

# Chapter 6. The Ethical and Moral Burden of Writing a True Story

One of the challenges is that, on the one hand, we need a larger framework that allows for a variety of different perspectives. Nobody's imposing one view on anybody. But on the other hand, you have to have enough glue in place: not just tolerance, but respect, not just respect, but humility. It's like a jazz artist, right, who learns and listens from others and knows that no one of us happens to own the truth.

– Cornell West, *“Is Liberalism Worth Saving?”*

But narrative can make perception more powerful than reality, and dangerously so.

– Alexander Hurst, *“Has France Really Gone to Hell?”*

Sometime in late summer of 1945, Stanley Szerafinski loaded a few suitcases into his car and, accompanied by two of his daughters, Madeline and her younger sister Dolores, drove from their home in Scranton to Reading, Pennsylvania. They were headed to Mount Alvernia High School, where Madeline would enroll, her first step toward becoming a Catholic nun in the Bernardine Order. Today, with interstate highways and modern cars, that drive takes about two hours. In 1945, my Great Uncle Stanley would have had to navigate mostly rural state and county roads to get from Scranton to Reading, a journey of some three or four hours. While writing this story, I have spent a great deal of time trying to imagine what that drive must have been like. As a parent myself, I have to believe that my Uncle Stanley must have had misgivings about taking his eldest daughter, who was only thirteen years old at the time, to a boarding school, where she would live away from her family while studying to become a nun. Like any loving parent, he must have worried about Madeline leaving home at such a young age. He also must have felt a sense of impending loss, anticipating how much he would miss his daughter. Maybe he had second thoughts as he got closer to Reading.

I have learned in writing this story that my Uncle Stanley did not seem to share his wife's fervent belief that they were glorifying God by giving their daughter to the convent. When Madeline left the Bernardine Order some twenty-four years later, he told her that he had never really wanted her to enter the convent in the first place. So what was he feeling on that August day in 1945? Did he, as any concerned parent might, try to hide his misgivings? Did he conceal his sadness and instead drive with a forced sense of resolve, feigning for his daughter's benefit the same conviction that seemed to propel Madeline throughout her remarkable life? Perhaps that conviction was strengthened by Dolores's presence. Only eight

years old at the time, she must have been excited for Madeline, proud to have a sister entering the convent. But how much could she understand at eight years old? She must have felt sad at the thought of leaving her older sister in a strange place. She must have known that she would miss Madeline. I have to think that they all felt apprehensive as they drove toward Madeline's future. Or maybe, as I am writing this story in this moment, I simply want to—need to—believe that.

In 2023, Dolores was the only surviving member of Madeline's immediate family, and, nearly eighty years after that fateful drive, she mainly remembered one salient detail: the car broke down on the way to Reading, and a stop for repairs lengthened the trip. All those years later, Dolores shared no memories of sadness or worry or apprehension. She recalled only that, at the time, she shared her family's pride in Madeline. By her account, which was corroborated to me by other family members, Madeline sincerely wanted to become a Catholic nun. The Bernardine sisters who taught at Saint Mary's, the small Catholic parish elementary school that Madeline and her sisters attended in Moosic, Pennsylvania, routinely recruited promising girls to join the convent. And Madeline, a star student whose academic achievements stood out among her classmates, accepted their invitation with genuine enthusiasm. She wanted to be a nun. That sense of conviction, even at such a young age, tracks with the Madeline I knew, with the Madeline I have come to know in writing this book. But I still wonder: at the age of thirteen, did she feel apprehensive about leaving her home to attend boarding school, leaving family and friends and the only place she really knew? No matter how sure she was about entering the convent and devoting her life to God, she must have been anxious and even a bit fearful, sitting in that car as it rolled through the northeastern Pennsylvania countryside toward a very different life than she had known to that point. Certainly, she would have wondered what that life at her new school—her new home—would be like, and no matter how excited she might have been, she must have thought about the loved ones she would be leaving behind. How could someone so young *not* have some doubts, some second thoughts, as she and her father and sister neared the convent in Reading, and the reality of being separated from all she knew and loved became clear?

Yet nothing I have learned in the process of writing this story suggests that Madeline ever had a moment of serious doubt about leaving home to become a Catholic nun. Today, a woman must be at least eighteen years old to be accepted into the Bernardine Order and begin the process of becoming a Catholic nun, a policy that makes good sense to me as I try to imagine that day in 1945 when my thirteen-year-old cousin was being given to the convent. If such a policy were in place then, would Madeline have made the same choice? Would she still have become a nun if she had had to wait five years until she turned eighteen years old? Would she have made the same commitment to a life of religious service? Or was that commitment a function of policies, driven by religious fervor, that circumscribed her young life and helped bring her to that moment? Did that

commitment emerge from those circumstances—circumstances to which Madeline adapted and in which, eventually, she thrived?

Twenty-four years later, Madeline left the Bernardine Order, and I have been writing this story to understand that event, to find the truth—a truth—that resides in that life-altering decision. In this story I am writing, Madeline’s decision to leave the convent has become an even greater act of commitment to God and to her faith than her decision to take her vows as a nun in 1949. As her friend Father Gamrot put it, her decision to leave the convent was a beautiful decision, a reflection of her fervent belief in her mission of service to others and her ongoing fight for racial equality and justice; it was a measure of the power of her faith that she would leave the Bernardine Order after so many years in order to serve others as she believed Jesus called her to do. Fulfilling that mission meant breaking her perpetual vows to the Bernardine Order, which, ironically enough, had, in her view, become an obstacle to her commitment to living according to Jesus’s example of love and tolerance and compassion for others. That is a truth that is emerging in this story I am writing in this moment. It is a truth that is embodied in the dramatic moment in 1969 when Madeline rebuffed her superiors, refused to curtail her activities to help low-income children of color, reaffirmed her advocacy for racial equality, and, removing the cincture from around her waist and the rosary from around her neck and placing them on the desk of her Mother Superior in the parish school in Washington D. C. where she was teaching, declared that she would leave the convent rather than stop fighting for racial justice.

But that truth, as real and right and *true* as it might be, as central as it is to this story I am writing, perhaps obscures other truths that are just as real, just as remarkable, just as *true*. Or maybe it’s more accurate to say that any truth is inevitably more complicated than it might seem. For this process of trying to write a true story has brought into relief another truth: that, as Cornell West has said, “no one of us happens to own the truth.” Whatever truth might be emerging right now in this act of writing this story—whatever truth might emerge in the writing of *any* story—is inevitably contingent and nuanced, even if it is necessary, even if it is exactly the right truth for this moment.

Narrative—writing a true story—reveals and obscures at the same time; storytelling shapes truth in the process of identifying it. According to philosopher Paul Ricoeur, “To tell and to follow a story is already to reflect upon events in order to encompass them in successive wholes” (“Memory” 24). This process of “narrativising” our past is an effort to “draw together disparate past events into a meaningful whole, by establishing causal and meaningful connections between them” (Barker). Thus, to write a true story about an experience is to construct (and reconstruct) truths that seemingly already exist but that would not exist without the writing of that story, without the *experience* of writing that story. This dynamic relationship among writing, storytelling, and truth-seeking further complicates the working conception of truth that I have articulated in Chapter 5, and it requires, I think, a closer look at the challenge of writing a true story and why it matters.

In Dubravka Ugrešić's novel *The Ministry of Pain*, the narrator, Tanjica, struggles to tell a story that does justice to her experience as a Croatian émigré from the former Yugoslavia living (as Ugrešić herself did) in the Netherlands after the Balkan wars of the 1990s. In trying to tell her story about fleeing the nationalist violence of her Croatian homeland during those years, Tanjica confronts "the larger question of whether a language that hasn't learned to depict reality, complex as the inner experience of that reality may be, is capable of doing anything at all—telling stories, for instance" (4). Ugrešić is questioning the very capacity of language to enable us to tell a story that conveys the truth of our experience, or that conveys any truth at all. This is the same basic question that, as I have noted earlier in this book, the philosopher Crispin Sartwell has taken up, concluding that language can never fully, or even adequately, capture our lived experience. Sartwell rejects the proposition that narrative—the stories we tell about ourselves using language that is ultimately inadequate to the task—can convey the reality we live. As a result, whatever truth a story we tell might convey is suspect and, in Sartwell's view, perhaps delusional, for any story we tell about our experience can never be *true*, if "true" means capturing the fullness, the full truth, of that experience.

Ugrešić does not go quite so far, it would seem. (She is, after all, a novelist.) Her novel about trying to tell a story that captures a complex and fraught experience exposes not only the challenge but perhaps also the impossibility of telling such a story. But she does not reject the effort, the process. How, she asks, can we tell a true story about our experience when we have no language for doing so, when language itself can be an obstacle to truth, but the need to tell the story—to understand our experience through storytelling—remains pressing and real? Writing a true story—*any* true story—is ultimately a matter of confronting this question. It requires not only acknowledging that any truth that emerges in the act of writing is inevitably constructed and contingent, but also accepting that the tool we have for telling stories—language—is limited in what it enables us to know or say about our experience and might, in fact, ultimately obscure the very truths we seek. Trying to write a true story thus demands a vigilance against the dangers inherent in the act of seeking truth through writing.

This wariness about language as a tool for truth-seeking arose for me after I took up the practice of Zen and confronted Zen's skepticism of language as a vehicle for enlightenment, something I explored previously in *Writing as a Way of Being* (see pp. 84–86). Indeed, writing that book, some twenty-five years after I began my academic journey as a graduate student and more than thirty years after publishing my first article as a professional writer, was the first time in my career as a writer and scholar that I seriously confronted the possibility that writing, this complex activity to which I have devoted my professional life, might not be the vehicle for improving human life that I always believed it to be. It was a long and tortuous journey to get to that point, at which I encountered a kind of impasse constituted not only by my years of scholarly inquiry into the nature of writing and language but also by my experiences as a writing teacher and, significantly,

my years of Zen practice, which seemed to complicate my efforts to understand writing and which deeply informed *Writing as a Way of Being*—a significant step in the development of my ideas about what writing is and what it can do. It was also a departure from the prevailing conception of writing that had informed my understanding and practice of writing for most of my career.

In writing that book, I examined the teachings of Zen philosophers regarding the inability of language to capture experience and access truth. In Zen teaching, truth resides in *preconceptual* experience. The task of the truth-seeker—the Zen student on the path to enlightenment—is to experience reality directly, without analysis, explanation, or mediation. Language itself cannot stand in for or represent that experience, nor can it enable us to realize truth. It is at best an imperfect if necessary tool to be used in the quest for perfection, the quest for truth. But this view of language must be understood within the context of the fundamental interconnection of all beings—that is, nonduality. Within this framework of radical nonduality, which has its fullest expression in the work of the great Zen philosopher Eihei Dogen, there is ultimately no distinction between our selves and the world we perceive. In Dogen’s view, no distinction exists between the world of appearance—in other words, our delusions about reality, which are in part a function of language—and the realm of truth; therefore, what is said is ultimately identical to what is. Language is not truth, nor is it the realm of truth; rather, it is part of all that is and therefore part of whatever truth can be realized on the path to enlightenment. From this perspective, the inadequacy of language does not prevent access to truth. In other words, truth cannot be realized in or through language but only experienced directly; however, language is a tool to be used on the path to enlightenment—indeed, it is inherently part of that path—and once a state of enlightenment is attained, one’s words and truth encompass the same reality. Within this framework of radical nonduality, then, the inadequacies and imperfections of language don’t really matter. As I concluded in *Writing as a Way of Being*, “In this [Dogen’s] formulation, language ceases to be an obstacle to truth because truth is extra-linguistic” (85).

I am suggesting here that the “true” stories we tell cannot fully capture truth, not only because of the inadequacy of language but also because, as Dogen teaches, truth does not reside *in* language; moreover, narrative itself complicates the process of truth-seeking even as it enables that process, because, as I have noted in this book, narrative inevitably shapes the reality we perceive as we use it to assign meaning to our lived experience. However, the *experience* of writing a “true” story, the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment, although it is fundamentally a linguistic experience, can nevertheless provide a means of access to *extra-linguistic* experience and thus to the preconceptual truth that Dogen describes. This is not at all to claim that the process of writing a true story is akin to Zen enlightenment; rather, I am suggesting that the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment can be a locus of truth because it does not rely on language either to capture or to convey that truth. Instead, the writer writing in the moment is using language as a vehicle for experience

itself—indeed, as an integral *part* of experience itself—wherein we might access truth. In this sense, writing-in-the-moment is more like meditation, which is not where truth resides but, in Zen teaching, is a practice that can provide access to direct experience of ourselves as part of all that is—and thus to truth. If we accept the limitations of language and its inability to capture or convey truth, we see that truth can reside in the *experience* of using language—of writing—rather than in the language—the text, whether written or spoken—itself. Thus, I am writing a true story not to write a true *story*—that is, a story/text that purports to capture and convey a truth—but rather to access truth through the *experience* of writing that story.

It is important to emphasize that this process of truth-seeking in storytelling—in the experience of writing a true story—is not an isolated, solitary matter of the writer seeking idiosyncratic or individual truth. Every act of writing is inherently social, and the writer is always already connected to others through the very act of using written language. The radical nonduality that Dogen describes—which I see as akin to the posthumanist physicist Karen Barad’s notion of agential realism, as I discussed it in Chapter 5—means not only that the solitary writer is never solitary, never separate, encompassing all that is simply by *being* in that moment of writing, but also that the moment of writing encompasses all other moments, past and future. Even without a rhetorical exigency, even without the intent to produce a text to be shared, the solitary writer is engaged in an inherently social act and, to invoke Walt Whitman, contains multitudes. And because it is inherently social, every act of writing, including writing our true stories, has an ethical component, for we always write in the presence of others, whether they are physically present or not. This is the same formulation by which Zen meditation is conceived as an inherently ethical act: the impact of meditation on the solitary student ultimately affects every other being because that solitary student encompasses all beings.

To try to write a true story, then, is an ethical act, and that has significant implications for how we should think about and engage in such writing. Ricoeur has explored the ethical and moral dimensions of narrative in the never-ending human effort to remember the past and to write history, most famously in his monumental work *La Mémoire, l’Histoire, l’Oubli* (*Memory, History, Forgetting*). As sociologist Seamus Barker summarizes Ricoeur’s thinking,

The past, for Ricoeur, demands narrativisation. Humans tend to carry out “emplotment” – as we draw together disparate past events into a meaningful whole, by establishing causal and meaningful connections between them. These attributions of causation, where other human subjects are involved, necessarily entail implications of *moral responsibility*, and so the narrative self is ineluctably established in a moral universe. (Barker; emphasis added)

Elsewhere, Ricoeur examines the moral dimensions of interpreting the past. “One cannot undo what is done, or make what has happened not happen,” he writes,

“yet the meaning of what has happened is not fixed once and for all” (“Memory” 19). Ricoeur argues that there is “a moral load attached to this debt that is owed to the past.” That is, every act of interpreting the past inevitably has a moral dimension in the sense that it can constitute “a transformation of the actual meaning of the past.” This kind of “reinterpretation” of past events or experiences, according to Ricoeur, “both on the moral plane or at a simple narrative level, can be considered a case of retroactive action of the perspective of the future on the apprehension of the past” (19). In this formulation, writing about the past is an unavoidably moral as well as an ethical act.

Ricoeur is trying to work out the relationship between memory and history, and his efforts to examine the moral dimensions of interpreting the past are meant to illuminate the project of history and its social and political impacts. But his ideas can also illuminate our efforts to understand the act of writing true stories about our individual “pasts”—our individual histories—as a process of truth-seeking: If writing a true story requires embracing the limitations of language—and of narrative—while seeking to overcome those limitations, and if that process is inherently social, then the writer writing a true story, the storyteller as truth-seeker, always bears an ethical burden. For if truth resides in this uncertain and fraught act of *writing* a true story, in this *experience* of writing-in-the-moment, then seeking to access that truth *must* be an ethical matter, because it requires the writer to acknowledge the possibility of other truths that might emerge in this storytelling in this same moment, in addition to other truths that might emerge at other moments in other acts of storytelling, truths that might complicate and diverge and challenge and contradict but might nevertheless be real and valid and necessary. Moreover, these varied truths, whatever they might be, can have implications not only for the writer as truth-seeker but also for all others who might encounter those truths or somehow be affected by them. As an ethical matter, the act of truth-seeking in the experience of writing-in-the-moment must, therefore, be a kind of open-ended process, one from which momentary truths might emerge but continue to evolve even as they emerge: potentially contradictory truths that might undermine or complicate one another, truths that might, as Blackburn suggests, require revision or even rejection as different and “better” truths emerge. The emergence of those many truths thus forces a kind of reckoning: the writer must find a way to navigate among truths that might seem contradictory and paradoxical and perhaps troubling but yet potentially valid and necessary. All those truths must somehow become part of whatever truth(s) might emerge in the moment of writing, truth(s) that is (are) inseparable from the writer *being* in that moment.

There is yet another dimension to this ethical burden: the power of stories themselves. As the writer Thomas King has shown, “stories can control our lives” (9). In *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, King shares his own family story, one in which his father abandons him, his brother, and his mother when King was only three or four years old. The story he and his mother and brother embraced in the aftermath was that something bad had happened to King’s

father, because, they reasoned, he wouldn't have just left them without explanation. But some fifty years later, King's brother was able to track down their father, who had recently died. It turns out that King's father not only had abandoned his wife and sons but also had cut himself off from his sisters. In the fifty years after he had disappeared, he remarried twice and raised two other families, neither of which knew anything about King, his brother, or his mother. "My father had never mentioned us" to them, King writes. "It was as though he had disposed of us somewhere along the way, dropped us in a trash can on the side of the road" (8). These stories, King notes, might not matter to anyone other than King and his brother, but they suggest the power that stories can have in our lives, "for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live" (9).

This power of stories functions—perhaps even more powerfully and dangerously—at the level of culture. King examines the Christian creation story of Adam and Eve alongside the Native creation story of the Woman Who Fell From the Sky. The latter story, which, King says, is largely forgotten in the U.S. "amidst the thunder of Christian monologues" (21), features numerous animal characters along with a human and depicts a universe that is "governed by a series of cooperations ... that celebrate equality and balance" (23-24). In the Christian creation story from Genesis, by contrast, "all creative power is invested in a single deity who is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent" and who presides over a fallen "chaotic world of harsh landscapes and dangerous shadows," a world that is "decidedly martial in nature, a world at war" (24). In the Native story, King asserts, "the world is at peace, and the pivotal concern is not with the ascendancy of good over evil but with the issue of balance" (24). Juxtaposing these two stories, one of which—the story from Genesis—holds sway over much of the Western world, enables King to illuminate the contrast between an indigenous worldview, in which "creation is a shared activity" and the world moves from chaos toward harmony, and the Western Christian world, which "slides toward chaos" and is "marked by competition" (25). If we embrace the Christian worldview, King argues, we are unable to see the harmonious, cooperative world of the story of the Woman Who Fell From the Sky; we are unable to appreciate the intimate relationship between humans and the more-than-human world. Instead, we see a world to be dominated, controlled, bent to our wishes, a world of conflict. King claims that he would not suggest that "the stories contained within the matrix of Christianity and the complex of nationalism are responsible for the social, political, and economic problems we face" (26), but that is precisely what he suggests, underscoring the dynamic by which these stories encode a worldview that in turn can shape not only how we understand ourselves as beings in the world but also how we act in the world. He asks (provocatively and, I think, a bit plaintively), "What if the creation story in Genesis had featured a flawed deity who was understanding and sympathetic rather than autocratic and rigid? ... What kind of world might we have created with that kind of story?" (27-28). Such questions point to the power of stories to manifest in our decisions, in our actions, in

the material reality we create by those decisions and actions, and they highlight the fact that “stories are wondrous. And they are dangerous” (9).

This power of stories to shape our lives means that the writer who seeks truth in storytelling, the writer who tries to write a true story, is obligated to write with humility and compassion and caution, acknowledging that any truths that emerge from the process of writing the story—from the experience of writing-in-the-moment—are necessarily contingent and can be dangerous. For stories have consequences, not only for the writer but also for others who might have some interest in or connection to that story: consequences for how we understand ourselves in relation to one another and how we might act with and toward one another on the basis of that understanding. More broadly, even if the truths that emerge from your story or mine seem limited to those who are directly connected to the story, those truths are part of a larger set of truths about human life and about how we live together in the world we share, truths to which we are all subject and to which we all contribute. My true story about Madeline (and myself) is thus also *your* true story, and the truths that might emerge from it matter to you as much as they do to me.

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In writing this story, I have tried to understand Madeline’s experience, especially in that pivotal moment in 1969 when she chose to leave the convent: what she might have felt, what she believed, what motivated her to take such a consequential step in her life, and what it all means. And I have speculated that she must have struggled in that moment. She must have agonized over that decision, even if only momentarily. She must have worried about violating her vows as a nun, worried that in leaving the Bernardine Order she might be repudiating the very same commitment to her faith that seemed to drive her whole existence—indeed, defined her very being. In short, she must have had some doubts. I once heard a Zen teacher tell a group of students that with great faith comes great doubt. Surely that was true of Madeline.

In 2023, I shared these questions with Madeline’s niece and namesake, Marlene, who told me her own version of the story of Madeline’s decision to leave the convent. In making that decision, according to Marlene, Madeline traveled to her home in Pennsylvania in 1969 to consult with her father. Madeline was, of course, aware that her family was extremely proud of her. Her very identity within her family was a function of her lifelong commitment to the Church as a Bernardine Sister, and she felt uneasy about disappointing them. But her concerns about what leaving the convent would mean in terms of her identity as a nun also had a more practical component: she was worried about supporting herself if she were to leave the convent. Since entering Mount Alvernia High School at age thirteen, Madeline had effectively been a ward of the Bernardine Order, which provided her room and board, took care of her basic needs, and, after she graduated from Mount Alvernia in 1949, paid her college tuition so that she could earn her bachelors and masters degrees. If she were to leave the Order, she would lose that financial support. This

was one of the concrete implications of her vow of poverty: she had no financial resources of her own. Moreover, teaching was her only professional skill, and during her visit to Scranton in 1969, she confided to her father that if she left the convent, she feared that she would be blacklisted by the Bernardines and therefore unable to secure a teaching position at any Catholic school. In other words, she feared that she would have no good way to earn an income, and she desperately wanted to avoid becoming a financial burden to her family.

Lives are always circumscribed by economic factors, and Madeline's concerns at that moment were perhaps not very different from any thirty-something woman in 1969. In 1970, fewer than half of American women between the ages of 25 and 54 were employed, as compared to 93% of men in the same age group (Sussman). (By 2016, the year of Madeline's death, those figures were 71% for women and 85% for men.) Moreover, opportunities for women were limited. Teaching (K-12—not postsecondary) was one of the few career paths available to women. Madeline was already a credentialed and experienced teacher, so the prospect of having that career path closed off to her would have caused legitimate concern about her ability to support herself. Her dedication to her mission of service, no matter how noble, could be undermined by the practical realities of being a single woman in the U.S. in 1969.

In this regard, Madeline's story is part of the larger story of gender and evolving social norms in the U.S., a story that is itself embedded in the story of the evolution of American capitalism and the emergence of so-called late capitalism in the latter decades of the 20th century. As the former chair of the Federal Reserve Janet Yellen pointed out in an essay marking the centennial of the 19th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which gave women the right to vote, a significant shift in attitudes about women and work was taking place at the time Madeline was leaving the convent to become one of an increasing number of working women in the U.S.:

By the 1970s, a dramatic change in women's work lives was under way. In the period after World War II, many women had not expected that they would spend as much of their adult lives working as turned out to be the case. By contrast, in the 1970s young women more commonly expected that they would spend a substantial portion of their lives in the labor force.

If Madeline's leaving the convent can be understood in the context of the reforms of Vatican II and the liberalization of attitudes about women, as Father Gamrot noted, then her struggle to make the transition from Catholic nun to working woman also was part of the changing socio-economic and cultural contexts of the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

Interestingly, 1969—the year Madeline left the convent—was also the year when Elizabeth Duncan Koontz became the first African American woman to be appointed director of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor (“History: An Overview 1920-2021”). A career elementary school teacher, Koontz

was also the first black president of the National Education Association, a post she assumed in 1968. I have no way of knowing whether Madeline was aware of Koontz, but those important milestones can be seen as a function of the same Civil Rights Movement in which Madeline was involved and which contributed to her own decision to leave the convent.

These broader forces, of course, played out in complicated ways in the individual lives of women who, like Madeline, sought professional careers that might afford them some measure of economic independence at a time when financial self-sufficiency was unavailable to millions of American women. In Madeline's case, the pressure to find such self-sufficiency was intensified by the prospect of disappointing her parents and other relatives who admired her and celebrated her life of dedication to the Catholic Church. She knew that at least some of her loved ones, especially her mother, would disapprove of her decision to leave the convent, and knowing that must have made the situation more difficult for her. It also makes her decision seem—to me, at least—even braver.

The accounts of Madeline's visit with her father in 1969 that family members shared with me varied in some details, but all of them were consistent in one key point: her father (my Great Uncle Stanley) was supportive of her decision to leave the convent and pledged to help her get on her feet financially. Years later, Madeline told her niece Marlene that her father seemed almost relieved when she revealed that she was planning to leave the convent: "What took you so long?" he said. Sometime shortly after that conversation with her father, Madeline did leave the convent and, after living with relatives for a short time, moved back to Washington D. C., where she shared an apartment with a friend and found a position as a teacher in a public school. Her father helped her obtain a car and provided other support until she was financially self-sufficient.

This account from Marlene adds complexity and nuance to Father Gamrot's view of Madeline's "beautiful" decision to leave the convent. Yes, it was beautiful, but there was messiness and worry and uncertainty and pain—for Madeline and for others. Father Gamrot's story captures what I think of as a significant truth about Madeline's decision but perhaps it obscures others. His story emphasizes her faith and unwavering dedication to serving others according to Christ's example, and it underscores the sacrifice that is often required to pursue such a path. It is a story that assigns a beautiful symmetry to Madeline's life, a story that emphasizes the nobility of her choice and the central role belief played in it. Marlene's story, by contrast, highlights some of the hard practicalities of making a living as well as navigating familial relationships and expectations. Madeline made her decision to leave the convent in the complicated socio-economic context of the late 1960s, when changing gender roles and race relations in the U.S. were restructuring the American workforce and creating new opportunities as well as new pressures for women and people of color. Madeline's own working-class background, which in many ways seemed irrelevant to her life in the convent, also circumscribed her prospects and helped determine the trajectory of her working life. Her family was

of modest means and limited resources. Like many of her contemporaries in her hometown, she would have felt pressure to avoid becoming a financial burden to her aging parents.

Marlene's version of the story of Madeline's decision to leave the Bernardine Order neither supersedes nor invalidates Father Gamrot's story of that decision. To my mind, Marlene's story enhances the beauty that Father Gamrot saw in that momentous event in Madeline's life. I don't think we can know whether she would have gone through with her decision to leave the convent if her father had not provided financial support and helped her overcome the practical challenges of making a living and obtaining the necessities that had previously been taken care of by the Bernardine Order. But the fact that she faced these challenges and worried about her financial well-being (and her family's) in a way that so many of us have to do makes her commitment to serving others and to fighting for racial equality seem even more admirable. In this sense, I think, the truths that emerge from Marlene's story, which complicate Father Gamrot's story, help make *this* story I am writing *more* true. At least, in *this* moment.

In this story I am writing, Madeline left the convent because of her commitment to leading a principled life of service and to fight to improve a distressingly unequal, unfair, and often oppressive American society. But leaving the convent to enter the workforce as a single woman would also affect her loved ones, and she apparently worried that it might affect them adversely. She did not, it seems, make a rash decision. She did not self-righteously act without considering the implications of her decision for her family. These revelations might reinforce the picture I am drawing of Madeline as someone who acted in selfless ways that reflected her faith-driven sense of mission, but they also demythologize her decision. The truth of this story I am writing about this special person thus becomes increasingly multilayered. And in becoming more human, more vulnerable, Madeline becomes even more remarkable. That's the truth—a truth—of her story.

But that isn't the end of the story.

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On Mother's Day in 2023, I visited Dolores, Madeline's younger sister and the only surviving member of her generation in her family. (By that time, Madeline's other two sisters, Sylvia and Marion, had died.) Growing up, I would regularly see Dolores and her husband, Hank, at family gatherings, and that continued long after my wife and I had moved away from Scranton and made our home elsewhere. But by that gorgeous late spring day in 2023, I hadn't seen Dolores for several years. I had learned that, after Madeline's death in 2016, there had been a falling out between her and two of her own three daughters and other members of her extended family over Madeline's will and estate. There were accusations and re-creations and, eventually, lawyers. And although Madeline's estate was settled, the matter was not fully resolved by the time I visited Dolores in 2023, more than

six years after Madeline's death. Grudges and resentment continued to poison family relationships, some of which had been irreparably severed. Madeline had long been dead while these legal and personal conflicts were playing out, but she was at the center of them. And, it seems, these conflicts had their origins, as so often seems to be the case, in a complicated and longstanding history of familial tensions that involved Madeline herself.

Dolores, by then widowed for several years, was alone on that Mother's Day. We sat at the table in the kitchen of the home she had lived in for half a century, talking about family members, living and deceased, updating one another on their doings and comings and goings. And sharing memories. She said comparatively little about Madeline, but her brief references to the conflict over Madeline's will made it clear that, despite her broad smile and quick laugh, Dolores was still feeling the sting of those conflicts with family members over Madeline's estate. My conversations with some of those family members while I was writing this book helped me understand that Madeline's relationships with her three sisters and their daughters were neither simple nor straightforward, and some resentments extended back in time much further than the settling of Madeline's estate after her death. I have been writing a story—a true story—about a remarkable woman who devoted her life to serving others, who fought for equality and justice, and who tried to live according to Jesus' message of love and tolerance and forgiveness. Dolores tells another story, one that complicates but neither includes nor precludes the truth of this story I am writing.

In her celebrated TED talk (and essay), Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie warns against the danger of a single story, a single version of events. "The single story," she says, "creates stereotypes, and the problem with stereotypes is not that they are untrue, but that they are incomplete. They make one story become the only story." Adichie is referring to the kind of larger cultural stories about national identity and race and gender that we tell about who we are and who others are, stories that can become part of the individual stories we tell about ourselves—the same fundamental dynamic that developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson identifies in the individual and cultural stories that reflect our sense of identity (as I discussed in Chapter 3). These stories, Adichie argues, constitute power, and they can disempower an entire people:

Power is the ability not just to tell the story of another person, but to make it the definitive story of that person. The Palestinian poet Mourid Barghouti writes that if you want to dispossess a people, the simplest way to do it is to tell their story and to start with, "secondly," Start the story with the arrows of the Native Americans, and not with the arrival of the British, and you have an entirely different story. Start the story with the failure of the African state, and not with the colonial creation of the African state, and you have an entirely different story.

The real danger of a single story, Adichie says, whether true or not, is that it can become the *only* story and therefore constitute reality for those subjected to its power: “So that is how to create a single story, show a people as one thing, as only one thing, over and over again, and that is what they become.” This cuts both ways. A single story can demonize and disempower just as well as it can valorize and empower. Either way, it cannot be *the truth*, even if it is, in some genuine way, true.

In Chapter 4, I conveyed my astonishment that Father Gamrot, Madeline’s close friend in her later years, knew nothing of the tensions in her family surrounding her marriage to Earle in 1979. During the years from the time they met in the early 2000s to her death in 2016, Madeline had never said anything to Father Gamrot about any of that family drama, which he interpreted as a manifestation of her ability to forgive. The Madeline he knew rejected resentment, no matter how justifiable it might seem; she was tolerant and loving. That interpretation fits my own story of who Madeline was and how she lived, and it is consistent with my own memories of her. And I have no doubt it is true. But it is also true that Madeline engaged in conflict with her family over her relationship to Earle and over their respective political views, and she confronted family members in ways that she never shared with Father Gamrot—in ways that I myself never witnessed. She did, it seems, harbor resentment—at least for a time—and that resentment sometimes erupted in overt displays of anger that seem inconsistent with the Madeline Father Gamrot described years later, and with the Madeline I knew.

One such incident occurred when her father died in 1975. Dolores recalled Madeline loudly castigating her three sisters in the funeral home where their father was lying in repose. She was angry with her entire family, according to Dolores, because they would not allow Earle, whom she was dating at the time, to attend the funeral. Dolores’s memory of Madeline storming in a fit of rage out of the solemn space of the funeral home clashes with the picture of calm, confident forbearance in the story I tell in Chapter 3 of Madeline confronting family elders on that Christmas Day some six or seven years before her father’s death. Given my own experiences with Madeline, I find it difficult to imagine her displaying such anger. Yet this angry, resentful Madeline that is depicted in Dolores’s story is not necessarily incompatible with the fundamental truth of the story I have been writing about Madeline, a woman whose convictions about Jesus’s message of tolerance for other human beings might have led to vexed feelings about her own family, whom she loved but whose views about race and interracial marriage sometimes diverged painfully from her own. But it does complicate matters, and it requires me to revisit significant moments in this story I am writing and, perhaps, adjust or even rewrite the story so that it is true—or *more* true—in *this* moment. And it underscores the ethical burden I discussed earlier as I try to navigate among the various, sometimes divergent truths that might emerge in the process: to ignore the story that Dolores told and its implications for *this* story I am writing not only would be inconsistent with the spirit of truth-seeking through writing as I have tried to illuminate it here (and in Chapter 5), but it also

would be unfair to Dolores and others who knew and loved Madeline—as well as to you and those who might, like you, come to know Madeline through this story I am writing. Truth-seeking demands that I honor Dolores’s story, at least for the moment, as I write my way to the truth about Madeline, even as I accept the contingency of this truth and acknowledge the possibility that any such truth might be, ultimately, unknowable. So it would be wrong to leave Dolores’s memories about Madeline out of this story I am writing right now.

Or would it?

If the goal in writing this story is to find a truth or truths that meet Blackburn’s standard that the truths we identify should help us live better together, can we knowingly tell a story that is not the whole story, even if it is a *true* story? Or *because* it is a true story? How do we know when a truth does actually meet that standard?

Historian Alessandro Portelli explores such questions in *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*, his provocative examination of the process of writing oral history. In the main essay, which gives the book its title, Portelli examines the evolution of the story of the killing of Luigi Trastulli, a 21-year-old steelworker, at a demonstration in the industrial town of Terni, Italy in 1949 (the same year Madeline graduated from Mount Alvernia High School on her journey to becoming a nun). Trastulli was shot, apparently by police, while he was among demonstrators protesting Italy’s decision to join the newly formed North Atlantic Treaty Organization, as they marched from the steel factory toward the city center in violation of police orders. At the time, Trastulli’s death quickly became a symbol of the workers’ ongoing struggle for better wages and safer working conditions and against economic and political repression, and the stories of the episode evolved into myths that reflected the beliefs, hopes, fears, and ideologies of those workers as well as others who continued to tell the story over the years. Portelli traces the evolution of that narrative of Trastulli’s death in Terni, the memory of which, he notes, “has exerted a shaping influence on the town’s identity and culture” (1).

Through oral history and a careful examination of written accounts from the time, Portelli identifies factual errors in the stories that emerged from that incident, including how Trastulli actually died and, significantly, *when* the incident occurred. Over time, those who told Trastulli’s story conflated the demonstration against NATO membership in 1949, at which Trastulli was in fact killed, with another key moment in Terni’s history: the violent unrest that occurred there in 1953 after more than two thousand workers were fired from the same steel factory where the anti-NATO protests were held four years earlier. More than two decades later, in the 1970s, Portelli interviewed numerous people in Terni about Trastulli’s death, and he discovered that many of those people, including some who had themselves witnessed or participated in the protest in 1949, believed that Trastulli had actually been killed during the unrest in 1953. Their stories, Portelli points out, “merge the two most dramatic events of Terni’s post-war history into one coherent story” (14).

Portelli does not see this rather stunning inaccuracy in the stories of Trastulli's death as a problem in itself. Acknowledging that oral sources "are not always fully reliable in point of fact," he argues that the presence of such errors in a story can actually be a strength: "errors, inventions, and myths lead us through and beyond facts to their meanings" (2). His goal as an oral historian is not primarily to determine with certainty exactly what happened (in a factual sense) but rather to understand what it means to those affected by or somehow connected to what happened. He admits to being "uncomfortably aware of the elusive nature of historical truth itself" (viii-ix), but like any good historian, he also aspires to truth as a matter of fact, even if "we know that certainty is bound to escape us" in the quest for such truth; it is "the search [that] provides focus, shape, and purpose to everything we do" (ix).

I am not writing an oral history, but the process of trying to write a true story about my cousin Madeline—or *any* true story—shares with oral history the challenge of confronting this kind of uncertainty. Moreover, both endeavors—doing oral history and trying to write a true story—confront the difficult question of the nature of the truth being sought. As Portelli puts it, "The question is, then, what kind of truth?" (ix). His answer as a historian rests on what he identifies as a distinction between fidelity "to fact of positivistic history and social sciences" and what he calls "the special attention to subjectivity ... which oral history requires and permits" (ix). In other words, the oral historian does not reject subjectivity in the quest for truth but rather examines subjectivity in order to better understand the meaning of what might be called factual truth. But for Portelli, fidelity to this factual truth on the one hand and subjectivity on the other "are neither apart nor antagonistic: each provides the standard against which the other is recognized and defined" (ix). As a professional historian, Portelli applied rigor to his study of the archival evidence alongside the stories told by his interviewees in pursuit of his goal "to attempt as faithful and minute a reconstruction as possible of what had actually happened." This reconstruction, however, as essential as it is to a historian, is not the point; rather, it is "a step toward the reconstruction of the *subjective truths* implicit in the tales [told by his interviewees] and the creative 'errors' they contained" (ix; emphasis added).

Portelli is quick to emphasize that the "subjective truths" of the storytellers for whom Trastulli's death was a significant event neither replace nor change the truth of what actually happened. He does not advocate "the abolition of controls, nor the unrestrained preference, convenience or whim of the researcher" (ix). Rather, he seeks to understand "what Hawthorne called 'the truth of the human heart': that is, 'the cultural forms and processes by which individuals express their sense of themselves in history.'" Although "less tangible and universal than those of hard facts" (ix), these subjective truths reflect the meaning that people constructed in their own stories of those "hard facts" as they attempted "to make sense of crucial events and of history in general" (26). In this sense, what might really matter in this story I am writing about Madeline is not so much to determine the truth of what actually happened and why—to the extent that that is even

possible—but to identify subjective truths about her life and to understand what they mean to those who knew her—as well as to those who didn't. These subjective truths are, to my mind, an important component of the process by which we seek what Blackburn refers to as *the truths we need* to meet the challenges of living and to manage the complexities of human life. In this process, we don't stop at these subjective truths as if we have completed the journey; rather, we explore them to help confirm, amend, reject, or replace the larger truths we are identifying as we engage in the process. A subjective truth, then, can be part of *the truth we need to live better together*, even if it is not *the truth* and even if it is subject to revision or rejection, as all such truths must be.

As Portelli points out, the death of Luigi Trastulli by a gunshot in Terni, Italy is not in dispute, but what his death means—the subjective truths of his death—can differ not only in the memories of those who were somehow connected to the event but also in the actual written accounts of the event itself, some of which were purportedly written by eyewitnesses and all of which reflect sometimes divergent ideologies as well as different identities. What is factually accurate or *true* and what it means are different matters, but the truths we need might reside in this process of navigating between the two, as Portelli does in writing oral history.

In my own effort to write a true story about Madeline, for example, we might know it is true that Madeline exhibited rage toward her family, but what that “fact” means is another matter. For Dolores, it might reveal Madeline as a resentful sister who lashed out when she felt she was wronged; it might reflect Dolores's own conflicted feelings about Madeline and her relationship with Earle, or her sense that Madeline unfairly depicted her and her sisters as bigoted or intolerant. This might be part of Dolores's subjective truth about that event. For me, Madeline's rage might reinforce a sense of her as a deeply principled woman, whose anger—understandably—reflected not only the pain caused by her family's refusal to accept the man she loved but also her distress that her own family, whom she also genuinely loved, could harbor the kind of racism that she had devoted her life to fighting. These different meanings might reflect the same fundamental truths about Madeline—or parts of those truths. Or perhaps they reflect divergent truths that are not necessarily mutually exclusive. How, then, should we evaluate these truths to determine whether one or the other—or all of them—are valid, are indeed *true*? Must we? If Portelli is right, determining what *really* happened is distinct from understanding what it means, and both can exist in tension with one another. Both can be *true*, even if they seem to contradict one another. More to the point, *all* these subjective truths about what actually happened might be valid and true—and necessary—if only for the moment. For *this* moment.

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In the process of writing this story, I learned that there had been disagreements in Madeline's immediate family about whether everyone should accede to their

mother's (my Great Aunt Sophie's) pronouncement that no one should attend Madeline's wedding. Some family members agonized over the matter, and they suffered punishing guilt about their decision to honor Aunt Sophie's wishes by not attending the wedding. I vividly recall Madeline's sister Sylvia crying as I described Madeline's own tears of sorrow at her wedding, only a few days after the event; Sylvia's distress reflected, I think, her own conflicted feelings about those difficult circumstances and the deep pain she suffered in acceding her to mother's wishes that none of the family attend the wedding. In Dolores's story, Madeline did not seem to appreciate this complexity; she did not seem to acknowledge the difficult situation that her sisters were put in by their mother's rejection of her marriage to Earle. In Dolores's story, Madeline believed her sisters were simply wrong to abide by their mother's wishes, and justified or not, she held that grudge for many years. More than four decades later, on that Mother's Day in 2023, Dolores still felt the pain of that period in her family's history, of Madeline's anger all those years earlier. The truth that emerges in Dolores's telling—a truth that, perhaps, *she* needs in her own efforts to make sense of her past and to reconcile that past with her present—reveals how the tangled complexities of human emotions, identities, and relationships can lead to diverging perceptions of significant events, even when the facts, such as they are, are beyond dispute. No one denies that Madeline's family did not attend her wedding in 1979 or that Earle was not welcomed at the funeral of Madeline's father in 1975. That part of these various stories is true. But it seems that different *subjective truths*, to borrow Portelli's phrase, emerge from these different versions of that important event in the family's past. For Madeline, one truth seemed to be that some members of her family abandoned her because of their racist views; in her view, they, like her mother, rejected her marriage simply because Earle was Black, and in that regard they were wrong. For Dolores, the truth seems to arise from loyalty to family and deference to family elders; from her perspective, she and her sisters had little choice but to honor their mother's wishes, whether they agreed with her or not. And honoring their mother's wishes was, for some of them, painful and came with a cost.

These different stories and the divergent and seemingly contradictory truths that might emerge from them underscore the need to resist certainty, to understand the process of truth-seeking through writing as ongoing, and to accept the truths that emerge from that process as always contingent and subject to adjustment, no matter how necessary those truths might be—in *this* moment or any other. The moments of Madeline's anger and resentment that Dolores so viscerally recalled so many years later are part of a true story that she tells about her sister Madeline—a story that Dolores might need in order to preserve her own sense of self late in her life, her sense of herself, perhaps, as a good person, a person who loved her sister and wished no harm on her or her husband, a person who needs others to know that her decision not to attend Madeline's wedding was not necessarily malicious or petty or bigoted but complicated and difficult and painful, even all these years later. These truths that emerge from her story are also—right

now, in this moment—part of the true story I am writing about Madeline, even if they are not my truths, even if they diverge from other truths that emerge from this story in this moment.

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At this moment as I am writing, I am inclined to accept Dolores’s version of Madeline’s story as she shared it and leave it at that. Her story complicates my own, reshaping, to some extent, the picture of Madeline that is emerging from my effort to write her story. Dolores’s story is driven by a longstanding pain, maybe even regret, or perhaps resentment, a sense of being wronged, maybe sadness that things didn’t work out differently, all of which strike me as understandable and perhaps unavoidable feelings under the circumstances. As she told her story to me on Mother’s Day in 2023, I sensed that she was alternatively defiant and conciliatory, regretful and content. She seemed to struggle to navigate between the truth of what happened (the truth as she perceives it—a painful truth perhaps) and the meaning she needs to make of what happened, to preserve a sense of her self as good and right, even if she might harbor some regrets about those long-ago words and actions. I want to leave it there. As Paul Ricoeur has written, “Even if in reality [past] events are ineradicable, if one cannot undo what is done, or make what has happened not happen, yet the meaning of what has happened is not fixed once and for all” (“Memory, Forgetfulness, and History” 19). Dolores, I think, might still be trying to figure out what those significant events in her past with Madeline mean. So am I.

But even if we embrace the prospect that varied and sometimes contradictory truths will emerge from our respective stories—from this process of trying to write a true story—we cannot simply accept all truths as equally valid and *true*, even if only for the moment. To do so risks falling into relativism, without any signposts for finding our way through the complicated landscape of human experience, for deciding how to act individually and collectively, and for finding “better” truths by which to live together peacefully and humanely. If writing a true story is a process of truth-seeking, consistent with Blackburn’s proposal that we focus on inquiry rather than on the (unattainable) goal of absolute truth, and if any truth should be measured against the standard that it helps us live better together, then how should we assess the extent to which a story actually meets that standard?

The need to find such signposts, to identify standards by which to judge the truth of a story, was brought into stark relief during the 2020 U.S. presidential election and its aftermath, when competing truths, both amplified and solidified by ubiquitous social media and ideologically polarized news media, were at the center of social, cultural, and political conflicts, illustrated in spectacular—and disturbing—fashion by the storming of the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021. As journalist Thomas Edsall explained in 2023 in an analysis of the extreme

polarization of the American electorate, “misperception and even delusion is driving up the intensity of contemporary partisan hostility.” Facts and fact-checking do little to combat the misperceptions and falsehoods embraced and disseminated by partisans, because, as Edsall’s review of the relevant scholarship reveals, it isn’t a desire for truth that energizes or informs partisan beliefs. Rather, as political scientist Julie Wronski put it in an email to Edsall, “Protecting your identity becomes more important than embracing the truth” (Edsall). Citing a comment by Michael Dimock, the president of the Pew Research Center, that “various types of identities [including race and religion] have become ‘stacked’ on top of people’s partisan identities,” Edsall notes, “the result is that an individual whose party loses on Election Day can feel that his or her identity has suffered a defeat.” To those enmeshed in such a dangerously polarized situation, the truth itself—in the sense of what actually happened and why—doesn’t matter; indeed, that truth can be a threat. Edsall quotes Stanford University law professor Nathaniel Persily to highlight this point: “I do not think most of affective polarization is driven by a misunderstanding of facts. Indeed, I think many in this field make the mistake of thinking that the line to be policed is the line between truth and falsehood. Rather, I think the critical question is usually whether the truth is relevant or not” (Edsall).

This rather stunning formulation underscores the challenge of assessing what Blackburn describes as “the truths we need” against his standard of truths that help us live better together. It seems obvious that we can reject some beliefs as falsehoods that cannot meet this standard, even if they might reflect “needed” truths for some. The view that so-called Deep State operatives orchestrated a stolen U.S. presidential election in 2020, for instance, is easy to reject as a “truth” that fails to accord with established facts of the most obvious and unproblematic kind, and clearly it fails to help us live better together, no matter how sincerely it might be embraced by some people in American society. At the same time, this “false truth” seems implicated in legitimate views about the racial, religious, gender, national, and other identities that are held by those same people, identities that matter to them in the way that psychologist Katherine Nelson illuminates (as I explained in Chapter 3). In other words, in the context of perceived social, political, economic, and even physical threats—real or imagined—to one’s sense of identity, which in turn is implicated in a sense of well-being, the bizarre “false truth” of the stolen election might seem not just understandable but even reasonable. In this regard, Edsall’s analysis, I think, reinforces the importance of seeking truth that meets Blackburn’s standard for shared truths by which we might live better together, but at the same time the analysis highlights the daunting challenge of doing so, for it underscores the tenuous nature of truth (however we might define it), its fraught relationship to identity, and the complexity of the role of truth in our social, political, cultural, and economic lives, especially during such polarized times. Sometimes, it seems, the truths we need can be dangerous. But simply rejecting the narratives from which these truths emerge is not enough.

To quote Thomas King once again, “stories can control our lives” (9)—in this case, it seems, not for the better.

To tell a true story about the 2020 U.S. presidential election and to write a true story about my cousin Madeline might seem like very different challenges, with very different implications. At first glance, the former seems so much more consequential. The fight over the truth of January 6, 2021 is, literally, a matter of life and death that has affected hundreds of millions of people—and has intensified during the second Trump administration, when January 6th rioters have been pardoned as heroes and patriots while law enforcement personnel who risked their lives to defend the Capitol have been variously vilified and valorized, especially in January of 2026, on the occasion of the fifth anniversary of that terrible day. By comparison, the truth of this story I am writing about Madeline is, arguably, insignificant. Yet the truth of January 6, 2021 emerges in countless stories told by individuals who were in some way involved in that event as well as in the stories told by those of us who continue to be affected by that event, simply by being citizens or residents of the U.S. Those countless individual stories matter at some level, for they are inseparable from the larger ideologically-driven narratives about that event, and the often conflicting truths that emerge from those stories can have far-reaching consequences, not only in our individual lives but also in the communities we are part of and the society we constitute. In that regard, every attempt to tell the true story of that event places an ethical burden on the storyteller. Finding a way to adjudicate among those truths is thus a pressing need that we all face. Every act of truth-seeking matters. Every attempt to write a true story has implications for how we live together on this earth we share.

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As I write that last sentence, I am transported back to my earliest days as a new teaching assistant at the University of New Hampshire, where I found myself trying to make sense of debates among the staff of the first-year writing program there, in which I was assigned to teach. The experienced instructors were engaged in an ongoing conversation about the relative importance of the different genres that we were teaching in that first-year writing course: personal narrative, analysis, and argument, among others. A common understanding of the main purpose of that course was to prepare students for the academic writing they would do across the university curriculum, and that sense of purpose informed the position that the most important genres we were teaching were research-based analysis and argument, since they were the most common forms of writing in the university. Therefore, those who advocated this approach argued, the course should begin with the personal narrative, which they described as the easiest and least academic genre, and progress to the more challenging genres of analysis and argument.

Others on the writing program staff, however, argued that narrative was in fact the most challenging of these genres, requiring more sophisticated skill on

the writer's part to craft effective prose that conveyed nuanced ideas through storytelling. Narrative was a vehicle for exploring the complexities of human life, which, proponents argue, was really what college should be about. From this point of view, narrative was the most important genre, not least because it served crucial functions outside the academy as an essential tool in human society. Given the nature of the challenge of writing effective stories and the broader significance of the genre, these proponents believed, narrative should be the culminating assignment in the course.

As a twenty-something aspiring professional writer and novice writing teacher, I did not understand the debate as anything more than practical: How should we design assignments that best served the purpose of helping students develop necessary writing skills? The conception of writing that informed my view then was utilitarian and relatively uncomplicated. Writing might be challenging and require a great deal of practice to learn to do well, but in the end it was basically a communicative tool to be used in achieving success in the classroom and the workplace. To my mind, writing was about craft, not truth.

Forty years later, I am trying to write a true story in an effort to understand writing as a process of truth-seeking. I am exploring the transformative potential of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. And truth is the only thing that matters.