

Chapter 5. Storytelling and Truth-Seeking

I believe that any experience, whatever its nature, has the inalienable right to be chronicled. There is no such thing as a lesser truth.

– *Annie Ernaux, Happening*

In late summer of 2022, the archivist for the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters in Reading, Pennsylvania, where my cousin Madeline began her journey to become a Catholic nun in the 1940s, shared with me some information about Madeline's time in the Bernardine Order, including the dates of her service: 1950-1969. Those dates gave me a start. 1950 would have been a year or so after Madeline completed her studies at Mount Alvernia High School in Reading, PA, so it made sense that she would have entered into formal training that year to become a nun. But 1969 is two years earlier than the family Christmas gathering that I described in Chapter 3, when Madeline, who was then still Sister Marlene, was challenged by elders of my family about her advocacy on behalf of people of color. My memory of that moment is perhaps my most important memory of her, for reasons I explain in Chapter 3, but the disclosure from the Bernardine archivist suggested that I had my dates wrong, which seemed to cast doubt on my account of that significant event. In my memory of that Christmas, Madeline is wearing her nun's habit as she debates with our relatives in my grandparents' home. In other words, she is still a nun at the time. So that Christmas confrontation could not have happened in 1971. If Madeline left the convent in 1969, as the archivist indicated, then I must be remembering an earlier Christmas, in 1968 or even 1967, and that confrontation could not have taken place during my eighth-grade year.

What does this knowledge—that Madeline left the convent in 1969—mean when it comes to the truth of this story I am writing? If my memory of the specific year of Madeline's Christmas confrontation with our family elders about the subject of race is inaccurate, is my account of that confrontation untrue? In Chapter 3, I explore the problem of memory and its vexed relationship to truth in our efforts to tell true stories about our lives, and I conclude that true stories are not necessarily accurate ones; further, I suggest that truth might reside in the act of *writing* the story—that is, in the experience of writing-in-the-moment—rather than in the story itself. The specific date of that event, therefore, might not be essential to the truth of the story. Nevertheless, this new knowledge that Madeline's service as a Catholic nun ended in 1969, at least two years earlier than I had been assuming, prompted me to return to the problem of determining what is true in storytelling. Does it matter whether that important moment in my story about Madeline's life took place in 1968 or 1967 rather than in 1971? Does the discrepancy about dates invalidate the truth of my account of that significant moment, as I have sought that truth in the act of writing this story about Madeline's life?

These questions underscore a central problem with which I have been wrestling in writing this story, which is the matter of how we can know whether a story is true. And that problem points to a larger problem that I have not explicitly addressed thus far: the nature of truth itself. Here—and throughout this book—I have been using the words *true* and *truth* in ways that reflect at least two different meanings. First, to state that it is *true* that Madeline left the convent is to make a claim that accords with certain knowable or observable facts. The truth of that claim rests on what might be described as factual evidence—in this case, in the form of written communications from the Bernardine Order that Madeline’s service as a Bernardine Sister ended in 1969 and that she did, in fact, leave the convent. That evidence is bolstered by the memories of many different family members as well as Madeline’s friends confirming that she left the convent—not to mention my own direct experience of being with Madeline when she a nun and, later, when she wasn’t. In this case, *true* means something like *accurate* or in accordance with established verifiable facts or knowledge. But in writing this story about Madeline’s life, I have also been using the word *true* to mean to something more than correspondence with facts, something bigger, something inef-fable: a more fundamental idea or proposition about the meaning of her life or, more broadly, about human life. This usage is evident in statements I have made about Madeline’s devotion and goodness and principled life. This second version of the word *true* encompasses belief and values and has a vexed relationship to fact and factual evidence. That is, this kind of truth may or may not accord with factual evidence or be accurate in a factual sense. It is, in a sense, larger than fact. In writing this story, then, I am trying to find and convey some larger *truth*, even if the story isn’t, strictly speaking, *true*.

This fundamental question—what is truth?—is not only beyond the scope of this book but also outside my own professional expertise. But as genuine experts in philosophical inquiry have made clear (see Blackburn), we cannot function as human beings without some working conception of truth, no matter how uncertain or contested it might be. We must, in other words, have some way to identify the truths we need to live, even if we accept the contested nature of truth or the impossibility of knowing absolute truth. And that need has been brought into relief in this so-called post-truth world that we now seem to inhabit (Keane), in which even some of the most basic and seemingly undeniable facts of human affairs are contested and even denied.

Mere months before he was viciously attacked by a fanatical knife-wielding assailant in late summer of 2022 at a symposium in western New York, acclaimed writer Salman Rushdie spoke at the PEN America Emergency World Voices Congress of Writers about the danger of the false narratives promoted by racists, nationalists, despots, and ideological extremists of various stripes to justify, rationalize, and excuse all manner of violence and oppression, such as the horrors that have been occurring in Ukraine since February 2022 at the hands of Russian invaders, the deadly attack on the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021, the bloody

sectarianism in India that intensified in 2022, the killing of tens of thousands of Gazans by Israeli troops after the vicious attacks by Hamas militants in October 2023 that left more than 1200 people dead at an outdoor music festival in an Israeli settlement, the hundreds of thousands more killed in the seemingly endless civil war in South Sudan, and on and on. The fight against these and other outrages, Rushdie suggested, must be won by countering false narratives with true stories:

Above all we must understand that stories are at the heart of what's happening, and the dishonest narratives of oppressors have attracted many. So we must work to overturn the false narratives of tyrants, populists, and fools by telling better stories than they do, stories in which people want to live. (Akhtar et al.)

From this point of view, telling true stories is a matter of survival, and truth is not an abstract ideal. Writing true stories is not just about making sense of our lives; it is a means of preserving life.

How we understand *truth*, then, matters, and some shared idea of what constitutes truth is necessary for us to live together humanely on this earth. More mundanely, this story I am writing rests on some idea of *truth*, and this act of storytelling requires that I try to articulate what that idea might be, at least provisionally. I have asserted that truth, such as it is, might well reside in the experience of writing-in-the-moment. If so, what kind of *truth* might we find in that experience?

This question of the nature of truth is not a question I would have been able to articulate or even conceptualize for most of my career as a writing scholar, even though the matter of truth has always been a central concern of the discipline of rhetoric and its more contemporary offshoots, such as writing studies and composition studies. I first encountered this question of truth in Plato's *Phaedrus*, which I was assigned to read as a first-year graduate student at the University of New Hampshire (1983-1984) and which introduced me to the longstanding debate about the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. That text presents the classic argument that truth can only be attained through philosophy, which represents genuine inquiry in the form of dialectic; rhetoric, by contrast, as it manifests in the common practice of persuasive speaking (or writing), is "but a knack which has nothing to do with art" (73). In Plato's dialogue, Socrates argues that "there is not nor ever shall be ... a genuine art of speaking which is divorced from grasp of the truth" (73). He goes on to articulate the principles of a philosophical or scientific rhetoric, a genuine art of rhetoric, the first of which is that it begins with knowledge of truth: one "must know the truth about any subject that he deals with, either in speaking or writing" (100).

At the time, I did not understand the relevance of this essential debate to what I took to be my main concern: how to teach students to write effective texts. It would be a decade later, when I was a new assistant professor at Purdue University, that I would begin to appreciate the importance and complexity of this question

of truth in the study and practice of writing. By then, the influence of poststructuralist theory had significantly reshaped the ongoing conversations in my academic field, and texts like *Contending With Words* (Harkin and Schilb) helped set the terms of these conversations. That text, which took its title from a passage in the *Phaedrus* (see page 5), “comes from the realization that although language can be the weaponry of battles to make knowledge in a world where truth is absent, language is also the only tool we have for dealing with that situation” (6). Only vaguely did I grasp the implications of this stance, which undermined much of what I had been taught and believed about writing. Nor did I pause over the claim that we function “in a world where truth is absent.” Not contingent or contested or even ineffable, but *absent*. Rather, I embraced the postmodern idea that language was the only locus of truth. With a kind of giddy excitement, I endorsed the position of the editors and authors of this volume that “theorizing composition in a postmodern age should not mean worshipping certain thinkers or stances but should involve continually evaluating those stances and envisioning ways to modify or even add to their insights” (10). This position seemed both radical and reasonable to me, and I did not feel the ground moving beneath me. It seemed to me that rather than destroying the traditional foundations of the field I had chosen as my intellectual home, postmodern theory gave it greater importance. For if language is all we have in a world without truth, then language—its study and its use—becomes the only real game in town, as it were. And I was excited to play. The influence of the writing theorists who embraced postmodern thought is evident in my first scholarly book, *Literacy Matters: Writing and Reading the Social Self*, in which I present a theoretical analysis of writing as a matter of constructing the self. My analysis in that book is unconcerned with the potential problem of radical relativism that arises from poststructuralist critique.

That problem emerged for me soon after the publication of *Literacy Matters*, as I began to confront the question of the role of writing in helping to perpetuate what I increasingly saw as an oppressive, unjust, and inhumane status quo. It was Barbara Couture’s impressive book, *Toward a Phenomenological Rhetoric*, which was published in 1998 but which I read a few years later, that helped crystallize for me the ways in which the field, through its embrace of poststructuralist theory, had redefined rhetoric as “the technology supporting relative truth” (2). As a scholar whose “belief in the essential good of writing,” which she sees as “a conscious behavior with the potential to bring the one and the many to a common good” (1), Couture was “unwilling to think that truth is relative or that we must always contest and dismiss each other’s ideas in order to identify, express, and establish the most persuasive truth” (2), which is her summary of a poststructuralist conception of rhetoric. In her analysis, “truth came to be separated from writing” (3) as a result of the widespread acceptance of the poststructuralist assumption that language is the only tool we have in a world without truth, as Harkin and Schilb put it. To counteract the worrisome implications of the radical relativism that Couture associates with that view of writing, she advocates

for a phenomenological rhetoric “to defend and explain writing as a practice that develops truth and value in human experience” (3). Couture’s incisive analysis and her fervent belief in writing as a potential tool for good and a means of truth-seeking prompted me to rethink my own embrace of poststructuralist theory and refocus my attention on the idea of truth as central to an understanding of writing. That shift in my perspective eventually led to the ontological theory of writing that I advanced in my subsequent book, *Writing as a Way of Being*, which was my effort to theorize the experience of writing-in-the-moment. And as I came to appreciate the power and importance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a potential locus of truth, I have had to confront the question I posed earlier in this chapter: What kind of truth might we find in this experience? If there is truth to be identified in writing this story about Madeline, I must somehow answer this question.

~~~

Sometime in 1969, Madeline left the convent. After some twenty years of service, she was no longer a Catholic nun. Both of those sentences are, as far as I know at this moment, true. And in writing this story about Madeline’s life, I have tried to understand the truth about her decision to leave the convent. I have returned repeatedly to a question—Why did she leave the convent?—that, to my mind, points to some larger truth about her life and what it might mean. If there is some truth to be found in Madeline’s extraordinary life, in the story I am writing about her life, it would seem to reside—at least in part—in that significant moment when she left the convent.

It is necessary to emphasize here that I do not use the term *truth* in this context to mean absolute or transcendent truth. The question of the existence and nature of such truth has preoccupied philosophers for millennia, and postmodern thinkers like Richard Rorty, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Derrida have made it ever more difficult to make claims about what absolute truth might be, arguing that even if reality or truth in this absolute sense does exist, we cannot know it directly but only—if at all—through perception mediated by language. And even if we reject this poststructuralist position, as Couture does, and embrace a perspective, such as phenomenology, that does not locate truth exclusively within language, we still lack a commonly accepted conception of absolute truth and how we might access it. So we are left with the task of trying to define small-t, contingent truth. That is the conception of truth I am trying to articulate here—provisionally, for the purpose of telling a true story: *this* true story.

In his brief treatise *On Truth*, philosopher Simon Blackburn argues that “treating truth in the abstract may be stretching up to reach the stars, but the actual practices of real people are the flowers at our feet” (71). Blackburn proposes that we shift our gaze away from what counts as *fact* as a basis for inquiring into truth and focus instead on the nature of the inquiry itself—in other words,

the philosophical (or scientific or empirical) *process* of seeking truth. Legitimate philosophical inquiry, he says, should be “whatever method increases the probability that its results accord with the facts” (72). But facts, he notes, the definition of which is typically the starting point in any philosophical effort to define truth, “are tricky customers ... not things that can be pinned down”: “Do we,” he asks, “have a firm grasp of what counts as fact in aesthetics, religion, morals, history, or even mathematics or science?” (72). It’s a rhetorical question, but he obviously believes the answer is no. If we cannot establish what constitutes *fact* as a starting point in our search for truth, Blackburn argues, we must start elsewhere. Drawing on the American Pragmatist philosophers Charles Peirce and William James, he suggests that “we look at methods first, and then describe fact in terms of the ideal endpoint (which we may never reach) of satisfactory applications of method” (72). For Blackburn, “the question at the forefront of our minds should not be ‘what is aesthetic (etc.) *fact*?’ but ‘what makes for a good aesthetic (etc.) *enquiry*?’” (72; emphasis added).

In Blackburn’s framework, the purpose of “good” inquiry is not to resolve the longstanding philosophical debates about the nature of truth or to attempt to define truth itself in absolute terms; rather, this inquiry “is essentially practical: we can say that its goal is truth, but it can as well be described as knowing when and how to act, whom to admire, how to educate people, what to believe, or, all in all, how to live” (108). If we “start where we are,” Blackburn proposes, and examine *how* we argue about things that matter and how we come to agreement (or not) about those things—that is, if we examine “our actual successes in learning how to live and what to believe”—we might “achieve modest confidences” in our provisional conclusions about thorny matters like moral truth and rational truth (107).

What I find compelling in Blackburn’s approach is, first, that he accepts the contingency of truth even as he recognizes the need to work toward an ideal of absolute truth and, second, that his philosophical project is ultimately intended to help us live together by providing some framework for identifying the truths we need to co-exist peacefully and humanely. In other words, he presents his project of truth-seeking as a tool for living, while acknowledging that the process of inquiry is ongoing and may never result in hard-and-fast, universally embraced conclusions about truth, may never lead to anything like certainty about truth. In fact, he warns, “We must remember that a tentative judgment of truth is not the same as a dogmatic assertion of certainty” (85). From this perspective, “dogmatic certainty” does not necessarily get us closer to the truths we need to solve the problems that prevent us from living humanely together. Indeed, the belief in such certainty is likely to exacerbate those problems. So Blackburn proposes that we not pursue certainty or even presume to think that we can achieve it; rather, we should seek to identify provisional truths that might help us solve the fundamental problems of living together, and we can do that by focusing on the process of inquiry that starts with “where we stand now” (125).

At the same time, Blackburn reminds us, “there is nothing sacrosanct about where we stand now.” That statement is an acknowledgement not only that there is so much that we cannot know, but also that our ongoing inquiry will challenge, refine, and even change “where we stand now.” Blackburn embraces this fundamental uncertainty without succumbing to radical relativism or, worse, fatalism. Acknowledging that “enquiry in interpretive disciplines such as history or law is apt to be contestable and fallible” and will lead to results that are “provisional and open to refinement and improvement or outright rejection,” he concedes that in these realms “truth seems especially fugitive” (125-26). But that does not mean “that anything goes,” because “even when our pictures of how things were are incomplete or partial, they may still be better than others” (126). What determines whether one picture is “better” than another is, for Blackburn, the ongoing process of genuine inquiry in the “common pursuit of values and priorities,” which “provide us with our stance toward the world” (126). Truth, contingent and provisional yet essential for living, emerges from this process—indeed, it resides *in* the process itself, which requires us, as participants in the process, not only to share the common goal of pursuing truth but also to do so with sincerity and disinterested humility and with a sense of the ethical burden any act of truth-seeking places on us. And to the question about whether such a process might be devoid of sufficient validity to give us any confidence even in those provisional truths, Blackburn offers what he describes as “the best answer”—a “brutal” one, he says—which is “that we have nowhere else to stand” (127):

We cannot live without elementary confidences, cemented routes of inferences, preferences, relatively fixed pleasures and desires. These give us the indissoluble rocks around which we have to steer our fragile barks. And this is what it is to look for truth, to enquire into it, to set doubt to rest, *to improve our understanding of the world.* (127; emphasis added)

I have discussed Blackburn’s ideas at length because his conclusions about seeking truth in the process of inquiry itself might illuminate my project of seeking truth in storytelling—more specifically, seeking truth in the experience of *writing* the story. His goal—to improve our understanding of the world—is consistent with my goal of trying to determine what it is about Madeline’s extraordinary life that might help us understand ourselves better and enable us to find truths by which we might live better together. Whatever Madeline’s life might mean should inform how we think about living better lives together. That’s really the goal. Moreover, Blackburn’s focus on the process of inquiry in truth-seeking is consistent with posthumanist ideas about knowing and being that have informed my own thinking about writing as an act of truth-seeking. Blackburn is not, strictly speaking, a posthumanist, but his understanding of the contingency of truth and his acknowledgement of the inherent uncertainty of being, I think, track with posthumanist notions about the limits of what we can know and what

theorist Karen Barad calls the “entangled” nature of being (Barad, *Meeting*). In particular, Barad’s theory of “agential realism”—which she describes as an “ontoepistemological framework” (*Meeting* 44) that explains reality not in terms of representations, such as specific scientific descriptions of the world, but in terms of discursive practices that are an inextricable part of the reality those descriptions are intended to understand—can shed light on the idea that truth might reside in the experience of writing-in-the-moment. Although a thorough discussion of Barad’s theories, which rest on her in-depth and complicated reading of key developments in quantum physics, is unnecessary for our purposes (and beyond the scope of this book), it is helpful to review briefly what she means by *agential realism*, which can inform our understanding of the contingent nature of truth and the act of writing as a means of truth-seeking.<sup>5</sup>

According to Barad, “That reality within which we intra-act—what I term agential reality—is made up of material-discursive phenomena. Agential reality is not a fixed ontology that is independent of human practices, but is continually reconstituted through our material-discursive intra-actions” (“Getting Real” 104). Further, “agential realism rejects the notion of a correspondence relation between words and things and offers in its stead a causal explanation of how discursive practices are related to material phenomena” (*Meeting* 44-45). What this means, in part, is that there is an inherent uncertainty and indeterminacy in any effort to describe reality, which is never static and which is constituted in what Barad calls the “intra-actions” between that material reality and our efforts to describe it—our discursive practices. Crucially, that reality can never be known separately from our attempts to explain it. (To my mind, Barad’s analysis lends credence to Freire’s view that we constitute the world through language, which I discuss in Chapter 2.) “Each bit of matter,” Barad writes, “each moment of time, each

---

5. It is important to acknowledge here the ongoing debates about the application of Barad’s interpretation of the theories of quantum physics to “non-scientific” problems, such as the matter of seeking truth in writing stories about our experiences in the world. See Everth and Gurney; Harris; Hollin et al. I understand the concerns of scientists about how Barad’s ideas have been (mis)appropriated, misunderstood, and inappropriately applied in other (“non-scientific”) domains, such as education, public policy, and feminist studies. As a scholar who is not a scientist, I cannot pass judgment on the scientific validity of her interpretations of key developments in quantum theory. At the same time, Barad’s ideas have been influential in many different fields, and she herself identifies as a feminist theorist and has written about the importance of scientific knowledge in informing efforts to seek social justice (Barad, “Quantum Entanglements”). In this chapter, I am drawing on Barad’s theories to enrich my effort to understand the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a site of truth-seeking and the process of writing true stories as a way to make sense of our places in the world we perceive. Whether or not her theories have genuine scientific merit, which is for others to decide, I see value in her insights and her interpretations when it comes to the challenge of identifying truths we need to live humanely together.

position in space is a multiplicity, a superposition/entanglement of (seemingly) disparate parts. Not a blending of separate parts or a blurring of boundaries, but in the thick web of its specificities, what is at issue is its unique material historicalities and how they come to matter” (Barad, “Diffracting” 176). That “thick web of specificities” is inseparable from our discursive practices, our language-mediated interactions with the reality we perceive. As in Blackburn’s approach, within Barad’s framework we can never achieve absolute *certainty*, even if we can achieve a certain level of *objectivity* by identifying specific phenomena that are “reproducible and unambiguously communicable” (*Meeting* 119). For Barad, the goal is not to eliminate uncertainty by establishing this kind of objectivity but rather to illuminate the multiplicity of ontological possibilities in the universe. Indeterminacy is not an obstacle to identifying truth. It is a fact of life—and its own truth.

Nevertheless, like Blackburn, Barad rejects relativism. “The existence of indeterminacies,” she argues, “does not mean that there are no facts, no histories, no bleeding—on the contrary, indeterminacies are constitutive of the very materiality of being” (Barad, “Diffracting” 177). This is crucial point. As I interpret Barad’s ideas here, her acknowledgement of this fundamental indeterminacy does not result in the elimination of the possibility of some kind of truth. Rather, acknowledging the “entangled” nature of being, in all its indeterminacy, obligates us to understand the discursive practices that are not only integral to our engagement with the world around us but also *constitutive* of that world. In other words, the world we perceive is a function of the intra-actions, in Barad’s terms, involving material reality and our discursive practices; the former does not exist separately from the latter. Consequently, we must understand our discursive practices themselves as inseparable from the world we seek to understand. “Crucial to this theoretical framework,” Barad writes, “is a strong commitment to accounting for the material nature of practices and how they come to matter” (*Meeting the Universe Halfway* 44-45). To put it somewhat differently, understanding our truth-seeking practices is as important as the truths we seek to identify through those practices. Indeed, truth itself, whatever it might be, and the process of truth-seeking are all of a piece; we cannot know one without understanding the other.

Significantly, Barad’s interpretations of quantum-based conceptions of matter, time, and space and the “entangled” nature of being place an ethical burden on us as we seek to understand the reality of which we are part: “Entanglements are not a name for the interconnectedness of all being as one, but rather specific material relations of the ongoing differentiating of the world. Entanglements are relations of *obligation*—being bound to the other—enfolded traces of othering” (“Quantum” 265; emphasis added). For Barad, the implications of this understanding of time-space-matter extend to all aspects of human life, and the project of furthering our understanding becomes an ethical one: “Crucially, there is no getting away from ethics on this account of mattering” (265). She sees ethics as “not a superimposing of human values onto the ontology of the world (as if ‘fact’ and ‘value’ were radically other)” but as integral to the phenomena—the

“intra-actions”—that constitute reality (265); furthermore, responsibility is “not a calculation to be performed” but “a relation always already integral to the world’s ongoing intra-active becoming and not-becoming” (265). In other words, responsibility is built into the very process of becoming within this “entangled” reality, a process which characterizes our very being.

This sense of ethical responsibility also applies to our efforts to understand the past, which, Barad asserts, “is never closed, never finished once and for all,” even if “there is no taking it back” (Barad, “Quantum Entanglements” 264):

To address the past (and future), to speak with ghosts, is not to entertain or reconstruct some narrative of the way it was, but to respond, to be responsible, *to take responsibility for that which we inherit* (from the past and the future), for the entangled relationalities of inheritance that “we” are, to acknowledge and be responsive to the noncontemporaneity of the present, to put oneself at risk, to risk oneself (which is never one or self), *to open oneself up to indeterminacy* in moving towards what is to-come. (Barad, “Quantum Entanglements” 264; emphasis added).

Within this framework, truth does not reside in a narrative that we construct in an attempt to *reconstruct* some past event or moment and establish it as fixed, finished, or certain; rather, truth is a function of the effort to make sense of that event or moment *without* trying to stabilize it or fix it in time and space, which, in Barad’s formulation, is not possible in any case. Indeed, truth-seeking becomes a process of trying to make sense of that past event or moment while acknowledging the indeterminacy of the event or moment and accepting the contingency of whatever truth we might find or identify in it among the multiplicity of possible truths. In this sense, telling a story about a past event or moment is an ongoing process of seeking truth in that past event or moment that is itself also always in the process of becoming.

Writing this story of Madeline’s/my past, then, is to accept, to embrace, the fundamental indeterminacy to which Barad refers, to accept the contingency of whatever truth I am finding/constructing/realizing in writing the story, a truth that I expect, following Blackburn, will inevitably evolve as my continuing inquiry into the matter necessitates refinements and adjustments and even, possibly, rejection of that truth—a truth that is always becoming in this act of writing.

As Barad appropriately emphasizes, this process of truth-seeking is an ethical matter: the ultimate indeterminacy of what might have happened in the past about which I am writing—as well as the present moment in which I remember/imagine/construct/engage with that past and the future I am imagining/constructing/engaging with as I write—does not absolve me of responsibility for trying to get it right, as it were, does not free me of the obligation to try to write a story that is as true as I can make it, a story whose truth might be contingent and fleeting but nevertheless valid and valuable and real and necessary, a truth that emerges from

this ethical process of inquiry and may have important implications not just for me but also for others. And if that truth changes over time, as Blackburn suggests it might (and probably should), it would nevertheless have been a story that was true in and for this moment, among the multiplicity of possibilities that Barad points to; that truth, then, becomes a tool for living in this here-and-now.

~ ~ ~

If Madeline left the convent in 1969, as the Bernardine archivist indicated, then my memory that the Christmas debate she had with our family elders took place in 1971 must be inaccurate. What, then, is the truth of that moment? To try to answer that question requires that I (re)write the story of that moment as part of this ongoing process of inquiry—this storytelling, this truth-seeking, this act of writing.

It is possible, as I noted earlier, that the family debate I am remembering occurred on Christmas Day in 1967 or 1968, when I would have been nine or ten years old. In some ways, those earlier dates make sense in this story I am writing about Madeline's life, because that Christmas moment would have taken place only two years or so after she returned from the mission school in Liberia, an experience that, she told me years later, transformed her. Fresh from that experience, she might have engaged our family elders with an invigorated sense of moral righteousness, a confidence in the rectitude of her dedication to racial equality and her service to those who had been marginalized and abused and wronged, perhaps a sense of confirmation that she was truly following Christ's path of love and compassion. Her moral position, as she stood there in my grandparents' living room next to the beautifully decorated Christmas tree, would have been strengthened, perhaps, because the memories of her work in Africa and of the young Liberian girls she had taught there would have been recent and intense and energizing. And, as a result, the truth of the words she spoke to our family elders at that moment could have been even more powerful, overpowering their bigotry and racial animosity and challenging the fear they must have felt as they were challenging her beliefs in racial justice, the fear they must have felt as they perceived dramatic changes that threatened their world. In my nine- or ten-year-old heart, in 1967 or 1968, Sister Marlene would have seemed even more obviously on the side of what is good and right and true, as I had been learning (presumably) in my Catholic schooling at the time.

In this version of my story, Madeline—Sister Marlene—remains the same paragon of good that she is in the version of the story I wrote in Chapter 3, a compelling (if complicated) example of someone who selflessly devotes her life to serving others, despite the risks and sacrifices, despite the suffering and, perhaps, the doubt. To me, she exemplified—indeed, she embodied—Christ's message of love for others. And her example uncomfortably shook up my youthful sense of the world, for next to her, my father and my uncles, whom I genuinely loved and admired, seemed diminished in what they stood for—and what they opposed.

Her enactment of Christ's message of love seemed to expose the moral failings of my beloved elders and the misguidedness of their perceptions and their pronouncements (which I recall all these years later, from my current perspective as a man who is older now than many of them were then, as disturbing) about those whom they perceived as different, as threatening, as Other. Madeline's life, by contrast, was a principled embrace of the Other in the name of Christ's love for all human beings. The real threat, she revealed by the example of the life she was leading, was not the Other she served and loved but the fear and hatred of the Other displayed by those family members, whom she also loved.

In this version of the story of that Christmas confrontation that I am writing right now, I must have shared my experience with my eighth-grade teacher, Sister Roberta Ann, not a few weeks after the confrontation took place, as I wrote in Chapter 3, but a few *years* later. And, in this moment as I am writing right now, that makes sense, too, for by *that* moment in my eighth-grade year, I would have learned more than I could have known at age nine or ten about the terrible truth of racism in the U.S. and in my community and my family and myself. As an eighth-grader (rather than a sixth or seventh grader) I would have (I believe as I am writing in this moment) seen that Christmas confrontation in retrospect as even more significant, more unsettling, more powerful in revealing who Sister Marlene really was than I could have when I actually witnessed it at age nine or ten. At age twelve or thirteen, I would have appreciated somewhat more fully what I had witnessed on that Christmas Day a year or two before and what it seemed to reveal not only about Madeline but also about my own family and community—and myself. As an eighth-grade student entering adolescence, I was beginning to see that the world was more complicated than I had previously understood. I could see that, no matter how much I believed I was trying to be “good” according to the word of God as I was learning it in my Catholic school, I was not “good” in the way Madeline was, nor were many of the elders of my family, who had always seemed to me to be good. None of us could claim that we were living lives of principled service to others; none of us could claim that we were actively engaged in combatting the evils of hatred and oppression in the world, working to make the world more just and humane, living according to Christ's message of love, as Madeline—our Sister Marlene—was doing. In response to my eighth-grade teacher Sister Roberta Ann's request that I write for her the story of that Christmas confrontation, I would have written something valorizing Sister Marlene, something about the extraordinary example she set, but something that—implicitly, at least—acknowledged my own moral inadequacies and, perhaps, my family's and my own prejudice. I would have highlighted the confusion I felt, the conflicted feelings I had in that moment on that Christmas Day. Perhaps unconsciously as I wrote that story for Sister Roberta Ann then, I would have been confronting difficult truths that I would continue to confront throughout my life, including at this moment as I am writing right now.

The newly discovered “fact” that Madeline left the convent sometime in 1969 rather than in 1971 might not, then, fundamentally change the truth of

that moment on that Christmas day, because a truth or truths of that moment are emerging in this moment of writing now about that moment then. In this act of writing right now, I am, inevitably, refining and adjusting truths that are emerging—that have emerged—through this act of storytelling, this process of seeking truth in writing this story, just as Blackburn suggests should happen as we collectively engage in the never-ending process of truth-seeking. So at this moment as I am writing, some truth about Madeline’s life is emerging, I think, and it is a truth that might inform how we should live together humanely and compassionately, a truth about love and hate and tolerance and fear, about the need to know each Other.

At least I hope it is.

~ ~ ~

Whether or not that Christmas confrontation about which I have been writing took place in 1967 or 1968, the fact remains that Madeline left the Bernardine Franciscan Order of Catholic Sisters just a short time later—maybe only a few months, maybe a year or a little more. That truth, I think, makes the question of why she left the convent seem more complicated—and perhaps more pressing. How could someone so convinced of the rightness of her mission walk away from her vows and leave the convent? Had she already been contemplating her departure from the convent at the time of that Christmas debate, when she so poignantly and passionately demonstrated her dedication to that message, to that mission? Was the steadfastness and calm righteousness that I observed in her that day a manifestation of her knowledge that she would soon leave the convent to continue her work of advocacy as a layperson? Was her conviction in her mission even deeper because of such knowledge?

As I noted in Chapter 4, Madeline did not even mention in her own obituary her two decades of service as a Catholic nun, and I have speculated that perhaps her own misgivings about the Church’s role in perpetuating racism might have informed her decision to leave the convent. I had long believed that her decision had been prompted primarily by her conflict with her superiors in the small Catholic parish in Washington, D.C. where she was teaching at the time. Against their wishes, she was spending some of her free time tutoring young students in nearby neighborhoods—children of color from low-income homes who were struggling in school and had little or no access to the kind of academic support that might help them succeed. She resisted her superiors’ demands that she cease those activities and, as a result, left the convent. Madeline’s friend, Father Gamrot, believed Madeline’s decision arose primarily from her desire to return to the mission school in Liberia, where she had taught a few years earlier. “She wanted to be an advocate for Liberians,” he told me, “and her religious life [as a nun] became an obstacle to that desire. So she found a different way to carry on as their advocate.” In his view, Madeline left the convent in order to continue fulfilling what

she believed was her greater mission of service to others. Her decision to leave the convent was, according to Father Gamrot, “a reflection of her divine mission.”

Those reasons—her desire to actively resist racism by serving those directly harmed by it, as I had believed, and her wish to advocate for Liberian students, as Father Gamrot believed—are not incompatible, of course, and in fact they reflect the same fundamental sense of purpose: Madeline’s divine mission, as Father Gamrot described it. And if Madeline had come to see the Church’s legacy of colonialism as another obstacle to fulfilling her mission, that reason would fit this story as well. Whatever her specific reasons, her decision to leave the convent was unquestionably a momentous and, I have long assumed, a difficult decision for her to make, no matter how certain she might have been that it was the right one. I have never found any reason to believe that Madeline did not love being a Catholic nun. All my family members who knew her seemed to agree that she was both dedicated to and fulfilled by her life as a Bernardine sister, which made her decision to leave to convent all the more surprising—even shocking and scandalous—to those of us who knew and loved her.

Father Gamrot stressed that becoming a nun was a major commitment, and he pointed out that Madeline’s decision to walk away from that commitment, whatever her specific personal reasons for it, was shaped by the historical moment. He saw her decision as part of a wave of change in the church as a result of Vatican II. Officially known as the Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Vatican II was a series of meetings held in Rome between 1962 and 1965 involving hundreds of Catholic cardinals, bishops, and other high-level church officials. The council’s charge was to examine Catholic doctrine and policy in view of the dramatic social, cultural, economic, and political developments that occurred in the post-war era and into the 1960s, including the far-reaching geopolitical tensions of the Cold War. At the end of its work, which involved dozens of committees and numerous reports over three years, the council’s official decrees promoted ecumenism, described significant reforms in the Catholic mass, and addressed important matters of church doctrine and governance, including religious freedom, the role of the laity, procreation, and family life, among many others (O’Malley).

The Second Vatican Council profoundly reshaped the Catholic Church. In the late 1960s, as some of the Vatican II reforms were being implemented, I was an altar boy in the small parish church where my family worshipped, and I vividly remember the mass changing from Latin to English, which meant that my fellow altar boys and I no longer had to memorize prayers in Latin. I recall elder family members complaining about the fact that the altar in church was moved so that the priest now said the entire mass while facing the congregation, whereas prior to the Vatican II reforms, the priest would face the crucifix that was displayed on the wall behind the altar, with his back to the congregants during most of the mass, including consecration, the holiest moment of the mass, when the bread and wine become, according to the Catholic doctrine of transubstantiation,

Christ's flesh and blood. I also remember debates about new and, in the minds of some family members, excessively liberal Church doctrines regarding marriage and divorce, birth control, the nature of sin, and relations with Jews and Protestants. To say that Vatican II affected every Catholic is to understate the matter, and the volumes that are still being written about the policies adopted by the church after the council testify to its ongoing impact and the controversial nature of the reforms it initiated. As one scholar noted nearly fifty years after the council completed its work, "Proof of the council's central role in the Church's path toward its future in the modern world is that the lively debate on Vatican II—both historical and theological—is far from over, even if the generation of bishops, theologians, and lay men and women active at the time of its celebration is gradually making room for a new generation of Catholics" (Faggioli 2).

Significantly, Vatican II and the reforms implemented in its aftermath took place as the Civil Rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s were intensifying, as the Cold War was reconfiguring the geopolitical map of the world, and as feminism, environmentalism, and other such reform movements were reshaping Americans' social and political views. These distinct but, in many ways, related developments not only changed American politics and law but also affected in concrete ways the lives of those of us who lived through that period, including Madeline. Whatever her personal reasons for leaving the convent, her decision was also a function of these historic developments that were taking place in 1969 and thus it is inseparable from that context: the Vietnam War raging in the aftermath of the 1968 Tet offensive; the Woodstock music festival celebrating the summer of love in 1969; national guard troops suppressing race riots in Chicago and New York; the Stonewall riots exploding in Manhattan in 1969 after city police attacked gay nightclub patrons; the Women's Liberation Movement organizing protests in cities throughout the U.S. Madeline left the Bernardine Order against this backdrop, and as Father Gamrot sees it, "There is a kind of fatefulness in her decision." The truth of her impactful decision, then, is multilayered and cannot adequately be expressed exclusively as an individual matter.

Yet even if Madeline's decision happened within that complicated historical context, even if her actions at the time were enabled and propelled by those extraordinary developments and can only be understood as part of that history, it was nevertheless an intensely personal decision that, to my mind, says a great deal about who Madeline was and about her deep commitment to living by her beliefs. Father Gamrot put it this way: "You dedicate your life to God and then you face a situation that challenges your all-or-nothing commitment. It was between her and God." Madeline must surely have understood her decision in such terms. How could it be otherwise? She was given to the convent when she was but thirteen years old, and she followed through on her commitment to God by completing her studies at Mount Alvernia High School, entering the convent, taking her vows, and serving as Sister Mary Marlene for two decades, during which she taught and mentored children in numerous schools, including the mission school

in Liberia. And during that time, while serving her students and the Church, she willingly deprived herself, as nuns are required to do, of so much of what enriches our existence as human beings and brings joy to us as we endure the inevitable suffering of life. The traditional vows taken by a Catholic nun include poverty, chastity, and obedience, and in taking those vows, Madeline gave up material possessions and comforts that most of us take for granted and consider among life's necessities. She also gave up the intense joys and pleasures of romantic love and sexual relationships, as well as her own autonomy in being able to decide whether to seek such experiences. In these ways alone, to become a nun was indeed a major commitment, as Father Gamrot aptly noted. Madeline embraced that commitment, seemingly without reservation, and she fulfilled her vows with a steadfastness born of her religious faith. So to walk away from her vows, to abandon her commitment to the convent, was a major commitment of a different kind: to her faith and her belief in God's message, as she understood and lived it, above all else; to her belief in her divine mission to serve, not the convent or the institution of the Church but other human beings, as she believed Jesus commanded; to continue her life of devoted service to others but outside a devotion to the convent itself. Whatever sense of commitment Madeline felt to the Bernardine Order and to the Catholic Church, her commitment to serving other human beings, driven by her deep faith and by her interpretation of Christ's message of love, was greater. Few people I have ever known would have, could have, made such a commitment. It was, I believe, extraordinary.

To Father Gamrot, Madeline's decision was something else, too: "Her leaving the convent was beautiful. She didn't leave God but instead she served him outside the constraints of the convent. It was not a mistake for her to be in the convent, and it was not a mistake for her to leave." Father Gamrot's words gave me pause when he spoke them to me in 2022, and as I am writing at this moment many months later, they provoke in me a kind of wonder. I had never before thought of Madeline's decision as beautiful. It had always seemed to me extraordinary, principled, and right, and I had always imagined it to have been difficult and perhaps even heart-wrenching for Madeline, no matter how right it might have been. But I had never seen *beauty* in that decision. Yet it makes perfect sense, for in beauty there might also be a kind of truth.

In his discussion of the role of beauty in scientific discovery, theoretical physicist and Nobel laureate Frank Wilczek reviews the great advances in scientific thinking made by such luminaries as Pythagoras and Isaac Newton, which laid a foundation for the more recent contributions of groundbreaking physicists such as James Maxwell; Wilczek concludes that "it was beauty and symmetry that guided Maxwell and his followers—that is, all modern physicists—closer to truth" (*Beautiful* 7). For Wilczek, beauty is both a reflection of and a vehicle for truth. In his conception, beauty encompasses symmetry, and he underscores the importance of symmetry in major scientific discoveries: "[T]he idea that there is symmetry at the root of Nature has come to dominate our understanding of physical reality"

(*Beautiful* 48). “In modern physics,” he writes, “we ... have learned to work from symmetry toward truth” (139). In these passages Wilczek is referring to the idea of *truth* in the sense that scientists seek to develop, through their collective inquiry, a “true” description of the universe, of reality. In that regard, beauty is a characteristic or quality that might reflect or contain a certain kind of truth; beauty is a reflection or indication of truth. But Wilczek also reminds us that “beauty is a human experience. It’s something that has to do with how humans react to the world and perceive the world. And it’s notoriously thought to be subjective, but it’s not entirely subjective” (Tippett). He goes on to say that “there are forms of beauty that are not found in science. ... But there’s a remarkable intersection ... and a remarkable overlap between the concepts of beauty that you find in art and literature and music, and things that you find as the deepest themes of our understanding of the physical world” (Tippett). For Wilczek, then, the concept of beauty is multifaceted, almost primal, and, to some extent, context bound.

Wilczek’s primary goal as a physicist is to use the concept of beauty as a way to gain a greater scientific understanding of the universe, not to advance a philosophical argument about truth. But although his scientific project is to help construct a “true” picture of the universe—in his case, at the sub-atomic level—he sees science as part of the broader human project of finding meaning and purpose, and ultimately his ideas about beauty and truth have relevance for that latter project. In 2022, Wilczek was awarded the Templeton Prize, which honors those whose achievements “harness[] the power of the sciences to explore the deepest questions of the universe and humankind’s place and purpose within it” (“World’s Most Interesting Prize”). In the lecture he gave upon receiving the award, he focused on how scientific inquiry can—and should—be integral to our collective effort as human beings to create a better future together. Rejecting the classic separation between scientific fact and human values—famously expressed in what has come to be known as philosopher David Hume’s law of *is* and *ought* (Cohon)—Wilczek argues that science helps us describe what *is* and identify what *could be*, but it also should inform our decisions about what *should be*. Referring to developments in quantum physics, artificial intelligence, and technology, he points to the great power these manifestations of science can lend to humans in their quest for a better future: “So in the domain of matter, in the domain of life, and even in the domain of mind, extraordinary prospects are opening up, and it would be difficult to overstate the power that this will give us. The question becomes, What are we going to do with this power? What should we do with the enormous powers we could have? This is where imagination and hopefully wisdom come into play” (“How Science”). For Wilczek, then, whatever truths science might help identify about the physical universe have value to the extent that those truths help us imagine and create a better future together as human beings.

I find it revealing that Wilczek was raised Catholic by immigrant parents and, by his own admission, experienced something of a crisis of faith as a young man. Pursuing his career as a physicist, he struggled to reconcile scientific inquiry with

Catholic teachings. In his youth, he says, he was “very, very taken with the ideas that the world had a meaning and a purpose,” which, in Catholic doctrine, rests with God (“Dr. Frank Wilczek”). That doctrine, which saw God’s glory in creation, seemed incompatible with his perspective as a scientist trying to describe and objectively explain the physical universe. Eventually, Wilczek resolved his dilemma by finding purpose in the project of imagining and working toward “good futures” through scientific inquiry. In other words, his real purpose as a scientist was not so much to advance science but to improve human life. Ultimately, for Wilczek as a physicist seeking truth through science, the most important question is “how to live wisely and agreeably and well.” Like Barad, Wilczek defines scientific truth in human terms; like Blackburn, he engages in rigorous inquiry in order to figure out how to live well together. Truth becomes a moral and ethical matter, and beauty becomes a tool or guidepost in that project of truth-seeking.

From this perspective on truth, writing a true story is also an ethical endeavor, an effort to seek truths that, as Wilczek puts it, help us “live wisely and agreeably and well.” Whatever truths we might seek in writing our true stories, whatever truths might emerge in my effort to write Madeline’s story, whatever truths can be realized in this act of writing right now, should, ideally, meet Wilczek’s standard: the truth of this story of Madeline’s life should help us live better together; the truths that emerge from this experience of writing should help us live better together in this moment. And the next. That, I think, is ultimately what it means to write a true story.

If there is beauty in Madeline’s decision to leave the convent so that she could pursue her divine mission, as Father Gamrot described it, her decision also seems consistent with the mission statement of the Bernardine Order:

We, the Bernardine Franciscan Sisters, are called by God to live the Gospel in the spirit of Francis of Assisi and Mother Veronica Grzedowska. As vowed women of the Church we choose to live simply and poorly. Rooted in contemplative prayer and committed to ongoing conversion, we strive to create communities of love and service wherever we are. *In the Name of Jesus, we reach out in compassionate love, recognizing the dignity and giftedness of each person.* We welcome all as brother and sister. Faithful to the Church and to our charism, *we seek justice, peace and reconciliation, especially as we work with and in behalf of the poor.* Trusting in Divine Providence, we journey in faith and joy, sister and servant to all. (“Bernardine”; emphasis added)

I don’t know whether the Bernardine Sisters even had a mission statement when Madeline formally entered the order in 1950, but as I read this statement now, it seems to me that Madeline’s life, both before and after her decision to leave the convent, was consistent with the Bernardine mission as stated in this text. Indeed, her entire life, but especially her life after she left the convent, seems to have

embodied this mission, especially in ways reflected in the italicized passages. We might quibble that after leaving the convent, she no longer lived “simply and poorly,” for she and her husband, Earle, lived a modest but comfortable life in a Washington D. C. suburb in their own home, with the trappings of a middle-class existence. But every other aspect of the Bernardine mission statement applies to Madeline’s life *after* she left the order. I could even argue that her decision to leave the order enabled her to fulfill the most important obligations in this statement, especially seeking justice, peace, and reconciliation and serving others in compassionate love in Jesus’ name. As I am coming to realize in writing this story, her entire life was a “journey in faith and joy.” She was indeed a “sister and servant to all.” The complicated truth of her decision to leave the convent seems to rest in a simple but deeply powerful belief in that mission. It *was* beautiful.

It is also the case that Madeline’s decision gave rise to a kind of ugliness that must also be part of this true story. Madeline’s departure from the convent shocked some members of my family, but it was her relationship with Earle, which began sometime after she left the convent, that really provoked ugliness, especially her mother’s shunning of her and the refusal of most of her family to attend her wedding some nine or ten years after she took off her nun’s habit for good. One painful irony in all this is that the beauty of her love for Earle seemed to bring into relief the ugly racism that existed all around her, including in her own family. The truth, as beautiful as it might be, is also messy and, at times, full of sorrow and suffering.

And if some members of Madeline’s White family rejected her marriage to a Black man, Earle’s family also had to confront this interracial relationship at a time—the 1970s—when such relationships were rare and seen by many as inappropriate and even wrong. In 1980, just after Madeline’s wedding, only 7% of all marriages in the U.S. were registered as interracial; by 2015, the year before Madeline died, that rate was 17% (Livingston and Brown). Earle’s half-brother, Jeff, who was only in his twenties when Earle began dating Madeline, recalled that the relationship initially raised a few eyebrows in his family. “I don’t remember Earle’s being with a White woman being a thing,” he told me, “but there was no prior experience [in the family] with interracial marriage.” Nevertheless, Earle’s family accepted Madeline, and I recall the love they displayed for her on her wedding day—love made more visible by the conspicuous and painful absence of most of her own family members. I did not know Earle’s family then, but they seemed to know Madeline well and they conveyed a sense that she belonged with them. I felt it as she introduced me to them as her “cousin from Pennsylvania,” in the warm way they welcomed me and my three cousins and made us feel like special guests of this woman who was now part of their family. At the same time, the love Earle’s family felt for her and their acceptance of her marriage to him did not mean that the road was easy for this interracial couple. Despite the deep and obvious love Madeline and Earle had for each other, manifested in a marriage that lasted for the rest of their lives, they married in a society in which race was—and continues to be—a vexed and complicated matter.



*Madeline and Earle with Three of Her Nieces, ca. 1981.*

Jeff remembers moments early in the marriage that underscore some of that complexity. He came to know Madeline as someone who was always outspoken, someone who called out those whom she believed were wrong. At a time when various (and sometimes competing) versions of Black identity were emerging in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and the racial tensions of the 1970s and early 1980s, Madeline had views about Black culture that were as strong as her views about racial equality and social justice. At times, Jeff recalled, she criticized some aspects of Black culture that were fashionable and, for many people of color, important expressions of identity. One such aspect was hairstyle, which became politicized in the 1960s and 1970s as part of the Black is Beautiful Movement (see Griffin; Randle). In particular, Madeline disliked the popular trend of cornrowing, arguing at that time that she had never seen young people on the continent of Africa wearing such hairstyles. Her strong views about the topic seemed to reflect her own lack of awareness about the social, cultural, political, and historical significance of hair

styling among people of color and especially among Africans—a lack of awareness that was especially stunning in someone who married a Black man, a woman who lived and worked in Africa for two years and whose entire life was characterized by her advocacy for people of color. In her criticisms of these trends, Madeline seemed either ignorant or dismissive of the fact that cornrowing, braiding, and other elaborate styling techniques have a long history on the African continent that extends back many centuries and reflects the “social, aesthetic, and spiritual significance” of hair for African peoples (Byrd and Tharps 7). Nevertheless, Madeline’s mother-in-law, a Black woman, agreed with Madeline about cornrowing. Jeff, a young man with his own strident sense of Black identity at the time, bristled at Madeline’s criticisms: “To have a White woman in my parents’ house telling us what Black people in the U.S. don’t know about Africa—well, I didn’t take it particularly well.” At that point in his life, Jeff “was going through a period of Black nationalism,” and Madeline’s comments made him resentful—a resentment, he acknowledged, that “was a reflection of the times.”

Jeff’s resentment might well have reflected the times in which those discussions about hairstyles took place, and in that regard his recollections underscore the extent to which Madeline’s story is wrapped up in the changing social, cultural, and political attitudes that characterized those times. At the same time, Jeff’s anecdote paints a picture of an opinionated and perhaps insensitive side of Madeline that I never really knew. I would have expected her to appreciate the political significance of hairstyling for Black women and the role that trends like cornrowing played in their efforts to claim agency and resist racial stereotyping and oppression, which was very real and often violent, as she herself well knew. Jeff’s story seems to suggest that despite her genuine commitment to racial equality, and despite her own marriage to a Black man and her love for his family, Madeline had blind spots when it came to attitudes about racial identity—blind spots that were, no doubt, at least partly a function of her own identity and upbringing as a White woman. And that raises questions about my own blind spots, as a White man, when it comes to this story I am trying to write about her, especially with respect to that family argument on Christmas Day sometime in the late 1960s as well as Madeline’s departure from the convent, events that are both at the center of this story.

Jeff, who is a physician, was much younger than his half-brother Earle and was never especially close to Madeline. But in the last year or so of her life, he spent more time with her, accompanying her on various medical appointments as she battled cancer. After one appointment, they had lunch together, and, he said, “she started talking about being a nun.” Madeline told him about the small Catholic parish school in Washington D. C. where she was teaching just before she left the convent in 1969, explaining that she didn’t believe at the time that it was adequately serving the black community. According to Jeff, she pushed the issue with her superiors, including the parish priest, but they did not, in her view, try to rectify the situation. “She told me she had a strong reaction to the priest’s attitude,” Jeff said, which ultimately was the impetus for her to leave the convent.

That was the story he knew—a story that differs slightly in detail but not in substance from the story I knew about her decision.

Jeff's conversation with Madeline over lunch took place in 2016, the year Madeline died and more than forty-five years after she left the convent. He confided that he and Madeline previously had never had conversations about her time as a nun, and I wonder now why she raised the topic with him in that last year of her life. At that point, Earle had recently died, and Madeline certainly knew her own death was close. Perhaps she felt a need to share her own story, to justify or clarify her decision, to revisit that fateful long-ago moment in her extraordinary life. Perhaps it was important to her that Jeff, a Black man who was much younger than she was and who was part of the family she married into, understand her decision to leave the convent as a reflection of her lifelong commitment to working for racial equality. If so, there might have been a certain kind of pride in recalling that decision so that Jeff understood it as part of her mission in life. Maybe she wanted him to understand better how she came to be part of his family. Or maybe she was still trying to make sense of that significant moment in her life so many years later. It would make perfect sense that, as she anticipated death, she might feel compelled to talk about what was clearly one of the most important acts of her life. Maybe she appreciated the beauty, as Father Gamrot saw it, of her decision to leave the convent and wanted to convey that idea to Jeff. That, too, would make perfect sense. Yet in her own obituary, which she might well have been writing at about the same time that she was sharing these recollections with Jeff in 2016, she never even mentioned that she had been a nun, much less that she left the convent after twenty years of service. Why? Is it possible that she experienced some regret? Did she have second thoughts all those years later about the actions she took in those earlier days, actions that seem so principled and founded on deeply held values but actions that also complicated her life and the lives of those she loved? Or maybe in her mind the matter was settled and didn't merit inclusion in her obituary.

I shared with Jeff my story about the Christmas confrontation Madeline had with my family elders all those years before, and he said, "That's the side of Madeline I saw in my lunch with her in the last year of her life." He noted that "she didn't appear to be bragging or on some high horse about her ideals, just resolute and disappointed with the poor response she received when she pointed out the deficiencies to the church leaders. I gained a lot of respect for Madeline in that conversation, but I don't think she was trying to produce any particular reaction in me. She just seemed to be telling her truth." It seems an especially poignant moment, as I imagine it from Jeff's telling, and what it says about Madeline underscores truths about her life that are emerging in this story I am writing.

In that conversation over lunch, Jeff developed an understanding of Madeline that he hadn't had before. "I learned that she stood up for these values, that she was not a passive person." No, she wasn't. A "passive person" would not have made the decisions Madeline made about how to live a principled life of service

to others, would not have left the convent after two decades and then gone back to Washington D. C. to teach in schools where the students were young people of color, many of them living in poverty, most of them without the advantages that she believed they should have in life. A passive person would not have fought all her life for justice and equality, making decisions in pursuit of that mission that caused her great suffering. A passive person would not have defied her mother and entered into an interracial marriage that led to estrangement from her family for a time. And perhaps a passive person might not have forgiven the relatives who refused to attend her wedding and did not initially accept her marriage to Earle. A passive person might not have been able to live according to Christ's message of love and care for others, despite the challenges and risks. Nor would a passive person have lectured people of color about Black identity. As I knew her, Madeline did not see herself as a passive person but rather, as Jeff noted, as a person who lived, mindfully and deliberately and confidently, according to her values, values founded on her faith and her embrace of Jesus Christ's command to love others, even those who disagreed with her and rejected her.

The truth of Madeline's life encompasses all this complexity, all this ugliness and all this beauty. And the important truths of her beautiful decision to leave the convent do not, I don't believe, lie so much in her specific reasons for leaving or her complicated and perhaps contradictory feelings about that decision as it does in her abiding commitment to a greater mission, as she understood it, to serve others, to work for equality and justice, to help make the world a more humane, peaceful, tolerant, loving place.

To the extent that these truths meet Blackburn's standard of helping us live better together, they matter. In this moment as I am writing. But in the next moment, these truths might evolve, and newer, even better truths might emerge as this process of truth-seeking, of trying to write our true stories, continues. I see now, as I am writing, that this process began for me four decades ago when Tom Newkirk, one of my earliest faculty mentors when I was a young graduate student at the University of New Hampshire, assigned Plato's *Phaedrus* as one of the required texts in a seminar on composition theory. As I noted earlier, I recall being a bit confused about the relevance of that text to the teaching of writing, and I was unsure about why we spent time in class discussing the relationship between philosophy and rhetoric. Those discussions make sense to me now as I strive to articulate a conception of truth as part of my effort to illuminate the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a potential locus of truth itself. I am grateful to Tom for introducing me to a text that became so important to my thinking so many years later. And if this part of my story is a construction, an effort to craft a coherent and meaningful story out of the randomness and meaninglessness of life, as Sartwell might say, then so be it. Because there is, I believe, truth in this *effort* to write this story.

In late 2019, as COVID-19 was emerging as a historic global threat—and about two years before I began writing this book—I was diagnosed with Posterior Vitreous Detachment (PVD) in my right eye. According to the American Society of Retina Specialists, PVD is “a natural change that occurs during adulthood, when the vitreous gel that fills the eye separates from the retina” (Bakri). For most people, the condition, which is relatively common among those over the age of sixty (Eliot), causes mild symptoms such as floaters or flashes in the eye, and the space created in the eye by the contraction of the vitreous gel naturally refills with fluid over a few months; it is painless and little more than an annoyance. For about 15% of people with PVD, however, the condition results in a torn or detached retina, a potentially serious problem that can lead to blindness. I was one of the 15%.

During the year and a half following my diagnosis, I had three surgeries performed on my right eye in addition to several minor laser procedures to repair tears in my retina. The surgeries exacerbated an existing cataract, dramatically reducing the clarity of vision in that eye and requiring cataract surgery in late 2022—several years before I otherwise would have had that procedure. In the end, thanks to the attentive care and remarkable skill of my surgeon, the retina in my right eye was repaired and my eyesight preserved. But the various surgeries did affect my sight. Scar tissue resulting from laser procedures to repair the retinal tears has created two small blind spots in my peripheral vision and some distortion in my forward vision. That distortion manifests as slight crookedness where I should (and previously did) see straight lines, such as windows and doorframes, picture frames, streetlight poles, road signs, the roof lines on homes in my neighborhood, or the computer monitor on my desk. Amazingly, the human brain tries to compensate for this distortion, so that my left, or “good,” eye seems to distort such lines in a way that “corrects” for the distortion I see in my right eye as a result of the surgeries. In other words, if I look at the vertical line on one side of a doorframe or window with only my right eye, that vertical line appears to bend slightly to the left. If I close my right eye and look at that same line with only my left (“good”) eye, the line bends slightly to the right. When I look with both eyes open, the line looks straight—at least at first, for if I continue to look closely, I will notice a very slight bend, though it is much less pronounced than if I were looking at the line with only my right eye. As I go about my day, I don’t notice this distortion in my vision, but at times, such as when I am sitting quietly and watching television, I will suddenly notice that the rectangular shape of the TV does not appear quite rectangular to me.

I am deeply grateful that my right eye still works, and as frightening as this experience has been, it has also been illuminating and helped me appreciate how much I previously had taken my eyesight for granted. And it has raised intriguing questions about how we perceive the world, what we know, and how we determine what is true. Which is why I am describing the experience here.

For example, now when I look at a doorframe, I see slightly crooked lines that I “know” from prior experience should be straight. If I were to state about

a perfectly rectangular doorframe, “That doorframe is not straight,” I would be making a seemingly true statement. But is that statement really true? If you were to look at the same doorframe, you would probably say, “That doorframe is straight” (unless you, too, suffer from some problem in your vision). That would also be a true statement. But which statement is *really* true, “objectively” true: that the doorframe is straight or that it isn’t? From our respective perspectives, both statements seem true, yet both might also be deemed false. If we accept that both statements are true, then we are working with a conception of truth that rests to some extent on individual perception mediated by several factors, including the physical condition of our eyes. There is a doorframe. Both of us presumably can see it and touch it. But the appearance of that doorframe is not the same for both of us, regardless of its “straightness.” As a result, what constitutes “straight” and “crooked” when it comes to that doorframe is contingent upon which of us is perceiving it.

We might qualify those statements somewhat. I might say, “That doorframe does not appear straight to me.” And you might say, “That doorframe appears straight to me.” Again, both statements seem true. But neither of these qualified statements is a claim that the doorframe is in fact straight or crooked—just that it appears one way or the other to each of us.

You might argue that whether or not I perceive the doorframe as crooked, it is, in reality, straight. In other words, the truth is that the physical object I am looking at is straight, a truth that might be verified by evidence such as measurement with appropriate tools (a ruler, a level, a square) and the testimony of others who can see it and touch it. And I might even assent to the claim that the doorframe is straight, even if I cannot verify that claim with my own eyes—even if, that is, that true claim seems false to me on the basis of my own perception of the doorframe and my own lived experience in encountering the doorframe. But a related truth is that I cannot see the “straightness” of the doorframe as you or someone else can. Even if I “know” that it is straight, it does not appear so to me. I must accept that truth claim on the basis of some sort of established “evidence” and the testimony of others even though I cannot verify it through my own experience of seeing it. And I have no choice but to live my life navigating through that doorframe that appears slightly “crooked” to me. In other words, my perception of that straight doorframe as crooked has material consequences in my life, whether or not my perception is “true” by some objective or socially agreed-upon standard.

Can we, then, accept as true both claims—that the doorframe is straight and that it is crooked—at the same time, even if we acknowledge the possibility of verifying the straightness of the doorframe through established methods of measurement, which is, in the end, a social process? To do so would be to acknowledge and accept the contingency of truth and the provisional nature of any truth claim—as well as its complicated relationship to some sort of external reality, which, after all, is ultimately a function of our perception of it and

therefore always, to some extent, a construction. And if we do accept this view of the contingency of truth, what of the truth value of the two claims? Are they equivalent? In other words, if we accept both claims as contingently true, do we give up the possibility of adjudicating among competing truth claims? Do we reject the possibility of deeming one truth claim “better” or “truer” than another? If not, then we must find ways to evaluate truth claims so that we can work toward identifying “better” truths, as Blackburn would have it. We must find tools that are the equivalent of the measuring tape and square by which we can determine that a doorframe is straight. We must learn to evaluate the truth of the stories we tell about our lives, which are inevitably shaped by our respective perspectives, memories, experiences, and positionality as knowers and as storytellers. We must be able to see both “crooked” and “straight” stories, both of which might be true but one of which might be “truer” than the other. We must be able to answer, at least provisionally, the question, How do we know if a story is *true*?

And more to the point of *this* story, we must be able to learn to write true stories about our lives such that the truth of our stories can help us live better lives together. Even if we know that the truth of the stories we write is inevitably contingent, we must learn to write truer and “better” stories, as Salman Rushdie exhorted us to do, in the face of destructive and dangerous and demonstrably false narratives about who we are and how to live.

Ultimately, we somehow need to get to a conception of truth that allows for us to determine whether the stories we tell about ourselves are true or not, whether they convey valid truths, contingent though they might be, rather than falsehoods. We need to be able to identify such truths, to be able to find the straight line of the doorframe even when we can see only a crooked one. Or to accept that the doorframe can appear both straight and crooked at the same time, whether or not it is in fact straight, depending upon who is seeing it. Maybe the obvious conclusion here is that we cannot know with absolute certainty that what we are seeing is what is, but as an individual storyteller trying to write a true story, as an individual human being approaching the doorframe, I can continue to inquire into what I am seeing, in the context of what others see, in the context of my own memories of what I have seen, in the context of what I can *know* on the basis of what others see and in view of shared bodies of knowledge and different perspectives that might inform my conclusions about what I am seeing—I can draw on all of this in my continuing inquiry into what I see so that I can arrive at tentative truth-claims that enable me to function as a human being and help us to live better together. That is the ethical obligation of the writer trying to write a true story about their life. Or Madeline’s. Or anyone else’s.

Whatever truths I am able to realize in writing this story about Madeline are, yes, contingent and might necessarily differ from truths others might “see” in her story. But those truths are neither equivalent nor completely subjective, for they are a function of the individual interactions each of us who knew and loved her has had and continues to have with the “facts” of her life, as we know them and as

we continue to learn about them and make sense of them. What we know about her life—her decades of service as a nun, her teaching, her advocacy, her decision to leave the convent, her marriage to Earle, and much more—serves as a reference point for the truths we each might find in her life. Those truths are necessarily partial and contingent and might even be divergent but they are not necessarily mutually exclusive. They might all contribute to a larger truth that encompasses all those contingent and even divergent truths. Ultimately, as individuals we each might perceive the doorframe as straight or crooked, but we work—ideally, together—toward a truth claim about that doorframe that enables us to make sense of it, to live with it, even if our respective perceptions might differ or diverge.

This conception of truth as contingent and provisional and partial yet also part of an ideal whole truth, which we might never realize, lends a certain kind of power to the experience of writing-in-the-moment, because in that act of writing we might momentarily identify or realize a truth without necessarily trying to fix it in the form of the text, which necessarily alters that truth (as I explain in Chapter 4). Rather, in the experience of writing there resides an inherent recognition of the contingency of the truth that might be emerging in that moment of writing, no matter what (inevitably partial) version of that truth might be encoded in the text we are producing at that moment. In this sense, the experience of writing-in-the-moment is an enactment of the contingency of truth-seeking even as it is an act of seeking genuine truth. At the same time, writing true stories can be—should be—a process of always continuing to seek “better” truths, in the way Blackburn proposes that ongoing philosophical inquiry might lead to refined and adjusted and even new truths by which we can live better together. As Blackburn argues, “Everyday certainties do not require that we get the whole truth before we get any truth” (34). In other words, my truth that that doorframe is crooked might be sufficient in order for me to walk past it safely, but you and I might need to try to determine a truth about the straightness of that doorframe in order for us to repair or replace it, even if it still appears crooked to me. In that sense, writing this story about Madeline might be a way to identify *a* truth as a step in the never-ending process of working toward the idealistic goal of identifying the whole truth, a goal we—you and I—might never quite realize.

In the end, what this story about Madeline’s life might tell us about how to live, about love, about race and identity, about faith and commitment, about the pain and suffering and joys of living, about uncertainty and faith—these are truths we need, for this moment and for all moments, partial and contingent though those truths might be. And we will realize them in the writing.