as we age. This perception has inspired much research and practice in the realm of *reminiscence*, and has encouraged those of us convinced of the value of *narrative care* with older adults, of listening openly to older adults' stories as a means of helping them deal with the developmental challenges of later life.

Literary scholar Edward Said (2006) has contemplated the impact of this sense of our death on the so-called "late style" of many painters, composers, and writers as they express their artistic vision in the latter stages of their careers. He writes about how "death does sometimes wait for us, and it is possible to become deeply aware of its waiting. The quality of time alters then, like a change in the light, because the present is so thoroughly shadowed by other seasons: the revived or receding past, the newly unmeasurable future, the unimaginable time beyond time" (p. xi).

Said's insights remind me of a concept put forward by Swedish gerontologist, Lars Tornstam: *gerotranscendence*. For Tornstam (1996), those in "deep old age" (de Lange, 2015, p. viii) manifest a qualitatively different way of experiencing time, self, and life in general. In particular, the lines between past and future, oneself and another, *and* life and death are all increasingly blurred. It's as if each side of each of these pairs bleeds into the other in our minds—not as the mark of cognitive impairment but as a naturally occurring psychic shift toward the boundaries of our being. Indeed, we have tastes of such bleeding and blurring all throughout our lives, whenever we resort to homespun sayings like "one door closes but another one opens," or "one chapter ends while another one begins," or "it's always darkest just before the dawn."

Before I shift to the topic of narrative openness, let me share some excerpts from a book entitled *The Measure of My Days* by Florida Scott-Maxwell (1968), at various times in her life a psychologist, an actress, and a mother. It consists of journal entries written in her mid-80s. Reflecting on the life-situation of the very old, she writes that "we are

people to whom something important is about to happen” (p. 138). “We seem to lead the way into the unknown,” she says; “all is uncharted and uncertain” (p. 139). Then there is this passage:

It has taken me all the time I’ve had to become myself, yet now that I am old there are times when I feel I am barely here, no room for me at all. I remember that in the last months of my pregnancies the child seemed to claim almost all my body, my strength, my breath, and I held on wondering if my burden was my enemy, uncertain as to whether my life was at all mine. *Is life a pregnancy? If so, then that would make death a birth* (p. 76; emphasis added).

### Narrative Openness in Life

The vision that motivates many narrative psychologists is that we experience our lives as stories that we’re continually composing as, simultaneously, author, narrator, protagonist, editor, and reader. The key, though, is that we are *inside* of these stories. In the words of Gary Morson (1994), “we can stand outside the narratives we read but not outside the lives we live” (p. 20). Psychologist Donald Polkinghorne (1988) puts the point a little differently in his landmark book *Narrative Knowing and the Human Sciences*: “We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end,” he writes, and “we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives” (p. 150).

So, to try and encapsulate what I see as core concepts in a narrative perspective on human development, we are, on some level, always operating with—or perhaps more accurately, *within*—some sort of story about our lives. That story—or *stories*—can, do, and will change, to be certain, and as they do, *we* change, for, as narrativists of various disciplines would say, our stories are inseparable from our identities, our lives, our selves. These self-stories, these stories that we are living, that we are (in a real sense) making up as we go along—as works of what Gary Morson calls “processual” fiction (pp. 270–271)—are continually, although sometimes dramatically and intentionally, being re-storied, being re-genre-ated—for better or for worse.

In other words, our self-stories can empower us or imprison us. Put bluntly, they can be weak or strong, thin or thick, rigid or flexible, closed or open, and they can be beset—perhaps especially in later life, which psychologist Mark Freeman (1997) calls “the narrative phase par

excellence” (p. 394)—by any number of narrative challenges, among them narrative dispossession, narrative domination, and narrative foreclosure. Narrative foreclosure, for instance, which older adults can be especially susceptible to, has been defined by Freeman as “the premature conviction that our life story has effectively ended,” that no new chapters, themes, or adventures are apt to open up. In a real sense, we live in “epilogue time” (Morson, p. 279). Narrative foreclosure, of course, is a whole complex concept in itself and there are various reasons why someone may succumb to it at any age, but that’s a subject for a whole other paper (see Bohlmeijer, et al., 2011; Freeman, 2010).

Furthermore, we compose our own self-stories, directly or indirectly, in relation to the stories of others in our lives: parents, partners, children, friends—all of whom themselves, of course, are engaged in continual re-storying. As such, our stories and their stories are hopelessly and dynamically intermeshed. We’re in a real sense co-authors of each other and where my story ends and your story begins is impossible to say. To go even further along these lines, we compose and *re*-compose our self-stories within any number of intersecting, concentric larger stories still—the stories of the families we’re part of, the communities we’re members of, and the cultures and creeds we’ve been shaped by.

By a larger story, I mean a more encompassing narrative context, or narrative environment, or metanarrative within which we live and move and have our being. Narratively speaking, none of us is an island. How we compose and comprehend our self-stories—not to mention how we “story” death itself—depends in significant measure on the nature of these larger stories that we live within, above all the story of what we envision to be the proverbial grand scheme of things. Following the lead of scientists like Paul Davies, author of books like *God and The New Physics* (1984) and *The Mind of God* (1993), the grand scheme of things is fundamentally an “open system” (pp. 182–185), which thus places creativity and novelty at the heart of the nature of things.

Alluding to things like the butterfly effect, chaos theory and quantum indeterminacy, Davies (1993) writes that “the intrinsically statistical [or chaotic] character of atomic events and the instability of many physical systems to minute fluctuations, ensures that the future remains open and undetermined by the present. This makes possible the emergence of new forms and systems, so that the universe is endowed with a sort of freedom to explore genuine novelty” (p. 192). As geneticist, Theodosius Dobzhansky (cited in Berry, 1987) puts it, “the universe in its emergence is neither determined nor random, but creative” (p. 199).

In a chapter entitled “The Mystery at the End of the Universe”, Davies (1993) discusses the mysticism that has been experienced by many of the world’s most creative scientific minds (p. 226)—like those of Einstein, Heisenberg, Eddington—in which physics merges, as it were, with *metaphysics*. Summing up the view of such thinkers, science writer David Peat (cited in Davies, 1993) describes

a remarkable feeling of intensity that seems to flood the whole world around us with meaning. We sense that we are touching something universal and perhaps eternal... We sense that all boundaries between ourselves and the outer world vanish, for what we are experiencing lies beyond all categories and all attempts to be captured in logical thought. (p. 227)

From what I’ve been saying so far, I hope we are starting to see how, in the grand scheme of things, which is itself an open, creative system—or as theologian Jurgen Moltmann (1979) puts it in a provocative book entitled *The Future of Creation*, an “open, uncompleted process” (p. 119)—we are intrinsically *open* creatures, and on several levels at once.

To reiterate, we’re open on the physical level, given that the molecules, atoms, and subatomic particles of our bodies are in continual interaction with the material universe around us through such basic processes as inhalation, exhalation, and perspiration, as ingestion, digestion, and excretion. But we’re open on the neurological level as well, or the level of consciousness. Despite ten thousands of cells generally and thousands of neurons in particular dying on a daily basis, a sense of “I-ness” persists amidst this constant process of recycling and regeneration. And it could be argued that we are plugged into *the* Consciousness that, McTaggart (2002) would say, infuses the universe as a whole, the brain being far less a generator of such consciousness than a receiver of it.

We are open hermeneutically or interpretively, too. While the events of our lives are what they are and cannot be changed, there is no end to the interpretations we can place on them, the meanings we can glean from them, no end to our development as meaning-making beings. Narrative development, writes Mark Freeman (1991), is thus “a potentially infinite process” (p. 90). Or as I am fond of saying, there is no limit whatsoever to how much we can grow old—not just *get* old, but *grow* old (see Randall & McKim, 2008).

We're also open on an intellectual level, insofar as, in a universe as vast as ours, there are literally (apart from those we may place on our own curiosity) no limits to the things for us to learn, including learn about ourselves, which means we're open autobiographically, as well. And we are open both autobiographically and developmentally in the sense that we all have any number of "possible selves" (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and "unlived lives" (Alheit, 1995, p. 65) that can swirl around inside us, calling to us, haunting us, seeding our souls with all manner of unfinished business as we journey through life's stages. To quote theologian Don Cupitt (1991),

the stories we can tell about our lives have various subplots and loose ends. They are continually threatening to break down or become incoherent. We have to keep on improvising, stitching and patching, amending our histories. (p. 67).

As mentioned, we're open interpersonally too, in that where my story begins and yours ends is impossible to state. Storywise, our lives are interknit. Along similar lines, we are open "generatively," in terms of the ways in which, as gerontologist John Kotre (1984) says, we "outlive the self" by contributing in some way great or small, obvious or obscure, to the well-being going forward of our family, our community, our world, both while we're alive and after we're dead—which also begs the question, of course, where in fact does "my life" end?

And of course, as you know I'm going to propose, we are open on a *narrative* level as well. In fact, I see narrative openness as encompassing many of these other forms of openness. Not only are we, as Polkinghorne (1988) says, echoing Cupitt, "constantly having to revise the plot" (p. 150), but the very concept of a *life story* is itself open-ended. In the words of narrative scholar, Charlotte Linde (1993):

A lifestory is an *open unit* ... whose structure is not tightly constrained ... which is both structurally and interpretively open. ... We change our stories at least slightly for each new audience; we change a given story for a given addressee as our relation to that addressee changes; we reshape stories as new events occur and as we acquire new values that change our understanding of past events; and we change our stories as our point of view, our ideology, or our overall understanding changes and reshapes our history. (p. 31)

Narrative openness is a key criterion of what psychologist Dan McAdams (2001), not without controversy, calls a “good life story” (p. 663). As he sees things, “a good life story ... shows considerable *openness* to change and tolerance for ambiguity. Such a story,” he says, “propels the person into the future by holding open a number of different alternatives for future action and thought. Life stories,” he goes on, “need to be flexible and resilient. They need to be able to change, grow, and develop as we ourselves change” (p. 663). So then, when it comes to our lifestories, nothing is ever final. And we can stand to be, perhaps need to be, *more* open.

Jerome Bruner writes about the importance of “‘keeping one’s options open’ where one’s self-narrative is concerned” (Bruner & Kalmar, 1998, p. 324)—keeping narratively open, in other words, not narratively foreclosed, insofar as narrative foreclosure is linked to negative mental health, to depression, to despair (Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2011; Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011). Re-storyings, minor and even major, are always possible, *even* in late life. Certainly, identity-work and therefore storywork continues all life long. Put another way, no matter how much life review we may engage in, none of us ties up all the loose ends of our life stories, resolves all our inner subplots and themes. Narratively speaking, we are also open systems. Gerontologist Harry Berman (1994), who advocates what he calls a “hermeneutic gerontology” (p. xxiv), has this to say in his book *Interpreting the Aging Self*, based on his analyses of the journals of older adults such as May Sarton, Scott-Maxwell, and others:

And what about the end? In the case of an older person it may be necessary for the narrator to ask “Is my story still happening or have I arrived at the end?” As the horizon of self-understanding shifts, it may become apparent that we were not in the middle of the story we thought we were in the middle of. Perhaps we thought our life was a tragedy and all along, unbeknownst to us, it was a romance. Or perhaps we thought our life was almost over, at least in terms of the future holding anything new, and it turned out there was a lot more to it. (p. 180)

Perhaps my favourite quotation regarding narrative openness is from Mark Freeman (1993), for how it parallels the way—as with works of literature—that there is no end of meanings to be gleaned. “Our lives,” he says, “[are] like richly ambiguous texts to be interpreted and

understood ... whose meanings are inexhaustible, whose mysterious existence ceaselessly calls for the desire to know, whose readings cannot ever yield a final closure” (p. 184).

### Narrative Openness in Death

I said a minute ago that how we story and re-story our lives depends in large part on the larger narrative context that we sense ourselves to live within. The same is true with how we “story” death, and that would be my point. As narrative creatures, we have to situate death within some sort of storyline. One of the larger stories, or metanarratives, that compels itself strongly to us as a resource to draw upon in storying life and death alike is that of science itself. “Of all our stories,” writes McTaggart (2002), “it is the scientific ones that most define us. Those stories create our perception of the universe and how it operates.” Yet, “although we perceive science as an ultimate truth,” she says, “science [itself] is finally just a story, told in installments.... New chapters refine—and often supplant—the chapters that have come before” (p. xix). There’s the version of the universe envisioned by Galileo, for example, which Newton’s version superseded, only for Einstein’s, Heisenberg’s, and Hawking’s progressively more encompassing, and in a sense more exotic, versions to overtake in turn.

Yet even at that, given the version she sketches in *The Field*, McTaggart (2002) claims that “the story we’ve been told is about to be replaced by a drastically revised version” (p. xx)—a version according to which, “at our essence”—from the quantum level to the social level, and beyond—“we exist as a unity, a relationship—utterly interdependent, the parts affecting the whole at every moment.... If a quantum field holds us all together in its invisible web,” then, she says, “we need to redefine what we designate as ‘me’ and ‘not-me,’ and reform the way we interact with other human beings” (p. xx)—and, I would add, we need to redefine what we designate as “life” and “not-life,” and thus reform the way we approach and interact with death.

The story of the grand scheme of things that science tells us is thus a work perpetually in progress. In his book *The New Cosmic Story: Inside Our Awakening Universe*, theologian John Haught (2017) describes the universe “as an unfinished story whose meaning is far from having been set in stone from the start” (p. 7). He goes on: “As we follow a story (for example, in a book), its meaning at any present moment may be dawning, but it still lies mostly out of range. Reading the cosmic

story,” he says, “calls for a similar kind of waiting, a policy of vigilance inseparable from what some religious traditions call faith” (p. 39). Haught’s allusion here to spirituality and faith would not seem out of place to certain voices in the field of medicine, in fact, that are questioning the dominant narrative that assumes this life is all there is.

I’m not talking here about physicians such as Atal Gawande (2014), who, to his credit, boldly broaches the topic of death in his (to me, curiously) bestselling book *On Being Mortal*. I’m also referring to those physicians such as Raymond Moody (1975), whose book *Life after Life* caused quite a stir when it first came out, as well as more recent physicians like Jeffrey Long.

Long has established the Near Death Experience Research Foundation (NDERF), which to date has collected extensive qualitative data from over 4000 near-death experiencers (NDE’s). In his book *God and the Afterlife*, Long (Long & Perry, 2016) outlines the core elements of most NDE’s—for example, going through a dark tunnel, encountering a being of light, reviewing one’s life, and feeling loved unconditionally. In the last sentence of the last page, he concludes that “NDE’s reveal that death is not an end, but an opening to a wonderful afterlife” (p. 196)—a conclusion that, coincidentally, most of the world’s main spiritual traditions arrived at some time ago.

Eben Alexander (2014), an academic neurosurgeon who has taught at Duke University and Harvard Medical School, was himself technically dead during a coma that lasted for seven days due to a rare strain of bacterial meningitis. In his own bestseller, *The Map of Heaven*, he writes that “when I returned from my journey ... I was in many ways like a newborn child ... I had to relearn who, what, and where I was....” “I was a different person from the one I had been ... what had happened to me in the week I spent beyond my physical body had rewritten everything I thought I knew about all of existence” (p. xxx-xxxi).

I’d like to end my talk—well, actually, “end” is the wrong word, for all I’ve said this evening feels to me more like a beginning. Rather, I’d like to offer an extremely tentative closure—an *open* closure, that is, in keeping with what has become my personal mantra: *Openness Without Expectation*—by citing someone who was a man of science to the core yet someone of the profoundest spirituality: Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.

In his biography of Teilhard, Claude Cuénot (1965) summarizes his description of God<sup>2</sup> in *The Hymn of the Universe* as “vibrant in the

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<sup>2</sup> I accept that the term “God” is for many problematic, is a “closed concept,” to quote Eckhart Tolle (1999, p. 14), who proposes the term “Being” instead.



ether and through it he penetrates to the very marrow of my material being” (p. 37). This is a vision that Tennyson (1891) captured in a line from his poem “The Higher Pantheism”: “Closer is He than breathing, and nearer than hands and feet” (l. 12). Replacing key words in Cuénot’s sentence with language from Hayflick, McTaggart, Tolle, and others, we could rephrase it, then, to say: “Being per se is *vibrating* in The Zero Point Field—the Quantum Field—and through it penetrates to the cells, molecules, and atoms of my material being.”

Given McTaggart’s (2002, p. 196) comment earlier about “returning to The Field” upon death, here, in a similar vein, are a few more quotations that are vintage Teilhard: “Grant, when my hour comes, ... that I may understand that it is you ... who are painfully separating the fibres of my being in order to penetrate to the very marrow of my substance and bear me away within yourself” (1957/2001, pp. 56–57). “Death,” says Teilhard (1965/1995), who sees it in a real sense as the ultimate communion, “brings about in us the required dissociation; death puts us into that state which is organically necessary if the divine fire is to descend upon us” (p. 134).

My colleague, Albert Banerjee (2005) recently shared with me an insightful article entitled “Speaking of Death: Representations of Death in Hospice Care.” The paper reports on Banerjee’s experiences as a participant observer in an ethnographic study of hospice care in the Canadian province of British Columbia. In it, he reflects on the metaphors for death and dying that he found to be in circulation among nurses, family members, spiritual care providers, and the dying themselves, not so much in palliative care, where death tends to be spoken of in medicalized terms, but in hospice care. The metaphors that stood out were death as a natural process, death as part of the *cycle of life*, death as an *opportunity for* emotional and spiritual *growth*, death as a *journey*, and death as a *birth*.

On this last point, you’ll recall Scott-Maxwell’s (1968) question: “Is life a pregnancy? That would make death a birth” (p. 76). I may be becoming soft-headed in my old age, succumbing to what Ernest Becker has classically called “the denial of death,” being pulled by perspectives from science and religion alike that anyone in their right mind would dismiss as wishful thinking. But I’m drawn very much to this image of death as birth—or, if you will, death as transition. Not termination, but transition. But transition to what?

Pick a metaphor, any metaphor that works for you, depending on the philosophical or spiritual tradition you may be rooted in, or have long

since rejected yet continue to be haunted by. It might be transition to Said's (2006) "unimaginable time beyond time" (p. xi) transition to The Other Side, to The Next Chapter, The Big Adventure, The Great Mystery—"the hidden mystery in the womb of death," to use Teilhard's (1957/2001, p. 76) cryptic words—a mystery as mysterious compared to this life as this life must be to the infant, brimming with creative potential and overflowing with futurity, as it sets forth, kicking and screaming, on the short but uncharted journey through the tunnel of the birth canal to the unknown realm that lies beyond. In its end is its beginning.

At this point in my life, and admittedly this may be me defaulting to worldviews or metanarratives which I've been shaped by from the get-go but haven't properly critiqued, I find this way of "storying" Death enticing for how it defuses some of the fear that the mere thought of death can engender in us and replaces it with wonder. It reminds me of Tornstam's (1996) notion of *gerotranscendence*, whereby the older we grow, the blurrier are the boundaries between past and future, self and other, life and death. Accordingly, death starts to emerge as a matter less of *de*-storying than of *re*-storying, less as the *ending* of our life stories, stories that are amazingly open already on multiple levels, than as their *transc*-ending instead (Randall, 2009).

In any event, that's how I'll leave things for now, leaving you and me alike, I'm sure, with as many questions as answers—or like any story worth its salt, with lots of loose ends. Thank you.

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