Chapter 1. The Funeral of a Lifetime: Narrative, Memory, and Purpose in Human Life

> Now that I write all this down, I'm not sure it's the way it was. It's all so hazy and dreamlike; it's like I was telling someone else's story rather than mine.
>
> – *Dubravka Ugrešić,* The Ministry of Pain

> The past is never dead. It's not even past.
>
> – *William Faulkner,* Requiem for a Nun

Madeline Szerafinski was born on September 13, 1932. She died on November 17, 2016. Her funeral service was held at Saint Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church a few weeks later in early December in Lanham, Maryland, where she had lived for much of her life. I attended the service with several of my family members. I was not prepared for the experience.

This is a true story about her funeral.

~~~

Before trying to tell that true story, I must pause to acknowledge that if I were writing this account twenty or thirty years ago, as an eager graduate student and then an assistant professor seeking to establish himself as a scholar, I would be telling a different story about Madeline's funeral. I would have been focused on providing an accurate account of the event, with the kind of vivid detail that would engage readers, accompanied by a theoretical analysis that would speak to other scholars in the field. I would have been focused on producing a text that would, in theory, capture the experience of that funeral and, ideally, become part of the ongoing scholarly conversations about writing to which I was so fervently seeking to contribute. I would have been writing for readers—editors and reviewers and scholars who constituted the audience for the journals in which I hoped to publish—who could validate my arguments. And this text you are reading would have been shaped by my interactions with the editors of those journals, editors who might have rejected my manuscript or mandated revisions or helped me refine my text to fit the perceived needs of their audiences and meet the standards for scholarly writing that they are charged to uphold. Over the years of my career, I sometimes disagreed and even argued with journal or book editors about my manuscripts, as writers will do, but those many interactions, as frustrating as they sometimes were, taught me, despite myself, how to be
~~~

a scholarly writer, a published academic author, who was not paid for his work (as I had been when I was writing nonfiction articles for magazines and newspapers and a children's book for a trade publisher). All these experiences no doubt changed my writing in discernible ways, and they reinforced my conception of writing as textual production; they reinforced my sense of what it means to be a writer, in this case an academic one. My writing and my emerging identity as a scholar were inseparable.

As I am writing this today, however, I am not thinking so much about this text I am producing or the editors who might at some point evaluate it. I am not imagining a rhetorical situation for which I am striving to craft a text that fulfills a rhetorical purpose—except, perhaps, at this very moment as I am writing to explain what I am *not* doing. Instead, I am writing, in this moment, to confront questions the answers to which I don't know in this moment. I understand that, as I am approaching the end of my career as scholarly writer, I face fewer pressures to adapt to trends in my scholarly fields, to create texts that editors want and readers expect. I recognize the luxury—and privilege—of being in this position and how it might shape *this* writing. But I also have come to view writing—*this* writing—differently from how I viewed writing—*any* writing—for most of my career. This, I think, is part of what it means to evolve—to develop—as a writer who sees value in writing: how one understands writing matters. The way a writer conceptualizes *writing* is as much a part of the process of writing as any technical skill or knowledge that the writer has developed over time through sustained practice and study. And as I am writing in this moment, this act of writing is driven by the view that being in this moment in the writing is more important than *what* I am writing—and more important than what you are reading in this moment sometime in my future. For my experience of writing in *this* moment is one of trying to understand past experiences that, it seems to me, have influenced my life, not only as a writer but also as a human being. And I am trying to make sense of my life—as a writer and as a human being—by trying to understand Madeline's life, by trying to write a true story about her life, a story that, for reasons that I am only just now coming to understand, matters so much to me—a story that, I am realizing in this moment, begins with her funeral.

~~~

As I am writing in this moment, I am approaching my 64th birthday, and I have been to more funerals than I care to remember: all four of my grandparents, including my maternal grandfather, who died when I was just ten years old, and whose funeral was the most painful experience of my young life to that point; two of my wife's grandparents, one of whom—her grandmother—took us in when we were a young family with a newborn, just after my parents had to close their restaurant, where I was working at the time, leaving me without a steady income; my wife's younger sister, Jodi, who died when she was only fourteen in a car crash
~~~

that killed seven other teens, in the same year that we were married; my father-in-law (many years later), whose inconsolable grief at Jodi's funeral remains seared in my memory; my youngest sister, Cindy, who died suddenly of a brain aneurysm when she was forty-four, leaving three teen-aged children without a mother and my parents without their youngest child; my nephew, Garrett, who died at age 26 of a drug overdose and whose memorial service in the spring of 2021, as the COVID-19 pandemic continued to rage, filled the church with more than 700 grief-stricken people—in violation of the county's COVID-19 safety protocols at the time; and many other uncles and aunts and friends and colleagues. Many of those services were unrelentingly sad and painful events. My memories of them can still hurt. But none of those experiences was quite like Madeline's funeral service, and none affected me in quite the way hers did.

Mostly, I remember it, some six years later as I am writing in this moment, as an exuberant and colorful affair. It was both traditional and unconventional, respectful and a bit irreverent at the same time. The service was a traditional Catholic funeral mass, consecrated by Father Defayette, who, as best I could tell, had been Madeline's pastor and friend and who shared, during his sermon, some of the conversations he had had with her while she was suffering from the cancer that killed her. Madeline was a devout Catholic all her life, despite leaving the convent to which she had given some twenty years of her life as a sister of the Bernardine Franciscan Order. She left the convent but she never left the Church. There was no question that her funeral service would be celebrated as a Catholic mass. And because I was raised as a Catholic and had attended thousands of masses and services in Catholic churches, Madeline's funeral service felt familiar. At first.

I had traveled to Maryland to attend the service with my sister and mother along with some other relatives. We drove from Scranton, Pennsylvania, where I grew up and where most of my extended family members live, to Lanham, arriving on the evening before the service. In the morning, we found our way to the church where the funeral mass would be said. There was a crowd, but the church—a large, open structure of contemporary design—was not full. Madeline's blood family members, who are White, sat mostly together in the front rows of the church on the left-hand side of the main aisle. Her late husband Earle's family, who are Black, sat on the right. A few rows behind them sat about twenty-five or thirty people of various ages dressed in brilliantly colored traditional African robes. All of them were Black. The women in this group wore striking headdresses, and some of the men wore kufis. As a group, they seemed out of place in that conventional and somewhat nondescript suburban Catholic church, and yet to me at the time they seemed exactly where they were supposed to be. These were Madeline's former students, members of the alumni association of Our Lady of Fatima and Saint Francis High School and College in Liberia, a group that Madeline helped found in 1990 to support students from those schools who came to the U.S. to attend college and, some of them, to find work. Madeline had spent two years teaching at those schools in the 1960s when she was a young

Catholic nun. These former students of hers were able to attend college in the U.S. largely through her efforts. She had once told me that her experience in Liberia had changed her life. It also changed the lives of many young Liberians, some of whom were in that church that morning. Seeing them at her funeral brought back memories of the first two African people I ever knew, Francis and Theresa. They were, I understood, the first two Liberian students that Madeline sponsored so that they could study in the U.S. She must have met them while teaching at the Catholic mission school in Cape Palmas, Liberia, where she had been sent by the Bernardine Order in the 1960s. I have vivid memories of meeting Francis and Theresa when Madeline, whom we knew in those years as Sister Marlene, brought them to Scranton for a brief visit during their summer break from college. That was sometime in the 1960s. I was perhaps eight or nine years old. I recall almost nothing of any conversations I might have had with them, but I vividly remember their warmth, their broad smiles, their thick accents, and how strange they seemed to me then. I remember, too, how proud I felt that I was Sister Marlene's cousin, this devout Catholic nun who was doing so much to help people from a distant part of the world in ways that seemed consistent with what the nuns in the Catholic parish school I attended taught us. (It would be many years later before I could recognize the paternalism and latent racism in the feeling of pride I had as a young boy about Madeline's sponsorship of those African students.)

I might have been only in grade school when I met them, but to my young mind, Francis and Theresa were concrete manifestations of Madeline's goodness, her faith, and the strength of her moral convictions. She seemed to me the very embodiment of the lessons I had learned in Catholic grade school about serving God by serving others. Francis and Theresa were, in my view, proof that Madeline was special, that she was good. She set a standard for a life of selfless service that no other member of my family met—a standard I myself could never meet. I learned later that Madeline was not only good but also brave and fearless in her pursuit of what she believed was right. It seemed to me that the goodness of what she was doing for Francis and Theresa and the many other students she taught and mentored was self-evident and beyond reproach.

That was the 1960s, when my own family's racial and ethnic biases reflected common views where I grew up. I was subjected to—and infected by—those views, which pervaded our small town. I remember the casual racist language on the playground and at the dinner table. I took part in it. I don't remember when that began to change, but by the time I finished high school, my views diverged from those of many in my community and my family, including my parents. My support for the Civil Rights Movement and my misgivings about the U.S. involvement in Vietnam led to arguments and, I think, strained my relationship with my father, a proud and patriotic Korean War veteran, who had not been shy about expressing his antipathy toward antiwar protesters and civil rights activists. As I became more politicized and left-leaning in my views during my college years, these tensions increased. In Madeline, I saw the moral justification I felt I needed

for my emerging political ideology. No one in my family seemed to question her goodness, but many at that time disagreed with her views about racial equality and questioned her activism in support of racial justice. Those disagreements softened over the years, but they must have pained Madeline. It must have been hard for her to confront racist views so directly in the family she loved. But she never stopped fighting for justice and racial equality, nor did she ever stop loving her family, despite their views.

And it must have been at least a little risky for the young Sister Marlene to bring Theresa and Francis to visit with her family in the 1960s, knowing, as she must have, the prejudices that we held and the bigotry that infected our views in those years. Yet she did bring them, and I remember a pleasant summer afternoon at my uncle's lakeside cottage outside Scranton when Theresa and Francis, chaperoned by Sister Marlene, joined us for a family cookout. They were the first people of color I ever really knew, and I suspect the same was true for most of my family members. Madeline must surely have known that.

I feel uncomfortably paternalistic sharing these memories, given the charged and problematic history of race relations in the U.S., my positionality as a White man, and my struggles to recognize and eliminate my own blind spots to racism over these many years. I have tried to make these sentences true, but memory can be unreliable and, admittedly, self-serving (a problem I will take up in Chapter 3). And yet, problematic as they are, these memories are integral to my sense that Madeline was doing important racial justice work in a racist society, long before I understood what that meant, long before I could recognize latent racism in myself. These memories inform my current understanding of the high stakes of such work at the time and the personal risks she took, none of which I could appreciate then. If our family celebrated her work as a Catholic nun on behalf of young African students like Francis and Theresa, it was, I now know, in a paternalistic way that reflected our racist views at the time. To many of us in her family, she was helping Africans as part of her Catholic missionary work. From that point of view, she was part of a narrative of White superiority—a deeply troubling narrative that she herself was ostensibly working to challenge. Not everyone in the family approved of her work, especially after she left the convent and began working in Washington, D.C. schools, where she taught students of color, many of whom were of limited economic means. Her first teaching job after leaving the convent was in a school where she was the only White teacher. At least, that is the story I remember being told. And it seems to me that it could not be other than true.

At the same time, I wonder about the extent to which Madeline's work as a Catholic missionary was, in fact, paternalistic in precisely the way that I now, so many years later, find so troubling. I had never associated her with such paternalism, yet thinking about it now raises questions about the nature of that missionary work and the extent to which it was driven by—and perpetuated—the very same racism and bigotry that Madeline devoted her life to fighting. Did she see herself as co-opting the paternalism of that missionary system in order to subvert

the racism that characterized it? I want to believe that. What is true is that she never wavered in her efforts on behalf of those young people from Liberia. She devoted her entire life to serving them and the thousands of young Black American students she taught over the course of her long career. What is true, too, is that she was part of an institution, the Catholic Church, whose missionary efforts were shaped by the racism she abhorred.

It is also true that several of the family members who had disapproved of Madeline's work for racial equality in the 1960s and 1970s were sitting in that church and celebrating her life all those years later at her funeral service in 2016. Most of them had refused to attend her wedding in 1977 because they could not accept her marriage to a Black man—or because her mother, my Great Aunt Sophie, rejected Madeline's marriage and made it clear that she did not want any of her other daughters or her extended family members to attend that wedding. Nearly half a century later some of those family members were there at her memorial service to mourn her passing and to join in the celebration of the remarkable life she had led.

This should be a story of progress, of tolerance and love overcoming bigotry and hatred, the victory of enlightenment over discrimination and ignorance. And I suppose it is to an extent. Eventually, Madeline's relatives accepted her marriage and welcomed her husband Earle into the family. That's a story of social progress that, it could be argued, tracks with the story of race relations in the U.S. in the latter half of the 20th century. In that story, justice and good eventually win, and my family symbolizes the basic goodness of the nation and its people. Today, Madeline's interracial marriage would not be quite so unusual, so shocking, as it must have seemed then.

But, of course, that isn't the whole story. Or even a true story.

For one thing, racism persisted in some corners of my extended family, even as individual attitudes softened and Madeline's decision to marry a Black man was eventually accepted. And the hate and violence that gave rise to the Black Lives Matter movement some four decades after Madeline's wedding are stark reminders that racist violence continues to stain American society and cause suffering and division no less troubling than the racial conflict Madeline witnessed in the 1960s and 1970s. Moreover, Madeline's funeral was held about a month after the 2016 presidential election, which was won by a man, Donald Trump, whose narcissism, selfishness, egregious personal conduct, and abhorrent views are antithetical to everything Madeline stood for, worked for, and believed in. Madeline died about a week and a half after that election, the outcome of which seemed to call into question the story of racial progress that Barack Obama's election as U.S. president a mere eight years earlier seemed to symbolize. A few of us who shared Madeline's political views saw the timing of her death as a blessing. We could not imagine her having to witness, at the end of a life spent fighting for racial equality, the presidency of a bigoted and selfish White man supported by a party whose actions and policies seemed to reject the very ideas of equality and social

justice. Yet some of the family members who attended Madeline's funeral service to celebrate her life of struggle against injustice had themselves voted for Trump and—seemingly without any sense of irony—openly supported his disgusting bigotry toward immigrants from Central and South America and "shithole" nations in Africa, as he called them (Dale). Indeed, at dinner on the evening before the funeral service, an older cousin of mine argued bitterly with his mother (my aunt) about the election and angrily castigated her for having voted for Trump.

I don't know what those relatives might have made of the colorfully dressed group of mourners sitting across the aisle from them in that church. And I don't know what they might have thought of the electric piano set up on the right side of the altar and the gospel music that was played during the service—music so different from the solemn hymns they had heard all their lives in the traditional Catholic churches where they worshipped. Madeline's service began with such traditional hymns accompanied by the church organ, but as the service went on, the hymns gave way to gospel songs with a decidedly different beat and an intensity that I never felt in all the Catholic services I attended over the years. What I am certain of is that none of us, none of my family, had ever attended a funeral like Madeline's.

There were tears, of course, but the service was actually a happy celebration, with laughter and many smiles—which kept bringing to my mind Madeline's own big, warm, sometimes wry smile. Madeline herself orchestrated the service, I learned later. She had left detailed instructions for her family and for the priest about what exactly she wanted to happen at that service. That is very likely why it was not a sad, somber affair. She had had a hard life in many respects, but I do not recall ever seeing her sad or somber or bitter. Sitting in that modern church, listening to the heartfelt and often funny eulogies that her nieces and friends delivered, enjoying the gospel music that was played during the service, I was struck by the reach of her life, the joy she brought even in death, the way she continued to move us even after she was gone. It seemed to me that all the important pieces of her life were there: Father Gamrot, the priest from Poland who helped celebrate the mass, representing her beloved Polish heritage; the Black keyboardist and vocalist who sang the bright gospel tunes, representing a cultural heritage she had adopted; members of her late husband Earle's family, who had embraced her and whom she embraced as her own; the members of Our Lady of Fatima and Saint Francis High School Alumni Association, in their striking traditional garb, who brought an unfamiliar but joyful energy to the mass and represented the years in Liberia that transformed her life; my aunts, uncles, mother, sisters, and cousins and me, most of us from Madeline's hometown of Scranton, Pennsylvania, representing the family she loved so much and never gave up on, despite the great pain it must have caused her over the years. It all seemed to fit.

During the service, I kept revisiting my memories of Madeline, precious memories of the few times I spent with her over the years. At the same time, I was repeatedly surprised by what I was learning about her from the priest's sermon and the eulogies and the names of people who participated in the service whom I

had never heard of. We were all celebrating Madeline and mourning her passing, but at times others in the church that morning seemed to be celebrating a Madeline I had never really known: Madeline the loving and sometimes mischievous aunt, Madeline the fun-loving neighbor, Madeline the rabid football fan. These were memories of a woman I didn't always recognize, even though these memories described fundamentally the same special person I had known.

This beautiful ceremony felt familiar and unfamiliar all at once. It was both comforting and somehow a bit unsettling. And although the Catholic funeral mass itself was the standard service I knew so well, Madeline had added bits and pieces to the service that seemed to keep us all just a bit off guard. And nothing prepared me for the final moments of the ceremony.

Traditionally, at the end of a Catholic funeral service, the priest and the altar attendants approach the casket, which is positioned in the center aisle of the church just in front of the altar. As he recites a prayer, the priest walks slowly around the casket, swinging a thurible, from which smoke from burning incense rises. After circling the casket, he hands the thurible to one of the attendants and takes up a vessel containing holy water. Circling the casket once again, he sprinkles it with holy water using a liturgical instrument called an aspergillum, as he completes the prayer. At that point, a signal is given to the pall bearers, who rise together from their pew near the front of the church and solemnly position themselves alongside the casket, each one placing a hand on the casket. The priest then walks to the head of the casket and, facing the congregation, leads the procession down the main aisle to the church entrance. As the casket passes each row of pews, the congregants shuffle out of their pews and join the procession.

Madeline's funeral service followed this traditional pattern, but just as the priest took his place at the head of the casket to begin that final procession, something unexpected took place. The members of the Alumni Association of Our Lady of Fatima and Saint Francis Schools rose as one, slowly filed out of their pews, and took up positions on either side of the main aisle, creating two colorful lines of mourners between which the funeral procession would flow. As they did so, they began singing a Liberian song, *Nyesoa Na pon Teo*' (God, I am looking for you), and they continued to sing as the procession slowly moved past them to the church entrance. I do not know whether this action—having mourners line the main aisle before the casket is led down the aisle and out of the church—is something that has taken place at other Catholic funerals, but I had never seen it before, nor have I seen it since. It was, for me, a stunning and powerful moment. The singing, a cappella, rich and full, solemn yet joyful, filled the church. Some of the singers swayed slightly in their brilliantly colored dress. Those of us who represented Madeline's family all stood up in our pews and waited our turn to join the procession behind the casket. I was weeping. Many of my family members were, too. I don't honestly know if those were tears of sorrow or joy, but they were unstoppable. It was one of the single most moving experiences of my life. I felt such love and pride for Madeline. I felt humbled and almost painfully

grateful to be there at that moment, to hear that beautiful unfamiliar song echoing throughout the familiar space of a Catholic church, to be with my family, to be with Madeline. And I felt a searing sense of regret that I hadn't spent more time with her, that I hadn't known her better.

That funeral was a ritual religious celebration of Madeline's life, to consecrate her soul and send it off to the afterlife to join the God she loved and served, but it also felt like a validation of her life, a subtle but unmistakable statement that her life mattered—and that, in the end, she was right: about being a Catholic nun, about leaving the convent, about marrying Earle. About dedicating herself to her many, many students over five decades of teaching. About working tirelessly for equal rights and social justice. For all the conflict and controversy in her life, there was none at her funeral. The seemingly disparate components of that memorial service all seemed to blend together in a beautiful harmony that, to my mind, reflected her life perfectly. Was that what she intended? To make a final statement that her decisions had been right and her life was good? I would love to believe that she did.

But that would not be consistent with the Madeline I am coming to know as I am trying to write this true story about her life. For one thing, I never had a single conversation with Madeline over the many years I knew her that revealed even a glimpse of ego. She was as self-assured as anyone I have ever met, as comfortable in her own skin as one can be, but I never sensed any need on her part to call attention to herself or her actions. She hardly ever even mentioned, much less boasted about, her significant accomplishments in the service of others or her lifelong efforts in support of racial equality or even her many decades of teaching. To me, she always seemed to do and say what she believed was right, and she always seemed completely comfortable with her convictions and the decisions she made. There never seemed to be a need to justify or explain. I remember her as living with a calm born of the certainty that she knew truth. Why would she use her funeral to justify her life? On the contrary, that funeral service was perhaps a manifestation of the calm certainty that she always seemed to exhibit in her life.

That kind of certainty can be dangerous, of course. It is evident in the religious violence that the world has always known—in the Middle East since before the time of Christ; during the Catholic Inquisition of the Middle Ages and Renaissance; in India during the Great Partition; in Northern Ireland during The Troubles; in Syria and Afghanistan long before September 11, 2001 but energized by the slaughter on that horrific day; in the Gaza Strip, seemingly forever; in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 and in the Tree of Life Synagogue in Pittsburgh in 2018. And on and on. One can argue that it is a specific kind of certainty about religious belief that leads to zealotry and causes all this hate and suffering.

As an academic, I have devoted much of my professional life to exploring complexity in a way that resists such certainty. My writing, like the writing of most scholars in my fields, embraces complexity in an effort to illuminate phenomena deemed significant in those fields, and the texts I have produced over

time were written with a goal of communicating some contingent understanding of these complicated phenomena. Indeed, as a young graduate student, I was attracted to writing as a subject of study in part because of its beautiful and rich complexity. I have taught my students to question, to reflect, to reject simplistic binary formulations of important but dauntingly complex matters. And I have tried to teach them to be humble, even if they are steadfast, in their beliefs and in what they think they know—a kind of humility that I myself have so often struggled to achieve. Certainty has never been the goal. In fact, my own worries about the great harm caused by some kinds of certainty—especially but not exclusively religious and political fundamentalism—have always informed my teaching and scholarship. I have learned to become skeptical of certainty, including my own.

Madeline's certainty, I always felt, was of a different kind. It was not the fundamentalist, dogmatic certainty of religious fervor characterized by proselytizing and a blind acceptance of doctrine. Nor was it a certainty that grew out of a sense of moral superiority. She was devout and deeply moral in how she lived. But the certainty I remember in the way she spoke and carried herself—in the way she lived her life—that solid, quiet, confident sense that she was doing good and that she was morally right, seemed to be a function of experience and struggle that both tempered and deepened her faith and sense of mission. She had seen hardship, injustice, and inequality as a young Catholic nun serving in the mission school in Liberia, and later she witnessed hardship, injustice, and inequality in the schools and neighborhoods in Washington D.C. where she served as a teacher and mentor to children who were subject to the ills of poverty and racism. She suffered her family's rejection of her marriage to Earle. She shared in the suffering of her husband's people, and she endured her own suffering as a kind of outcast as one half of an interracial marriage. And she must have suffered—she *must* have—when she made the fateful decision to leave the convent after so many years. These experiences, shaped by her belief that she was making decisions in the best interests of others rather than her own self-interest, decisions that were driven by principles of moral goodness arising from her abiding religious faith, must also have given her a deep sense of confidence in how she lived, a humble but unshakeable certainty that she was doing good. In my memory, it was evident as soon as she entered a room. It set her apart from the rest of us. It drew us to her. She had a presence that people noticed. I remember admiring her and at the same time feeling slightly intimidated by that presence, by her apparent certainty about how to live, about how to *be*, by what I perceived to be her goodness. This story I am trying to write about her life is an attempt to understand that certainty, that calm confidence of hers that I remember so vividly—and what it might mean for us, for me and for you.

~~~

I believe that everything I wrote in that previous paragraph is true. But I am old enough to have learned to question my own memory, even when I want my
~~~

memories to be true. Even when I *need* those memories to be true. My first mentor as a writing teacher, the journalist-turned-scholar Donald Murray, who was a faculty member at the University of New Hampshire when I studied there for my masters degree in the early 1980s, believed that writing was an act of discovery, a way to find meaning in experience. And memory plays a complicated role in that act of discovery: "Memory," Murray writes, "provides us with a perpetual double vision, the past illuminated by the present, the present illuminated by the past. The past adds texture and significance to the moment and the moment puts the past in a new perspective" (Murray 7). Murray is right, I think. But his take on memory is perhaps too straightforward. The past and present certainly "illuminate" one another. My present experience as a father inevitably illuminates my (remembered) past experience as a son, for example. This is what E. B. White's famous essay "Once More to the Lake" is about, and the insight White realizes in that "illumination" isn't very comforting. The "new perspective" that Murray extols becomes, in White's essay, a chilling realization about the inevitability of death. But it is a realization that arises from White's perspective as a middle-aged man; he could not have had exactly the same realization as a younger—or older—man. Which is to say that if the past and present illuminate one another, they also complicate and contradict and confuse one another. We conflate past and present. Our memories change over time, because *we* change. And the meaning we attach to our memories also changes.

Murray writes that "the past adds texture and significance to the moment." In this moment, as I am writing these words, as I look into Madeline's life to find meaning in my own, the past I remember might lend significance to my present. But I can't entirely trust my memories of Madeline—or of anything else, because the memory of that past is a function of the present (in extraordinarily complicated ways that I will examine in Chapter 3). I talk to my relatives who knew her, and most of them reaffirm my sense that Madeline carried herself with that distinctive calmness and sense of confidence that I have tried to describe here. But the divergences in our respective memories invite skepticism. We might simply be reinforcing each other's constructed narratives about who she was and how she lived, narratives that are more about us than they are about her. And so those individual and idiosyncratic narratives might get us no closer to the truth of her life. Did she see herself as exuding that certainty that I remember feeling so powerfully whenever I was with her? Did she herself *feel* certain? Someone who experienced the suffering of the world as she had must have had doubts. She must have confronted troubling, even crippling doubt at certain times in her amazing and often painful life. Or is that just what *my* story of her life requires?

More than five years after Madeline's funeral, her niece Kim told me that Madeline had been planning her funeral for several months while she was in the final stages of the cancer that killed her. That makes sense to me—and it fits the story I am trying to write about her life. I want it to be true. I also learned from Reverend Jaroslaw Gamrot, the Polish priest who was a friend of Madeline's and

one of the celebrants at her funeral, that Madeline had actually been planning elements of her funeral many years before she became sick. As early as 2003 or 2004, when Father Gamrot was a visiting pastor at Madeline's church, she confided to him that she wanted to have a well-known Polish hymn, "Serdeczna Matko" ("Beloved Mother"), sung at her funeral. And Father Gamrot did so at Madeline's request. It was a moving and solemn moment early in the service, with Father Gamrot's lovely unaccompanied voice rising softly to the rafters, echoing in the kind of melancholic way that sounds do in the large empty spaces of a church. In that moment, the hymn, sung in Polish, felt soothing and perfect. Father Gamrot's voice filled the silence of that moment lovingly.

I did not understand—or even think about—the lyrics of that hymn at the time I heard it during Madeline's funeral. But five years later, I read translations of this hymn that is so well known to Polish Catholics:

> Beloved Mother, guardian of the nation,
> Hear orphans weeping in their supplication.
> We are Eve's exiles, do you hear us praying?
> Show us your mercy when we begin straying.
>
> We have sinned often over all the ages,
> Hence we deserve God's punishment that rages.
> But when the Father strikes, be our defender,
> Be our safe refuge, Mother dear and tender.

These stark lyrics clash with the peaceful comfort I felt in that moment while listening to Father Gamrot sing this hymn at Madeline's funeral. And in this moment these lyrics clash with my sense of Madeline's Catholic faith, which seemed more in line with the progressive Catholicism of Dorothy Day and the Catholic Worker Movement she founded in the U.S. in the 1930s, a movement built on the idea of Jesus's love for those in need, rather than with the fire-and-brimstone vision of a sometimes vengeful God that I remember from the traditional Catholic church I attended as a boy. Why would Madeline have chosen a hymn like this one, which seems consistent with a vision of Catholicism that, I believe, she had rejected—or at least a vision that diverged in important ways from her own? Did those lyrics in fact reflect her vision of Catholicism? Did they voice her own feelings of sinfulness, her expectation of divine punishment? Do they speak to regrets she might have had about the decisions she had made, especially her decision to leave the convent and walk away from the vows she took so many years before?

If those lyrics feel discordant to me now, because they seem to call into question this very sense of certainty that I am trying to understand about Madeline, the melody of the hymn itself, as sung in Polish by Father Gamrot, was not. It beautifully complemented the upbeat gospel music, accompanied by an electric piano, and the solemn Catholic hymns, backed by the church organ, and even the Liberian song sung a cappella at the end of the service. These disparate musical

elements harmonized in the way that the seemingly discordant pieces of her life ultimately harmonized. Her two decades of service as a Catholic nun, her transformative years in Liberia, her decision to leave the convent, her partial estrangement from her family over her marriage to a Black man, her activism on behalf of racial equality, her lifelong efforts to support young Africans in their desire to study in the U.S., her half-century career as a teacher, her devotion to her nieces, even her love of sports and her devoted support of a team (the Washington Redskins) whose racist mascot was formally abandoned several years after her death in the midst of controversy—all these fit together in a harmonious, coherent narrative of an impactful, meaningful life. Her funeral service seemed a perfect memorial to this person whose life was so extraordinary.

At least, that's the story I am writing at this moment.

~~~

Or maybe I am merely subject to what Sartwell calls "the teleological order" (12)—that is, the idea, which he traces back to Aristotle, that human life must have purpose, what Sartwell calls a *project*. "Human action would, on Aristotle's account, be impossible outside a teleological order, and the fundamental explanation of any event turns on what the telos of that event is—at what end it is aiming" (3). According to Sartwell, we fashion narratives about our lives out of our need to find purpose, to believe we *have* a purpose. This "narratology" reduces everything to stories and makes those stories "definable in terms of *telos*" (3). In other words, we create stories about our experiences that reflect a sense of purpose, and those stories impose order on an otherwise incoherent set of experiences, an order that reflects that same sense of purpose. Sartwell challenges this Aristotelean view and takes on some of the key Western philosophers who have pursued this tradition: Alisdair MacIntyre, Richard Rorty, Nelson Goodman. He argues that part of our human experience lies outside of language and cannot be captured in narrative, "a prenarrative experience of a random world which precedes narrative organization" (15). (This is a proposition I have taken up in a previous book, *Writing as a Way of Being*.) And if we examine any narrative from a particular point of view, we inevitably find dissonance, lapses, moments that don't quite seem to fit. Sartwell asserts that "every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative" (16). That would include this narrative I am trying to compose of Madeline's funeral service, which is a significant part of my effort to construct a larger narrative of her life—and my own. Where, for example, do the lyrics of that Polish hymn fit? The hymn seems to be an example of the dissonance that Sartwell claims we will find in *any* narrative. Ultimately, from Sartwell's point of view, the harmony I see in my memories of Madeline's funeral service is a construction, a harmony I am creating in this story I am writing about her life. According to Sartwell, it's all just a function of our need to see purpose in our lives.
~~~

As I noted in the introduction to this book, Sartwell rejects the idea that human life has such purpose, a *project*. He sees the teleological order, as he calls it, as a destructive force, an impulse that gives rise to human suffering as well as environmental degradation. His own project, as it were, is "not to let go of project, but to see that none of us lives by and large in and for projects, except as a self-delusion and avoidance of life" (65). That's a rather stunning and distressing statement that, to me at this moment, nevertheless feels true. A true sentence. But not a sentence that I would have accepted as true for much of my life. And not a sentiment that just about everyone I know would accept as true. But Sartwell is striving to accept—and invites us to accept—what he considers to be the truth that human life has no transcendent purpose. He urges us to embrace the lack of purpose in life in order to truly *live* life. That is the truth Sartwell sees: that there is no *telos* in human life but to *be*. He invites us not so much to reject narrative wholesale as to accept its inadequacy: "I want to show how the self-understanding provided by narrative or goal is always radically inadequate to the everyday life in which we are all the time embedded, so that in some sense all projects are inadequate, and a life lived for project is delusory" (63). Sartwell wishes to be in the moment, to embrace the experience of living in the moment unfettered by the quest for meaning, unadulterated by project, unhindered by *telos*: "Pull yourself away from significance for a moment and let yourself feel the sweet, deep, all-enveloping insignificance all around you" (65).

It is an alluring proposition. I have felt—deeply—this impulse to let go of project and just *be* in the moment. My practice of Zen has been, in many ways, an embrace of that impulse. I find Sartwell's project—what he calls his "wish" in his book—compelling, and in large measure I share much of his perspective on what it means to live fully, mindfully, and in the present. I have accepted his invitation—and struggled with it. In this regard, I think my life and Madeline's diverge. I never told her that I rejected Catholicism as a young man and, later, embraced Zen. I wonder what she would have thought about that. And I wonder what she would have made of my struggle, through my Zen practice, to accept the prospect that all we have is the here and now—my own version of Sartwell's wish.

At the same time, to accept Sartwell's critique of Western culture's obsession with project and narrativism and to pursue the path he advocates seems to call into question my very effort to tell Madeline's story. For this effort is predicated on the assumption, the belief, that her life was meaningful precisely because it had a special purpose, a project that mattered to others, a higher calling. Is it possible to accept the idea that human life has no purpose and still see Madeline's life as purposeful in this way? Surely, her life was *meaningful*, in the sense of philosopher Todd May's conception of a significant life. "What makes a life meaningful," May writes, "is not a thing to which it answers, but instead how it unfolds over the course of its time on the planet" (74). Surely, Madeline's life unfolded in a way that signifies meaningfulness. But meaning and purpose are not the same thing. Is the meaning of Madeline's extraordinary life somehow diminished if we accept

the proposition that it had no purpose, that human life has no purpose? And if so, is it possible to reject the idea that we can find order in our lives through narrative and still embrace the idea that we can find truth in *a* narrative—a truth that reflects some sense of the purpose, illusory and fleeting though it might be, of an extraordinary and seemingly meaningful life?

Sartwell himself acknowledges the central role of narrative in our lives while highlighting what he sees as the limitations of narrative:

> All of us participate in the making of narratives, but none of us can live wholly in narrative; none of us can even live very thoroughly in narrative. The lack of narrative is a kind of madness, but too much narrative is also a kind of madness. Perfect presence in the present is not recognizable as a *human* life, but perfect continual comprehensibility of the present in relation to the future is not recognizable as human *life*. (67; emphasis in original)

Sartwell seems to seek an accommodation here: accepting the need to live with narratives that enable us to make some sense of our individual lives even as we acknowledge the absence of purpose in human life. That makes sense to me.

I think Madeline would disagree. I think she would reject Sartwell's rejection of *telos*. She would disagree with him that human life has no purpose. For she was an intensely devout Catholic whose entire life was driven by a belief that she was serving God by serving others. Her lifelong advocacy for racial justice was a reflection of her belief in Christ's message of love and care for others and her effort to enact that message, to *live* it. And that belief, it seems, obviates the possibility of living only in the present, for that belief is driven by the promise of a certain kind of future. Contrary to Sartwell's plea, she was indeed comprehending the present "in relation to the future": Within the belief system of her Catholic faith, the promise of eternity gives meaning to the present, and our purpose in the present is to live in ways that will enable us to realize that promise. Given her abiding faith in God and Christ's message of love for others, Madeline certainly must have believed that our lives have purpose. How can such a life be "not recognizable as human life," as Sartwell suggests?

But I also think that Madeline lived her life in ways that were consistent with Sartwell's wish to live more fully in the present. As I knew her, and as I am coming to know her through this act of writing about her, she did not seem to exhibit an obsession with project, nor did she seem to have a need to tell her own story in a way that announced that sense of purpose, of mission, even though she clearly seems to have been driven by a deep sense of mission. She did not talk much about her work or her life of service. She did not talk much about the past, and she seemed to harbor no ill will toward others for past wrongs committed against her. She did not call attention to her actions or her beliefs. And I never heard her preach to others about how to live, even in the context of intense arguments

about justice and equality. Devoted as she was, she never explained or promoted her devotion. She never proselytized. At least, not in my presence. She just did her work in the service of others. Without hesitation, she spoke the truth that she knew. And she lived it. I am coming to think that the calm confidence she exuded was partly a function of her certainty that she was living a life with a clear sense of purpose, and therefore she didn't have to worry about whether this moment or that one, this action or that event, fit into some narrative of a purposeful life. For her, the big question was answered, and there was no need to ruminate on it or agonize about it. As a result, she seemed capable of living fully in the present, in all its complexity and challenge, even as she anticipated a certain kind of future that shaped her sense of that present. Each moment mattered in terms of that broader sense of purpose. And she didn't seem to have any need to tell her own story of those moments. She just lived them—fully and always, it seems, in the service of others.

This version of Madeline's story makes a certain kind of sense in *this* moment as I am writing it, even as it doesn't quite explain what seem to be important dissonances, gaps, and anomalies in her life. Nor does it sufficiently answer the big question about her decision to leave the convent. What explanation does this story provide for that decision? Nothing in my memory or the memories of the family members I spoke to about her suggests that she agonized over that decision. Yet how could someone with such deep convictions about God and the Catholic Church *not* have agonized over such a decision? She had given herself to God at such a young age by entering the convent and becoming a Catholic nun. One does so in the expectation that it is a lifelong commitment. Indeed, Catholic religious orders refer to the vows taken by those who become nuns as "perpetual." It seems such an all-or-nothing act, an act born of the absolute certainty of religious faith. And if Madeline believed fervently in that calling, could the decision to abandon it have been easy and straightforward? Did she have the same confidence, the same certainty, in that moment when she decided to leave the convent that she always seemed to exhibit in the rest of her life?

In this story I am writing about her funeral service, these questions give rise to my own nagging uncertainty that I am not telling the whole story, a true story, or at least a different version of the story that might answer these questions, and I can find indications that perhaps Madeline did harbor doubt. For example, a few months before her death, Madeline told her brother-in-law, Dr. Jeff Smith, Earle's half-brother, about leaving the convent so many years earlier. According to Jeff, Madeline went to her parents' home in Scranton to explain her decision to leave the convent to her father. As Jeff remembered Madeline's story, she was trying to apologize to her father for her intention to leave the convent. But her father apparently dismissed her concerns, telling her that he had never wanted her to enter the convent in the first place. This story—which is Jeff's story about Madeline's story—suggests that Madeline might have had some misgivings about her decision to leave the Order of Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, or perhaps that

she felt some need to justify or explain it to her father in honor of his feelings and beliefs. Maybe she felt some guilt about walking away from her vows. Or maybe she was just uncertain enough that she sought her father's approval. It could be that she believed she was making the right decision, but she found it hard to carry out after having devoted her entire adult life to that point to the convent. Whatever the case, her need to talk to her father about her decision suggests that it was neither easy nor simple.

Indeed, Madeline's choice of Serdeczna Matko as a hymn for her funeral service might be interpreted as an indication that her decision to stop being Sister Marlene was painful and difficult for her and that so many years later she might still be asking God's forgiveness. Those lyrics portraying a demanding God from whom we must beg forgiveness might betray Madeline's own lingering sense of the sinfulness of her decision. Maybe she believed that it was the right decision and yet a sin at the same time.

Maybe, however, I am imposing my own doubts about faith and truth on her story. Inevitably, my telling of her story is a version of my own story, and in writing this story, I cannot avoid revealing truths about myself, even as I am writing to find truth in Madeline's life. Maybe those are the same truths in the end. Or maybe these dissonances and doubts are just evidence that Sartwell is right—support for his view that all the narratives we construct about our lives "fail of coherence"; maybe this narrative I am writing about Madeline's life is "plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness" (16).

Still, I think there is truth to be found in Madeline's story, despite or perhaps because of the uncertainties and discontinuities of that story—and of all stories. At this moment, as I am writing these words, I am as sure of that as Sartwell seems to be that there is no transcendent purpose in human life. I will continue writing with a confidence that the writing itself—if not the story I am writing—will lead to some kind of truth.