

“Good Enough Stories”: Helping Couples Invest in One Another’s Growth

KAREN SKERRETT, PH.D., RN*

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This article utilizes key constructs of the narrative metaphor: that stories organize, structure, and give meaning to events in our lives. When stories are used as a way to understand the lives of couples, they have the potential for enhancing individual and relational growth. It is proposed that knowing both our own and our partner’s story and development goals increases the likelihood of making an investment in self/other and relational growth. It is further suggested that helping couples develop narratives with a sense of “We” promotes a more generative perspective. These ideas were developed in a small qualitative pilot study with long-married, middle-class, heterosexual couples, which suggested that the synthesis of each partner’s life story into a couple story promoted individual and relational development. Implications for therapeutic work with couples are presented as well as specific recommendations for ways to utilize the life story approach as an aspect of treatment. It is intended to assist clinicians and teachers in translating narrative ideas into therapeutic work with couples.

Keywords: Identity/Life Story; Relational Development; Meaning Making

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How could I possibly explain my marriage? Anyone watching a ship from land is no judge of its seaworthiness, for the vital part is always under water. It can’t be seen. (*The Story of a Marriage* by Andrew Sean Greer)

As couple therapists, assisting our clients to understand and make meaning of their life experiences lies at the very heart of our work. Much of the therapeutic endeavor centers around helping couples who feel lost, out of touch with what matters, and disconnected from one another. As therapists, we are challenged to assist couples as they grapple with some of the most mystifying, complex questions in human experience.

*School of Nursing/Health Sciences, University of San Diego, San Diego, CA. Chicago Center for Family Health, Chicago, IL.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Karen Skerrett, School of Nursing/Health Sciences, University of San Diego, 5998 Alcalá Park, San Diego, CA 92110. E-mail: kskerrett@ameritech.net

In addition to helping couples make sense of their experience, therapists also facilitate change. However, the challenge to simultaneously promote individual and relational growth is daunting. For example, the growth of one partner may be in directions incompatible with the growth of the relationship; individual partners may be working on very different developmental tasks and/or progressing at very different rates. When partners are distressed, it is typically difficult to shift their focus from their own distress and blaming stance to a curiosity about the other, and an even greater challenge to promote partner investment in the other's growth.

The aim of this article is to link the individual construction of meaning and its relationship to the development of couple meaning and examine how both affect relational growth and change. The ideas were developed in a series of qualitative studies which pointed to the value of helping couples develop narratives that reveal each partner's perspective as well as a quality of "We-ness."

THE LIFE STORY MODEL OF PERSONAL IDENTITY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANING

McAdams' life story model of identity (2001) has been pivotal in developing the notion that individuals in modern society provide their lives with meaning and purpose by regularly constructing internalized and evolving narratives of the self. Meaning making by making stories is one of the crowning achievements of personal development. It is the way we transform despair into hope, problem into possibility, make peace from conflict, and learn how to navigate life.

Stories begin to be actively constructed in late adolescence/early adulthood (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990; McAdams, 2008). Once begun, a narrative identity is a work in progress that continues across the adult life course.

Interest in the storied self-emerged in the 1990s with the postmodern and social constructivist approaches offered by Gergen (1991) and others (Shotter & Gergen, 1989). It is familiar to family therapists through the writings of Michael White (see also Freedman & Combs, 1996; Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004; Madsen, 2009; White, 1993; White & Epston, 1990; Zimmerman & Dickerson, 1993). These authors maintain that the meaning of life events come from the stories people tell themselves and each other and as such constitute the shape of our lives and relationships. From that perspective, therapy is fundamentally a process of story reformulation and repair.

Family therapy is rooted in story exploration. Gottman (1999) writes that a critical component to couple functioning is the capacity to share their stories, find meaning, and dream out their lives together. Pioneering family therapists Peggy Papp and Evan Imber-Black (1996) propose that one's meaning system, revealed in themes, dictates story development and shapes the domain of problems and possibilities for individuals. Once patterned, meanings provide the scaffolding for our stories and cues to our abiding vulnerabilities. Thus, identifying themes and tracking thematic patterns is not new to family therapists, but we have had a limited empirical base from which to support the validity of utilizing themes in our clinical work.

The projects reported here draw from the empirical work on life themes of Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie with adult men (1979) and Skerrett with executive women (1997). Both men and women were found to be absorbed with a central issue, called a "life theme," that they organized themselves around solving. The themes focused on achievement, following expectations, and behaving responsibly. The meaning

constructed gave shape and continuity to their life stories and served as a guide to decision-making. The life theme has since been utilized to examine disabled populations (Delle Fave, 2006; Delle Fave & Massimini, 2004) and found that individuals called their disabilities both a negative life influence and an opportunity for personal growth.

INDIVIDUAL AND COUPLE MEANING CONSTRUCTION AND CHANGE PROCESSES

Just as one's sense of self is crafted in story, so too is the couple narrative a mutual, ongoing creation. Couple stories, that is, the stories shared by both partners about their relationship, also lend a sense of meaningful coherence and a guide for engagement.

A couple story reflects a mutual identity that couples describe as experiences of "We-ness." It is evidenced by a kind of thinking that reflects reciprocity and integration of the other's perspective in one's own and has defining as well as adaptive qualities throughout the course of a couple's relationship (Skerrett, 2003, 2004). Fishbane mirrors this essential interdependence in proposing a dialogical, collaborative approach to understand couple life (1998). Other authors have proposed that working to enhance partner ability to engage as participant observers in their own relationship (become conscious of the "we") can be used in the service of their own change (Fergus & Reid, 2001; Kayser, Watson, & Andrade, 2007; Surrey, Shem & Bergman, 1998). Reid, Dalton, Laderoute, Doell, and Nguyen (2006) report that changes in partners' sense-of-self in the relationship led to robust improvement in marital satisfaction in two studies and a follow-up.

Another study, this one examining couple adjustment to the experience of breast cancer (Skerrett, 1998), emphasized the pivotal role of meaning to both individual partners and for couple adaptation. Twenty couples, all 18–31 months postdiagnosis, were intensively interviewed about their communication patterns, beliefs regarding illness and health, problem-solving techniques, feelings of loss, and other topics related to their experience. Based on analysis of the coded interview data, couple coping was categorized as either resilient or problematic. Resilient couples (85%) were identified as having a philosophy of adjustment that defined the experience as "our problem" and this directed their coping efforts.

A 10-year follow-up with 13 of the original sample of couples (Skerrett, 2009) revealed that meaning-making continued to play a role in the couples' capacity to manage the ongoing challenges of living with a life-threatening illness. The majority of the resilient pairs from the first study maintained their resilient adjustment and collaborative approach. As Walsh (2006) identified the importance of cultivating meaning for managing adversity and building resilience, the teamwork of these couples appeared to provide a template for responding to other life stressors.

Recently, Connor, Robinson, and Wieling (2008) highlighted the importance of developing a common couple story for managing a painful medical condition.

These studies raise provocative questions as to the individual and couple properties that help couples cope in more relational styles. Are interdependent individuals simply more empathic people or is there something in the nature of their relational experience that cultivates such qualities? Is it possible that what promotes the most resilient adaptation, sense of mutuality, and teamwork (We-ness) is related to generative growth enhancing properties of the relationship?

GENERATIVITY: YOURS, MINE, AND OURS

The midlife years are frequently conceptualized as a time of considerable identity work and the time that adults achieve their greatest powers of generativity as they focus on caring for and contributing to the well-being of the next generation (Walsh, 1999). Empirical work by McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, and Mansfield (1997) and others (Peterson & Klohnen, 1995) have demonstrated the salience of caring for others, leaving a positive legacy, and giving back for the stories of midlife adults.

Lyubomirsky (2007) writes that the generative behaviors of kindness and compassion are now associated with numerous life extending and life enhancing benefits and links the pursuit of meaning and purpose to long lasting subjective well-being. She maintains that meaning comes from having a coherent “life scheme” (p. 236) or life story and recommends writing one out and sharing it with someone. Perhaps both the identification of one’s life script, as well as telling it to another, would not only provide a broad context for intimacy but encourage compassion and other acts of generous caretaking.

LIFE STORY PILOT STUDY

To begin to pursue this possibility, a small qualitative study was conducted. Eight couples in later midlife (ages 51–64) were identified through convenience sampling and paid a nominal fee for their time. Six couples were Euro-American and two were African American. All were in first marriages, from 30 to 43 years in length. They self-identified as “middle-class with some college education.” Both spouses in all pairs were working full-time. All had adult children who were living independently and six of the couples were grandparents. Both partners agreed to be interviewed and were not receiving psychotherapeutic services. All signed a consent form signifying their willingness to participate and their understanding of the provisions taken to ensure confidentiality. By virtue of their marital longevity, the couples represented more experience with meaning making as well as the stage of life when generativity becomes most relevant. It is also important to note that, unlike early married couples who are just bringing together their individual histories, hopes, and dreams, our couples had time to develop their shared narratives.

The process for all couples was the following. First, they were interviewed individually by the investigator using the Life Story protocol adapted from McAdams (2001). See Appendix A. Interviews were tape-recorded and lasted from 1 to 2 hours. Each partner was also asked to identify a salient issue they wanted to change in their current lives. Once the interviews were transcribed, couples met again with the investigator and read aloud their story protocols to one another. Next, they were given instructions on how to blend their life stories into a couple story based on utilizing each individual life theme.

“Using your individual life themes, come up with a couple theme that you both agree reflects the story of your couplehood.”

Following this, they evaluated the overall experience with the investigator focusing on the following questions:

- a) Describe the process of identifying your couple story together.
- b) What was the impact on you personally and on your relationship of knowing one another’s life story?

Interviews from both meetings were audiotaped and transcribed by the investigator and two outside raters familiar with the Life Story protocol and generativity theme identification (see McAdams et al, 1997). The verbatim transcriptions were read multiple times, coded, and the coded interviews became the data source for evaluation. Reliability across all three raters on all transcriptions achieved 91%.

The theoretical framework followed the phenomenological tradition, particularly Giorgi's method of data analysis and coding (1985). Each partner's narratives were organized into the broad categories addressed by the interviews.

Specifically, analysis of taped interviews was guided by an interest in identifying an individual life theme (script) in the life story, identification of the relationship of the life theme to a salient issue for change in their current lives, identification of the couple story, and the presence of generative themes/actions in the couple story. The key questions of interest were:

1. Does awareness of one's life story clarify both opportunities as well as obstacles for individual and couple growth?
2. How does witnessing the telling of one another's life stories affect partner ability to support one another's growth?
3. Does the ability to blend an individual life story into a couple story increase relational awareness and sense of "We"?
4. What is the role of generative issues/themes on the development of a couple story and relational growth?

Because of the dense amount of data generated, discussion will focus on the central patterns that emerged and were titled by the investigator "the good enough" individual and couple story.

THE "GOOD ENOUGH" STORY

Each individual was able to describe their life story and identify a theme. Because of the basic homogeneity among the couples, it was not surprising to find stories focused on the midlife goals of working and loving well. No one reported recent or major stressors of any kind and everyone described themselves in good health. Most stories reflected themes of accomplishment, caretaking, overcoming adversity, and mastering the challenges of balancing work and family concerns. As McAdams (2006) has described, this reflects the uniquely cultural brand of American storytelling he calls redemptive: one meets up with an obstacle, works to overcome it, and becomes a "better" person in the process. While all 16 were able to identify a theme and a goal for growth, relating the two proved to be more complex. Some individuals easily made the link; for example, the man whose theme was "never doubt yourself" commented that he would probably be better off if he learned when it made sense to doubt himself instead of always "barreling ahead and making some huge mistakes." Seven individuals were unable to make such linkages. One woman said that she recognized the repetitive pattern of her theme but couldn't put into words what that might have to do with a personal task she was trying to master. While they were aware of various life events as problems to be overcome, they seemed less aware that their responses constituted either an example of, or an opportunity for, growth. For example, one

man described the 8-year experience of taking care of his 82-year-old mother (stricken with emphysema) as a string of problem-solving challenges, but did not describe the impact on his personal life or what those experiences meant to his development as a person.

Since the entire group of couples described recurring issues with children, extended family, friends, and work, a characteristic noted among the stories constructed by all the men and women could best be described as differences in reflective capacity—the capacity to intentionally think about the impact of an event, gauge its unique meaning, and incorporate that into a view of self. This was unrelated to the amount of challenges present in any given life story and unrelated to gender. Among the seven, four individuals comprised two couples. Those who had faced numerous challenges were not necessarily the crafters of stories with the most evidence of personal growth. Clearly, for some of these individuals, it is possible to go through a life beset by obstacles and not use them as occasions for reflection or the accumulation of wisdom. Although this project did not assess the role of personality and dispositional dimensions, it is understood that those factors impact reflective capacities (McAdams, 2008).

Despite the small size and exploratory nature of this project, a blueprint emerged which we titled the “good enough” life story. The good enough life story or life-script is postulated as one that has the potential to help us grow throughout our lives. The majority (9) of the stories in our small sample were “good enough stories.” A good enough story suggested the following general characteristics:

- a) An active, conscious interpretation of life experiences that clarifies how one got from point A to point B.
- b) Shows an internal consistency or overall coherence.
- c) Is generally characterized by motifs of resilience and the recasting of negative events into positive meaning.

Ideally, good enough stories would evolve across time into a greater balance of thoughts/feelings/actions, a greater flexibility of adaptive style, and greater interdependence with others (i.e., greater complexity). Gottman, Gottman, and Declaire (2007) emphasize the importance of creating a culture of relational positivity and future investigations should examine the empirical value of positive stories.

Our stories tended to display an interaction between the storylines created and the ways the individual engaged with life. For example, one 56-year-old middle manager titled her life theme “going after the gold” and lived a lifestyle filled with self-chosen challenges and risk taking both professionally and personally. She was encouraged in her adventurousness as a child, both by parents and siblings, and, despite a number of risks turned bad, she continued to “jump in head first to whatever comes my way.” One man whose life story was characterized by motifs of competition such as “besting one’s opponents” or “looking for the next challenge” wisely described being concerned about his upcoming retirement when he’d no long “know where to look for the new game.” Another woman, deeply religious, described the value in “waiting to see what life has to offer and then praying for the guidance to serve in the best way.” She lived a life characterized by charitable giving, volunteerism, and training therapy dogs.

WITNESSING ONE ANOTHER'S STORIES

Every participant said the experience of reading their story aloud to their partner was quite powerful, using such descriptors as moving, meaningful, surprising, and poignant. The experience of sharing something so personally significant was emotionally moving, triggering tears in several individuals.

There was something about just talking out my story all at once and having him listen that really got to me. A lot of this stuff I never think about anymore and to share it all at once . . . it was pretty overwhelming.

Telling that story about camping with my brother in high school, I just felt my gut tighten and the tears come. I couldn't believe it—such a simple story but it made me miss him so much.

The experience as listener was often equally powerful for many. The following captures many of the elements described by participants in talking about the experience of listening.

I can't say I learned a lot of new things . . . after all these years you pretty much have heard it all at one time or another. But there was just something about listening to him go through his life from the beginning to now that helped me get a better sense of who he is, what all he's had to overcome and maybe why he does some of what he does.

I remember that I started out this marriage wanting to be the best man and husband I could be. Over the years I've felt like a failure at both. It was so good to hear her say she remembered me that way—that somehow buried under all these years is the guy who just wanted to do his best.

The structure of each partner reading while the other made no comment appeared to encourage affect in the speaker and contemplation and empathy in the listener. Several individuals said that learning the sustaining importance of some life goal in their partner's story made them want to be more of a helpmate. The comments below suggest the genesis of a budding compassion:

You know I was always somewhat put off by her perfectionism—everything always had to be just so. I never realized she's been that way since she's a little girl, her father was so critical and mean that I can see how that was her reaction—never make a mistake. I can have a little more patience with her now . . . she doesn't have to be perfect for me.

His partner said:

That makes me feel so good—it helped me to share all that but to know you get my so called quirks is such a relief—like you might help me let go of some of that.

This is reminiscent of Weingarten's (2003) description of the outcome of compassionate witnessing; by providing an opportunity for loss and grief to be supported, pain heard and felt, compassion and hope can be generated.

THE GOOD ENOUGH COUPLE STORY

The couples crafted stories with titles such as "Caring and Sharing," "Giving All We've Got," and "The Green Team." However, two of the eight couples experienced

great difficulty creating a couple story from the directions given. They were the four unable to articulate what they wanted to change and told stories with less evidence of reflection. They gave a more superficial reporting of life events, with less complexity, coherence, or thoughtful interpretation of their experiences. For example, one husband commented, "I gotta tell you I really tried to think about these questions but I can't come up with much. I'm a guy that just tries to do what needs doing—I guess I'm not a deep thinker about much of anything." Particularly because these four were married to one another, it is interesting to speculate that an interpretive, reflexive capacity may be a necessary ingredient to the ability to build a couple consciousnesses and a couple story.

Most couples responded positively to the exercise, liking the emblematic quality to their couple story. Couples reported the exercise made them: (a) think about their relationship and (b) think about how "each part fit together into a whole." The use of the life theme as a potential way to blend their stories was found to be useful by these partners.

The following highlights and exemplifies the process for our couples by profiling the couple story construction of Bob and June:

June, a 51 year old teacher, named her theme "Earn your right to life". As the oldest daughter in a working class Polish American family, she had early and regular responsibilities for her five younger siblings. She viewed her parents as burdened financially and emotionally and carrying much of the "old country ideas" that one is only worth the work that they do. She grew to be a responsible student and a dutiful, if not creative elementary school teacher. Life got even busier as she married and then added three children to her responsibilities. Currently well into midlife, with all her children launched, she was beginning to slow down but admitted "I'm not sure I'd know how". She recognized being very uncomfortable with any options other than work and worried how she would cope in the event of a confining illness. Her 54 year old husband was the family clown of his large, boisterous Irish Catholic family of origin. He learned early that he could always bring a smile to his mother's face and he liked how that felt. Growing to adulthood, he cultivated the jokester role, finding it a "way to win the girls" and "stay out of conflicts at the office". While not going so far as to call it his development goal, he did allude to the increasing awareness that the class clown persona was wearing thin and that he was getting tired of trying so hard to please others. He called his life theme: "Keep everybody happy."

They had an interesting conversation in trying to come up with their couple story. They understood their mutual attraction as "people pleasers" who were focused on the expectations and caretaking of others. They first titled their couple story: "Give 'um what they want." Later, they spontaneously recognized that the most enduring conflict in their marriage was "not having enough left over for each other." June commented that realizing how far the pleaser quality went back for Bob made her feel less critical of his "passive, go with the flow attitude." They came up with an alternative couple story title that they thought best reflected them now, or "where they would like to head" (growing edge). "Pleasing ourselves and each other" was what they said they would aim for and they even began to talk about what that might look like (i.e., travel, working 4 day weeks, going on more walks together, etc.).

The task of creating a couple story complete with title appeared to help couples expand their awareness of relationship. Couple conversations were peppered by the

spontaneous use of “we” and/or “our” and many stated that they liked thinking of their relationship in such “mutual” ways. One woman said:

We’ve been together so long now, I don’t particularly think about an Us anymore . . . guess I take it for granted. I liked the way trying to blend our stories made me remember the big picture and feel more connected to each other.

Her partner said:

Yeah, I get accused of just thinking about myself—what do I have to do, what do I want . . . I can forget about us.

THE GOOD ENOUGH STORIES: GENERATIVITY AND GROWTH OF SELF IN RELATIONSHIP

The individual life stories reflecting the most generativity were also the most generative couple stories. They were made by the couples who most easily fashioned couple stories that bore titles like: “Doing Better Together” and “Giving All We’ve Got.” As individuals, they tended to be engaged, proactive people concerned with social action, political causes, and being available to friends and family. These pairs spoke about the strength they experienced in knowing that they held shared goals and that they were interested in making the world a better place.

I don’t know that I could do what I do (volunteer work) without Sandy’s support. She tells me she thinks it’s important, doesn’t nag me when I’m home late, even goes to a meeting in my place now and then. We’ve also raised our kids to be that way—not always looking out for #1 but to see beyond themselves a bit. Even if we’re apart, we’re together on what we think is important.

She added: That’s good to know but you’d do the same for me, for sure. When I had my floundering period after Terry went off to school, you reminded me that I liked to help out at church. I went back to that & it got me out of my slump.

Many of the couple stories reflected an awareness, albeit expressed differently, that the shared vision (the we-ness of their partnership) was a quality that not only helped them adjust to life’s challenges but also helped them develop as individuals. However, they also commented that this awareness was not something they typically thought about or communicated. The majority remarked that becoming more aware of their partner’s life story and, particularly, the patterns and overall continuity to their concerns had the effect of wanting them to be more available to their partners to help, support, or to continue achieving their goals. As one woman said: “This just really helped us get back to the big picture. I can get so caught up in the minutia—in the everyday stuff, I lose track of where we’ve been together. Comforting to know we’re still headed in the same direction and that we can help each other get there.” In follow-up contacts, several commented that since doing the mutual life story readings, they referred back to what had been shared, asked new questions, and offered help on a story-related project or agenda.

CLINICAL APPLICATIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

It is essential to view these pilot findings in light of the limitations of size, self-selection, design, and as not generalizable beyond the scope of this exploratory project. The pilot was intended to identify properties of couple functioning through story analysis and objective measures of individual/couple well-being were not assessed. It is recommended that future research explore possible correlations between a “good enough” couple story and measures of satisfaction and optimal functioning.

Our data did suggest that by expanding partner perspectives as to the meaning, continuity, and importance of each other’s life concerns (via life theme), partners were better able to understand and invest in the other’s change processes. If Bob and June were to present for therapy, helping them isolate the themes/scripts that had outlived their usefulness could focus change efforts. If they were able to identify with the value of shifting away from an external focus back toward self (and then toward one another), their appreciation for mutual vulnerabilities could contribute toward compassionate caretaking.

Thus, the greatest potential of this work may be to help couples make the development goals for self, partner, and the relationship explicit, conscious, and intentional. A structured storytelling experience, particularly in abbreviated form, may be a useful adjunct to clinical work with couples. It may prove valuable in normalizing, contextualizing, and establishing linkages between the presenting problems and development goals, thus identifying possible avenues for focused change. It may also interrupt the problem saturated storylines with which couples initiate therapy, help them gain a bigger picture, and embed their “presenting problem” within thematically patterned life struggles (in self and other). It may be thought of as an example of level one and level two interventions in the multilevel approach outlined by Schenkman (2008).

Based on highlights of the project findings, a clinical sequence is proposed below:

1. Request that each partner write a brief version of their life story to bring to a session and read aloud to one another. These would not only include current goals, but hopes and dreams for the future.
2. Help each identify the relationship of the presenting problem, as they see it to a key issue each is working on in terms of their personal development.
3. Teach the 3R process:

Reflect: Spend time in quiet meditation in which each reflects on their life theme and how it is manifesting in their current life.

Reorganize: Rebalance the components of their theme in light of their presenting problem.

Recreate: Rewrite the problem in the direction of positive outcome(s).

4. Share the above with their partner.
5. Help them blend their individual stories into a couple story, utilizing the life themes of each and the developmental issue identified as relevant.

6. Help them identify the challenges for the relationship posed in the couple story.
7. Recommend utilizing the 3R process again to identify ways to revise their couple story so as to support both individual and relational growth.
8. Identify a plan of action to support the above and reinforce with regular practice.

This sequence could be modified to adjust to the unique needs of particular couples, done in varying combinations of in- and out-of-session work, and recycled as new problems emerge.

CREATING MEANINGFUL STORIES/SHAPING VITAL LIVES

In summary, our exploratory project outlines some advantages to systematically examining life stories in order to deepen our understanding of couple life. Results suggest a value in learning to consciously identify one's abiding challenges and to reframe them in the direction of greater optimism and resilience. It would be fruitful to explore these preliminary hypotheses in future research. As Siegel (2007) states, health and vitality may rest on the development of systemic complexity—defined by the integration or linkage of differentiated parts. Moving individual and couple stories toward increasing complexity helps us shift a system toward flexibility, stability, and adaptation. Just as developing integrated, cohesive life stories fosters parent/child attachment (Siegel, 2007), learning to tell cohesive individual and couple narratives may foster couple connection/attachment and enhance generativity.

Finally, stories are made to be told. The experiences of our couples suggested that sharing life stories with one another enhanced relational consciousness and compassion. Increased awareness of one's individual and couple story over time may have the potential to function as a kind of template, or roadmap, that helps couples craft lives in which both may flourish.

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APPENDIX A: LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

I would like you to begin by thinking about your life as if it were a book. Each part of your life composes a chapter in the book. Please divide your life into its major chapters and briefly describe each chapter. You may have as few or as many chapters as you like, but I would suggest dividing it into at least two or three chapters and at most about seven or eight. Think of this as a general table of contents for your book. Give each chapter a name and describe the overall contents of each chapter. Discuss briefly what makes for a transition from one chapter to the next. Just give me a sense of the story's outline—the major chapters in your life.

I am going to ask you about eight key events. A key event should be a specific happening, a critical incident, a significant episode in your past set in a particular time and place. Think of such an event as constituting a specific moment in your life that stands out for some reason. For each event, describe in detail what happened, where you were, who was involved, what you did, and what you were thinking and feeling in the event. Also, try to convey the impact this key event has had in your life story and what this event says about who you are or were as a person. Did this event change you in any way? If so, in what way? Be specific.

The eight key events are:

1. Peak experience: A high point in the life story—the most wonderful moment in your life.
2. Nadir experience: A low point in the life story.
3. Turning point: An episode wherein you underwent a significant change in your understanding of yourself. It isn't necessary that you comprehended the turning point when it happened. What is important is that now, in retrospect, you see the event as a turning point or as symbolizing a significant change in your life.
4. Earliest memory.
5. An important childhood memory.
6. An important adolescent memory.
7. An important adult memory.
8. Other important memory.

Every person's life story is populated by a few significant people who have a major impact on the narrative. These may include, but not be limited to, parents, children, siblings, spouses, lovers, friends, teachers, coworkers, and mentors. Please describe four of the most important people in your life story. At least one of these should be a person to whom you are not related. Please specify the kind of relationship you had or have with each person and the specific way he or she has had an impact on your life story. After describing each of these, tell me about any particular heroes or heroines you have in your life.

Now that you have told me a little bit about your past and present, I would like you to consider the future. As your life story extends into the future, what might be the

script or plan for what is to happen next in your life? Outline your overall plan or dream for the future. Also tell me how, if at all, your dream plan or outline enables you to (1) be creative in the future and (2) make a contribution to others.

Looking back over your entire life story as a book with chapters, episodes, and characters, can you discern a central theme, message, or idea that runs throughout the text?

What is the major theme of your life? Explain.