
Writing, Storytelling, and Truth

A black and white photograph of a group of approximately ten people, including a nun, standing in front of a house. The group is arranged in two rows, with some people kneeling or sitting in the front. The nun is positioned in the center of the back row. The photograph is faded and serves as a background for the title text.

**Madeline Was Our
Sister**

by
Robert P. Yagelski

MADELINE WAS OUR SISTER

WRITING, STORYTELLING, AND TRUTH

LIFESPAN WRITING RESEARCH

Series Editors: Ryan J. Dippre and Talinn Phillips

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Robert P. Yagelski

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For Cheryl

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Acknowledgments

A writer's development is inherently a social process, and the story of my own journey as a writer and scholar is, in large measure, about the many people who shaped my thinking, encouraged my writing, supported me, and guided me along the way. I have been extremely fortunate to have as mentors some luminaries in the field of writing studies: Donald Murray, whose influence on my thinking has been profound and whose personal support for me I describe in the Preface to this book; Donald Graves, Murray's close friend and colleague at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), who taught me the meaning of research and introduced me to Paulo Freire's work; Thomas Newkirk, whose course on composition theory transformed my thinking about writing and who took me under his wing at the beginning of my academic career, despite my impatience and unwarranted youthful hubris (which must have frustrated him!), and gave me the opportunity to present my first paper at a national scholarly conference; Andrea Lunsford, my dissertation director, who taught me more about being a scholar and a mentor than anyone I ever knew and whose generous support for me took both obvious and not-so-obvious forms throughout my career; Cheryl Glenn, whose friendship, advice, and example helped teach me what it means to be a good scholar; Jim Phelan, a member of my dissertation committee, whose patience, thoughtfulness, and intelligence became a model for the kind of academic I aspired to be; Richard Ohmann, who as editor of the journal *Radical Teacher* published my very first academic article and who, years later, generously agreed to write an afterword for a collection of essays I co-edited with my good friend Scott Leonard. There are so many others whose scholarship, advice, and generosity—and friendship—shaped my career in significant ways: Heidi Andrade, Arthur Applebee, Bruce Ballenger, Lil Brannon, Roger Cherry, Dan Collins, Robert Connors, John Duffy, Janet Emig, Lester Fisher, Cathy Fleischer, Asao Inoue, Janice Lauer, Paul Lynch, Paula Mathieu, Michael Moore, Beverly Moss, Steve North, Nedra Reynolds, Bob Tremmel, Keith Walters, Irwin "Bud" Weiser, Kathleen Yancey. I also wish to recognize historians Rick Fogarty and Tony DeBlasi, my colleagues and very good friends at UAlbany, whose insights and knowledge have enriched my thinking and whose willingness to engage me in in-depth conversations about teaching and writing deepened my understanding of important aspects of postsecondary writing instruction. (Rick and Tony were also integral to the effort on our campus to create the WCI program, which strengthened undergraduate writing instruction at UAlbany.) Special thanks as well to "The Jamesons": Scott Leonard, Gerald Nelms, Rebecca Rickley, and Carole Clark Papper, my Ohio State classmates and very good friends, who provided so many opportunities over the years for rich conversations about important issues in writing studies, whose thinking shaped my own, and whose friendship provided a safe and fun space for testing ideas.

Before I was blessed to know any of the people mentioned in the preceding paragraph, I had the truly good fortune to meet James Rambeau, who literally changed my life and helped set me on the path to the academic career I have been so fortunate to have. Mr. Rambeau, as I called him then, became my advisor at Penn State, where I was an undergraduate from 1976 to 1980. I entered Penn State as a biology major, unsure of the professional path I wanted to take but assuming it would somehow involve wildlife conservation work. (I had always loved the outdoors and spent a lot of time camping and hiking as an adolescent, and by the time I graduated high school, I was a passionate “conservationist,” as we used the term in those days.) In the spring of 1977, after two trimesters of studying science and math almost exclusively, I enrolled in an elective course called Contemporary Literature. The instructor was Rambeau, at the time an associate professor in the Penn State English Department and a Henry James scholar. I absolutely loved the course. At that early point in my college career, I was beginning to question my decision to study biology and my plan to become a wildlife biologist, and I was struggling to find my way in the complicated and sometimes intimidating intellectual landscape that Penn State represented. Rambeau’s course reminded me how much I loved (and missed) the study of language and literature that I had begun in high school. I relished the “homework”: reading authors like Vonnegut and Nabokov and poets like Sylvia Plath and Robert Lowell and writing about their work, which I barely grasped but which excited and intrigued me. One sunny spring afternoon after class, I walked with Jim (as I came to know him much later) back to his office, talking animatedly about whatever we had discussed in class that day. By the time we got to his office, the conversation drifted to my plans as a student. “What’s your major?” he asked. I hesitated for a moment and (I remember this as clearly as if it happened last week) said, “Well, it’s biology, but it should be English.” Jim didn’t hesitate in his response: “If it should be English, why isn’t it?” I told him about my fading dream of becoming a wildlife biologist, the science courses I didn’t really enjoy, my love of the classical languages and canonical literature I studied at the Jesuit high school I had attended, the expectations of my parents that I pursue a “good” career path (which, for them would have been medicine or the law), and my uncertainty about how to make sense of all this. This must have sounded familiar to Jim. First-generation students like me were not uncommon at Penn State in those days, and he surely must have previously encountered the confusion and anxiety that I expressed in that moment. He also must have understood that his encouragement would matter to me. It did. He helped me see that I could pursue the study of subjects about which I was passionate and find a way to make a career in those areas. I did. It was a tortuous path, but Jim Rambeau’s early guidance made it possible. More important, his confidence in me and the promise he saw in my writing and thinking made it real. I will forever be grateful to him.

There are too many others who were part of my journey as a writer to acknowledge properly here, but I will try at least to name some of the many people who somehow contributed to my becoming the writer I have become.

First, I must thank the many, many students I have taught over the years, most of whom will have long forgotten me but all of whom helped me become a better teacher and taught me important lessons about writing that I could not have learned on my own. In particular, I would like to thank the students in the first-year writing courses I taught in the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry (WCI), which I helped design and implement at the University at Albany (SUNY) in 2013. The students I was blessed to work with in WCI taught me crucial lessons about writing and teaching that helped solidify the theoretical view of writing that I explore in this book; they also made teaching writing fun for me in a way that it hadn't been for many years. They don't know any of this, but I am deeply grateful to them. I also would like to offer special thanks to the students in the very last course I taught in my career: ETAP 655L (Seminar in Teaching Composition in the Secondary School) in spring semester 2025. Officially, I retired at the end of fall semester 2024, but some of my students that semester persuaded me to teach ETAP 655L, which had not been offered in our teacher education program for more than fifteen years. It had been a favorite course of mine, and the students who requested that I teach it understood that its replacement (Literacy Instruction Across the Disciplines) would not offer them, as preservice English teachers, the same preparation for teaching writing that ETAP 655L would. The dean agreed, and I was hired on a part-time appointment for one semester to resurrect that course. It was truly a joy to work with those wonderful, enthusiastic, interesting, smart, and dedicated students, in whom resides any hope I have for our threatened education system in this country during this very dark time. I especially wish to acknowledge Bailey, Sophia, Ainsley, Gabe, Henry, Clayton, Hannah, Isabella, and Abby, who enriched my experience in that course and gamely took up the challenges I set before them. As always, I learned more from them than they could have learned from me, and that course was a fitting, if bittersweet, end to my four-decade teaching career.

I have worked with and mentored many outstanding doctoral students over the years, and I am grateful to all of them for the opportunity to be part of their professional journeys—in particular, Ann Green, of Saint Joseph's University in Philadelphia, who became a friend and colleague and who enriched my professional life long after her dissertation was finished. I am also grateful to Jenna Singer and Robin Ward, two excellent secondary English teachers whose dedication to learning fueled their desire to pursue doctoral work, despite daunting practical and personal obstacles. They, too, help keep my hope alive for a better future for American education. I will add to this list Kristen Breh, who was a student in an undergraduate tutoring seminar I taught in the late 1990s and who subsequently worked as a tutor in the UAlbany Writing Center, which I directed at the time, before entering the graduate-level teacher certification program, in which I served as her advisor and instructor; Kristen became one of the most dedicated teachers I have known, and she helped me become a better teacher educator in ways she can never really appreciate. I am deeply grateful to her for her friendship and support over these many years.

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Special thanks also to my colleagues from the Capital District Writing Project (CDWP), a site of the National Writing Project, which I helped re-establish at UAlbany in 2004 and which I directed until 2017. The amazing teachers with whom I worked in CDWP over the years were integral to my evolution as a writer and teacher and influenced the development of the ontological theory of writing that I articulated in my book *Writing as a Way of Being* (2011) and that informs this book. In particular, I owe a debt of great gratitude to Alicia Wein, Amy Salamone, Molly Fanning, and Aaron Thiell, from whom I learned more about teaching writing than I have ever been able to convey to my own teacher education students. And very special thanks to Carol Forman-Pemberton, my friend, mentor, and co-director of CDWP, whose experience and insight truly made our site a special place for teachers and enabled me to be a better leader. All these wonderful people have been both colleagues and friends, and I am proud to have worked with them all these years.

Of course, my own family deserves my deepest and most heartfelt gratitude for their love, support, and patience these many years. My siblings—Mary, Gary, Dianne, and our late sister Cindy—always made me feel special because of the work I have done as a writer and scholar. My parents—Ron (who died in 2020) and Joan—took great pride in me, which sustained me in ways they could never truly know. My in-laws—Charlotte and Joe—who are now both deceased, always gave me the space I needed to pursue my career goals, even when doing so took their precious daughter and grandchildren far away from them; I am sincerely grateful to have had them in my life (and I miss them). My sisters-in-law—Dara and Kim—accepted me as a brother, despite my flaws and the self-centered pursuit of my career. Most important, my sons—Adam and Aaron—have always been at the center of my life and are inseparable from my development as a writer, thinker, teacher, and human being. I love and cherish them more than they can ever know, and I am so grateful for the many conversations we have had over the years about education and politics and philosophy, all of which have influenced my view of the world. I am grateful as well to my daughter-in-law, Sarah, who knew me first as a teacher in the UAlbany teacher education program and who

was always willing to engage me in substantive conversations about teaching and related matters in ways that informed my thinking.

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A number of people were involved directly or indirectly in the development of this book and deserve recognition:

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resulted in this book becoming part of the groundbreaking LWR book series.

- Mike Palmquist at the WAC Clearinghouse saw merit in this project and lent his support to it, for which I am deeply grateful.

And, of course, my sincere thanks to the editors of the LWR series, Ryan Dippre and Talinn Phillips. Ryan and Talinn saw promise in this project, despite its unusual nature, and without their support and insightful advice, this book might never have been published at all. I can't thank them enough for their guidance, patience, and confidence in me.

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Finally, I wish to thank the members of my family who spoke to me about Madeline and shared their memories, photographs, and other artifacts related to her life: notably, my cousins Emil, Dolores, Kara, Kristen, Karen, Sharon, Marlene, Mary, Mike, and especially Kim, who was truly generous in sharing her memories and perspective, which profoundly shaped the story I tell about Madeline; my sisters Dianne and Mary; and my mom. Their willingness to share their perspectives energized my effort to write this true story about our sister Madeline.

Series Editors Preface

Ryan J. Dippre and Talinn Phillips

Jay Lemke opens “Across Scales of Time: Artifacts, Activities, and Meanings in Ecosocial Systems” with two interesting questions:

- How do *moments* add up to *lives*?
- How do our shared moments together add up to *social life* as such? (273).

These questions call our attention to the relationship between particular moments—shared or otherwise—and the wide, rambling paths that make up our lives. But Lemke’s phrasing of asking how moments add up has always struck us as an imperfect encapsulation of what goes on in a life of moments (not that Lemke ever suggested it wasn’t). Our moments do not add up, in many ways: we have particular moments with considerable weight that transform or define our lives in some way. And we have other moments that are, at best, unremarkable: the uninspiring work of sending a “per my last email” email, the joyless attempts to stay awake in a meeting. The rich tapestry of our lives is made up of many moments of different import and impact across greater or lesser strains of time.

Lifespan writing researchers have long been wrestling with the relationship(s) of the moment and the lifetime. What is the role of the moment in a life? How can we see it? What should we attend to, as researchers? How can we trace the impact of a moment across a range of timescales?

There are no easy—or single—answers to the above questions. But Robert Yagelski’s *Madeline Was Our Sister* marks a major contribution to our ongoing efforts to get at them. In the pages of this thoughtful examination of a writing life—and the social lives that come with it—Yagelski engages with topics and questions that lifespan writing researchers have been pursuing for some time in the pages of our articles, chapters, and collections:

- What is the relationship between the researcher and the researched? (e.g., Naftzinger; Bazerman; Fulford and Rosenberg; Rosenberg, Fulford, McGowan, and Long)
- How might we position ourselves as researchers in relation to a research site? (Workman)
- What is the role of time and memory in a writing life? (Cirio and Naftzinger)
- How do inscriptions shape the lifeworlds we construct for ourselves? (Roozen)

Yagelski, of course, does not lead us to answers in these questions. He can’t, after all. These questions are not meant to be answered but explored. They position

us, as researchers, to be active agents in the work that we do and in the stories we come to tell about how writing happens throughout a lifetime.

Instead, Yagelski calls our attention to these issues, tracing the rich and complex life of Madeline through a network of careful decisions and thoughtful analysis. In this work, we can see what it means to meaningfully and deliberately question ourselves, challenge our positionalities, and examine the relationship between the researcher and writer while also moving forward, toward a richer and more complex understanding of how people build and sustain writing lives.

One reviewer of this manuscript argued that “[t]he primary value of this book is the means by which its ideas are discovered and represented in a recursive, genre-fluid monograph, which offers a unique blend of scholarly essay, biography/memoir, op-ed, and philosophical meditation. I have never read anything quite like it, and I appreciated its sophisticated layering of the personal, professional, philosophical, and spiritual.” In our earlier work, we describe writing through the lifespan as a massive research object, one that required every tool we could get our hands on to understand (Dippre and Phillips, “Introduction”). In consequence, we have sought out researchers from a variety of disciplines and who use many different approaches to share their knowledge, and we have facilitated conversations about methodologies for studying writing lives in multiple contexts. Our aim has been to build a “big tent” in which scholars from across the many different disciplines of writing studies can find a home—a site outside of disciplinary silos where their work, approaches, and findings are valued. In Yagelski’s book, as in other recent publications by Bazerman and by Phelps, we see writing studies scholars examining different ways of exploring the writing lives best known and most accessible to them: their own. We see Yagelski here offering lifespan writing research another tool as he models an extended self-examination of his writing life and of how that writing life evolved to become ever more expansive, ever more ontological, and far less invested in any particular product. Moreover, he does so in a way that speaks powerfully to this moment in which the truths in front of our own eyes are being daily assaulted.

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Preface

Actually, when I write there is a feeling of necessity, of something that is stronger than myself that demands that I must write as I write.

– *Jacques Derrida*

Tell all the Truth, but tell it slant.

– *Emily Dickinson*

Sometime in early 1982, newly married and a little more than a year after graduating from college, I was living in my hometown, Dickson City, PA, trying to make a living as a freelance writer. One day I stopped at a local gas station, and I chatted with the owner, Johnny, as he pumped fuel into my car. I had known Johnny since I was very young. He sponsored one of our local little league baseball teams and was well known in our small town. My dad always bought gas there, and once I began to drive, so did I. On this day, as Johnny and I made small talk, he told me that he had recently read an article of mine that had been published a few months earlier in a magazine called *Country Journal* (which has long since gone out of print). I was surprised that he knew about the article, or even that I was a writer, and maybe even more surprised to learn that he subscribed to the magazine, which no one else I knew at the time was even aware of. As he finished filling my car, Johnny asked whether I was working on other articles for the magazine, and we talked a few minutes more about those projects. I paid him, and as I got in my car to leave, he said, “You’re a good writer.” It was as great a compliment as anyone could have given me.

The following year I enrolled in a master’s program in English at the University of New Hampshire (UNH), where I was introduced to the academic field referred to as rhetoric and composition (also called composition studies or writing studies). At UNH, I taught my first writing courses as a graduate teaching assistant, and I met others who, like me, were trying to establish themselves as writers while studying composition theory and pedagogy. I also met Donald Murray, whose ideas about writing provided the framework for the process-oriented pedagogy that characterized the first-year composition courses there. Don was the figurehead for the composition program at UNH as well as a major figure in the field, and he became my first mentor as a writing teacher. As a newcomer to this emerging academic field of “Rhet/Comp,” I was becoming aware of Don’s stature in the field, but I also learned that he had been a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist before joining the English department at UNH. To me, no matter how “big” he was in the field I would soon seek to enter, he was, first and foremost, a writer. And like my peers in the graduate program, I sought his guidance and approval. Don was a genuinely warm and approachable person who was generous with his

time, especially given the many demands we students placed on him. So I felt fortunate when he agreed to meet with me early in my first year in the program. Over lunch we talked about the field of composition, the teaching of writing, available graduate courses—the kinds of things beginning grad students tended to discuss with their professors. But the conversation seemed to shift when Don asked me about my background and learned that I was a published writer who had been earning a paltry living for a few years by selling articles to magazines and newspapers. I cannot recall the specifics of that conversation, but it seemed to me that my admittedly limited track record as a published writer gave me a measure of credibility in Don's eyes. I do remember him saying at one point, "Look, you're a writer. So write." I left that meeting elated. To me, Don Murray's comment reinforced what Johnny had said to me. I was a writer. It was an identity I embraced. And it would come to define my life.

I have often wondered why. I was a first-generation college student, the son of a father who worked variously as a salesperson and travel agent and a mother who was a secretary and then a caterer. During my second year of college, my parents bought a small restaurant, but it closed after only a few years, after which my father worked in the mail room at a nearby university and my mother managed stores for a small, locally owned women's clothing business. Neither had any interest in writing or literature, though my father was an avid reader of history and an amateur artist who spent time in retirement painting landscapes. None of my four siblings, two of whom earned college degrees, pursued careers that focused on writing or creative or scholarly endeavors. My grandfathers were coal miners, and my grandmothers were a factory worker (paternal) and a tavern owner and caterer (maternal). From an early age I was a good student who was expected to earn good grades, but none of my teachers encouraged my writing, in which—I now realize—I showed an intense interest that would have been unusual among my classmates. In seventh grade, with a few of those classmates, I started and wrote for a short-lived school newsletter, and in eighth grade I co-wrote with some friends a satiric play that we performed at a school festival. In high school I began writing songs with my guitar. Despite these and other non-academic writing activities and despite my success with school-sponsored writing assignments, my teachers seemed oblivious to my emerging passion for writing. Save one: Mr. Vanston, my senior high school AP English teacher, a rather eccentric full-time undertaker who taught English part-time at the Jesuit high school I attended. Mr. Vanston, whose wry cynicism I neither understood nor enjoyed, intimidated me, but I was drawn to his knowledge and obvious love of American literature. Sometime during my senior year, he read a few poems I had written, and one day in front of the entire AP English class, he praised them. To that point, Mr. Vanston seemed barely aware of my existence—at least, that's how it felt to me—and had seen only my academic writing, which was exclusively in the form of conventional analyses of the canonized literary texts we were assigned: novels, stories, essays, and poems by Hawthorne, Melville, Thoreau, Dickinson, Emerson, Hemingway,

and Fitzgerald. But in a pedagogical practice that I now recognize as unconventional, he allowed us to submit original stories or poems in place of the required weekly literary analysis essays. He never commented much on those academic essays of mine, other than to grade them, but his surprised and positive reaction to my poems I took as validation of my writing.

It wasn't until I was a junior in college that a professional writer named Robert Gannon, who taught non-fiction writing at Penn State and who had published numerous books and hundreds of magazine articles, primarily on scientific topics, encouraged me to pursue writing professionally. It was because of Bob Gannon's guidance that I was able to secure my first magazine assignment and publish my first newspaper article—two years before I graduated from college.

Looking back now—as I come to the end of the career that, arguably, began in Gannon's non-fiction article-writing course at Penn State in the late 1970s—I can craft a coherent narrative about how I got from that point to where I am now as a writer. And to some extent, this book includes that narrative. Or a version of it. And yet, as I try to tell this story about my development as a writer as part of another—distinct but related—story about my cousin Madeline, I wonder how it was that I found myself in Bob Gannon's class, which I chose as an elective among the many traditional survey and genre courses that were available to English majors. What drove me to seek the guidance that Gannon eventually gave me? What factors nurtured my desire to write and shaped my decisions then—and later—to pursue this career that evolved from writer to writing scholar?

According to Ryan Dippre and Anna Smith, “A defining feature of the ‘span’ of life is the differing contexts across which and with which a writer moves” (27). This seems self-evident, and much of this book is about how *context*, in all its “protean” complexity (to use Dippre and Smith's term), influenced my development as a writer—and shaped the remarkable life of my cousin Madeline, whose story is part of my own. This book is the story of my effort to tell a true story about her life, and that effort becomes the vehicle for a parallel story: how I became the writer I am now and, more to the point, how my conception of writing evolved from a conventional focus on textual production to an understanding of writing as an ontological act and a focus on the experience of writing-in-the-moment. Not only do these intertwined stories emerge from complex and varied contexts, but they also are being written in yet another complex and fluid context in this moment—which inevitably shapes those previous moments, as I demonstrate in this book. In their examination of context for writing, Dippre and Smith underscore this complexity, arguing that “thinking of context as protean can launch the transformative possibilities of context to the fore of our thoughts when working to imagine writing through the lifespan” (28). The story of my evolution as a writer might serve to illuminate these “transformative possibilities.” But my story also raises questions about the different ways in which these possibilities can emerge from the same context.

In my case, there always seemed to be a *need* to write. I cannot recall a time when I didn't write—or didn't want to write. Nor do I recall imagining a life

without writing somehow at its center. I don't know where this need to write came from. No one else in my family has ever engaged in writing in anything like the way it has been central to my life. And no one in my family ever displayed a desire—a need—to write. We all were exposed to similar social forces that paradoxically encouraged and discouraged writing as anything other than school-sponsored or utilitarian. We all grew up in the same small town, went to the same small Catholic elementary school, and shared similar formative experiences with literacy as kids, students, and young adults in those contexts—all of which circumscribed our individual literate development, but somehow in very different ways.

Dippre and Smith argue that context does not exist separately from actors but is, rather, co-constructed. And “if actors co-construct context as they construct social order, we can begin to think about the ways in which context participates in that co-construction.” How, Dippre and Smith ask,

do the resources that actors talk and act into meaning in a given moment emerge from the talking and acting that went on in the moment before? In the moment that follows? Furthermore, how do these resources shape the talking and acting that goes on within that moment? If context is tied to history through the work of relocalization, how might the protean nature of that context enable actors to untie and retie various historic threads in the production of the moment? The protean nature of context enables a multiplicity of alternatives in any given moment of social action that might be recognized by members of the scene in question as legitimate and meaningful. (Dippre and Smith 32)

This understanding of context seems to offer at least one way to answer my questions about why I felt this intense need to write from an early age while those with whom I grew up in similar circumstances did not. But the proverbial devil is in the details: in the “multiplicity of alternatives in any given moment of social action” to which Dippre and Smith refer. And this book is, in large measure, a detailed account of the evolution of my own writing—especially my conception of what writing is and what it is for—as it emerged from those many alternatives over time. Dippre and Phillips describe the purpose of lifespan writing research as an attempt “to build accounts of whether and how writers and writing change throughout the duration and breadth of the lifespan” (quoted in Dippre, p. 4). This book provides an unequivocal yes to the question of *whether* writers and writing change over one's lifespan; the question of *how* is more complicated. This writing that you are reading is an account, imperfect though it may be, of how this writer and his writing have changed over time.

In the following pages, I tell a story of my effort to write a true story about a remarkable person, my cousin Madeline, whose life affected so many others, including me, in profound ways. This is a story about finding truth in a life, through

writing, and why that matters. And in telling that story, I tell the story of how my conception of writing has changed over time and why I believe *that* matters. Significantly, this story of my effort to write a true story about Madeline is also an *enactment* of the conception of writing that has emerged from my scholarly inquiry over time: a conception of writing as ontological, as a way of being, that illuminates the transformative capacity of the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment. In some of my scholarly writing, I have described this development of my thinking as a shift in focus from the *writer's writing* to the *writer writing* ("A Thousand Writers"; *Writing as a Way of Being*; "Writing as Praxis"). This way of thinking about writing means that to be a *writer* is not just about producing texts, as I long believed; it is also—and more importantly—about engaging in an act of writing-in-the-moment as a way to make sense of our experiences in the world and to seek truth in that moment of writing. In that regard, this book is ultimately an argument for a way of understanding writing as more than textual production, as more than a communicative act, as more than a social or cognitive process: as a process of truth-seeking.

As I come to the end of my career as a writer and scholar, as I witness changes in the world that I did not think possible—changes that have shaken the Freirean sense of hope that I have tried to embrace throughout my career—I have come to appreciate more profoundly the pressing need to seek truth and to protect the communal process of finding shared truths by which we can live humanely and peacefully together. Much of this book is about the emergence of this need to place a viable shared conception of truth at the center of what we do, not only as writers and scholars and educators but also as human beings who must live together in this threatened world we share. In some ways, this is an old project, the value of which I am only now, late in my life, coming to appreciate. Early in my scholarly training I was introduced to the Sophists, who sought truth in the practical realities of human life rather than in metaphysical realms, and I wrestled with the problem of defining rhetorical practice as more than *techné*, as more than a set of communicative skills that could be turned to any purpose, good or ill. My thinking was shaped by the work of scholars like Susan Jarrett and Barbara Couture, who pressed the field to confront this problem, anticipating, perhaps, how the lack of a shared conception of truth—or at least an agreement that such a conception is possible and necessary—would become central to the resurgence of fascism that we are witnessing as I write these words in 2025, both here in the U.S. and around the world. Rhetoric, these scholars argued, must ultimately be about truth, and slowly I came to appreciate why this problem remains central to the discipline to which I devoted my career. Powerful new technologies and the recent emergence of artificial intelligence have changed the game in important ways, but the need for honest and ethical truth-seeking seems as pressing as ever. Writing, I have to believe, can be central to that process.

Very early on I was influenced by the work of scholars who emphasized the inherently ideological and political dimensions of writing practices and pedagogies,

especially Richard Ohmann and James Berlin (whose colleague I was privileged to be at Purdue University for a few short years before his untimely death in 1994). Their work, especially Ohmann's *English in America* and Berlin's *Rhetoric and Reality*, helped me begin to appreciate the complicated ways in which writing functions in Western society. As this book will demonstrate, Paulo Freire's work, which informed the writing of Berlin and other influential scholars in writing studies, became central to the evolution of my thinking about writing, and I have returned to it time and again over the four decades since I first entered graduate study. I return to it in this book, too, in part because his ideas reward sustained study but also because they are relevant to *this* moment. The fundamental ideas that inform his theories about literacy—that teaching literacy is inherently political, that language is an essential tool for human agency, and that truth is essential for liberation—might be self-evident at this point, but as I survey the current landscape of writing studies, these ideas, despite their complexity and significance, seem so taken-for-granted as to be almost ignored. They should not be. I see little in current scholarly conversations that should call into question Freire's vision for literacy instruction whose purpose is to enable students to become “more fully human” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44) and to resist the dehumanization that results from the oppression brought on not only by fascism but also by established political and economic structures in our ostensibly democratic society. In this regard, the scholarship of Freire and those who adopted his ideas in their work never seems dated. Current scholars stand on their shoulders.

What Berlin and Ohmann and Jarratt and Couture—and Jackie Jones Royster and Deborah Brodkey and John Trimbur and many other scholars who are sometimes associated with what came to be called the “social turn” in writing studies—really taught us, I believe, is that how we understand writing is inseparable from the writing practices that characterize mainstream schooling, which continues to valorize the production of a narrow range of texts and serves as a tool for disciplining young minds so that they are prevented from experiencing the transformative potential of writing; as a result, mainstream writing instruction represents an obstacle to the development of the critical consciousness that Freire believed was essential for liberation, and it obstructs that process in precisely the ways Freire describes in his famous “banking model” critique (*Oppressed*, chapter 2). Berlin famously writes in a 1988 *College English* article that “a way of teaching is never innocent” (“Rhetoric and Ideology” 492) but is inherently ideological, which is another way of saying that how we conceive of writing matters, for our pedagogies rest on the foundation of our conception of writing, consciously adopted or not.

On this insight, I vividly remember Janet Emig castigating Berlin in her keynote address at a conference at UNH a few months after that article, “Rhetoric and Ideology in the Writing Classroom,” was published in 1988. She was incensed that Berlin classified her work as “cognitivist,” not only because doing so was reductive but also because she understood the power of theoretical ideas about

writing and how that power can be turned to political purposes, those that are nefarious as well as those that are ethically sound. At the time, I was in my first year as a doctoral student at Ohio State, where my thinking would be guided by Andrea Lunsford and Edward Corbett and other scholars who approached their work with a deep sense of ethical responsibility. But sitting in the audience at that conference, I did not quite appreciate the importance of the moment, nor did I fully understand the reason for Emig's ire. All these years later, older now than Emig was then, I think I do. She was not only rejecting the label of "cognitivist" as a description of her views on writing; she was also objecting, I believe, to the ways in which Berlin's classification system oversimplified writing and undermined the power of the very ideas about writing that Emig set forth in her own work, most significantly in her article "Writing as a Mode of Learning." Recalling that moment all these years later, I think Emig's anger was justified. I will say again: how we conceptualize writing matters. And we should do so carefully, intentionally, ethically, and with humility. Together.

This book, then, is a project of reconceptualizing writing in ways that support ethical truth-seeking and oppose oppression. It documents the evolution of my own theoretical view of writing as an ontological act and a process of truth-seeking. At the same time, it *enacts* that theory in telling the story of my cousin Madeline, who sought her own truth as she fought for justice, peace, and tolerance as a Catholic nun who became part of the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s and 1970s. In that regard, the project of telling the story of my development as a writer, as part of the emerging project of lifespan writing research in this field of writing studies, is also a continuation of the age-old effort to work out the relationship between language and truth; this project is thus part of the never-ending struggle to imagine and create a more just, humane, and peaceful world. Together.

MADELINE WAS OUR SISTER

WRITING, STORYTELLING, AND TRUTH

It is difficult to know with precision how things became as they have, to be able to say with some assurance that first it was this and it then led to that and the other, and now here we are. The moments slip through my fingers. Even as I recount them to myself, I can hear echoes of what I am suppressing, of something I've forgotten to remember, which then makes the telling so difficult when I don't wish it to be. But it is possible to say something, and I have an urge to give this account, to give an accounting of the minor dramas I have witnessed and played a part in, and whose endings and beginning stretch away from me. I don't think it is a noble urge. What I mean is, I don't know a great truth which I ache to impart, nor have I lived an exemplary experience which will illuminate our conditions and our times. Though I have lived, I have lived.

– *Abdulrazak Gurnah, By The Sea*

Introduction. Writing a True Story of a Life

Concerning the life story, there are no precise instructions. The beginning can start at any point in time, just as a first glance can alight on any point within a painting; what matters is that, gradually, the whole picture emerges.

– Michel Houellebecq, *The Possibility of an Island*

This story is about Madeline Szerafinski White. Teacher, activist, Catholic nun. My cousin. It is a story about her extraordinary life during extraordinary times. It is a story about the extraordinary impact Madeline had on so many other lives. And it is a story about my effort to write a true story about her life: how writing this book began as a project of documenting and celebrating an extraordinary life and evolved into a more complicated and fraught act of truth-seeking that has been both joyful and painful—and ultimately transformative. In that regard, this is a story about writing as a way to truth.

In writing this story, I am inquiring into the role of writing itself in helping us face the many challenges of living our lives. *That* story includes a kind of chronicle of how my own view and uses of writing have evolved over my lifetime. I am a scholar, a teacher, a researcher, and a professional writer, and writing has always played a central role in my life. But that role has changed significantly over time as I have come to understand—and engage in—writing as a tool for living.

For most of my professional life, I did not see writing in this way, nor did I use writing to help me navigate the complexities of life. At least not knowingly. It may well be that, without realizing it, I have always written as a way to understand my life, to solve the inevitable problems that all people encounter in living their lives, to pursue professional and personal goals, to be happy—to name the world, as education theorist Paulo Freire puts it (*Oppressed*), in pursuing “the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human” (66). But for most of my writing life, I did not see writing as a tool for living. I did not understand the role of the experience of writing, or the potentially transformative power of that experience, in navigating the stormy waters of human life. Rather, I believed that the power of writing lay in the text—that is, in the potential impact of a text, as a container of meaning, on others. I understood writing as a transaction, “a form of mediated, learned activity that carries out social activity at a distance,” as Charles Bazerman puts it (9). The writer, Bazerman asserts, “offers temporally and spatially organized representations, transformations, and acts in an attempt to influence the cognitive state, disposition, and mental organization of the readers” (9). Like Bazerman, I saw writing as literate action: the texts I produced would act on readers in some way. However, I did not

appreciate the impact *on the writer* of the act of producing those texts. I did not recognize the power of the experience of writing-in-the-moment to shape my sense of self, and to give rise to the truths I was seeking. I cared only about the texts I was producing and how they might be received, what they might *do* in the world. Now I have come to realize that if writing has shaped my life, it was as much—or more—the *experience* of writing, rather than the texts I produced, that did so.

This book is, in part, the story of that transformation, an account of how I came to appreciate the transformative power of the experience of writing and its potential as a tool for living. Ryan Dippre has advocated a “lived reality perspective on literate action development” to illuminate “the entirety—conscious and unconscious, typified and untypified—of literate action as it is happening *in the experience of the person performing that literate action*” (5). In writing this story, I offer an account of *this* experience of performing *this* literate action as it is happening, and in doing so I am exploring more broadly the transformative potential of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. This account is an effort to explain what I now see as a profound shift in how I conceptualize writing and how I engage in the writing I do at this stage of my life, when truth-seeking through writing is more important to me than literate action that is intended to have some impact on a reader. At the same time, I am trying to write a true story about my cousin Madeline to explore this transformative potential of the experience of writing and to embrace the experience itself as a way to get at the truth of her life. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the possibilities of the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a process of truth-seeking.

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I began writing this story in earnest in late 2021, five years after Madeline’s death and in the midst of a pandemic that disrupted and ended so many lives—and prompted many of us to consider what those lives, our lives, might mean. It is a very old question, this matter of what meaning a life might have, and it seems especially pressing at a time of such extraordinary suffering and death, not only because of what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic but also because of longstanding racial divisions that intensified in recent years in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tyre Nichols, and too many other people of color in the U.S. as well as the deep and increasingly violent political polarization that led to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021—an event that has become a flashpoint in an expanding and disturbing struggle over the very nature of truth. At the same time, the horrifying war in Ukraine, which began with Russia’s invasion only a few months after I started writing this book, a war whose tactics recall the horrors of World War II, felt—to me, at my rather advanced age—like a terrible step backwards for humanity, even if history shows us that unspeakable violence toward one another is an unfortunate characteristic of human life.

who devoted herself to the struggle for racial equality during decades that were, in large measure, defined by that struggle, whose devotion to social justice prompted her to leave the life of devotion she had led for two decades as a Catholic nun, and whose sense of purpose—driven by her faith, her enormous capacity for love, and her dedication to principles of human dignity and equality—never wavered, despite the risks to which her beliefs exposed her. I am writing this story to try to understand what Madeline’s life meant—what it means—to me, to others. I am also writing to try to understand what my own life means—to me and to others—as I approach the end of a long career defined by writing. I wish to examine the extent to which writing itself has any meaning, whether it can help us make sense of our lives in the midst of pain and struggle and the sometimes terrifying uncertainties of human life. I wish to examine the extent to which writing can be a means to truth. I am writing *toward* truth: of a life, of a story, of writing itself.

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When I began writing this story, I thought I knew most of what I needed to know about Madeline. She was revered in my extended family and loved by hundreds, even thousands, of people whose lives she had touched through her work as a Catholic nun, a lifelong educator, and an activist for racial equality. I believed I understood why she had such a significant impact on so many people throughout her life and why she had been such an important figure in my own life. It seemed obvious. The big facts of her life as I knew them are striking.

Sometime in 1946, at the young age of thirteen—only days shy of her fourteenth birthday—Madeline was sent to a residential Catholic high school for girls in Reading, Pennsylvania, to become a nun in the Bernardine Order, the first step in a life of service and faith that few people ever live. As Sister Mary Marlene, she was trained as a teacher and earned degrees in education. In the mid-1960s, she served in a Catholic mission school in west Africa for two years and taught at numerous Catholic elementary schools in the northeastern U.S., including one in Washington, D.C., where she advocated for racial equality during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement. Working with a few like-minded colleagues, she tried to incorporate Black history into the curriculum at that small parish school, while also volunteering her own time to tutor children of color from low-income homes without access to many of the resources they needed to succeed in school. She pressed her school and her convent to better serve people of color and, as a result, clashed with her superiors, who did their best to censor her efforts. She advocated for people who were marginalized by poverty and racism, and she fought for equality and justice at a time when the U.S. was experiencing intense racial conflict and social unrest. Her activism in the midst of that unrest prompted her superiors to order her to curtail her activities, threatening to reassign her to a retirement home for nuns in rural Connecticut, where, presumably, she would be out of the way and no threat to the established order. But she refused

to be silenced. Instead, she left the convent after twenty years of service to the Church, retaking her given name of Madeline and causing something of a scandal in her conservative Catholic family—my family—who had idolized her for her life of devotion and faith. Subsequently, she returned to Washington, D.C. as a layperson and began teaching in a public school where she was the only White teacher on the school's staff. There she met and fell in love with a divorced Black man, Earle, whom she married in 1979, another act of devotion that deepened the rift with some of her family members and resulted in her estrangement from her mother, my Great Aunt Sophie, who disapproved of Madeline's marriage and made it clear that no family members should attend the wedding. Only four did: I was one of them, along with three of my cousins, all of us in our twenties at the time. We were among the few White people at her wedding, which was held at the home of one of Earle's relatives in Washington, D.C. Madeline and her new husband were effectively banished from her family home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she was born and where most of her extended family still lived. When her father died a few years before the wedding, she was told that Earle would not be welcome at the funeral. Some years later, Madeline's mother died, and over time her extended family accepted Earle, who became a fixture at holiday celebrations and family events and who was dearly loved by so many of us. During those years, roughly from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, Madeline continued to teach in schools in Washington, D. C., devoting her work to students who fell into the established categories for risk of academic failure: primarily students of color from families of limited means. She also sponsored many young students from Liberia, where she had served in the Catholic mission school years earlier, so that they could attend college in the U.S. Eventually, she helped establish an association to support these students. When she retired in the early 2000s after 53 years of teaching, hundreds of people attended her retirement celebration to honor her. Some years later, her funeral, only a few months after her beloved Earle's death, was a stunning memorial to her life, attended by many people whose lives she touched, including dozens of her former students whom she helped bring to the U.S. from Liberia.

This is the basic story of Madeline's life that I knew. It is a story of a special person who devoted herself to serving others, who never wavered from her principled path despite the suffering she endured, who always seemed to live according to her beliefs in equality and justice and God's love. It is a story of a woman who was a product of her turbulent times—1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—yet who seemed ahead of her times in significant ways. She entered into an interracial marriage before such marriages became relatively common in the United States. She was part of the American Civil Rights Movement and a lifelong advocate for people who have historically been marginalized and persecuted in American society, and she pursued that work at a time when the Vietnam War was raging and American cities were shaken by riots sparked by racism and police violence, a time when the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. shocked many Americans, including her own family,

many of whose members rejected the principles of racial equality and social justice that Madeline embraced. Through all of it, she continued to fight against hatred and to promote tolerance and love.

Madeline was the most remarkable person I have ever known, and for many years I have wanted to write this story. Many years before she died, I began making notes for a book about her. I even told her about it shortly after she retired from teaching, though she dismissed the idea. I did not see then that my desire to tell her story was driven not only by my admiration for her but also by an idea that was a function of my own experiences as a student and a professional writer to that point in my life: a conception of writing as primarily a matter of textual production, which is consistent with prevailing cultural views of what it means to write. I did not see then that I could not write this story then, because I could not yet appreciate the complexity of the truth of her life and I did not yet understand that I needed to write my way to that truth, that writing itself could be a way to truth. But not writing as I conceived of it then. Writing Madeline's story—*this* story—I eventually came to understand, was not a matter of producing a text; it was, rather, a process of truth-seeking, a way to get at truth by writing a true story about her life.

That life, I have always believed, emerged from and illuminated significant moments in the social, cultural, and political history of the U.S. and of the Catholic Church in the latter half of the 20th century. The story of Madeline's life, therefore, is inseparable from momentous historical developments that reshaped American society. At the same time, she pursued a distinctive path in the midst of that history. She lived a life that mattered to so many others. And strikingly, after devoting two decades to the Catholic Church as a Bernardine nun, she left the convent so that she could continue to serve others in ways that she believed were consistent with her Catholic faith and with the message of love preached by Jesus Christ. That, I have always believed, was a remarkable, if puzzling, act of commitment to her most fundamental moral beliefs. She was an extraordinary person whose life of devout service arguably made the world a better place—a more loving, equitable, and tolerant place.

That, at least, is the story of Madeline's life as I have told it for most of my adult life. The truth of this story seemed almost self-evident, and I wanted to share that truth with others, who, I believed, would benefit from knowing something about Madeline's work and life. Writing a true story about her life and the impact she had, I thought, would be a relatively straightforward matter. And writing her story would extend the good work she did by making it visible to others who never knew her. It took two decades of trying to write that story before I came to realize that I couldn't write it. Because I believed I already knew the truth of it.

As I finally did set about writing this story in earnest in 2021, however, it became clear that I knew less about Madeline's life than I had always believed. I came to realize that the truth of her life was elusive at best and its meaning contested among those who knew her. My memories of the few times I spent with her over the years were vivid and precious, and the big facts of her life as I thought I knew them

seemed to point to an obvious narrative of a special woman who lived a remarkable life. But my memories were incomplete, and I began to see big gaps in the story I thought I knew about her life. Initially, I made notes based on my memories and on my own experiences with her over the years: a family Christmas gathering she attended when I was very young; her wedding a decade later; a visit in the 1980s to her home outside Washington, D.C., where I was doing research for a magazine article; celebrating with her at a family wedding a few years before her death; her funeral in 2016. I soon realized that these memories, as compelling as they might be to me, raised more questions about her life than they answered. These were powerful memories connected to some of the most important moments of *my* life—moments I relived and shared with others many times over the years—but ultimately they offered limited insight into Madeline and the life she led. They were my memories and, I came to realize, they were really about me. And the more I revisited them, the more I came to understand how much more there was to know about her.

Talking to my relatives who knew Madeline exposed more gaps in her story and raised further questions about her life. Everyone seemed to have precious memories of her, but few knew concrete details of her life beyond the big facts I have shared here. And many of those facts were called into question by conflicting memories among her relatives. Five years after her death at age 83, her closest relatives seemed unable to answer some of the most basic questions about her life. My online searches did little to fill in these gaps, yielding fewer than a dozen sources with little concrete information about her: a brief obituary, a notice about the conferring of her bachelor's degree from Villanova University in 1962, a reference to an alumni organization she helped establish years later for the African school where she had taught as a nun. These sources were noteworthy only because they made the gaps in what I knew about her life seem even bigger. And Madeline herself left no writing of her own about these events—at least none that I could find—aside from some letters and greeting cards to beloved relatives. It was striking—and dismaying—that there seemed to be so little information available about a woman who—as I knew her, and as others knew her—had had such a powerful impact on so many people, a woman who was so obviously loved and admired, a woman who left a mark on the world, a woman whose life was characterized by devotion to principles of equality and justice and who seemed to embody the message of God's love that her own Catholic Church promoted and to which many others aspired. How was it that so little was known about such a life? Why couldn't those who loved and admired her answer some of my most basic questions about her life? What did that say about the way we all remembered her? What did it say about the stories we tell each other—and ourselves—about who we are, what we do, and why?

The stories about Madeline that are told by those of us who knew her, stories based on these big facts of her life but stories with big gaps, are, perhaps, the only stories we need. If I were to write nothing more about her life than what I have written here, it might be enough. It might, at least, convey some sense of the significance of her life, celebrate her principled service to others, and document in a general,

if superficial, way the important, loving work she did. This writing, this brief text, might be all we need. This eclipsed, incomplete version of her story is a hero's tale—a saint's tale, really—and it serves the purpose of highlighting the impact she had. It also acknowledges the special challenge of the life of service she led. It bears witness to the fact that she helped make the lives of others better, that she worked for equality and peace in ways that, we might justifiably believe, made the world a better place. Maybe that's enough. Why seek to tell a more detailed story, a different story?

Part of the answer is that Madeline's life seems to have embodied truths that matter beyond her life, and in that sense, hers is a story that others should know. Madeline made a genuine difference in the world in significant, discernible ways that most of us can never hope to do, even if we aspire to. I would like to tell that story, that true story, the details of which are striking and sometimes painful but hopeful, too. It seems an important and even necessary story at a time when the very notion of truth is under sustained attack; when the competing stories we tell about ourselves are weaponized for political gain and profit; when unarmed American citizens are murdered by masked federal agents violently enforcing increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic policies; when fundamental questions about the purpose and meaning of human life have been brought to the fore by yet another vicious and destructive European war, an equally vicious and murderous war in the Middle East, and by smaller but no-less-vicious and destructive wars in Sudan and Yemen and Myanmar and elsewhere; when racism, ever resilient, takes new and virulent and dangerous forms; when thousands of innocent people are slaughtered in renewed conflicts fueled by age-old religious hatreds. Madeline's story, a function of the turbulent times in which she lived, seems to have something important to say to us during our own turbulent times.

Another part of the answer is that writing our stories—trying to write our *true* stories—might be a way to some kind of truth itself, and writing *this* story might help us understand how writing matters, how we might use it as a tool for living in a dangerous world. Writing this story about trying to write a true story about Madeline might inform how we understand—and use—writing itself.

As I embark on this project, approaching the end of my four-decade career as an academic writer and writing researcher and theorist, the various fields interested in writing seem to be struggling to adjust their conceptions of writing and adapt writing practices, both in and out of formal schooling, to disruptive historical and intellectual developments, including the dawn of this so-called post-truth era, driven in part by the prominence of social media and new and powerful digital technologies that are being complicated in disconcerting ways by the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence.<sup>1</sup> These developments call into question longstanding views about

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1. This mention of artificial intelligence is one of the few I will make in this entire book, which warrants some explanation, given the fact that, as this manuscript is being prepared for publication in early 2026, AI has become ubiquitous, increasingly powerful, and inevitable as a tool for writing. Recent studies indicate that the use of AI technologies

writing and rhetorical practice and prompt scholars to wonder about the future of writing itself, a question which, according to the editors of a leading journal in the field, “merges with the question of human-ness, and thereby humanity” (Davis and Taczak; see also Hill Duin and Pedersen). In the midst of these disruptions (and perhaps driven by them), posthumanist theory has influenced how we understand knowledge-making and language. As a result, it has reshaped contemporary writing theory after the disruptions of earlier theoretical movements, especially post-structuralism, which helped give rise to the so-called “social turn” in writing studies in the 1980s and which became a tool for a sustained critique of the humanism out of which much of the theory that informed writing studies emerged in the 20th century. As composition scholar Laura Micciche has noted, “In current theoretical discourse, complexity reigns, as do nonoppositional stances wearied by critique’s taste for subtraction, which has failed to slow the commodification of identity and culture, capitalism as an engine of social life in the United States, or abuses of dominant ideology. Primary tools of the social turn—textual and linguistic analysis as well as ideology critique—have proven important but limited” (488). For Micciche, “What’s at stake in reconfigurations of social theory is nothing less than the big wide world that both includes and exceeds subjects, altering understandings of agency, identity, subjectivity, and power along the way” (489). In this milieu, our conceptions of writing are evolving in sometimes unexpected ways, and traditional ways of understanding acts of writing are giving way to an emerging conception of writing as “radically distributed across time and space, and as always entwined with a whole range of others” (489). Such a conception of writing might challenge long-standing ways of understanding the purposes and uses of writing and the development of writing ability over time, but these theoretical and social developments also open up the possibility that the experience of writing-in-the-moment, as distinct from the process of writing as textual production or communicative action, can be

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by college students is almost universal at this point (see Freeman; Study.com). As Brett Shanley puts it in a provocative and illuminating 2026 article, AI represents “a paradigm-shifting innovation for the field of college writing and much else” (7). He goes on to state that “when looked at honestly, it is almost impossible to overstate the impact this technology has on the field of college writing, or, perhaps even, it is growing increasingly impossible to imagine how the field will survive” (8). I agree. I also agree with Shanley’s call for “a radical re-imagining of college writing studies” (17) that shifts the focus from textual production and skills development to “our students themselves, both in terms of their knowledge-building of the world and their personal development as complex beings operating within it” (18). The conception of writing that I advance in this book (and in my previous work—see especially *Writing as a Way of Being*) is consistent with this kind of re-imagined pedagogical project, which would value writing as an ethical practice of living rather than simply as a communicative skill. That practice, as I describe it in this book, emphasizes the writer’s experience of writing-in-the-moment, rather than the production of text, as potentially transformative. In that sense, AI is neither a tool nor a threat and is largely irrelevant to the project of truthseeking that I demonstrate in these pages.

a locus of truth and a site of transformation in ways that we have perhaps previously failed to appreciate. Writing this story about Madeline is an effort to write *that* story, too, which is part of *my* story as a writer.

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If the big facts of Madeline's life point to a conclusion that she was special, that she made the world a better place as a result of her lifelong pursuit of justice and equality, they also invite us to learn more about that special person and the impactful life she seems to have led, to understand *how* such a life is lived, to find truth in such a life—a truth or truths by which we might define our own lives. The facts of Madeline's life as I know them, compelling yet incomplete, also raise compelling—and sometimes unsettling—questions that seem to demand answers:

Why did Madeline's mother—my Great Aunt Sophie—decide to send Madeline to the convent? What does it take for a mother to give her pubescent daughter to the Church, to send her away to a convent when most other children her age are attending their local schools, playing with their neighborhood friends, and growing up at home with their families? Was giving her daughter to the Church an act of devotion, of faith, of selflessness—an extreme sacrifice for her God? Or was it selfish, an attempt to win divine favor? What did Aunt Sophie want or hope for her daughter—and for herself?

And what did Madeline herself want at that young age? Did she assent to being sent away to a convent to become a Catholic nun? Was she given that choice? Did she have a voice in that decision? Can a girl so young even give her assent to such a decision? And what was it like for her to be sent away from home to a strange place as such a young girl? She must have been painfully lonely. Was she? How did she endure the separation from her family? Did she believe it was God's will? And what if she did? What is the nature of belief in a divine being—of faith—in someone so young? Could she understand the ramifications of such faith, of the sacrifice she was making?

And what was Madeline's life as a nun like? What were the joys and sorrows of coming of age in a convent, away from family and friends, in a place that was not her home, in the context of a regimented, cloistered life so foreign to most of us? Did she embrace that life with a sincere faith? Did she believe she was truly doing God's work—in those early years of training, of study, and then, later, during her service as a teacher in Africa and, eventually, in Washington? And if so, what resolve must she have had to muster the will to leave the convent after so many years? How did she arrive at such a momentous decision? Did she act rashly? Or did she agonize? Did she have doubts? Did she believe she was violating her sacred vows as a nun? Or did her convictions about racial equality and social justice supersede her oath to the convent? Did she think of that act of leaving the convent as sinful, as a breach of her faith? Or as an act of courage, of moral righteousness, a true expression of God's will?

And what about her powerful commitment to racial justice and equality, which, it seems, informed her decision to leave the convent? Did that commitment develop over time, perhaps as a result of her experiences in Africa and Washington? Did she enter the convent with the same racial prejudices that her family held, with the bigotry of the region where and the era when she grew up? Or did she begin to reject those views at a young age, without her family even knowing her true beliefs? What was it like to devote herself, as a young White woman, to the cause of racial justice and the education of people of color in view of the racism she witnessed in the family she loved and the nation she was part of? And what was it like to live estranged from some in her family, especially from the mother who gave her away to the Church? How did that affect her marriage, her relationship with Earle's family? Did she feel vindicated when that estrangement ended? To me, she always seemed to be in the right, but did she herself feel that way?

What, in the end, did Madeline think of her own remarkable life?



*Sister Mary Marlene and Family. Madeline (Sister Mary Marlene) with her family at her home in Pennsylvania, ca. 1955. Her father (Stanley) is behind her; her mother (Sophie) is in the dark dress on the far left of the photo. Robert Yagelski photograph.*

As I began writing this book, it seemed to me that these questions went beyond the details of Madeline's life and pointed to larger truths about all our lives. These questions are about the challenges and complexities of living, about identity and faith, about responsibility and commitment, about love and loss, about the moral and ethical uncertainties of human life. They are about how we believe we *should* live and why we so often don't live as we believe we should. They are about finding meaning and purpose in our lives—in human life. And they are about truth itself, in all its complicated, contested glory. That seems reason enough to tell a fuller story of Madeline's life for others to know. A true story of her life.

For most of my professional life, it would not have occurred to me that writing itself might be the way to answer such questions, that it could be a vehicle for truth-seeking. Instead, I would have seen writing as a way to share with others, in the form of a text—a book or essay or article—whatever answers I might have discovered as I researched Madeline's life. But as I am writing in this moment, I am focused on the questions rather than answers that would constitute a text: maybe the very act of posing these questions is the point, no matter what answers I might find or whether answers are even possible. Maybe the point is the act of writing about these questions rather than producing a text that conveys answers to them. After all these years of writing—of producing texts to be read—I am seeing value in the experience of writing as a way to inhabit these important questions, something I did not appreciate as a younger writer and scholar. Indeed, trying to write this true story about Madeline has deepened my sense of the value of this experience of writing-in-the-moment.

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On the few occasions when, in her later years, Madeline visited our hometown for a family wedding or funeral or graduation, I would talk with her about politics and race relations and—more rarely—about her own past, but my memories of those conversations are few and sparse and leave me unable to answer the questions I have posed here. My memories leave the big facts of her life intact until the story I know about that life becomes almost a myth, a fable, even a cliché. The big-facts version of her story seems to reduce her remarkable life to a trope, whereby she becomes a kind of admirable but one-dimensional hero that most of us know we can never be—that Madeline herself could never be. In that regard, my memories do little to help me find a way to any kind of fundamental truth of her life. My memories seem insufficient for helping me make sense of her remarkable—and complicated—life in a way that does justice to it. But these memories are what I have. They are real, and though they might be partial and uncertain, they seem significant and essential. I need them, no matter how little they might reveal of the truth—of *a* truth—of Madeline's life. Or my own.

This story I am writing about Madeline's life, then, is *my* story of her life and of my efforts to write about her life. It is about what I am discovering about her

life and about what her life means to me, which is not necessarily what her life means to others. And in writing about what Madeline's life might mean, I am making sense of my own life—in *this* moment, *as* I am writing.

In that regard, this story is ultimately a story about telling this story. It is my attempt to explain how writing this book began as an effort to document the life of a special person who devoted herself to making life better for others, and became a complicated process of truth-seeking, in which the very act of trying to write a true story becomes the locus of truth itself. In other words, this is a story about writing and how it can change lives. It is about how writing changed my life as well as the lives of others I have known: students I have taught over the years, friends and family members, people I have known only through their own writing. It is about how writing might help us find a way to truths that we need: about who we are and what we have experienced and how we have lived. And what it might mean.

Writing can change the world. I believe that. And this story—*writing* this story—is about that potentially transformative power of writing. I am not referring here to the Great Writing of the popular imagination—that is, writing by famous novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists whose works we valorize, study, quote, and analyze for wisdom and Truth-with-a-capital-T. Rather, the kind of writing I am referring to here is writing that we might do in the conduct of our lives: writing as an act of genuine inquiry into our own experiences and the experiences of those around us; writing as a way to make sense of our lives, to find truth, *a* truth, a truth we need; writing as a way to *be* in the moment. Writing as a tool for living. This is a crucial distinction—between Great Writing that we tend to think of as art that conveys knowledge and Truth on the one hand and, on the other, the acts of writing in which we might engage in the living of our lives, whose truths we are trying to identify and understand. The writing I am trying to describe here, the writing I am writing about in this book, is not about producing a text but about the experience of writing in the moment as we seek the truths we need.

In his memoir *A Moveable Feast*, the Great Writer Ernest Hemingway describes his strategy for being able to continue writing when he faced the proverbial writer's block: "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know ... and then go on from there" (22). That's what I aim to do in telling this story. And in doing that—in trying to write one true sentence after another—I hope to find my way to some kind of larger truth. About Madeline's life and my own. About telling stories about our lives. About writing and living. Maybe even about truth itself—or at least, the project of seeking the truths we need in our lives.

And there, as another Great Writer once wrote, is the rub. Because how do you define a "true sentence," exactly? Hemingway doesn't really say. Over the course of his career, Hemingway made many pronouncements, as Great Writers will, about writing as a way to get at what is true. "Good writing is true writing," he said (Phillips 10). But he skirted the question of what is *true*. How do we *know* what is true? He doesn't say.

These are old questions, of course, which have preoccupied philosophers and theologians and Great Writers for millennia—questions that have taken on a new urgency in this age of alternative facts and competing versions of reality. I won't presume to try to address such questions. What I am interested in here—what has simultaneously confounded and thrilled me as I am trying to write a true story about my cousin Madeline—is the question of how one might seek truth in writing. Not Great Writing such as Hemingway's, but writing such as I am trying to engage in right now: writing that is an act of inquiry into what we know (or believe we know) in *this* moment; writing as a way of *being* in this moment; writing-in-the-moment in an effort to understand ourselves and the moment itself. If there is truth to be found—or made—in writing, I suspect it lies in the act of writing, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment, rather than in the product of the writing, the text or the story itself. And I'm guessing Hemingway knew that. Maybe he didn't define a true sentence because the truth lay not in the sentence but in the experience of trying to write that sentence.

If truth does reside in the experience of writing—in the act of telling a story by writing it—rather than in the text, it must be in part because language, written or otherwise, cannot capture the totality of our experience. It can only represent a part of that experience, inevitably transforming or rendering that experience in the quest to make meaning of it. Our experience and the meaning we make of our experience through language are not the same thing. Writing, as a visual representation of language, a physical manifestation of the spoken word, can never be the thing written about. A text is always a construction, a representation of a thing or phenomenon or idea and thus always something other than the thing or phenomenon or idea itself. That is not to say that writing to produce a text is without value or truth. Quite the contrary. Writing as a matter of textual production is a powerful tool and a necessary means of figuring out and, crucially, sharing what we know, what we believe, what we accept as true. It is, as Bazerman shows, a way to act in the world. The texts we create through writing convey wisdom and insights and truths that are shared across time and space.

But the texts produced by an act of writing can never truly contain the things they are about. That is a stunning insight into language that postmodern philosophy and poststructuralist theory have helped us understand, even as they have confounded our never-ending efforts to make sense of our lives and to identify truths we need to live those lives. It is an insight that shook up the foundational conception of writing as textual production that informed my own writing for the bulk of my career. It is an insight that I tried to confront in my scholarly work, especially my first scholarly book, *Literacy Matters*, which I wrote in the late 1990s just before earning tenure as a younger scholar. In that book, I explored the fundamental contingency and uncertainty of agency and meaning that post-structuralism illuminated, and I tried to work out what meant for the teaching of writing. My own writing—that is, my writing process, as it were—didn't seem to be affected by these scholarly ruminations, but I now think that was because

I wasn't really paying attention to what was happening as I continued to try to produce scholarly texts that were meant to share my insights. Eventually, I came to realize that if a text is not the same as the thing it is about, neither is a text the same as the experience of writing it. The text cannot contain the *experience* of writing that text. This story you are reading right now will never quite convey to you this experience I am having as I am writing these words right now. Moreover, what this text might mean and the meaning of this experience I am having as I write this text are not the same. In this sense, the text can only be a fragment of a truth, a potentially powerful but ultimately only partial representation of what might be true; the text—the story—cannot contain all of what we know or believe to be true in the moment. We must seek that truth, I have come to believe, in the experience of writing itself. In the end, that's what this story is really about.

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So this story I am writing about Madeline's life is about how we might find truth, if we can find it at all, in the experience of writing the story itself. In that sense, this story I am writing is also about *story*—why stories matter and how they come to matter. And that can be a fraught exercise. For a story, whether true or not, is still a story, a rendering, which entails its own complexities and uncertainties. Philosopher Crispin Sartwell has challenged what he believes is Western culture's collective obsession with narrative, which he argues arises from "a mania for the teleological ordering of time and of the lives that take place in time" (8). He rejects the use of narrative "in the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience" (9). The kind of storytelling that Sartwell rejects fulfills a basic human need to find meaning in existence, and we all do it all the time—from the stories we tell about our past experiences that reflect our beliefs or values or hopes or fears to the stories we tell about the trajectory of our lives, as if each of us is living the plot of a novel or play that gives our experiences coherence and contains the truth of our existence. Sartwell sees more harm than good in this way of using narrative to find meaning, to *make* meaning, in part because "narratives themselves fail of coherence" (16): "Every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative. Every narrative is just as plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness." In other words, when held up to scrutiny, the stories we tell to order our lives, to give coherence to our experiences, to show meaning in those experiences, fail to do so. They are constructions that impose order and meaning where none exist. Just as poststructuralist theorists claim that a text is not the same as the thing it is about, Sartwell argues that the story of a life is not the life itself. It is a representation of that life, inherently incomplete and insufficient. And, ultimately, a false one at that.

More fundamentally, Sartwell questions "whether human experience and human life are meaningful" at all (10). Narrative, he believes, is a tool we use to create

meaning that isn't there. Most people I know would reject Sartwell's rejection of meaning. They would dismiss the idea—an idea that is frightening for many—that human life has no meaning. For most of my life, I also would have rejected Sartwell's position on this most important question. Raised in a conservative Catholic home, I accepted as a forgone conclusion that the meaning of human life ultimately rested with God. When that belief weakened in early adulthood, I sought meaning elsewhere: in the teachings of Christian contemplatives like Thomas Merton, in philosophy and literature, in work, in family, in mountaineering, in the practice of Zen Buddhism. In love. Sartwell would probably point out that each of these frameworks of belief or spiritual practice or experience is itself driven by the very same specious use of narrative that he challenges. In other words, in leaving Catholicism for Zen, in seeking meaning in work or mountaineering or love, I was simply replacing one narrative with another, getting me no closer to the meaning I was seeking, which is, according to Sartwell, illusory.

I think Sartwell is right. I find persuasive his argument that we tell stories to construct meaning where it might not exist, to try to impose a bearable order on the sometimes unbearable chaos of living. I am reminded of this need each time I hear a friend or family member say, in the midst of pain or suffering or after a setback at work or a medical emergency, "Everything happens for a reason." That very common expression—common, at least, among the people I grew up with—reflects a pressing need to see meaning in events or traumas or good fortune that seem random and meaningless and without explanation. It reflects, too, a fear of the unknown, of the capriciousness of suffering, of the abyss. And it may well be that Sartwell is right about the potential danger of the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of the inevitable chaos and suffering that is life. But it might also be that there is genuine value in the *effort* to make meaning, even if that meaning is a construction, a fabrication, an illusion. It might be that the *act* of storytelling, rather than the stories we tell, is meaningful, even if it does not lead to meaning.

Sartwell himself suggests as much. In rejecting narrative and "the delusion of distance imposed by the structure of language and representation" (125), Sartwell proposes that we embrace our being in the world, to "stop struggling to reduce everything to means which we can annihilate into ends" (124). In this embrace of the absence of purpose and meaning, Sartwell finds hope: "What's hopeful about our entrapment in the human, conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality and of historical time, is precisely that it is a delusion" (132). If only we could accept that language is not what makes humans special but is merely—and brilliantly—"a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth," if we could let go of the need to impose order on an inherently chaotic world, "we could learn to let the world be." That, Sartwell believes, "would be a lesson of love" (133).

Writing—the act of writing-in-the-moment, the experience of writing at the moment of writing—can, I have come to believe, be a way to let the world be and

to simply *be* in that world, to embrace our wildness as creatures of the earth, to express love, to find hope in our existence together, even as we pursue possibly illusory truths about our lives. In other words, I want to realize Sartwell's vision of radical acceptance of the here and now; like him, I want to reject the use of narrative as a way to impose order on a universe that resists it and to create meaning that isn't there. But I also want to retain what seems most necessary and hopeful about our human need to tell stories to help us make sense of our lives. In a famous essay, literary scholar Barbara Hardy wrote that "storytelling plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives": "For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future" (5). Or as the influential educational psychologist Jerome Bruner famously wrote, "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (4). In short, telling stories helps us live. In that sense, storytelling seems necessary. It seems to fulfill an unavoidable human need to understand and make meaning in the face of inevitable suffering and uncertainty, no matter how uncertain or illusory that meaning might be. And in telling stories to make meaning, we try to find truth. Storytelling, then, is integral to our efforts to seek truth.

I see no contradiction in rejecting narrative and embracing storytelling, for in the moment of storytelling, of writing our story, we exist—just as, in Sartwell's view, we exist in the wordless moment of ecstasy or the perception of beauty or the sensation of pain or the feeling of wonder. Even if language cannot capture experience, as Sartwell argues, using language is itself experience. It is part of being human, and it is part of the human effort to find truth in human life. In the moment of storytelling, then, in the moment of writing our story, we might find a momentary truth, which might be all we need, even if the truth is that, ultimately, there is no truth we can grasp and hold.

And so I am writing about this powerful, seemingly inscrutable, almost magical thing called writing to which I have devoted my professional life. I am writing about what I have come to know about the importance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment, and how that understanding has evolved over so many years of writing, of trying to write, of trying to make sense of writing, of trying to understand the role of writing in our efforts to find truth.

And I am writing to tell a true story about my cousin Madeline.

In the process, I will have to figure out what "true" means. And I will do that by writing.

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

Now that I write all this down, I'm not sure it's the way it was. It's all so hazy and dreamlike; it's like I was telling someone else's story rather than mine.

– *Dubravka Ugrešić*, *The Ministry of Pain*

The past is never dead. It's not even past.

– *William Faulkner*, *Requiem for a Nun*

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

This is a true story about her funeral.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Beloved Mother, guardian of the nation,  
Hear orphans weeping in their supplication.  
We are Eve's exiles, do you hear us praying?  
Show us your mercy when we begin straying.

We have sinned often over all the ages,  
Hence we deserve God's punishment that rages.  
But when the Father strikes, be our defender,  
Be our safe refuge, Mother dear and tender.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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



# Chapter 2. Writing About Experience and the Experience of Writing

We have an appointment with life in the present moment.

– *Thich Nhat Hanh*, *The Path of Emancipation*

The act of writing is located inside an ever-shifting context of a present moment.

– *Alexandria Peary*, *Prolific Moment*

It is the morning of the second day of 2022, and I am writing, as I try to do most mornings. Usually, after finishing my coffee, I turn on my laptop, check my email, review my schedule for the next few days, and then set to work writing for a few hours. This morning I have followed that same basic routine. But I am not at my desk in my home in upstate New York. Instead, I am sitting in the basement of my in-laws' home in Dickson City, Pennsylvania, the town where I grew up, just a few miles from Madeline's birthplace. This is also where my wife, Cheryl, grew up, and this home is where she was raised and where her mother, Charlotte, eleven years a widow, now lives alone. We are here because Charlotte has been ill for the past few weeks. In early December, she was hospitalized for atrial fibrillation, a condition she has had for many years. She was treated and released after five days but then readmitted two days later with worsening symptoms. She spent the next week and a half in the hospital, where she was treated for pneumonia along with her heart condition. Charlotte has always been a vigorous, active, energetic woman, with a ready smile and a zest for living. She has rarely been so ill, and never for such an extended period of time. Being confined in such a state to a hospital bed, with limited visitation, took a heavy toll on her mood. She is weak and discouraged.

After Charlotte was readmitted to the hospital, Cheryl traveled to Dickson City, where she remained after Charlotte was released from the hospital for the second time, a few days before Christmas. As I write this morning, Charlotte is stable, but her condition has not really improved. She is using supplemental oxygen and remains weak and tired. She is unable to take care of herself and needs more-or-less constant care. For all practical purposes, Cheryl has become a full-time in-home health-care aid. She has been here in Pennsylvania for all but a few days of the past month, taking care of her mom and managing periodic visits from nurses as well as phone conversations with various doctors. Cheryl is exhausted, emotionally and physically. It has not been much of a holiday season for her—or for any of us. As the omicron variant of COVID-19 spreads around the world, we have been in self-imposed quarantine in Charlotte's small home, partly to avoid exposing her to the coronavirus and partly because she simply cannot be left alone.

As I write these words right now, I am in the basement den, while Cheryl is upstairs tending to her mom. It is about 8:30 in the morning. From my seat at my late father-in-law's makeshift bar, which I am using as a desk, I can look out the large floor-to-ceiling basement window to see the Lackawanna River valley extending to the southwest. The small city of Scranton is visible in the middle distance, beyond the large mall and the other big-box retail stores and medical buildings near Charlotte's home. Further beyond the city's small downtown is the section of Scranton known as South Side, and just beyond that is Moosic, where Madeline was born and where she grew up before being sent, at age thirteen, to Mount Alvernia High School in Reading, Pennsylvania, to become a Catholic nun.

I had hoped to do some research for this book while in the Scranton area these past few days, but this morning I am feeling that low-level sense of dread that has been an unwelcome but constant companion since the start of the pandemic in early 2020—nearly two years ago now. As I look out at the valley under a brooding winter sky, however, I am not thinking much about Madeline. I am worrying about Charlotte and Cheryl and thinking about the spring semester that will begin in a few weeks at the university where I work. Since Charlotte came home from the hospital, the days have taken on a dull but tense routine, driven largely by how Charlotte is feeling: whether she can eat, when she needs her medications, whether she can remove the oxygen tube from her nose, how well she slept. Cheryl cannot leave this house to return to our own home unless someone else—most likely her sister, who lives nearby—can stay with Charlotte. I do not want to leave Cheryl here to shoulder this burden alone, but I will have to return home in a few days to prepare for the start of the semester. Nothing seems certain at the moment except that Charlotte cannot take care of herself. Everything else is on hold—except maybe for the pandemic, which, at this moment, is raging once again, with the virus spreading at rates not seen since the beginning of the pandemic in early 2020, disrupting life again and sending record numbers of patients to hospitals. Nevertheless, this historic pandemic seems like an abstraction at this moment, as Cheryl and I remain in this house and continue to care for Charlotte. And this sense of dread seems to shadow my very being, an almost palpable presence, keeping me on edge.

In this anxious moment, I am imagining a future moment, when Cheryl and I will be in our own home again, living normal lives, whatever that might mean once the pandemic morphs into endemicity, as many public health experts predict. At this moment, I am imagining, too, a more distant moment when you—whoever you are—might be reading these words I am writing right now. These words are, in part, an account of what I am thinking and feeling in this moment right now, on this second day of 2022, while I have been writing in this basement room in a house in Dickson City, Pennsylvania under this gloomy January sky. But this account, such as it is, is partial. It can only be so. What is missing from this text you are reading right now is the embodied experience of writing, the many fleeting thoughts and visceral feelings I have been having as I am writing

these words: of my mother, who lives a few miles away from here in the house where I grew up and whom I will visit in a few hours; of my two adult sons, who live near my home in upstate New York and who right at this moment are doing whatever they are doing, of which I am unaware—something that adds to my sense of dread, because they have given us much to worry about in recent months; of the university writing program I direct, whose classes are scheduled to begin in person in a few weeks, even as the pandemic threatens to disrupt the start of the semester; of my brother, whose son died of a drug overdose last spring at age 26, and who has been suffering terribly this holiday season with an almost unbearable sense of loss; of my cousin Kim, Madeline’s niece, who lives in Moosic and whom I hope to talk to soon about her memories of Madeline. And more.

I cannot include in this text I am writing right now all of what I have been thinking and feeling and experiencing in the hour or so that I have been writing this morning. In other words, the text you are reading right now and the experience I am having right now as I write this text are not the same thing. And this distinction—between an act of writing and the text that is produced as a result of that act of writing—is significant; it is crucial to my effort to find meaning in Madeline’s story and to understand the relationship between writing such a story and whatever truth it might contain or reveal.

There is, I think, truth of a kind in this text you are reading right now, which, I hope, is composed of true sentences such as Hemingway sought to write. Hemingway believed that a text can contain truth. In that sense, reading a text can be an act of truth-seeking—or truth-finding. His goal as a writer was to produce such “truthful” texts, by writing one true sentence after another. In his famous *Paris Review* interview, he said that in his writing he “tried to eliminate everything unnecessary to conveying experience to the reader so that after he or she has read something it will become a part of his or her experience and seem actually to have happened” (Plimpton 84). It is in this “experience” where truth resides. As I understand Hemingway, he strove to capture human experience by writing one true sentence after another, and if he was successful, his writing—the texts he produced—conveyed the truth of that experience to his readers:

From things that have happened and from things as they exist and from all things that you know and all those you cannot know, you make something through your invention that is not a representation but a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive. (Plimpton 88-89)

His stories—the texts he produced—were the result of his effort to construct a truth “truer than anything true and alive.”

Whether stories such as Hemingway’s do contain such truth is for each of us to decide, I suppose. As a young writer, I embraced this conventional idea that writing can be a form of truth *telling*, that Great Writers like Hemingway communicated truth through their literary art. As a high school student and, later, a

college English major, I believed that to be a writer, a true Writer, was to produce such literary art, and I aspired to do so—so much so that when I first began writing and publishing (and being paid for) non-fiction magazine and newspaper articles while I was still in college, I didn't consider it "real" writing. It was serious writing, and it was often about subjects that mattered: infant mortality, the absence of health care in rural regions, the energy crisis, nuclear power (which was a topic of intense controversy in the late 1970s when I was writing those articles). But it wasn't art. At least not in the naïve way I defined it then. And therefore it couldn't convey the important truths about human life that a novelist like Hemingway could bring to us through his work.

And so as I was beginning to build a career as a writer, enjoying minor successes in securing article assignments from editors of what seemed to me to be important periodicals, such as the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, I continued to work on my poetry and I began a novel. My professors at Penn State University, where I was studying, encouraged this, especially my most important mentor, Jim Rambeau, a Henry James scholar who became my undergraduate advisor. Mr. Rambeau, as I called him then, would become my most trusted early guide after I graduated from Penn State and continued to write newspaper and magazine articles and then decided to pursue a graduate degree in English. It was Jim Rambeau, more than anyone else, who is responsible for my early decision to pursue an academic career. He showed me possibilities and intellectual horizons I could never have seen myself—that no one else had opened up for me. And he encouraged me to keep writing.

But like most of my professors in those days, Jim also encouraged me to pursue a career as a "real" writer, as a novelist or poet. He always congratulated me in those days whenever I would secure a magazine assignment or publish a newspaper article, but he seemed more enthusiastic to see early drafts of a novel I was trying to write. And I was desperate for that encouragement, because I wanted to be that Writer whose literary art contained truth. I wanted to produce novels in which, like Hemingway's, readers found truth. Like just about everyone else I knew who knew anything about writing or literature, I believed great literature *was* truth, and I wanted to write a novel that met Hemingway's standard, a novel that was "a whole new thing truer than anything true and alive."

But there is also truth, I think, in the experience of *writing* the story. There is truth to be found—or constructed—in this experience I am having right now as I write this story about Madeline, and this text you are reading right now does not—indeed, *cannot*—contain the whole of whatever *that* truth might be, because you, as a reader of this text, cannot share in this experience that I, the writer, am having at this moment as I am writing, no matter how truthful this text you are reading right now might be. I am trying to understand that dynamic, for reasons that I hope this chapter will make clear, and I think the path to that understanding is to keep writing.

And so I will.

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While working on this book in the early weeks of 2022, I learned of a longstanding effort to have Dorothy Day, the famed political activist and co-founder of the Catholic Workers Movement in the 1930s, canonized as a Catholic saint.<sup>2</sup> Day was a well-known muck-raking journalist and outspoken pacifist who lived a notorious bohemian lifestyle before finding her way to Catholicism. After numerous affairs and an abortion in her early twenties, she gave birth to a daughter in 1926, at a time when she was becoming interested in the Catholic faith. Although she had been raised as an Episcopalian, she was not an active member of that church and had never been religious. Her interest in Catholicism emerged through her contacts with Catholic activists who worked alongside her in New York City's slums. But the birth of her daughter seemed to intensify her interest in Catholicism, and she began to study catechism under the tutelage of a Catholic nun she had met. A year after giving birth, Day had her child baptized in the Catholic Church, and a few months later, in December 1927, Day herself was baptized, at the age of 30.

By the early 1930s, Day was deeply involved in social activism on behalf of immigrants and those living in poverty. Frustrated by the seeming indifference of the mainstream Catholic Church to the suffering of so many millions of people at the height of the Great Depression, she helped establish *The Catholic Worker*, a newspaper that took an unabashedly partisan stance in advocating for social justice and opposing violence, especially state-supported violence. Her opposition to the Spanish Civil War and her refusal to endorse the Catholic Church's support of General Francisco Franco, who was aided by Nazi Germany in his revolt against the left-leaning Republican government of Spain, were controversial and resulted in diminished support for her newspaper and the Catholic Worker movement. Nevertheless, her lifelong activism and pacifism seem to have been intensified by her adopted Catholic faith and, in particular, by her progressive views on Catholic theology that often diverged from the more conservative interpretations of the mainstream Church.

Very soon after her death in 1980, advocates within the Catholic Church initiated a movement to have Day canonized as a saint. Given Day's wild lifestyle in her early years—and, in particular, the fact that she had had an abortion—it is not surprising that the prospect of her canonization has been controversial. But there can be little doubt about Day's faith and her unwavering devotion to a vision of social justice deeply shaped by her Catholic beliefs. The bid to have Day declared a saint became formalized within the Catholic Church in 2002. By the time I

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2. This account of Dorothy Day's activism and conversion to Catholicism was constructed from information in the following sources: Allaire, "Dorothy Day: The Road to Canonization"; Cep, "Dorothy Day's Radical Faith"; "Dorothy Day," *Wikipedia*; "Dorothy Day, Oblate"; Dulle, "An Inside Look"; Krupa, "An Introduction to Dorothy Day"; "Process of Canonization"; Stack, "Was Dorothy Day Too Left-Leaning to Be a Catholic Saint."

began writing this book twenty years later, the process still had not been completed. As part of this process, Day was formally declared a “Servant of God” in 2005, and her case for canonization entered a new phase, during which a review would take place to determine whether any documented miracles could be attributed to Day. That determination was still pending in 2026.

Reading about the controversy surrounding Day’s sainthood, I could not help but think of Madeline. Day was a complicated and compelling figure who led a very different life from Madeline’s, especially in her early years. Yet there are striking similarities in their stories. Both women devoted their lives to serving others in need, and both those lives were characterized by a profound belief in God. Intriguingly, both were also connected to specific religious organizations within the Catholic Church: Madeline was a Bernardine nun (Sister Mary Marlene), and Day became an Oblate of the Benedictine Order of Monks some years after her conversion to Catholicism. Both women also espoused left-leaning political views and had strong beliefs about social justice and racial equality (though I do not believe Madeline would have embraced Day’s socialist and even anarchist political ideology). But whereas Day became a convert to Catholicism at age 30, after living an areligious life of sin—according to Catholic doctrine—to that point, Madeline was a devout Catholic from childhood, having given herself to the Church as an adolescent in order to be trained as a nun (to the extent that an adolescent can knowingly make such a choice). And although Madeline never left the Catholic Church, she did leave the convent after twenty years, even if her life of service—and devotion—continued. And both women battled overt sexism not only in pursuing their respective fights for social justice but also in their personal lives: Day was a single mother at time when societal norms and sexist attitudes dramatically exacerbated the challenges for a woman trying to raise a child alone; Madeline pursued a career as a teacher, one the few career paths without significant obstacles to women at the time, after abandoning the only pathway for women to be a formal part of the institution of the Catholic Church.

Learning about Dorothy Day’s lifelong activism and her conversion to Catholicism prompted me rethink Madeline’s decision to leave the convent. Day’s formal embrace of Catholicism seemed to solidify the moral values that informed her social activism in the service of those she believed needed help, but those moral values seemed to have been present all along, even as she lived a seemingly sinful life and before she formally converted to Catholicism. Perhaps Catholic theology gave substance to her existing values, or verified them. Catholicism was an institutional superstructure that was—in theory, at least—built on the foundation of those values of love for and service to others, all driven by a belief in God and in Jesus as divine (despite the systemic sexism of Church policy and doctrine). Madeline, on the other hand, had been part of that superstructure for most of her life until she left the convent in her late thirties. Is it possible that she left because that superstructure no longer provided the support, moral as well as practical, that she needed to serve others in the way she believed was

consistent with the values of the Catholic faith? Did she leave the convent so that she could continue to pursue what she believed was the right path of service to others, a path that reflected Christ's message of love but one that was, ironically enough, being denied to her by her superiors in the Church, as I understood her story? Had the convent itself, through which she was part of the institution of the Church, become an obstacle to that life of service? In other words, did she believe that she had to leave the convent, which she had entered in a profound and seemingly selfless act of devotion to her Catholic faith, in order to continue to be true to that faith?

That is the story I would like to tell.

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In this moment right now, this part of the story I am writing about Madeline—her decision to leave the convent after two decades of service—feels true. But it may be that this experience I am having as I try to write Madeline's story is itself the source of that truth—or some kind of truth. In other words, there may be some truth emerging from this experience I am having as I try to write a true story about Madeline, a story that gets at some truth about her decision to leave the convent. And for me, at this moment, the question becomes, What is the relationship among these truths: the truth about Madeline's decision to leave the convent, the truth of this story I am writing about that decision, the truth I am realizing or identifying in this moment as I am writing?

Right now I wonder about the extent to which these words I am writing will—can—convey whatever this truth is that might be emerging in this moment. I wonder, too, what will become of these words I am writing right now—what will happen to them after they are transformed into the text that you are reading right now. At the same time, I feel a sense of wonder, because my forty-years of professional experience have taught me that this experience I am having right now as I write these words will lead to something unexpected, maybe something useful, maybe even something good. Something *true*. There is a kind of magic and mystery in this process of communicating with you, a reader whom I do not know and will likely never meet and who is (I hope) reading this text sometime in my future. That future moment—your present—is somehow contained in this present moment when I am writing these words, which is in your past as you read this text. This moment in which I am writing contains all these other moments, and in that regard my experience of writing is, as it were, outside of time. "Writing," says education researcher Janet Emig, "connects the three major tenses of our experience" (127): past, present, and future. My own experiences as a writer tell me that Emig is right. This text you are reading right now contains some record of this experience I am having right now as I write it—a *now* that is in your past—but that record (this text) is distinct from this experience I am having at this moment. And your experience of reading this text at some moment in my future is

somehow connected to this experience I am having right now in this moment as I am writing, but your experience as reader and mine as writer, though inextricably and profoundly connected, are not the same.

It is in this sense that writing is unique as a “linguaging act,” as Emig describes it. And it is uniquely powerful, both the act of writing-in-the-moment and the text produced by that act. We tend to associate the power of writing with the text—with the capacity of the text to communicate ideas and information across time and space. But the experience of writing that text—an experience that intensifies the present moment even as it transcends this moment, an experience that is at once physical and metaphysical, an experience that is separate from yet inseparable from the text—can be a source of power as well. When fully focused on the writing itself, when thoroughly engaged in writing-in-the-moment, without worrying about the text but being present in the *act* of writing, the writer writing can experience a sense of release, akin to the experience of meditation: a feeling of timelessness in time, of *being* in the moment, of momentary *well-being*, even when the subject of the writing is painful, complicated, unsettling, even traumatic. The written words themselves become almost irrelevant. I know I will return to them later, because as a writer I will eventually want you to read them. That part of my understanding of writing, that motivation to write, remains intact from my earliest years as a writer, even as my conception of writing and my practice of writing have changed. So at some point I will revise these words I am writing right now and transform them into this text you are reading right now. But right now, at *this* moment while I am writing, I don’t worry too much exactly what these words might mean when you read them. Because there is some sort of truth in this experience I am having as I am writing in this moment. I will try to capture that truth and convey it to you through the text that I will eventually create from this writing in this moment, and I hope that in this way, this writing—both this act of writing in which I am engaged right now and the resulting text that you are reading right now—connects us, you and me. But whatever I am able to communicate to you through these words that will become the text that you will read later will not invalidate this experience I am having in this moment as I am writing, which has its own truth.

Ultimately, I know that the significance, the meaning, of Madeline’s life—the truth of her life—will never be fully captured in these words you are reading right now. It might be that the real truth of her life is contained in the experience I am having as I write about her, as I experience revelations about her and see connections in her life to mine and to others, connections that seem to emerge from the act of writing itself or perhaps become visible in or through this act of writing, as I try to tell you a story that matters to me and (I hope) to you. You cannot share in the truth of *these* moments as I am writing. But this account—this story you are reading—can, I hope, convey to you something of the transformative power of writing as an act of truth-seeking, a power that is transforming me, as I write, in ways that I only vaguely understand in this moment of writing. I wish to tell you

something of *how* I have written Madeline's story, I wish to describe the experience of writing it, so that you might appreciate the importance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment—and so that, together, we might learn how to seek truth through and in and by writing.

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Understanding this experience of writing and its capacity to transform our sense of being in the world has been my professional project for nearly two decades now. As a scholar who studies writing, I have investigated different aspects of writing, including factors that affect how students revise their texts, the errors student writers tend to make, and the role of digital tools in the production of a text. I have also studied writing theory, linguistics, literacy research, cultural theory, anthropology, cognitive psychology, and the philosophy of language to better understand how writing can shape our sense of identity, our perceptions of the world around us, and our sense of who we are as beings in relation to others who share the world with us. For most of my career, these efforts to understand writing were really about learning how to make better texts: figuring out how to help students to write more effectively, to harness the power of writing to communicate ideas and move readers. Eventually, however, I became less interested in the quality of the texts that student writers produce and more interested in what happens as students are writing—that is, what is happening in the moment as they engage in an act of writing. Even this interest in understanding the experience of writing-in-the-moment was initially motivated by my desire to identify more effective ways to teach writing so that students could learn to produce more effective texts, according to conventional standards for textual quality. But as I pursued that utilitarian goal, I began to notice that something else was happening each time my students graciously accepted my invitations to work hard at their writing in an effort to become better writers—that is, to learn to write better texts. Something important was happening to them as they engaged in writing as a genuine act of inquiry into pressing matters in their own lives. And what was happening to them as they were writing seemed distinct from the texts they produced or from their developing skills in written communication. In other words, I began to see in my students' experiences the importance of the distinction between the writer's writing and the writer *writing*, between the text and the act or experience of writing itself. I saw that students could realize some significant benefit by engaging in specific acts of writing regardless of the quality of the texts they produced and regardless of whether those texts were intended for readers other than the writers themselves. Time and again, I would see the powerful impact of these experiences on my students, so many of whom were struggling to find a path through life's challenges. And I realized that I needed to understand that impact of the experience of writing, because in some cases it seemed to matter more to my students than the writing skills they might be developing, the

knowledge they were gaining as writers and readers, or the academic success they might be achieving.

These revelations about the potential power of the experience of writing-in-the-moment led to a shift in my professional focus. As I have already noted, like other scholars trained in writing research, for most of my career I tended to focus my inquiry on understanding writing in order to improve writing instruction, and that focus coincides with broader societal expectations when it comes to what scholars in education ought to spend their time doing. Despite the necessity of theoretical inquiry—in *all* academic fields—prevailing conceptions of higher education in the United States are shaped by a widespread belief that academic research should have practical value, that it should have some concrete utility in the world—in this case, in schools and classrooms. Understandably, many of us who do this kind of work (most of us, I think it's fair to say) assume that what we learn through our research can in some way help make the teaching of writing, and education more generally, better (whatever that might mean), even if we are not studying teaching itself. My early studies of revision, for example, which I began as a doctoral student in the late 1980s and then pursued as a new assistant professor in the 1990s, were intended in large part to help teachers understand how students revise their academic papers so that they (the teachers) could develop more effective methods of helping their students learn to revise in ways that resulted in “better” writing (whatever that might mean).

This process is far more complicated than it might appear to people outside academe, and there is a great deal to say about the ways in which any academic research is embedded in complex historical, cultural, economic, political, disciplinary, and institutional contexts. Moreover, the relationship between academic research and the expectations of the broader society within which those institutions exist is vexed and contested. For a recent example, consider the political controversy about so-called Critical Race Theory (CRT). By the time CRT became a hot-button political issue in the U.S. in 2020, it had already been a well-established theoretical movement in education research and legal theory, among other academic fields, stretching back nearly three decades into the early 1990s. But the application of CRT in K-12 schools in the U.S., at a particularly fraught historical moment characterized by extreme political polarization and in the midst of the Black Lives Matter movement, sparked intense controversies in local school districts that led some state legislatures to pass measures restricting the teaching of CRT in public schools (Schwarz). A similar dynamic is evident in past controversies about education-related subjects such as Ebonics, bilingual education, and the Whole Language movement, among others. Such controversies illustrate the complicated and often uneasy relationships among academic research, institutionalized education, and the larger society.

I vividly recall a moment when that truth became real for me as a young scholar. In the early 1990s, just a year or two after earning my doctorate and accepting my first academic appointment as a new assistant professor in English Education

at Purdue University, a colleague and I were invited to do a series of professional development workshops for teachers in a small school district in Montana. I don't recall the specific professional connections that led to that invitation, but my colleague and I accepted and, some weeks later, traveled to Montana to conduct the workshops over a period of two or three days for the district's middle and high school English teachers. Our focus was helping these teachers develop effective techniques to teach their students greater awareness of the writing process. In other words, we were teaching the teachers methods to help their students learn to develop ideas for their essays and to refine their drafts through specific kinds of invention and revision techniques. It seemed straightforward enough, but when we met with the superintendent to discuss our plans, he cautioned us about our terminology. We had planned to spend some time with the teachers reviewing some of the research and theory on which our recommended teaching techniques were based—including some research associated with the Whole Language movement. The superintendent explained to us that Whole Language was a controversial topic in his school district, having been vigorously opposed by some parents who wanted a more traditional phonics-based and grammar-focused method of instruction (the effectiveness of which, my colleague and I believed, had been called into question by numerous studies). Whole Language, he told us, was a term we should avoid in our presentations—even though some of the techniques we would share with the teachers were based explicitly on Whole Language principles. Sharing these techniques with his teachers was OK, he said, just don't say "Whole Language." It was one of the first times in my academic career when politics directly affected my own work. It would not be the last.

All of this is to say that even seemingly uncontroversial research, such as research intended to help improve students' writing skills, is never exempt from politics and ideology. Nevertheless, as I pursued tenure and tried to establish myself as a scholar, the studies I conducted of how students revise seemed to me to have obvious practical implications in the larger project of improving education, a goal that I embraced and one that I—naively—assumed might seem apolitical and uncontroversial to those outside the scholarly communities in which I was working. My decisions about my research were not simply career-driven and self-serving, however: I was genuinely interested in gaining a better understanding of the complexities of writing, and I believed that what I was learning through my research would help me become a more effective teacher of writing; I also believed I was contributing to my scholarly field and to literacy education research in general. Although the specific focus of my research evolved over time, the studies I conducted were always motivated by this fundamental goal of helping to improve writing instruction and schooling in general. All the professional writing I did was in the service of this goal. And it's worth noting that although my scholarly work led me to examine the deeply problematic nature of formal schooling in the U.S. and expose the social, cultural, and political complexities of literacy, I was slow to appreciate what

the scholar Elspeth Stuckey has described as “the violence of literacy,” and I never seriously questioned the idea that institutionalized education in the U.S. is a fundamental good, that despite its serious shortcomings, formal education ultimately benefits individuals and the society at large.

That belief in the value of institutionalized education in the U.S. began to weaken as I looked more closely at students’ experiences with formal writing instruction and with schooling more broadly. Initially, I was interested in finding ways to help students write more effectively under the assumption that good writing skills are necessary for individual success in the American economy and essential for a healthy democracy, an assumption that was baked into my own experiences as a student writer and reinforced by prevailing discourses about education and politics during my formative years as a writer in the 1970s and early 1980s. This is the Jeffersonian ideal, the view that genuine democracy rests on the foundation of an educated and informed citizenry. Like so many American educators I have known, I embraced this ideal, and I saw my job as a scholar and teacher in that light. And in that light, I found it distressing to examine data on the writing abilities of American students. For example, results from the writing component of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), one of the most sophisticated and useful barometers of students’ writing skills, show little progress over time. Although most high school students in the U.S. seem to develop writing ability that NAEP describes as “basic,” very few can write at levels deemed “proficient” or “advanced,” which is roughly equivalent to the level of skill expected by most college-level faculty. NAEP writing scores have not been released since 2011, but those results showed that while 79% of 12th graders achieved a “basic” or better level of competence in writing, only 27% of 12th graders wrote at the “proficient” level or better and just 3% at the “advanced” level (*Nation’s Report Card*). What is striking is how consistent these scores have been over several decades. (NAEP results for reading are equally distressing, showing that 12th graders’ overall reading scores have declined by 7% between 1992 and 2019.) Given the voluminous bodies of research that illuminate the development of writing skill and the demonstrated effectiveness of specific writing pedagogies (e.g., see Graham & Perin), not to mention the billions of dollars spent annually on specialized teacher training and professional development to enhance classroom instruction, I found it more than puzzling that assessments like the NAEP did not show even minor improvements in students’ writing abilities over time.

Investigating why so many students seemed unable to learn to write effectively eventually led to a shift in the focus of my professional inquiry *away* from trying to understand how to enhance the abilities, skills, and motivations of those individual student writers and their teachers and *toward* exploring the role of the institutional and cultural contexts within which those students were writing. In other words, I became less interested in *what* and *how* we teach (pedagogy) and more interested in *why* we teach what and how we teach (purpose). The answers to my questions about the apparent lack of collective progress in students’

writing achievement seemed to lie not in what individual students and teachers were doing but in the larger institutional, political, economic, and cultural forces that shape the policies that in turn circumscribe the decisions of school administrators and teachers about what and how to teach and how students will learn to write. An important part of what I began to learn is that the utilitarian focus of schooling, along with the emphasis in teacher training programs—including the ones I worked in—on *how* to teach, ultimately serves a conservative political function. To put it somewhat differently, mainstream school-based writing instruction helps to maintain the political and economic status quo.

This is old news in some academic circles. In my own fields, scholars had long been illuminating the ways in which formal schooling in general (Freire; Postman and Weingartner) and the teaching of writing in particular (Berlin, Giroux, Ohmann) are implicated in the capitalist status quo and help perpetuate inequities in educational outcomes (Gilyard; hooks, *Talking Back*, see esp. pp. 98-104; see also pp. 55-61, 73-83). Although education in the popular American mind tends to be associated with progress, education researchers and theorists have long been exposing the ways in which formal schooling in the U.S. resists change and can impede social progress, especially for the most vulnerable and marginalized segments of American society. Famously, in 1976 sociologists Samuel Bowles and Herbert Gintis published a sophisticated analysis of the relationship between formal schooling and economic inequality and concluded that “parental economic status is passed on to children, in part, by means of unequal educational opportunity, but that the economic advantages of the offspring of higher social-status families go considerably beyond the superior education they receive” (Bowles and Gintis, *Schooling in Capitalist America: Educational Reform and the Contradictions of Economic Life* 1-2). In other words, schooling helps perpetuate socio-economic inequalities in American society, a phenomenon they refer to as “intergenerational persistence.” Further, their historical analysis of formal schooling in the U.S. led them to the conclusion that “the evolution of the modern school system is not accounted for by the gradual perfection of a democratic or pedagogical ideal. Rather, it was the product of a series of conflicts arising through the transformation of the social organization of work and the distribution of its rewards” (2). To put it in slightly different terms, the modern school system as we have come to know it does not reflect the pursuit of democratic ideals but rather serves the interests of a capitalist economic system and, in particular, those who hold power within that system. A more recent analysis in 2002 that was based on newer data led Bowles and Gintis to the same conclusions: “In light of the outpouring of quantitative research on schooling and inequality in the intervening years, the statistical claims of the book have held up remarkably well. In particular, recent research by us and others using far better data than were available in the early 1970s has entirely vindicated our once-controversial estimates of high levels of intergenerational persistence of economic status” (Bowles and Gintis, “Schooling in Capitalist America Revisited” 2). Studies from many different quarters of the education research establishment reinforce Bowles

and Gintis's conclusions. David Berliner, for example, reviewed various bodies of data to show that in the U.S. "poverty, particularly among urban minorities, is associated with academic performance that is well below international means on a number of different international assessments" (949). Jean Anyon's famous study of classrooms in "five elementary schools differentiated by social class" (4) documented stark differences in what and how children of different socioeconomic backgrounds are taught and led her to conclude that schools were "reproducing the tensions and conflicts of the larger society" (38) such that students are, in effect, trained to take their places in an existing social and economic hierarchy. In a related kind of inquiry, Henry Giroux has argued that the training of teachers in the U.S. is characterized by what he described as "deskilling," a process whereby teachers learn to deliver predetermined content using canned teaching methods; as a result, teachers function not as pedagogical experts but as technicians whose main tasks are to convey sanctioned knowledge and teach rote cognitive skills rather than critical thinking ("Teachers"). This process helps explain why schools function to preserve the intergenerational persistence that Bowles and Gintis observed. Within the field of English Studies, scholars including James Berlin and Richard Ohmann have examined how conventional skills-based writing instruction is associated with the rise of industrial capitalism in the late 19th and early 20th centuries and continues to serve the interests of so-called late capitalism today.

Although these critiques of formal education in the U.S. were familiar to me as a young scholar, they did not initially cause me to question my belief in the fundamental value of American education or the Jeffersonian ideal that I believed informed it. But as I witnessed the struggles of my own students, which so often seemed to have little to do with mainstream educational concepts of individual motivation or academic preparedness, these scholarly perspectives began to make more sense to me. Slowly, I began to see my students' struggles as writers as a function of institutionalized ways of defining, teaching, and assessing writing rather than as individual failures. As anti-racist scholar Asao Inoue has written, "Failure is produced by comparisons with a fixed ideal of writing, usually Standardized Edited American Academic English (SEAAE)" (333). The problem, I eventually began to realize, was that fixed ideal, which ultimately is narrow and exclusionary and does not encompass the remarkable complexity and diversity of writing styles, practices, and uses that enrich our world. Slowly, I was beginning to see that my students' "failure" is, as Inoue puts it, "constructed by writing assessments, and is not simply a result of bad or lazy students, teachers, or pedagogies" (333).

At some point in this journey, I returned to the provocative ideas of the influential Brazilian education theorist Paulo Freire, whose work I initially encountered as a new graduate student in the early 1980s. Freire's classic critique of institutionalized education, which is widely referred to as "the banking concept" of education and which he articulates in his famous treatise *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, helped explain what I was seeing in my students' experiences with formal schooling. To my mind, Freire's analysis provides a persuasive theoretical explanation for the

phenomenon that Bowles and Gintis observed in their research. More specifically, Freire's analysis exposes the ways in which mainstream education places students in the role of "receptacles," into which sanctioned knowledge is "deposited" by their teachers. Conventional instructional practices, such as lecturing, which facilitate the delivery of predetermined content to students, along with standard assessments and rules governing behavioral norms in schools, ultimately train students to be passive learners who are taught to accept the status quo:

The more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them [by teachers], the less they develop the critical consciousness which would form their intervention in the world as transformers of that world. The more completely they accept the passive role imposed on them, the more they tend simply to adapt to the world as it is and to the fragmented view of reality deposited in them. (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 73)

In this way, what students really learn, regardless of the content of the curriculum, is to accept the reality that is being described to them and, significantly, their usually powerless place within it. Formal schooling, according to this critique, teaches the student a way of understanding the self in relation to reality. Students learn a passive way of being in the world. They learn to accept as the status quo a worldview that serves the powerful who control that status quo.

Freire's theories, which he first advanced in the late 1960s, energized a broad progressive reform movement in education and became a key part of the philosophical basis of the critical literacy, or critical pedagogy, movement. His ideas about the ideological thrust and profound social and political implications of conventional schooling are consistent with other important theories and reform movements in education and, more specifically, literacy education. And they grew in their influence at a time when adherents to these movements were pushing for change in American schools. For example, Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner's pointed critique of American schooling, *Teaching as a Subversive Act* (1971), shares Freire's basic view of the influence that conventional (and seemingly reasonable and innocuous) educational practices and teaching strategies—including lecturing, the reliance on traditional textbooks, and standardized testing—have on the way students think and how they come to understand themselves as (passive) beings in the world. That view was in tandem with broader social movements at the time, such as the antiwar movement in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the Civil Rights Movement, which helped give rise to developments in literacy education, notably the Whole Language movement, bilingual education, and the writing process movement. What all these developments had in common were an emphasis on the active role of the student in literacy learning; the centrality of meaning-making as opposed to rote learning in the development of writing and reading skills; and the inherently social, cultural, and ideological nature of literacy and education.

None of this was new in the early 2000s, when I was trying to make sense of what I perceived to be the collective failure of literacy instruction in mainstream education in the context of my role as a university teacher educator charged with preparing new teachers for secondary school classrooms. But much of it was new to me. And its impact on my own thinking about education and writing instruction was profound. When I first encountered the idea of “the writing process” as a new graduate student and beginning writing teacher in the early 1980s, I saw this pedagogical approach simply as a better way to teach writing than the traditional skill-and-drill instruction to which I had been subjected in the Catholic schools I had attended as a child and adolescent. I did not see until much later the subversive nature of these pedagogies and the profound implications they could have, not only for students’ development as writers but also for challenging the educational status quo (see Yagelski, “Radical”). The seemingly simple shift in focus from the form and quality of the finished text, which is what traditional mainstream schooling emphasizes, to the complex and recursive process of inquiry by which the student writer creates that text can have a significant impact on how that student is positioned as a writer, thinker, and knower—and on the student’s own sense of self as a being in the world. To state it somewhat differently, the writing process approach assigns agency to students within an institutional context that effectively denies that agency.

This kind of pedagogy represents a real, if limited, threat to the status quo. For me, in the early 2000s, in the wake of the widespread challenges to civil liberties—to which most Americans seemed to acquiesce—and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq that followed the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, revisiting the process-oriented pedagogies that I had been trained to use in the early 1980s opened up unsettling new ways to think about my scholarly work, its focus and purpose, and the ways in which it might be implicated in a status quo that, increasingly, I came to see as fundamentally unjust and unfair. I began to reconsider the purposes of my work in terms of the broader social and political changes that I believed needed to be made to create a more just, equitable, humane, and sustainable society. Freire’s theories helped me understand that need and provided a powerful framework for exploring ways to reconceptualize my scholarship and teaching. They also underscore the importance of language and literacy in how we understand the world around us. But more to the point of this text you are reading right now, his theories eventually helped refocus my attention on the *experience* of writing as the locus of the potential power of writing to facilitate change—both individual and collective.

The key to Freire’s argument for a liberatory pedagogy—that is, a pedagogy that enables students to learn to resist an oppressive and unjust status quo—is the idea that human beings actively construct the world, not only by their actions but also—and crucially—through reconceiving who they are in relation to that world. In other words, how we perceive the world matters and can have material consequences in how we interact to transform that world. In Freire’s formulation,

the world—reality—is not static; it is a function of our perceptions and actions, and therefore it can be changed. Significantly, it can be changed in ways that move toward justice and liberty. But that change can happen only if human beings conceive of themselves as capable of fostering change. In this regard, human beings have the capacity to change themselves and the world itself, and they can do so—they can claim agency for changing the world—by gaining an understanding of their own nature as beings who have such agency. Conventional schooling denies this agency, according to Freire, by presenting the world as static and defining students as passive inhabitants of that world, inhabitants who are taught to accept the status quo—and their places within it—as fixed. In this way, Freire argues, conventional education is dehumanizing.

Because the world is not static, Freire asserts, human beings need not accept a status quo that dehumanizes them: “[D]ehumanization, although a concrete historical fact, is *not* a given destiny” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44; emphasis in original). Rather, “reality is a process, undergoing constant transformation” (75), and human beings have the capacity to participate directly in that process, to change the world, to make it more just and humane. To do so requires reconceiving “men and women as beings in the process of *becoming*—as unfinished, uncompleted beings in and with a likewise unfinished reality” (84). This reconception of human *being* is a crucial part of the process of *conscientização*, which is often translated in English as “critical consciousness.” Freire’s translator defined *conscientização* as “learning to perceive social, political, and economic contradictions, and to take action against oppressive elements of reality” (35), but Freire’s analysis throughout *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* makes it clear that the kind of critical consciousness he seeks is more complex than the capacity to perceive a problematic world in a certain way—for example, to be able to recognize the oppressive ways in which mainstream schooling teaches students not only what to think but also *how* to think. Critical consciousness, in Freire’s framework, is a fundamental reconceptualizing of human *being* and reality more broadly, and it is essential for genuine liberation. In other words, the capacity for the kind of transformation of the world that results in liberation and thus true humanization resides not merely in perception of the “contradictions” of the status quo, which provides a basis for action, but, first, in how we conceive of ourselves as beings who are capable of action in the world.

As Freire routinely reminds us, this kind of change is a challenging process, and it is dialectical in two senses. First, there is an ongoing dialectic between humans and the world they perceive and co-create. Human beings, who are always in the process of becoming, interact with a world that in turn is always evolving, a process in which humans have the capacity to participate and intervene. Second, there is a dialectical relationship between thought and action. In Freire’s formulation, there is no possibility of one without the other. This relationship is central to true liberation, according to Freire: “Authentic liberation—the process of humanization— ... is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women

upon their world in order to transform it.” (79). According to Freire, action—true liberatory action that can transform the world—is not possible without genuine critical reflection that results in a conception of the self as always in the process of becoming in relation to a world that is always in the process of becoming. “In dialectical thought,” Freire writes, “world and action are intimately interdependent. But action is human only when it is not merely an occupation but also a preoccupation, that is, when it is not dichotomized from reflection” (53).

Given this analysis (which I have oversimplified here), it becomes evident why education—and in particular, literacy instruction—is central to Freire’s vision for a more just and humane world. Liberation, of both individuals and the societies in which they live, is possible only if we learn to see ourselves differently and embrace our own agency to intervene in the reality we perceive and help construct through our thoughts, words, and actions. Education can be, in Freire’s oft-quoted phrase, the practice of freedom by creating a framework within which this kind of learning is possible. Moreover, language is integral to this learning because it is an essential part of the process by which we come to know ourselves as beings in the world; it is thus central to the development of a genuine critical consciousness. Language learning, then, can be a vehicle for true change.

In a famous passage, Freire explains the role of reflection—of reconceptualizing our very being in the world—in his version of a liberatory educational process:

Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that humans are abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from humans. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without men and women, but men and women in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 81)

This kind of educational project focuses on helping students see themselves anew as beings in an ever-changing world so that they can realize a different way of being in that world. Through Freire’s problem-posing pedagogy, students “come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in process, in transformation” (83). This is the basis of Freire’s idea of *praxis*: “the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it” (79). And, significantly, this *praxis* is a linguistic process. To put it differently, language is necessary for *praxis*.

But if language is to serve this liberatory function, it must be *true*.

According to Freire, “Within the word we find two dimensions, reflection and action. . . . There is no true word that is not at the same time a *praxis*. Thus, *to speak a true word is to transform the world*” (87; emphasis added). In this analysis,

a *true* word arises from reflection; it is a function of *conscientização*. Without the emergence of this critical consciousness, the word becomes empty, inauthentic, false. Language, then, in both its oral and written forms, becomes a necessary component of and vehicle for *conscientização* and an indispensable tool for change and liberation:

To exist, humanly, is to *name* the world, to change it. Once named, the world in its turn reappears to the namers as a problem and requires a new *naming*. Human beings are not built in silence, but in word, in work, in action-reflection. (88)

In this analysis, Freire is drawing upon centuries of philosophical inquiry into the relationships among thought, language, and being. He offers his revolutionary take on the age-old problem of the role of language in how we constitute reality. For him, without *praxis*, which requires language, the possibilities for liberatory change cease to exist. Language education, and literacy instruction in particular, are absolutely crucial to his vision for a better world.

What makes Freire's analysis so compelling to me is that he conceives of literacy as both epistemic and ontological. In other words, through language we create knowledge and construct reality (epistemic), but we also constitute our very *being* through language (ontological) in dialectical relationship with the reality we perceive and help bring into being. That formulation assigns to language—and literacy—great power and genuine potential for change.

As a teacher of writing and a scholar, I found my perspective on my own work profoundly challenged by Freire's theories, for they revealed that I was an unwitting cog in an educational machine that I was coming to see as troubling and oppressive. Freire's critique of conventional education suggested that the kind of work I was doing served as a tool for preserving the status quo that I believed needed to be changed. It was a kind of existential crisis for me. How could I continue researching, developing, and advocating pedagogies that ultimately enabled educators to teach writing in ways that inhibited the very changes I sought in society? How could I work to develop ostensibly liberatory writing pedagogies that could be implemented within an education system that effectively trained students to adopt a passive stance in relation to the world around them—to accept a status quo that refused to assign them agency and therefore undermined genuine hope for a just and equitable future? How could I *write* to realize these changes? These unsettling questions shook my faith in the idea that my career could be part of a broader effort to improve human life, as Freire puts it, even as that career became, by conventional measures, more successful. I began to lose faith that my work as a scholar and teacher could contribute in some way to the building of a better, more just, humane, and peaceful future. The more I contributed to our collective understanding of writing and teaching, it seemed, the more I also contributed to the educational status quo that, I was coming to believe, was antithetical to my vision for a better future.

But Freire also offered a way out of my dilemma by providing a theoretical—and practical—rationale for focusing on the *experience* of writing as a possible site for liberation, as a vehicle for transformation. In other words, Freire’s analysis of the relationship between literacy and ontology pointed toward a path I couldn’t quite see at the time: away from an understanding of writing primarily as textual production, which is the focus of school-based writing instruction, and toward a conception of writing as a potentially transformative experience of the self in relation to the wider world—which could, I hoped, be the basis for a liberatory practice of writing as a tool for living.

Like many educators who embrace a vision for liberatory education of the kind Freire espoused, I devoted a great deal of time and energy—and suffered a great deal of frustration—trying to fit my evolving version of a liberatory pedagogy into the institutional contexts within which I was working (at my university as well as in K-12 schools where I worked with teachers, mostly through the National Writing Project site I directed at my institution, to improve writing instruction). This sort of struggle is well documented in the scholarly literature in my academic disciplines (Ellsworth; North; Tassoni and Thelin), and some critics argue that any effort to incorporate into American schools a critical pedagogy such as Freire advocated is misguided at best (see Miller, “Arts”). I have known well-intentioned colleagues who abandoned their efforts to make their classrooms sites of liberatory education because of these challenges. For me, the story is about trying to reconcile my liberatory goals with what I came to view as the reactionary role of formal institutionalized schooling and mainstream writing instruction; that is, I tried to make peace with the fact that even as I taught my own classes and trained new teachers in ways that supported a vision of a more just and humane society by questioning and resisting an oppressive status quo, my position as a tenured faculty member in a public university made me complicit in the very system I sought to change. There is a great deal to say about this problem, but what matters for this story I am writing now is that I believed I was resisting the impulse to give in; I consciously tried to stave off a sense of resignation, in part because so many other colleagues I knew and respected remained committed to the idea of an educational system that can help create a better world. Moreover, my students at UAlbany—the university where I have spent most of my career—so many of whom are low-income, first-generation students (as I myself was so many years earlier) struggling against systemic obstacles that dim their prospects for a better future, motivated me to stay in the fight, as it were. They kept teaching me about resilience and possibility.

There is compelling evidence that some institutions, including the university where I teach, can be powerful vehicles for greater economic well-being for our students (Nolan). For example, the Economic Mobility Index (EMI), based on the research of economist Raj Chetty on inter-generational mobility, measures the extent to which students from low-income households benefit economically by attending a specific university (Itzkowitz). According to this assessment, my

own university, UAlbany, 43% of whose students qualified for Pell Grants in 2022 (indicating that they are from low-income households), ranked 78th out of more than 1300 colleges and universities in EMI—and 3rd out of the 64 campuses in the SUNY system. Similarly, UAlbany ranked 39th out of 1398 postsecondary institutions on the 2025 Social Mobility Index (SMI), which “measures the extent to which a college or university educates more economically disadvantaged students (with family incomes below the national median) at lower tuition and graduates them into good paying jobs” (“2025 Social Mobility Index”). Such analyses convey a sense that we at UAlbany are doing well by our students; we are helping many low-income kids improve their lot in life. Nevertheless, these gains, such as they are, occur within a system characterized by increasing inequality (see Siripurapu), the very same system that marginalized these students and their families in the first place. The fact that a percentage of students at my institution do better than their peers from most other universities does not change the fact that the economic/political system in which they live is structured in ways that do not, in the end, serve their interests as human beings seeking well-being, both individual and collective.

Semester after semester, I have come to know the stories of my students, and—my university’s EMI or SMI rankings notwithstanding—those stories reinforce the larger narrative that emerges from studies like those conducted by Bowles and Gintis: young people from precarious economic circumstances, whose families live on the verge of financial ruin, who have to cut corners in ways that undermine their academic progress, who face uncertainty about whether they will be able to remain in school for another semester or year, who question whether they even belong in college—and whether it is worth the great financial and social risks they face—struggling to reap the seemingly mythical rewards of a college degree.

Semester after semester, my students have written about these challenges, about their worries and fears, and about their hopes. And in their writing, they share deep anxieties and doubts: Do I have what it takes to succeed in college—and life? Should I be borrowing so much money for a degree? Will I be able to pay off my loans? How do I decide whether this major or that one will lead to a good job? My students also write about their successes: earning a good grade in a challenging class, receiving praise from a respected professor, joining the board of a student organization, getting a scholarship or academic award, landing a coveted internship. And they tell the stories of their lives: the daughter of a single mom who worked extra jobs to save money for her daughter’s college education; the brother who washed out of college but encouraged his younger sibling to stick it out; the father who insists on a science major his son hates; the immigrant parents who don’t understand financial aid; the politically awakened young woman who felt estranged from the conservative rural community where she grew up after getting involved in the Black Lives Matter movement on campus. Semester after semester what seemed to matter most to my students was telling

their stories—writing about the joy and pain and challenge of their own lives, writing about their own experiences with bigotry and poverty and love and loss and change, writing to raise their own distinctive and often silenced voices, writing their individual and collective ways to some semblance of agency—writing to realize some truth about their lives, and about life in general.

Significantly, my students told their stories in whatever form was available to them. For their required formal essays—standard research-based academic analyses or arguments—they wrote about important matters in their own lives, even when the ostensible subject of the essay was something else: an analysis of the social, financial, and educational impacts of growing up in a single-parent household, an argument against the permissive social mores in college, an investigation of the stigma associated with mental illness among Latino/Latina students. These essays look, at first glance, like conventional academic writing, but they were actually vehicles for these students to examine and understand their own lived experience, to place that experience in broader social and economic context, and to make sense of who they are as young people confronting the complex challenges of a treacherous world. Focusing, as educators tend to do, on the standard measures of “success,” which, in the case of college writing courses, typically includes the “quality” of the students’ prose, can make it all too easy to overlook how much this work meant to these students—not the quality of their finished essays (or the grades they might have earned for their efforts), but the process of inquiring into their experiences through writing, and feeling validated as a result, gaining a new, if sometimes unsettling, perspective on their lives.

For me, it became impossible to ignore how much these experiences mattered to my students. Increasingly, their inquiries into the pressing questions and problems that shaped their young lives emerged in less-formal writing that I eventually began to ask my students to do as a regular part of my pedagogy. (I say a bit more about this development in Chapter 7.) I begin each class meeting, for example, by inviting students to write about their questions, ideas, or feelings about a specific problem or question or about something happening in their own lives or on our campus. Although these writing activities were intended in part to contribute to students’ development as effective academic writers, the real value of this writing is that it gives students low-stakes opportunities to delve deeply into their own experiences in the world, to identify the challenges they face, and to explore the many difficult but crucial questions they have about living. Over time, it became clear to me how much the students appreciated and benefitted from these writing opportunities, especially when freed from the burden of worrying about their grades. It became clear that the *experience* of writing mattered to them, especially when that experience was driven by genuine inquiry and not circumscribed by the expectations of formal writing assignments. At the beginning of every semester, my students would exhibit skepticism about these writing activities, but they would dutifully complete them as if simply fulfilling another course requirement. But as the semester progressed, their engagement

inevitably intensified and, for most of them, the writing became a genuine act of inquiry. They would write, silently and intently, for the first ten minutes or so of every class meeting. They would write about experiences and ideas and feelings that are at the center of their changing lives. Later, they would tell me how much they valued those opportunities to write about what matters in their lives without worrying about grades and grammar and judgment—to claim their own voices through that intense silent writing, to *be* in their writing.

And in this way, my students helped me gain a different perspective on my concerns about the detrimental impact of mainstream education. They helped me see a way to make my work as a scholar potentially consistent with my vision for a more just and equitable future—and a more humane world. Significantly, their experiences became the embodiment of what I was coming to understand in Freire's theories about the necessity of rethinking the nature of the self and how it emerges in acts of writing. In this regard, my students helped me see writing differently—not exclusively as an essential communicative skill and powerful means of learning, but, more importantly, as a tool for living.

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I am telling this story about my evolution as a writer and scholar in part because it might help explain how I came to appreciate the importance of the *experience* of writing—and illuminate the story I am trying to write about Madeline. The crisis of faith I had as a professional somehow seems similar to the crisis that Madeline must have faced when she was sent away from the Catholic school where she was teaching in Washington, D.C. and where her superiors prevented her from doing the activist work she was engaged in there, which eventually resulted in her decision to leave the convent. She must have believed fervently in her activist work if she was willing to give up her identity as Sister Marlene in order to continue doing that work on behalf of vulnerable students. She must have held an unshakable belief in the rightness of that work if she would walk away from the convent after two decades of devoted service as a Catholic nun. I do not pretend to equate my own professional struggles with Madeline's decision to leave the convent, nor do I see my educational career as equivalent to hers, even if we both understood our work as serving vulnerable students in some way. I am, instead, trying to understand her decision to leave the convent, which seems so consequential a moment in her life and in the lives of others, through the lens of my own experience, which makes her decision seem even more momentous and remarkable.

As I am writing this more than five years after Madeline's death, it strikes me that Freire's Catholic upbringing is relevant here. I wish I knew whether Madeline was aware of Freire's work and, if so, whether she was drawn to it as I have been. She was already an experienced teacher and engaged in social activism at about the time that Freire's writings became available in the U.S. in the early 1970s, and she left the convent as his ideas were beginning to influence progressive educational

movements in the U.S. and elsewhere. Her dedication to her students' well-being, her lifelong fight for social justice and political franchise, her efforts on behalf of racial equality, and her deep belief in the potential power of education to improve the lives of all her students but especially the most vulnerable among them—all these suggest that she shared Freire's most fundamental values as well as his unwavering hope that human life *can* be improved. But would she have agreed with his critique of institutionalized mainstream education, in which she worked for fifty years? Nothing in my memories of her—or in the memories of my relatives who knew her—indicates that she believed the established institutions of formal schooling were so deeply flawed as to be inconsistent with her own beliefs in social justice and racial equality and love for others. The fact that she remained a teacher in a public school for most of her fifty-three-year career suggests that, at the very least, she saw public education as a vehicle for the pursuit of justice and equality, a means of individual agency and societal improvement. Or maybe she understood her work within the education system as a necessary compromise.

I don't think I can know whether Madeline was aware of Freire's work or whether she would have embraced his vision. I want to believe she did. It would be a perfect story if I were able to share a memory of a conversation I had with her about Freire's vision for liberatory education, about implementing his problem-posing method in the urban schools where she taught. I have no such memories. But at this moment, as I am writing this story, I believe she believed in the Freirean ideal of education as a practice of freedom, whether or not she knew of Freire's work.

Sartwell argues that a story like the one I am telling right now—the story of my own development and evolution as a writer and scholar—is driven by the belief that there must be a purpose in what we do and that the trajectory of our lives bends toward that purpose. This is the obsession with teleology that Sartwell abhors, as I noted earlier in this book. I suspect Sartwell is right about all this. Perhaps I am constructing a narrative that assigns coherence and meaning to these disparate events in my past because I need to find purpose in my life as my career as an educator winds down. It might well be that I cannot accept the absoluteness of living wholly in the present. Maybe I just can't accept the notion that we have no purpose other than to live in the moment. Maybe I can't just "let the world be," as Sartwell urges us all do (133). If so, for now—for right now—I accept my inability to accept. Right now, I want to see purpose in Madeline's life—and my own. I want to believe that she lived a meaningful life. I want to believe, with philosopher Todd May, that "meaningfulness lies not in what is achieved or recognized, but in *how* a life is lived" (181). To my mind, there can be little doubt that *how* Madeline lived meets May's criteria for a meaningful life. A *good* life. But like Sartwell, May seeks meaning in a universe that he believes is devoid of it—what he calls "a silent universe"—and Madeline would reject his formulation of meaning. I am certain of that. For her, meaning arose from her fervent and unshakeable belief in a god, in God, which, I think, gave an unquestioned sense

of purpose to her service to others. Right now, I still need to make sense of these seemingly significant events from Madeline's life—and my own—in a way that assigns some kind of meaning to them and identifies in them some kind of truth.

So I am writing this story of my development as a writer and the evolution of my work as a scholar in order to explore a truth about writing that I see as central to the story I am trying to write about Madeline and the truth of her life. I have learned through my journey that writing can make a difference in our lives, that the experience of writing about our own experience can help us makes sense of our lives and, ideally, help us live better lives. That is a truth that I believe is emerging in this moment as I am writing, a true story that is a function of this *praxis* in which I am engaged in this moment. And I am writing about Madeline to understand how storytelling can help us find these truths we need. But I also know that I am finding a truth in this moment of writing. The very act of writing this story matters, right now, and that might be enough.

Chapter 3. Remembering and Writing a True Story

... with the passage of time you will always find yourself imagining that you might have said this or that, even believing that you actually said those words, so that what one narrates often becomes more real than the actual events narrated, however difficult it may be to put real events into words

– *José Saramago, Baltasar and Blimunda*

My most vivid and powerful memory of Madeline is an old one: She is Sister Mary Marlene, looking dignified and even sacred in her severe dark brown nun's habit—which covers her from head to toe, her face tightly framed in white from brow to chin and cheek to cheek, with a large crucifix dangling from a rosary around her neck and her hands folded just above the knot of the cincture at her waist—standing tall in the middle of the living room of my grandparents' home near the resplendent Christmas tree that obscures a huge picture window. She is facing a half dozen or so male elders of my family, including my father and hers, who are seated on the sofa and easy chairs surrounding the tree, with their glasses of beer or whiskey. She is calmly, almost serenely, but confidently, holding forth, this formidable Catholic nun, against their criticisms of the Civil Rights Movement and, in particular, people of color.

It was Christmas Day, 1971.

At some point that day, I had made my way from the basement family room, where dinner had been served, to the living room on the first floor, where I saw Sister Marlene standing before my father and my uncles at the Christmas tree. I did not know what was happening, but it quickly became clear that this was not a happy holiday conversation. It was, instead, an intense discussion, an argument. There were tense, even angry voices in contrast to the holiday laughter that echoed throughout the house that day. I listened from the stairs as Sister Marlene, who would have been in her late 30s at the time, refuted these family elders. She spoke on behalf of Black people, and she defended the Civil Rights Movement as right and good and consistent with Christ's message of love for others. My elder male relatives seemed to be arguing against equality and tolerance and love; they seemed to be opposing Christ's message. It didn't make sense to me.

I was thirteen years old.

Today, more than half a century later, that image of Sister Marlene, my cousin Madeline, on Christmas Day is fixed in my memory as a kind of tableau representing the endless struggle against racism and bigotry to which she devoted her life—and depicting the courage she displayed in suffering the disapproval and

anger of the family she loved. It is, perhaps, my most important memory of her. And the more I revisit that memory, the more significant that image becomes: Sister Marlene on that important Catholic holiday, standing for justice and equality, the very embodiment of Christ's message of love for others, confronting the prejudiced views of her own loved ones. That memory is central to my story about Madeline as a courageous, devoted, and selfless advocate for love and tolerance and justice. And my memory of that moment becomes even more important considering that it was just a short time after that moment on Christmas Day in 1971 that Sister Marlene left the convent. She left after nearly twenty years of devoted service, I have always thought, because she had determined that staying in the convent would actually prevent her from continuing her service to people in need. In other words, leaving the convent was the only way she could continue to do God's work. In view of that momentous and seemingly contradictory decision to leave the convent, the significance of my memory of that moment in my family home on Christmas Day, 1971 grows.

The truth of that memory, however, is more ambiguous than I have long believed. And interestingly, my memory of that time includes writing: an account of that important moment on Christmas Day that I was asked to write by a Bernadine nun who was my teacher at the Catholic school I attended at the time. That text no longer exists, but as I try to recall it now, it represents an early indication of the important role that writing would play in my life.

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Christmas in my family was always momentous. For most of the first twenty-three years of my life, at which point I moved out on my own, my parents and four siblings and I lived in the home of my maternal grandparents, whom we called Bacz (which we pronounced *bahtch*, short for Babcia, the Polish word for grandmother) and Dziadek (*jah-jee*, Polish for grandfather). That house was the site of our family's Christmas celebrations, founded on the Polish Catholic tradition of *Wigilia*, a solemn but joyful meatless meal held on Christmas Eve that always began with the ritual sharing of blessed wafers called *opłatek*, which my grandmother would obtain from our parish priest. *Wigilia* in our home included Bacz and Dziadek, their two children (my mother and my Uncle Paul), and their nine grandchildren (my four siblings and me along with our four cousins). In later years, the meal included the spouses and children of my siblings and cousins (including my two sons) and, eventually, their children's spouses and children. In the early years, until about the time I was in college, there were thirteen of us around the table. Over the decades, that number expanded to more than forty.

*Wigilia* was always held in the large finished basement of my grandparents' home, which became my parents' home after my grandmother's death in 1994. My mother and sisters would arrange a variety of chairs and tables into one long banquet table, set with their finest holiday china and silverware and with Bacz's special

blessed candles. On those tables would be placed traditional foods for the meal: home-made pierogi stuffed with cheese or potato, baked fish, fried breaded shrimp, popinki mushrooms (usually gathered by my grandmother or, later, a family friend), home-made sweet bread, pickled herring, cole slaw, and various cooked vegetables. After the table was set but before the food was served, a large *opłatek* wafer was placed on each plate. The evening began with an hour or so of mingling and sipping drinks as family members arrived and greeted one another and my grandmother, mother, and sisters made the final preparations for the meal. At the appointed time, we would all take our seats around the table, and after saying a prayer, my grandfather (and, in later years, my father) would lead a toast to the family and the holiday. At that point, the main part of the Wigilia tradition commenced.

Beginning with the eldest family member at the head of the table (my grandfather in my earliest years, then my grandmother, and eventually my father and, after he died in 2020, my mother), each person in turn would rise from their seat and move around the table, offering a piece of *opłatek* to each other person seated around the table and, in turn, taking a piece from each person. This sharing of *opłatek* was accompanied by heartfelt embraces and expressions of love and holiday joy. The names of those family members who had died during the previous year would be invoked during these exchanges. As the family grew over the years, this process could take the better part of 30 or 40 minutes, and it was always emotional. Tears were as much a part of the tradition as the *opłatek* itself. By the time the last person had completed the exchange of *opłatek*, many of us would be emotionally drained, but happily so. To me, the ritual of Wigilia often felt deeply cathartic, a reaffirmation of familial love, a purging of the previous year's inevitable pain and sadness, and a healing—if only temporary—of family grudges and conflicts.

For most of my life, that special ritual of Wigilia on Christmas Eve in my family home was the highlight of the year. After I left my hometown with my young family in 1983 and moved around the U.S. in pursuit of an academic career during the following two decades, returning home for Wigilia was the single most anticipated moment of the year for me. It was central to my sense of identity, even after I left the Catholic Church and, as Baczyński used to say, lost my faith.

My family maintained the tradition of Wigilia long after my grandfather's death (in 1968) and my grandmother's (in 1994), and it wasn't until around 2018 or 2019, after my Uncle Paul (my mother's brother) died, that Wigilia in our home began to change. By then the number of family members who attended had become almost unwieldy, and some, like me, were living away from Scranton—one cousin as far away as Italy. When the COVID-19 pandemic hit in 2020, Wigilia was canceled altogether, as family members maintained their own versions of quarantine and isolation and confronted travel restrictions. A year later in December 2021, a somewhat truncated Wigilia was celebrated. My dad had died at the beginning of the pandemic lockdowns in early March 2020, and my nephew Garrett (my brother's son) died the following spring. So Christmas in 2021 was

not a very happy holiday in my family. Not everyone was able (or wanted) to attend Wigilia that year. And to my mind, the vivid joyful memories of all those past holidays made Christmas in 2021 even sadder.

Fifty years earlier, however, in 1971, Wigilia was, for me, magical and full of love and energized by the happy mysteries of a traditional Catholic Christmas. The joy of the tradition extended into the next day, Christmas Day, when members of my extended family—aunts, uncles, cousins, great aunts, great uncles, and distant relatives whose specific blood connections to me I could not explain—came to my grandmother’s home to share Christmas dinner. After the solemnity and familial intimacy of Wigilia on Christmas Eve, dinner on Christmas Day always felt raucous and fun, and 1971 was no exception. Which made that moment in my parents’ living room that year all the more discordant. Tension, conflict, argument—especially about political or social issues—were never part of the holiday in my memory. So it was disconcerting and confusing for me to witness Sister Marlene, this special person who seemed almost holy to my thirteen-year-old mind, having to defend the humanity of people of color and justify her advocacy for equal rights in the face of the latent bigotry and racial animosity of my own family, of men whom I dearly loved and respected and with whom I, at that young age, could find no fault. Although I only vaguely understood what they were arguing about, I somehow sensed that my father and uncles and elder cousins were wrong and Sister Marlene was right. She seemed to occupy the moral high ground, and she—not they—represented the moral values that were, I believed, the foundation of our Catholic faith, the same values that were being celebrating on that special holiday that marked the birth of Jesus Christ, who, I learned in my Catholic school classes, exhorted his followers to help those who lived in poverty and those who were sick and those who were shunned and those in despair. As I understood it at the time, Sister Marlene was living Christ’s message and doing His work. The elder members of the family with whom she was arguing, as best I could tell, were not.

In my memory of that moment—which might have lasted ten or fifteen minutes or one or two hours, I’m not sure—Sister Marlene never raised her voice or became emotional, despite blatant expressions of ignorance and bigotry that I recall being made by these men she loved, men who did, as I recall, express anger and who did become emotional, men who made derogatory statements (which are now deeply troubling to me) about “the Coloreds” who didn’t appreciate what they had in America. In my memory, Sister Marlene maintained her composure and remained steadfast in her advocacy for the people whom her relatives were dehumanizing. In my memory, she was standing, in that beautifully decorated living room on that most special of Catholic holidays, for good.

That is what I remember about that moment on Christmas Day in 1971.

I have shared this memory with numerous family members and others who knew Madeline—including a few who, I am certain, were there in 1971—and none of them remembered that specific moment in my parents’ living room. None of them remembered that significant moment, which for half a century has been

central to my view of Madeline as a courageous and righteous advocate for love and justice. But they all believe it happened.

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Memory is a tricky thing. The stories we tell about our lives rest on memories of past experiences. But those memories are neither static nor reliable; they are a function of our present selves, which are shaped by both past and present and by how we look at the world now, which in turn informs how we remember and understand the past. Addressing the challenge of writing about our past experiences, writing scholar Jane Bessette points out that memory is “dynamic and unstable, at odds with our attempts to grab hold of it in writing and make it permanent as a foundation for understanding our present selves,” and she emphasizes “the slipperiness of our perceptions of the past: the ways in which changing present circumstances reconfigure our sense of what happened” (80). This is old news, of course. We all have had the experience of sharing memories of important events with others who remember the very same event very differently. And it is well established in neuroscientific and psychological research that memory is malleable and therefore notoriously unreliable.<sup>3</sup>

This contingency and instability of memory becomes problematic when we are trying to tell true stories that rely on memories of our past. Bessette asserts that “writing the past cannot be understood in terms of truth, except in Joan Didion’s sense of a subjective truth: the ‘truth of how it felt to me’” (80). As Bessette sees it, writing about the past cannot be an act of finding objective truth (to the extent that one accepts the existence of objective truth and the possibility of accessing it—about which I will say more in Chapter 5); it can only be about *subjective* truth. Didion was famous for promoting a “New Journalism” that not only acknowledged but actually embraced the biased viewpoint of the reporter. She rejected the conventional view of journalistic objectivity and developed a style of journalism that foregrounded the reporter’s perspective as an integral and unavoidable part of the reporting (see Muggli). Writing about the past involves the same fundamental problem of navigating the choppy waters of subjectivity and trying to identify *truth* as something more than opinion. If we have no access to objectively true or even reliable accounts of our past experiences, what does it mean to try to write a true story based on our memories of those past experiences? How can I write a true story about Madeline when I can’t even claim that the memories on which I am basing that story are accurate?

This problem becomes even thornier when we consider the complicated relationship between memory and narrative. Psychology researcher David Nash

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3. See Gardner; Howe and Knott; Loftus. Such studies provide compelling empirical evidence that underscores the malleability and unreliability of our memories. As Nash notes, these studies “show us how our memories can change spontaneously over time, as a product of how, when, and why we access them.”

argues that “our memories are only ever as reliable as the most recent story we told ourselves” (Nash). And those “recent stories” are themselves unreliable because they are a function of belief, ideology, culture, and various social forces that shape our sense of identity as well as our perspectives on our experience. Moreover, narrative shapes memory. In other words, we create, store, access, and share our memories *as* stories, and by doing so we impose a narrative structure on them, which shapes—or *reshapes* or even *creates*—them. To put it differently, our memories are not neutral mental snapshots or video clips of our past experiences; rather, our memories are a function of the stories we construct about those past experiences. Or as historian David Lowenthal notes, “Memories are not ready-made reflections of the past, but eclectic selective *reconstructions* based on subsequent actions and perceptions and on ever-changing codes by which we delineate, symbolize and classify the world around us” (210; emphasis added). Our memories are adapted to and by the stories we tell about the experiences we remember. In this regard, memory is wrapped up in narrative, and vice versa. As Nash puts it, remembering is itself “an act of storytelling.”

We might see this role of narrative in memory as yet another manifestation of Sartwell’s “teleological order”: not only does *telos*—that is, our need to believe that our lives have purpose—drive the stories we construct about our lives, but narrative—that is, the act of imposing meaning on experience by constructing stories that assign purpose to our experience—shapes our memories of past experience. But whereas Sartwell approaches the problem as a philosophical one—What are the implications of our *telos*-driven storytelling about ourselves for how we should live together?—it turns out that cognitive scientists, psychologists, and neuroscientists see it (not surprisingly) as a scientific problem—What are the social, cognitive, or physiological mechanisms of memory? In fact, cognitive research seems to provide empirical support for Sartwell’s claims about the powerful role narrative plays in how we understand ourselves as beings in the world and how we conceive of the meaning of our lives. The “narrative hypothesis,” widely influential in neuroscience and cognitive psychology, holds that narrative is “not only a prominent form of human communication but also a fundamental way to represent knowledge and to structure the mind” (Szilas 133). The psychologist and scholar Jerome Bruner, whose theories have influenced views about knowing and learning in psychology, education, and related fields, wrote that “our experience of human affairs comes to take the form of the narratives we use in telling about them” (5). This hypothesis has been the subject of scholarly debate, but whether or not *all* knowledge is ultimately a function of narrative, as some scholars have argued (including Bruner), the problem of memory in the stories we tell one another about who we are and what we have experienced means, I think, that we must tread lightly when it comes to determining the extent to which those stories are *true* and what “truth” might mean in this context. For my purposes here, the question becomes something like this: If we accept that the memories of Madeline (mine and others’) around which I am constructing this story are inherently unreliable (at least in the sense that they are not necessarily

factually accurate), to what extent does the unreliability of these memories affect the *truth* of this story? More pointedly: Can we tell a true story if the memories that are the basis of that story are unreliable or inaccurate or perhaps even wrong?

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A week or so after that Christmas Day in 1971, I returned to my eighth-grade classes at Saint Mary's Visitation School, the parish grade school I attended through the eighth grade. One of my teachers was Sister Roberta Ann, a young Bernardine nun who, as I recall, knew my cousin Sister Marlene. Perhaps they had crossed paths in their training, or maybe they had been assigned to teach at the same school at some point. (In researching Madeline's past, I learned that she actually had taught briefly at Saint Mary's Visitation School a few years before I enrolled there in 1964, but I don't know whether her time there overlapped with Sister Roberta Ann's.) Sister Roberta Ann was, as I recall her now, a progressive-minded teacher, in contrast to most of the older nuns at Saint Mary's School in those days, who were strict, traditional, and conservative in their teaching, valuing obedience over learning and rarely allowing for student voices to be heard aside from reciting the correct answer in response to a direct question. In that day of classes after the Christmas holiday, it was customary for students and teachers to talk about the holiday, and Sister Roberta Ann must have asked her students about their holiday celebrations. In response, I must have shared my story about Sister Marlene's confrontation with my family elders. I have only a vague memory of that classroom conversation. I don't even recall the subject of the class itself. I suspect it was English, but I'm not certain. I remember only that Sister Roberta Ann was curious about what had happened in my family home on that Christmas Day, and she seemed especially interested in what I told her about my cousin Sister Marlene's defense of civil rights and racial equality. After class, Sister Roberta Ann asked me if I would draft a written version of what I had said during that classroom conversation about the holiday break. She said she wished to share it with some of her colleagues.

From my earliest days in school, I was a "good" student, which meant that I followed the rules, did my homework, and scored high on quizzes and tests. My report cards always featured a lot of As and good scores for what was termed "comportment." By the time I was in Sister Roberta Ann's class, I had also established myself as a "good" writer, which meant that I produced correct texts that conformed to expectations for school-sponsored writing, which tended to emphasize grammar, organization, and related parameters such as page limits. At Saint Mary's School, penmanship was also valued. I enjoyed writing—possibly in part because I was good enough at it to earn praise in a context where it was rarely given and probably also because it pleased my mother, who expected and celebrated the good grades and positive comments I routinely earned on my "compositions." But I think I also enjoyed writing for reasons that I couldn't articulate then. Constitutionally shy in large groups, I enjoyed being able to express ideas in writing. Despite the severe restrictions placed

on school-sponsored writing, I think I sensed the power of my voice in writing. And I found ways to engage in writing outside of school. As I have noted in the Preface to this book, I recall writing an unofficial class “newspaper” with a few friends as well as a comedic “play” that we were allowed to perform at a school carnival. These writing activities were neither encouraged nor discouraged. But the fact that they were not explicitly discouraged along with the fact that I enjoyed the responses I received to what I was writing energized me and prompted me to keep writing. I am sure I would have been excited by Sister Roberta Ann’s request.

I do not know exactly why Sister Roberta Ann asked me to give her that written version of my story about my cousin Madeline or what she planned to do with that text. It’s possible that she asked me because she knew I was a “good” writer who enjoyed writing outside school assignments. It also seems to me, in retrospect, that she held more progressive political views than would have been common or even tolerated among the nuns who taught at St. Mary’s School in those days, and my story about my cousin’s advocacy for racial equality might have struck a chord with her. Maybe she herself was, like my cousin, involved somehow in the Civil Rights Movement. I have no way of knowing. But I wish I had that text right now—if it ever existed. I have a vague recollection of drafting something in response to her request, but any writing I did back then no longer exists in physical form, even if it remains in my memory. All these years later, it strikes me as ironic—or perhaps appropriate—that I was asked to *write* that story, for not only did I eventually become a writer, but I also am writing a story about that story right now: I am writing a story based on a memory of writing that is being transformed by writing it.

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Scholarly inquiry into these matters of memory and narrative reveals the significant roles that storytelling plays in our lives, from the foundational stories that define our religious, cultural, and national identities to the personal stories we tell to define our individual racial, ethnic, gender, familial, professional, and other identities within those broader contexts. To some extent, all these kinds of stories incorporate and rely on memory. For example, the story of the founding of the U.S. rests on shared, if contested, memories of specific events and historical developments that have come to be understood as somehow integral to the existence of the U.S. as a nation-state and the identity of its citizens as Americans, such as the settling of Plymouth by Europeans in the 17th century or the abolition of slavery by Abraham Lincoln’s Emancipation Proclamation in 1863. These stories both inform and reflect our sense of identity as part of a larger entity, such as an ethnic group or nation-state, so it is no surprise that both the stories and the shared memories on which they are based are contested. But the stories we tell about our own lives rest on personal, idiosyncratic memories—what developmental psychologist Katherine Nelson has described as “autobiographical memory” (Nelson

125). Such memories, according to Nelson, serve “as a vehicle for self-expression and definition.” She argues that the different kinds of stories we tell—personal stories as well as those larger cultural stories—are functionally and structurally related. In other words, we should understand our individual stories within the larger contexts of culture, history, geography, religion, race, politics, ideology, etc. As a result, “it is necessary to see the relation between memory as an individual function, its role in the phylogenetic scheme of adaptation, and narrative as the medium of shared memories, collective memories, and fictional creations” (125). For Nelson, that set of relationships regarding the various functions of our different individual and collective memories raises the question of “the role of narrative in the composition of autobiographical memory, and whether autobiographical memory exists in a raw, non-narrative form.”

In exploring this question, Nelson traces the development of storytelling as both a cultural and individual phenomenon amidst the rise of the ideology of individualism in the West in the 18th and 19th centuries, an ideology that “permeated the institutions and practices of society” (128). That momentous set of developments had significant implications for social, political, and economic structures and practices that profoundly shaped communal life as well as how individuals understood themselves and their past—and how they told stories about themselves and their past. Within this framework, Nelson argues that narrative is not, as Bruner and others believed, an inherent form of human thought but rather “a cultural invention, one that may be adopted by individuals in organizing their own autobiographical memories” (129); moreover, the extent to which individuals adopt narrative as a tool for understanding varies across cultures and historical periods. In that sense, my story about Madeline must be understood as a reflection of my positionality, which is inevitably gendered, as part of Western—and, specifically, American—culture at a particular historical moment.

Especially intriguing in Nelson’s analysis is the apparent effect of sharing a memory on the memory itself. In imposing a narrative structure on a memory in order to share it with another person, the teller inevitably creates a kind of “distancing” from the event or experience being remembered and therefore does not “re-experience” the remembered event in a way that some scholars believe is essential for creating an autobiographical memory (Nelson 130). “Whereas the meaning for the individual resides in the re-experience, the imposed narrative is a way of establishing shared (not idiosyncratic) meaning” (130). This “narrativising” of the memory, which is a way of sharing the memory, also can change it—and in turn affect the rememberer’s “re-experiencing” of it.

My own experience in trying to write this story about Madeline might serve to illustrate Nelson’s analysis. The shared memories of Madeline differ—sometimes slightly, sometimes significantly—among the various people who knew her, and the remembered events that are the apparent basis for those shared memories are remembered—and re-experienced—differently by the different people sharing their memories of her. My memories of Madeline’s wedding in 1979, for

example, don't exactly coincide with the memories of my three cousins with whom I attended the wedding, and my conversations in 2022 and 2023 about Madeline with other relatives revealed similar divergences in our individual "autobiographical" memories—and in the stories we each tell on the basis of those memories. Moreover, my own relationship to that event (Madeline's wedding)—and the way I "re-experience" it—has changed as I have continued to share my memories in the process of writing this book. As we have shared our individual memories of Madeline's wedding and discussed that event, my relatives and I are (re)creating a shared memory which might differ from our individual autobiographical memories but which in turn inevitably shapes those autobiographical memories and how we might re-experience that event. The significance I attach to my attendance at Madeline's wedding has, therefore, evolved over time as I have remembered and retold my story of attending that wedding, and my sharing of my evolving memory has contributed to the creation of a memory of that event that is now shared among my cousins and myself. And the story of that event continues to evolve.

This complex dynamic came into relief during a conversation I had in the spring of 2022 with Kim, Madeline's niece and my third cousin, about her relationship with Madeline. Kim shared much about Madeline that I hadn't previously known, including how close Madeline had been to her eight nieces (the daughters of her three sisters) and how much time they had all spent together over the years on "girls' weekends," as she called them, which Madeline organized in Baltimore, Washington, D.C., and elsewhere. Inevitably, Kim and I talked about Madeline's wedding and the fact that only four of Madeline's relatives attended that event because my Great Aunt Sophie (Madeline's mother and Kim's grandmother) disapproved of Madeline's marriage to Earle and made it clear to the extended family that they should not attend. Kim and I talked about the years following that wedding, during which Aunt Sophie did not allow Madeline to bring her husband to her family home in Scranton, Pennsylvania. In those years, Madeline was effectively disowned by her own mother and by some other members of her extended family. Kim remembers Madeline and Earle making visits to Scranton and staying in Kim's parents' home—the home of Madeline's sister Sylvia and Sylvia's husband Emil. (Emil—Kim's father—shared similar memories with me.) Kim described to me some of her own vivid memories of the first such visit to her home by her Aunt Madeline and her new Uncle Earle. Kim was in high school at the time. As far as she recalls, there were no people of color in her small high school back then or in their small town, and Kim worried what her friends would think about her parents hosting a Black man in their home.

Kim also shared memories of the first time she met Earle. It was on a visit to Washington, D.C. with her family sometime in the 1970s, before Madeline and Earle were married. As Kim remembers it, the visit included her family, the family of her Aunt Dolores (one of Madeline's three sisters), and my family (my mom, my four siblings, and I). There were no fathers on the trip, only the mothers—Madeline's two sisters, Sylvia and Dolores, along with my mother, Joan—and their kids.

It was summer and very hot, and Kim remembers all of us, along with Madeline and Earle, visiting the National Mall in Washington. Kim's memory sparked my own, which seems to overlap with hers but diverges in important ways.

I, too, remember visiting Washington, D.C. with my mother, brother, and sisters sometime during a very hot summer in the 1970s, but I don't remember Kim and her family being with us. What I do remember was a moment when we were visiting the National Mall. In the oppressive heat, we found an air-conditioned concession stand near the famous monuments along the Mall, and we all went inside to get cold drinks, my mother and her five children. Several teens were working the concession stand, which was empty of customers at that moment. As we entered, the teens, all of whom were Black, were chatting and joking with one another behind the counter. My mother went up to the counter and stood there, waiting to get their attention so that she could place an order. Either they didn't notice her or they ignored her. My memory of that specific moment is vague. But I do remember my mother, after waiting for a minute or two, politely calling to them to get their attention: "Boys. Excuse me, boys." At that time, I was perhaps 14 or 15 years old, and I don't think (at *this* moment, as I am writing) that I appreciated what my mother had done (inadvertently, I believe, but, as I remember it now, unforgivably). But I do recall the immediate and understandable hostility of the young people behind the counter when they heard my mother. As I recall that moment at *this* moment five decades later, we six white people instantly became racists in the eyes of those teens. I don't know if we did get our cold drinks, but I remember that moment as excruciatingly uncomfortable—and the more so as I am writing about it at *this* moment. My mother's indignation, which she made clear after we exited the concession stand, didn't help.

I had never associated this memory with Madeline and Earle, but my conversation with Kim made me revisit it and, in the process, perhaps (probably) revise it. My sense that we (that is, my family) were seen then as ignorant racist White people by those young workers in that concession stand is inevitably shaped by my perspective now as a sixty-something white man recalling that moment with embarrassment and regret—and believing himself (now) to be a tolerant and fair-minded person who embraces the ideals of equality, inclusiveness, and racial justice. That memory is also inseparable, according to Nelson, from the shared (contested) stories we Americans tell ourselves about our history—in particular, about the Civil Rights Movement, racism, and race relations in the U.S. The story I am writing now is inevitably shaped by those stories, which inform how I see myself now and remember myself then.

Sometime in 2023 I asked my mother about that trip to Washington, D. C. She did not recall the moment in the concession stand as I described it, but she was certain that Kim and her family had not been in Washington with us. That was a different occasion, she insisted. A few weeks later, Kim sent me some old photos she had found. They showed all our families standing together with Madeline at the National Mall in Washington D.C. on a very hot day sometime in the early 1970s.



*Madeline with members of her family in Washington, D. C., ca. 1970. Madeline is in the center, wearing a yellow blouse. The author is directly behind her. Her sisters, Sylvia and Dolores, are to her immediate left. Kim Conte photo.*

There is no way to determine conclusively whether Kim or my mother is “right” about that particular family trip to Washington in the 1970s. And it doesn’t really matter. What is true is that, at some point, we all visited Washington and we all spent time with Madeline there during a particularly fraught moment in the history of American race relations, which shaped my family’s history and informs our individual memories of the visit. My memory of what happened at the concession stand seems important in the context of my story about Madeline as a social justice warrior fighting for racial equality. This story I am writing about Madeline inevitably (re)shapes and perhaps lends significance to my memory of that moment in the concession stand, which is also a part of my own story about who I am today. At this moment as I am writing, my story about my journey to Washington when I was 21 years old to attend Madeline’s wedding a few years later in 1979 with three other young members of my family also casts me as an advocate for racial equality, an ally of those whose histories are deeply affected by racism: I see myself in 1979, like Madeline, as a young person willing to act on his beliefs about what is right and true—and willing to defy his family in staying true to those beliefs. The incident at the concession stand becomes part of this story by highlighting the intensely fraught nature of race relations in the U.S. at that time and helping to illustrate the bigotry I grew

up with that was not always acknowledged and rarely confronted—and which infected my own worldview then and complicates my memories and my feelings about those memories now. I cannot avoid acknowledging as I am writing at *this* moment so many years later that I, too, might have held racist views at that time when we visited the concession stand. That uncomfortable truth affects how I am remembering that moment, for as the sixty-something man I am now, I cannot remember that moment with any fondness, nor can I write about it without embarrassment and regret.

That moment in the concession stand also matters because it helps place my story in the context of a specific historical moment, in the 1970s, a time of great racial tension in the U.S., and at a significant location, Washington, D.C., which was the site of momentous events in the history of the American Civil Rights Movement, including Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech. That concession stand stood near the public space where King spoke his famous words; it was a site of the same struggle for racial justice, literally and figuratively.

All of which is to say that I am trying to construct a certain kind of truth so many years later by writing this story of that experience that is based on memories that are being shaped by this same act of writing, *this* storytelling, which itself must inevitably be part of that truth, whatever it might be. In other words, the line between the truth—such as it is—and the act of telling a story that is supposed to convey that truth—isn't always so clear. I'm not sure the two are ever separable. One does not seem to exist without the other. And it might be that this truth I am trying to find, to construct, to realize, about that significant moment in the past, is located in *this act* of writing this story in *this* moment now.

But whatever truth I am constructing by writing this story very likely says more about who I am at *this* moment than about who I was then or about what might actually have happened at that concession stand. And for the purposes of this project, it might not matter how much of this story "really" happened as I am telling it here. That incident might not have happened exactly as I have written it here, and yet this story I have written about that incident might still be true. Or perhaps more to the point, the story might convey an important truth or truths without actually being *true*: it might bring forth truths that I need—truths that *we* need—for *this* moment.

My memories of that visit to Washington D.C., my cousin Kim's memories of meeting Earle for the first time on a visit to Washington, D.C., my mother's memories of that family trip—all these memories don't exactly tell the same story of that event. Nelson might point out that all these individual memories differ because autobiographical memory is "imaginative"—that is, "based on past experience re-imagined (or reconstructed) to fit the present and future circumstances" (Nelson 130) of the individual doing the remembering. We are all different individuals inevitably remembering the same event differently, despite our efforts to construct a shared memory of that event. I can live with that. In this sense, all these individual memories of the "same" events can differ and still be true. The

point is not accuracy but meaning. And the quest for what that moment—and the memories of it—might mean is fraught, ongoing, and contested. And necessary.

As I noted earlier, Nelson would emphasize the extent to which my memories of Madeline and those of my relatives who knew and loved her are inseparable from the social, cultural, and historical contexts within which the experiences we are remembering took place. Madeline and Earle's wedding took place in the late 1970s, when the Civil Rights Movement was redefining American society and altering attitudes about race. No doubt each of us is sharing—and thus reshaping, very likely even creating—these memories in the context of our experiences with and feelings about more recent events, such as the Black Lives Matter Movement and the protests around the world after the killing of George Floyd by Minneapolis police in 2020, as well as more recent incidents of racial violence, including the Trump administration's violent suppression of immigrants in 2025 and 2026. How we remember our past, as I've already noted, is a function of our present selves, which is shaped by these recent events and the way others portray and react to them. In the same way, as Father Gamrot pointed out to me, Madeline's decision to leave the convent and, eventually, to marry Earle, a divorced Black man who was not Catholic, took place against the backdrop not only of race relations in the U.S. at the time but also of the continuing impact of the Vatican II Council, which dramatically altered the Catholic Church and resulted in changed policies, practices, and attitudes among Catholics regarding things like marriage and divorce, even as old prejudices and beliefs persisted. At the same time, the women's movement was changing attitudes about those same issues of marriage and divorce and the roles women can take on, not only in the contexts of institutionalized religion but also in families, like my own, with deeply held traditional beliefs about gender roles. Our memories of what happened then are shaped by how we understand those developments now, and Madeline's story is inextricable from both those historical developments and our memories of them.

These complexities of memory and storytelling are important to confront, given the sustained assault in recent years on truth as well as the intensifying conflicts about our shared identity as Americans. Writing in 2003—well before the era of fake news and the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6th, 2021 that, one might argue, was energized by questionable and demonstrably “false” but nevertheless influential stories about American democracy and identity—Nelson highlighted the importance of understanding autobiographical memory within cultural and historical context. In contemporary American culture, she argued, autobiographical memory is particularly important, “because, in the light of the vanishing mythic or fictional models that instruct individuals how they are to live their lives, lives must be individually composed” (Nelson 133). It seems to me that Madeline's own story derived its truth, at least in part, from such “mythic models”—in particular, the stories of Jesus and his life that reflect the progressive Catholic theology that she embraced as well as the collective stories of historic change and social justice that energized the Civil Rights Movement and

the women's movement—in ways that my story (and perhaps those of my cousins with whom I attended Madeline's wedding) have not been driven by similar shared mythic narratives. Nelson sees the need to establish an autonomous self in American society as greater than ever; therefore, "autobiographical memory is more important to the individual today in both its social and personal functions" than might have been true of previous generations (134). Autobiographical memory in the U.S. today, according to Nelson, is necessary for "maintaining identity within a somewhat fractured community." As I am writing two decades or so after Nelson published that article, I am tempted to remove the qualifier ("somewhat") from that statement, but the point nevertheless rings true today. It may well be that these memories and the story I am trying to tell on the basis of them are a reflection of this need that Nelson has described to create and maintain identity at a time and in a society in which doing so has become fraught and challenging. In that regard, my memories of that visit to Washington D. C. and the incident in the concession stand and my attendance at Madeline's wedding are all part of my own evolving story about who I am, not only as a certain individual human being and lifelong writer but also as an American citizen in the third decade of the 21st century. I share these memories as part of a story I am telling that presents my younger self (*not*, I hope, entirely self-servingly) as an advocate for racial equality, a young person trying to disavow the bigotry of his upbringing and reject the racism of the time and place in which he came of age and trying to live that advocacy by attending Madeline's wedding. A young person, like Madeline, trying to act according to moral values.

If Nelson is right, my memories of those events have been narrativized, their truth, such as it is, a function of the story I am writing right now. So as I am writing this story, I am still trying to negotiate among conflicting and changing memories—my own and those of my relatives and others who knew Madeline—in light of the information I am gathering that is related to those memories (dates and places and photos and similar "facts"). In part, that's why this act of writing about these memories and trying to tell this story is, I believe, as important—indeed, *more* important—than the text of the story you are reading right now. At this moment, this writing I am engaged in feels necessary and true. This experience of writing in this moment is an experience of truth-seeking that, I hope, is leading to some kind of truth—for you as well as for me.

And as I remember Madeline in this moment of writing—as I try to understand her life in the context of the social and political turmoil that she experienced in the U.S. during her lifetime, turmoil that we all experienced—I feel an urgency to tell this story about her. This true story. Or more accurately, my version of this true story.



## Chapter 4. A Perfect Story: Writing, Text, and Truth

To speak a true word is to transform the world.

– Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*

Sometime in late 2021, Madeline's niece Kim told me that Madeline had written her own obituary. I had not seen it when she died in 2016, but when I first read it some five years after her funeral, I was surprised by how short and even perfunctory it seemed. It contains very little of the big facts of her extraordinary life that I have shared in this book. Nor does it convey a sense of the impact she had, aside from a brief reference to her teaching career and the alumni association she helped establish. In fact, the obituary makes her life sound almost ordinary. Here's the entire text, published on Nov. 30, 2016, in her hometown newspaper, *The Scranton Times-Tribune*:

Madeline Szerafinski White died Thursday, Nov. 17.

She was born on Sept. 13, 1932, in the Greenwood section of Moosic, Pa. She was preceded in death by her beloved husband, Earle; her parents, Stanley and Sophia (Kobeski) Szerafinski; and her younger sister, Marion Cavalari.

She leaves to mourn sisters, Dolores (Henry) Zurek, Sylvia (Emil) Conte; brother-in-law, William Cavalari, nieces, great-nieces and nephews.

She received her early education in St. Mary's Catholic School. Madeline graduated from Mount Alvernia High School in Reading, Pa., in 1949. She spent 53 years teaching in various areas, including Pennsylvania, New Jersey, Delaware, Maryland and Washington, D.C. Madeline spent two years teaching at Our Lady Fatima High School and College in Liberia, West Africa. In 1990, she was influential in the establishment of the OLF/SF Alumni Association. The association is instrumental in assisting the present-day students at these high schools.

Madeline received her teaching degree from Villanova University, a master's from the University of the District of Columbia. She also matriculated from Misericordia University, Dallas, Pa., Dayton University, Boston College, the University of Scranton and University of Maryland.

Madeline was a die-hard Washington Redskins and Boston Red Sox fan.

The Mass of Christian Burial will be held at St. Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church in Lanham, Md. Burial will take place in Ft. Lincoln Cemetery in Maryland.

Reading this obituary left me wondering why Madeline left such a brief—and, to my mind, incomplete—sketch of her eventful life. Why did she leave out, even in this brief text, some of what seem to be the most significant facts of her life, most notably her many years of service as a Catholic nun and her activism on behalf of people of color? Why are some of the most compelling events of her life, the ones that are central to the memories her loved ones have of her, missing from this account? Every sentence in that obituary is, as far as I know, true. Yet the story of her life that Madeline tells in her obituary seems to be different in significant ways from the story I am writing right now. At the same time, it seems to me now, in this moment as I am writing, that despite the questions it raises, the story Madeline herself tells in her obituary might be exactly the right story for her to tell.

That story excludes perhaps the biggest chapters of her life, but it includes what seemed to matter most to her: her loved ones, especially her husband Earle and her sisters and nieces. And its spare details create a basic record of her long career in teaching, which was at the center of her life, and her own education, of which she was understandably proud. It even mentions her love of two professional sports teams, which would have brought knowing smiles to those closest to her and which reflected the obsession with sports (especially football) in the region in Pennsylvania where she grew up. The story her obituary tells is the story of a dedicated lifelong teacher whose career included sustained efforts to support students from Africa, where she had taught for two years. It tells the story of a woman who loved her family and who served her students. It is a bare-bones story that nevertheless seems fundamentally true, a Hemingway-esque story composed of true sentences.

In an important sense, Madeline's obituary is exactly the kind of writing that I once aspired to do. It is writing based on the idea of the text as container of meaning—and, potentially, of truth. My own writing during much of my career was driven by this idea in pursuit of Hemingway's ideal of a true story. I embraced that ideal, and I strove to produce texts, like Madeline's obituary, that contained truth. Her seemingly pro forma yet (I am sure) carefully worded obituary was intended, I believe, to convey a certain truth, a truth that she believed about herself and about life in general.

At the same time, Madeline's obituary seems to skirt the truth. Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that it conveys a certain truth about her life that seems partial and incomplete, if strategically so. It ignores what might be the most significant and complicated parts of her life. And, on the surface at least, it seems to

avoid mentioning any details of those significant parts that might raise the kinds of big questions about her life that I have been trying to answer by writing this story. Most important among those questions is why she left the convent. Admittedly, an obituary might be the wrong venue for addressing such questions, but the absence in that text of even a passing mention of her two decades of service as a Bernardine nun raises its own intriguing questions. What did her many years of service to the convent mean to her? Does the lack of any mention of her time in the convent say something significant about how Madeline felt, at the end of her life, about having been a nun? What does it suggest about how she felt about her decision to leave the convent? Did she consider that decision so final that she repudiated her former identity as a nun and no longer felt any need to acknowledge that period of her life—a period that, to me, seems to have been so impactful, so formative? Should we, readers of this text that was released after her death, ignore the absence of any mention of her two decades of service as a Catholic nun? Or did Madeline intend to call attention to that period of her life by not even acknowledging it—knowing, as she would have, that most of the readers of that text would be intimately familiar with the story of her time as a nun and her decision to leave the convent?

In the end, what story did Madeline wish to tell about herself in the obituary she left us?

When I spoke to Madeline's good friend Father Gamrot in 2022, I initially asked him about the funeral service, which he helped officiate, but our conversation quickly expanded to a discussion of Madeline's life. Madeline, he told me, had introduced herself to him in 2003, shortly after he became pastor-in-residence at St. Matthias the Apostle Catholic Church in Lanham, Maryland, where she was a parishioner. She was deeply proud of her Polish heritage, and she was excited to have in her parish someone who was actually from Poland. During his time as pastor-in-residence at St. Matthias, he and Madeline became close friends, and they talked often. She was intensely interested in what he had to say about Poland: its current politics, its culture, its people, its history. "She was Polish through and through," Father Gamrot told me. His favorite memory of her, he said, was a trip they made to Poland with some other St. Matthias parishioners in 2005. Madeline organized the trip, on which Father Gamrot served as a kind of local guide. "It was laughter. It was joy. It was curiosity," he said as he recalled that trip. And everything he said about his time with Madeline rang true to me. He was describing the confident, interesting, joyful, curious, devout person I had known, and his sense of her impact on others matched mine as well.

The highlight of that trip to Poland, Father Gamrot told me, was a visit to the Jasna Góra Monastery in the Polish city of Częstochowa. The monastery, which was founded by Catholic monks of the Pauline order in the early 19th century, is the site of the shrine of Our Lady of Częstochowa and the so-called Black Madonna, a painting depicting the Virgin Mary with the Christ Child in her arms, both of them resplendent in bejeweled robes and gold crowns. Scholars debate the

origin of the painting, but it is believed to have arrived in Częstochowa sometime after the Pauline monastery was established in the 1830s. The shrine is one of the most revered in Catholicism, especially for Polish Catholics, given the painting's connection to several important events in Polish history, including key military battles against Poland's enemies. The painting of the Madonna is also associated with a number of miracles that are said to have occurred over the many decades of its residence in Częstochowa.

The most striking thing about the painting is the dark color of the skin of the Madonna and the Christ Child, which historians explain in various ways, including that the image was discolored by fire, that it was altered by later artists, or that "the skin pigmentation is characteristic of this stylized portraiture" of that era (Duricy). At least one interpretation is that the skin color of Mary and Jesus in the painting is "a more realistic depiction than the icons typically presented by the Church" (Freus), an interpretation with significant implications, it seems, for how we might think of the racial identity of Mary and Jesus. This interpretation resonates with me. Or perhaps what I should say is that this is the interpretation I wish to endorse. For Father Gamrot's memory of his visit to Częstochowa with Madeline in 2005 includes the moment when he and Madeline were viewing the actual painting, and Madeline, who was then in her seventies and seeing the painting for the first time, turned to him and said, "I can die now."

That poignant memory of Father Gamrot's fits my story of Madeline's life perfectly. Given her devotion to the Catholic faith, her experience as the White wife of a Black man, her service as a teacher at a Catholic mission school in Liberia, where all of her students were African, and her lifelong advocacy for racial equality, it makes sense that she would experience that moment so powerfully as she was standing before the Black Madonna for the first time. And her emotions at that moment, as Father Gamrot described them, which grew out of her own life experiences, might also have been wrapped up in the stories about the Black Madonna that make it a venerated shrine for Polish Catholics. Madeline's own story seems to mean more in the context of those shared Catholic stories about the Black Madonna and in view of her own role in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1960s and 1970s. That moment in Poland in 2005 has greater significance because of the significance of those shared cultural and religious stories about the Black Madonna as well as the ongoing struggle for racial equality in the U.S. and elsewhere today.

Father Gamrot's memories of Madeline reinforced my sense of who she was—or at least who I think she was, who she was to me. Who she *is* to me. Early in our conversation, when I first asked him about Madeline's funeral, he had to pause for several long moments to compose himself. I apologized for bringing up memories that provoked his tears, but he dismissed my apology, saying that he had not thought about her recently and my questions made him realize at that moment how much he missed her. And loved her. At that moment, it seemed to me that he and I were remembering and missing the same Madeline. His memories of her so

thoroughly overlapped with my own, even though our respective memories were of distinct events that the two of us experienced separately.

As we shared our memories, however, it became clear to me that Father Gamrot was unaware of so much of what I took to be central to Madeline's life—so much of what was missing from the obituary she wrote. When we began to talk about her marriage to Earle, Father Gamrot told me that he never knew about Madeline's estrangement from her mother or about the fact that members of her family initially rejected her marriage. To my mind, that period of her life, which encompassed her wedding and the early years of her marriage as well as her ongoing work with students of color in Washington, D.C., is crucial to understanding who she was and the struggles she faced in pursuing a principled life of service to others—to say nothing of the deep personal pain she must have experienced to be effectively shunned by some members of the family she loved. Yet she had never mentioned any of that to Father Gamrot, despite their many long hours of conversation about matters of faith and family, despite their close friendship, despite their trip to Poland together. Madeline apparently felt no need to share those memories with this man with whom she had shared so many other memories, a man she seems to have loved and trusted to such an extent that she discussed his role in her own funeral more than a decade before it actually took place. Why? She never seemed to me to be in the least bit secretive about her past or embarrassed about any aspect of her life. What does it say about her that she would not have shared with him such important details about one of the most significant—and, presumably, painful—chapters of her life? The story of her life as she shared it with Father Gamrot seemed to be missing important parts of her life, important truths, just as her obituary does.

When my conversation with Father Gamrot drifted to Madeline's decision to leave the convent, he suggested that she left the convent because of a conflict she had with her Mother Superior at the time. Madeline had never wanted to leave the Catholic school in Liberia where she had taught for two years, and she resisted her superior's decision to bring her back to the U.S. That conflict, Father Gamrot said, was a sign to her that it was time to leave the convent. Being recalled from the school in Liberia, where she felt such a deep sense of purpose, did not square with her belief in her life's mission. As a result, according to Father Gamrot, she had to leave the convent in order to continue what she believed was the work she was called to do.

I shared with Father Gamrot my own version of the story of Madeline's decision to leave the convent. My story included the fact that Madeline, while still a nun, tutored, on her own time, academically struggling Black children and advocated for incorporating Black history into the curriculum of the Catholic parish school in Washington D. C. where she was assigned to teach in the years following her return from Liberia in 1965. Those efforts ran counter to the more conservative views of her superiors, who, as I knew the story, disapproved of her activism on behalf of racial justice and her support of the Civil Rights Movement.

In their view, it seems, the Catholic Church's missionary work in Africa, with all its historical racist baggage, was appropriate service to people of color, whereas teaching Black history or supporting the struggles of Black people for equal rights in the U.S. was not. In other words, it's OK to teach poor African children in a foreign country but not to advocate for people of color in the U.S. Is this how Madeline saw the situation at the time? Is that why she made no mention in her obituary of her time in the convent? Whatever the case, in order to manage the problems they saw in Madeline's activism, her superiors apparently reassigned her from the parish school in Washington D. C. to a retirement home for nuns somewhere in rural Connecticut, where, presumably, she would be out of the way and would no longer constitute any sort of threat to their established order. Madeline, however, refused to accept that assignment and, after two decades of service and devotion as a Catholic nun, she left the convent. She took a train or bus north from Washington D. C. to her sister's home in Connecticut but never reported to her assigned post at the nun's retirement home. And she never returned to the convent.

Father Gamrot listened keenly as I shared this story with him, but he confided that he did not know the story I was telling him. "I cannot confirm those details," he said, "but that makes sense. It's a perfect story about her."

*A perfect story.*

It is. But is it true?

The story I shared with Father Gamrot is not the story he knew about why Madeline left the convent, perhaps the single most important decision of her life. If the story I knew *is* true, why would she not have shared it with him, such a close friend and a person who, like her, had devoted his life to the Church? And given the importance of her service as a nun in her own life and the impact of her experiences as a nun on her career as a teacher who was devoted to serving students of color, why did she make no mention in her obituary that she had even been a Bernardine sister? If her obituary tells a true story about her life, it does not seem to be the whole truth. Or at least it is not the truth I am realizing as I write this story.

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In the introduction to this book, I referred to the distinction between a text and the subject of that text. They are not the same. A text is always a representation, a rendering of experience. In that sense, a text, no matter how true it is, can contain only a partial truth constructed from the experience being written about—constructed, significantly, in the act of writing itself. Madeline's obituary might be true, but the truth it might convey about her life is inevitably incomplete. It does not convey the truths about Madeline's life that Father Gamrot and I believed or experienced—or constructed—ourselves. In that sense, the text of her obituary might tell a perfect story that isn't entirely true. Or it might tell a perfect

story the conveys several truths—several different, potentially divergent truths. And those truths will emerge from the reader’s interaction with the text. In other words, truth, such as it is, does not reside in the text. And whatever truth Madeleine might have intended to convey through that text might not be consistent with the truths that emerge as readers interpret her text.

This idea that truth does not reside in a text arose, for me, from scholarly efforts in the 1980s to theorize meaning-making in writing, such as Martin Nystrand’s social-interactive model of writing. Drawing on structural linguistics and discourse analysis, Nystrand proposes a model of written communication as “a fiduciary act for both writers and readers in which they continuously seek to orient themselves to a projected state of convergence between them” (75). The goal in any act of writing, as Nystrand sees it, is shared meaning between writer and reader: “when the respective purposes of the writer and the reader intersect as they must when the reader comprehends the writer’s text, the meaning that the reader gives to the text is a unique result—a distinctive convergence or interaction—of writer and reader purpose” (74). In this model, “Text is not just the result of composing, it is also the medium of communication” (75). According to Nystrand, the skilled writer works with a “sense of reciprocity with her readers” such that “the skilled writer senses, in typically tacit manner, when her purpose is likely either to mesh with or to run against the grain of her reader’s expectations and purposes” (78). In other words, the writer anticipates readers’ “expectations and purposes” in order to produce a text that readers will interpret more or less as the writer intended. In this framework, meaning doesn’t exactly reside in the text, but the text constrains and guides the reader’s engagement with it in a way that makes it more likely that the writer’s intended meaning is pretty much the same meaning that the reader constructs from the text.

So-called social theories of writing, such as Nystrand’s, challenged my received ways of thinking about writing, meaning-making, and texts. As a college student in the late 1970s, I was trained in a version of the New Criticism that embraced the idea of the intentional fallacy (based on the influential work of Wimsatt and Beardsley) and emphasized the goal of a true or accurate interpretation of the text. As an English major, I learned to read texts (primarily literary texts) accordingly: applying rigorous methods of analysis to a text, I could (in theory) identify that text’s valid meaning. That meaning was not necessarily what the author intended, but a particular interpretation of a text’s meaning could be acceptable or not, according to this school of thought.

The social theories of writing, such as Nystrand’s, that I began studying a decade or so later complicated the understanding of meaning-making that I developed as a result of my undergraduate training, and eventually I rejected New Criticism and embraced a view of writing as inherently social, situated, and culturally mediated. Models like Nystrand’s made sense to me as I struggled to grasp the complexities of writing and learned to produce—and teach my students to produce—“effective” texts that conveyed the writer’s intended meaning. Meaning

is not truth, of course, and even if we might be able to determine with any confidence the meaning a writer intended in a particular text, the truth of that text remains to be determined and perhaps is inevitably contested. Both—meaning and truth—remain questions for me with respect to Madeline’s obituary.

It is difficult for me to accept the idea that Madeline might intentionally have excluded from her obituary something as significant to her life as her two decades as a Catholic nun because she felt that it was somehow a blemish on what mattered most to her—which is one way to interpret the absence in that text of any mention of her life as Bernardine sister. I would like to believe that she excluded that part of her life’s story because doing so would result in a text that is actually closer to the truth of her life as she saw it. If the text can convey only a partial truth about a life, then perhaps there are some partial truths that are “truer” than others, more important than others. Or less painful. Or perhaps the truth, whatever that might mean (a problem I will take up in the next chapter), lay elsewhere.

In the introduction to this book, I suggest that truth might reside not in the text of the story we write but in the experience of writing that story. I suggest that this text you are reading right now—this story I have been writing about Madeline’s life—might contain truth, but it cannot contain the truth of this experience I am having as I write it. If that is so, then we might ask about the truths Madeline might have found in her own experience of writing her own obituary. What truths did she realize in the experience of writing her obituary—truths that the text of her obituary do not and cannot contain or convey?

The answers to such questions might be utterly unavailable to me—to us—but the questions themselves point to the limitations of the text as a vehicle for truth. And these questions underscore the significance of the experience of writing as a potential locus of truth, a means of truth *finding*. A text might be a way to “fix” the truth of an experience. In writing a story about our experience, we attempt to stabilize that experience, construct meaning of it, and communicate that meaning intact. But rendering experience in this way—that is, transforming it into a text—can be risky, and not only because memory is such a fraught basis for writing about our experience, as I noted in Chapter 3. To some extent, *every* true story will be inherently untrue, because the truth of our experience can never be static and can never be fully captured by a single telling. Thus, it can never be completely fixed in a text. That truth inevitably is shaped by our evolving perspective on our life and our identity, which in turn are shaped by our ongoing experience of ourselves in the world. So how I make sense at this moment of something that happened yesterday will not necessarily be the same as how I make sense of it tomorrow or next week or next year, because I will not be exactly the same person who sees the world in exactly this same way tomorrow or next week or next year, nor will the world be the same. The truth or truths that emerge from those efforts to make sense of experience must also evolve.

That, I have come to believe, is one reason why the experience of writing a story—of *writing* itself—is so important. In the moment of writing one can inhabit a

memory without fixing it, and the truth of that memory, such as it is, can emerge in that moment of writing. But although some part of that truth might be encoded in the text, the text cannot contain the truth of the experience of realizing whatever the truth that was encoded in the text might be. And it is possible that the truth that matters is fleeting, momentary. The text might contain a truth that is realized at that moment of writing, but in the next moment or the next, a different truth might emerge. Or the truth realized in that moment is altered or amended as we continue to seek it or try to grasp it in the next moment. Thus, the text can become a record only of a momentary truth, a truth that is true at a specific point in time and perhaps only then.

What momentary truth about Madeline's life might be contained in her obituary? I suspect that Madeline was keenly aware of her audience as she was writing her obituary, in the way that Nystrand describes the skilled writer, and whatever truth about her life she wished to convey was genuine and heartfelt and real yet at the same time carefully constructed for the audience she knew would likely read that text. As I knew her—and as others have known her—she did not have an ego that needed to be proclaimed or protected, so it seems unlikely that she would have tried to craft a self-serving story in her obituary. Rather, she would have tried to convey the truth of her life as she understood it—at least in that moment. If that's the case, the decision to leave out of that text any reference to her two decades of service as a Bernardine sister was neither an oversight nor an effort to manipulate the truth in a way that was self-serving or self-aggrandizing. It must have been a decision that reflected her belief about what mattered most in her life. Exactly what that might have been isn't entirely clear to me. For if that decision suggests that her dedicated service as a nun for more than two decades wasn't what mattered most as she took stock of her life, then the absence of any direct reference to her many years of advocacy for racial equality seems also to suggest that that advocacy, which seems to have led to her departure from the convent, wasn't what mattered most. We might interpret the brief references in her obituary to her many years of teaching, her two years of teaching in Africa, and her role in helping to establish the alumni association for students from Our Lady of Fatima High School in Liberia as significant, given the brevity of the text and the lack of any reference to the many other seemingly significant components of her life. In other words, the text of her obituary seems to suggest that what mattered most to Madeline was her work as a teacher, most of whose students were young people of color. That seems plausible—and consistent with this story I am writing.

And yet.

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Much of what I have written thus far in this chapter about Madeline's obituary might be described as conventional textual analysis, the kind of analysis scholars

might conduct of a Hemingway story or a letter he wrote—or any kind of text. As I suggested earlier, the nature and value of this kind of analysis have long been the subject of scholarly debate, evident in the arguments surrounding key intellectual movements in the past century such as the New Criticism, reader response theory, deconstruction, vitalism, postcolonial theory, and other theoretical schools that have attempted to answer the basic questions of how a text—or an utterance or a sign—“means” and who gets to decide. Whatever else the debates about these questions might have to teach us, the fact that such debates are always happening and never quite resolve these basic questions underscores the contingency of truth and meaning when it comes to language and texts. In other words, whatever a text like Madeline’s obituary might mean or whatever truth it might “contain” is contingent, depending on a variety of complex factors, including, importantly, who is interpreting it and why. The key point here is that a text, by itself, does not enable us to answer the kinds of questions I have pursued here, such as why Madeline left the convent and, more important, what that decision might have meant to her and what it might reveal about the truth of her life. Even if Madeline had directly discussed such matters in her obituary—or in some other text, such as a journal or a letter—whatever answers the text might “contain” would still be partial and contingent. In the end, making meaning of a text is a complicated business, and such an analysis won’t provide the answers I seek to the complicated questions I am posing here. We must seek those answers elsewhere.

Or not.

It might well be that the expectation that we can find answers at all is itself the problem. Maybe it is the questioning, not the expectation of “true” answers, that matters.

Indeed, my own development as a writer might fairly be characterized as a process of coming to terms with the need to answer seemingly unanswerable questions, a process of accommodating doubt and living with uncertainty. In that regard, I think, I am in good company, especially among teachers and scholars of writing and perhaps educators more generally. For the more we come to know, the more we realize how little we know about what matters most to us. Writing, I have learned, can be a powerful vehicle for this kind of learning.

In a thought-provoking essay called “Shadow Living: Toward Spiritual Exercises for Teaching,” writing scholar Paul Lynch examines what he sees as the inevitable moments in every experienced teacher’s practice when self-doubt overwhelms the teacher’s sense of mastery and gives rise to an unsettling question: What am I doing here? Lynch sees such moments not as failure but as a function of mastery. In other words, the greater a teacher’s mastery and experience, the greater their understanding of the complexities of teaching and learning, and thus the more likely they are to have these moments of almost paralyzing self-doubt. Lynch wants to explore what the teacher should do about such doubt: How should the teacher confront the question, What am I doing here?

It is not a trivial matter. On a purely practical level, it is not in the interests of the students or the education system more broadly for an experienced, dedicated, and (presumably) successful teacher to become less pedagogically effective as a result of such self-doubt or, worse, give up teaching altogether, which, alas, is all too common.⁴ At the same time, the kind of thoughtful and critical reflection on one's teaching practice that can give rise to difficult questions that in turn lead to self-doubt is, paradoxically, a mark of an expert and effective teacher and necessary for that teacher to continue to grow and improve as a professional (see Schon; Yancey). It is a tricky line for the dedicated expert teacher to walk between reflection that is necessary to enhance teaching practice and reflection that can lead to crippling self-doubt.

Education theorist Paulo Freire (whose ideas I discussed at length in Chapter 2) is illustrative in this regard. In his effort to define a truly liberatory pedagogy, Freire devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the role of the teacher and the teacher's relationship to the students. In doing so, Freire walked this same tricky line—sometimes stumbling on it—as he tried to describe the often vexed position of the thoughtful, dedicated teacher in pursuit of the goals of education as the practice of freedom. In *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he explains the complicated and fraught means by which the liberatory educator—whom Freire refers to as the “teacher-student”—can design instruction that will avoid the pitfalls of mainstream education, which, in his analysis, reproduces an oppressive and inequitable status quo. For Freire, the truly liberatory teacher is always also a student who is always also learning, not only about the subject being taught but also—and more importantly—about the students themselves and what Freire calls their “limit-situations”—that is, the social, political, historical, and material circumstances that circumscribe the students' learning and prevent their liberation (*Oppressed* 99). Freire warns that the revolutionary teacher must take pains in order not to fall into the false dichotomies that characterize the worldview of mainstream “banking” education—in particular, the fundamental Cartesian binaries of subject vs. object and mind vs. body as well as the problematic binary of teacher and student; he cautions the teacher not to succumb to the false sense of superiority that can accompany the teacher's greater knowledge and experience as compared to their students.

In seeking to help students overcome their passivity and their acquiescence to an unjust reality and thus enable them to change that reality—to make it just and

4. It has become a kind of truism among education researchers and policymakers that new teachers suffer high rates of teacher attrition. One widely cited study from 2003 indicates that 40% to 50% of new teachers leave the profession within five years (Ingersol). Some studies report lower rates, but others report even higher rates, especially when the figures are broken down by category of school—i.e., urban, rural, etc. See Papay et al. Data on attrition among experienced teachers are more difficult to pin down, given the many different factors affecting individual decisions to leave the profession and given the challenge of defining “experienced.” But the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 seems to have exacerbated the problem for all categories of teachers. See Steiner and Woo; Walker.

therefore to liberate themselves—the liberatory educator cannot simply bring “a message of salvation” (95):

It is not our role to speak to people about our own view of the world, nor to attempt to impose that view on them, but rather to dialogue with the people about their view and ours. We must realize that their view of the world, manifested variously in their action, reflects their *situation* in the world. Education and political action which is not critically aware of this situation runs the risk either of “banking” or of preaching in the desert. (96)

Instead of bringing “salvation,” the teacher must “understand the structural conditions in which the thought and language of the people are dialectically framed” (96) and, on the basis of that understanding, teach in a way that helps students also understand those structural conditions and recognize them as obstacles to their liberation. That is, the teacher must learn from the students about their limit-situations in order to design instruction that enables the students to overcome those limit-situations. This is not a straightforward process, for as the quotation above suggests, Freire risks falling into the trap of paternalism in his efforts to explain how the enlightened revolutionary teacher can enlighten their students without imposing on those students the teacher’s ideology in a way that trades one form of oppression and domination for another. Freire recognizes this problem, of course, and he works hard to avoid infantilizing the students, going into great detail about specific pedagogical methods that can help oppressed students perceive their status quo as oppressive—to recognize the limit-situations in their lived reality—and to “introduce [them] to a critical form of thinking about their world” (104) without denying them the agency to think on their own. Indeed, his whole project is intended to help students re-imagine themselves as human beings in a way that enables them to claim agency. In this regard, his liberatory problem-posing pedagogy is intended to empower students even as he acknowledges their lack of power within the broader context of their lives (see esp. pp. 104-16).

Yet, ultimately, Freire cannot avoid the fact that even the most well-intentioned liberatory teacher does possess an inherent authority, a power, that the students do not (yet) enjoy. Even within his liberatory framework, the very roles of *teacher* and *student* suggest a hierarchy, at least in terms of the extent to which each one has acquired that “critical form of thinking” that is necessary for genuine liberation. In trying to resolve what he calls this “teacher-student contradiction” in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (75), Freire asserts that his problem-posing method “can fulfill its function as the practice of freedom only if it can overcome the above contradiction. Through dialogue, the teacher-of-the-students and the students-of-the-teacher cease to exist and a new term emerges: teacher-student and students-teachers. The teacher is no longer merely the-one-who-teaches, but one who is himself in dialogue with the students, who in turn while being taught

also teach” (80). Yet even in this dialogue, each remains distinct from the other. The very act of dialogue inevitably—and perhaps paradoxically—reifies their respective identities as teacher and student.

Freire seems to have wrestled with this contradiction throughout his career. In *A Pedagogy of Hope*, which he wrote some thirty years after *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, he addresses the criticism that his problem-posing approach is elitist, and he tries to clarify the relationship between the liberatory teacher and the students, whom he refers to in this later work as “educands.” In one poignant passage, he describes an experience he had while living and teaching in Chile in the late 1960s. At the time, he was visiting a “culture circle” that was part of what he refers to as an “agrarian reform project,” and he recounts a conversation he initiated with the “peasants” who were participating in that project. The conversation, according to Freire, was “a lively dialogue,” but it was “promptly followed ... by a disconcerting silence” (*Hope* 44). In that moment, Freire intentionally resisted the urge to break the silence, concerned that doing so would be tantamount to claiming authority as the teacher. But one of the peasants urged Freire to speak: “Excuse us, sir ... excuse us for talking. You’re the one who should have been talking, sir. You know things, sir. We don’t” (45). Freire tried to undercut his own position of authority as the teacher, but the students insisted that he embrace it. Presumably, only by acting in his role as teacher and embracing his authority could Freire make his knowledge accessible to the students.

Freire presents this anecdote to underscore the crucial need for the teacher to learn from the students, to reflect carefully on his position as teacher so that the social and cultural authority inherent in that position does not impede the students’ learning and reinforce their subordinate positions as students:

My experience has taught me that educands need to be addressed as such; but to address them as educands implies a recognition of oneself, the educator, as one of two agents here, each capable of knowing and each wishing to know, and each working with the other for an understanding of the object of cognition. (*Hope* 45-6)

His problem-posing method is intended to help his “educands” come to “an understanding of the social relations of production, ... of class interests, and so on and so on” (48-9) without imposing on them his ideology; it is intended to enable them to claim agency and reject the passivity that he believes they are trained to accept in mainstream education. But even these vivid accounts of his experiences with various students inevitably cast him as the enlightened one, well-intentioned and earnest though he might have been in his desire to help students overcome their oppression but nevertheless possessing knowledge and a critical perspective that they lack.

Later in this account of his encounter with the Chilean students, Freire claims that he does “not deny the political and directive nature of education”; rather, he

claims to “accept that this is its nature,” to accept that his “ethical duty, as one of the subjects, one of the agents, of a practice that can never be neutral—and educational—is to express my respect for differences in ideas and positions” (*Hope* 79). Moreover, he acknowledges that his method, based on dialogue between teacher and students, “does not place them on the same footing professionally. ... Teachers and students are not identical, and this for countless reasons. After all, it is a *difference* between them that makes them precisely students and teachers” (117). He goes on to argue that “dialogue is meaningful precisely because the dialogical subjects, the agents in the dialogue, not only retain their identity but actively defend it, and grow together.”

I do not wish to criticize Freire here but rather to point out that even a visionary who devoted his impactful career to the project of fighting oppression through education—at genuine risk to his own life—struggled to resolve the “teacher-student contradiction,” to find an answer to this question of how to teach for liberation when the very act of teaching can be a form of oppression. Freire returns to this problem time and again. In the end, he seems to reach a kind of acceptance that the paradox must be acknowledged and confronted but will never really be resolved. Indeed, *Pedagogy of Hope*, which Freire presents as an extended clarification and updating of the ideas he laid out in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, sometimes feels to me like an effort to work out the limitations of those ideas, a recognition that his quest for understanding is both never-ending and uncertain, despite his own certainty about his principles and about his overarching goal of liberation. At the end of the book, in describing a meeting with some revolutionaries who were fighting the military dictatorship in El Salvador in the 1990s, Freire writes of them, “As far as was possible, they were avoiding both the illusions of an idealism that ascribes a power to education that it does not have, and the mechanistic objectivism that denies any value to education until after there is a revolution” (*Hope* 200). In that statement I hear echoes of Freire’s recognition of his own struggle to live with the teacher-student contradiction as an unavoidable challenge in his ongoing project of promoting a certain kind of literacy education as a means of achieving “a less-wicked, less-unjust society, little by little more decent, more human and humane” (200). In his words I sense a kind of self-doubt and an acceptance that such doubt might be inevitable but also ethical and, ultimately, useful.

To revisit Freire’s struggle with such contradiction and doubt in 2025, in the midst of a global resurgence of fascism and the overt political oppression and violence it brings, is to appreciate both the importance of his ideas about education as a practice of freedom and the daunting challenge of realizing his vision. To my mind, the political developments in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world in the past few years underscore the relevance of Freire’s ideas and the desperate need to continue his struggle.

Paul Lynch takes a similar tack to Freire—albeit in less lofty terms—in exploring the problem of how an experienced teacher might navigate the kind of

self-doubt that is reflected in the question, What am I doing here? While acknowledging the distress that such a question causes for a dedicated teacher, Lynch proposes that the teacher nevertheless “live with” the question. Drawing on the work of another writing scholar, Paul Kameen, Lynch invokes the idea of “living in the shadow of [the question’s] imperative” (501) rather than seeking “simple fixes” for what is ultimately a complex and daunting problem. In other words, rather than trying to find a concrete and workable answer to the question “What am I doing here?,” Lynch, following Kameen, proposes embracing the question as a way to inhabit the experience of self-doubt, a self-doubt driven both by the teacher’s desire to teach effectively and by the teacher’s expertise and extensive knowledge, which, paradoxically, enables the teacher to understand more clearly how difficult it is to truly teach effectively. By living in the shadow of the question, Lynch suggests, the teacher should proceed in a way that isn’t intended to ignore or eliminate the doubt but rather to acknowledge the doubt and incorporate it into his teaching practice itself. This, I take it, is a way to accept the reality that a thoughtful, dedicated teacher will always confront doubt: about the effectiveness of a particular teaching technique, about the wisdom of a specific pedagogical decision, about the impact of an assessment on a student, about what the students are (or aren’t) learning, about the larger purposes of education. As Lynch sees it, eliminating that doubt is neither possible nor desirable. For doubt, which arises from a genuine desire to serve students and an appreciation for the complexities of teaching and learning, is a means by which the teacher can avoid the hubris of believing that they already know what and how to teach and what is best for the students. Genuine self-doubt about one’s effectiveness as a teacher is necessary for accepting one’s limitations with humility. It is a version of Socrates’ famous dictum that true wisdom lies in recognizing how little one knows. To my mind, in advocating that the teacher who questions live in the shadow of the question, Lynch is not only acknowledging a fundamental truth about teaching but also displaying the very same attitude of humility that he aspires to as a teacher who is genuinely dedicated to his students’ learning rather than his own success or status as a professional.

That in itself is laudable, for teaching is hard, and teachers, understandably, sometimes use their knowledge and professional authority as a defense against this very same kind of self-doubt that Lynch describes, the kind of doubt in whose shadow he proposes teachers must live.

As I am writing this, I am thinking about the confidence that I observed in my cousin Madeline, whose 53-year career as a teacher is a testament to her own dedication to her students and their learning. I am thinking now about that long career in many different classrooms, and I wonder whether she ever confronted the question, What am I doing here? I never observed Madeline teaching, nor did I discuss teaching with her in any depth, but I have to believe that the calm certainty I saw in how she lived her life must have been accompanied at times by self-doubt as she faced crises and challenges of a kind that I can barely imagine

facing. Her belief in herself and her mission were driven, it seems obvious to me, by her Catholic faith and her principled view of Christ's message of love. But her many years of experience as a teacher and her earnest desire to serve her students, many of whom faced frightening challenges of their own, must have given rise to moments of self-reflection and doubt of the kind Lynch describes: doubt in her own effectiveness as a teacher, doubt in the education system itself as a vehicle for social and individual improvement. And if she did experience such moments, did she, as Lynch proposes, live in the shadow of that question, that doubt?

For Lynch, living with this kind of doubt is more than a way for the dedicated teacher to avoid pedagogical paralysis and to continue to teach effectively. It is also an opportunity to deepen one's self-understanding more broadly as a human being. "This idea of shadow living," he writes, "is an implicit invitation to spiritual exercise" (501), and he goes on to propose "a habit of written exercise that seeks neither to make arguments nor provide answers, but instead to occasion a kind of openness crucial for inhabiting a network of obligations." In other words, Lynch suggests that writing itself can be a way for the teacher to live in the shadow of doubt as a professional, but it can also be an integral component of living, both as a professional and outside of one's professional practice.

Significantly, the kind of writing Lynch is advocating for this purpose is without rhetorical exigency, a kind of spiritual practice that does not result in the production of a text to be shared but rather enables the writer/teacher to inhabit the moment and experience the truth of the doubt that the writer/teacher is confronting. In other words, to engage in writing as a practice of living. Lynch reviews what he identifies as a long tradition of writing as a spiritual practice, noting that "the history of spirituality reveals that writing (writing-as-experience rather than writing-as-notation-system) was a common part of spiritual practice" (508). He invokes Michel Foucault, whose philosophical writings about the role of language in subjectivity—how the self is constituted through language—profoundly influenced thinkers in the latter half of the 20th Century. According to Lynch, in his later work Foucault "turned his attention away from the larger discursive formations that shaped subjectivity and toward those practices through which subjects might shape themselves" (Lynch 508). Foucault was concerned not only with understanding what he called "the technologies of the self"—that is, the language practices by which the self is constituted—but also with *care* of the self, the spiritual practices whereby "individuals might 'transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality' ('Technologies' 18)" (Lynch 509). This process of transformation "involved training and regular practice" (508) and, significantly, writing.

It might seem odd that Foucault, whose theories helped lead to a fundamental reconceptualizing of the idea of the self not as the Cartesian intellectual entity of modernist thought but as a function of discourse—a notion that is foundational to poststructuralist theory—was also concerned with "care" of that self. But as Lynch points out, Foucault drew on classical texts to illuminate the ways in

which these same spiritual practices by which one would care for the self were ultimately about accessing truth. In his famous treatise “Technologies of the Self,” Foucault elaborates on the nature and purpose of this kind of practice: “One of the main features of taking care involved taking notes on oneself to be reread, writing treatises and letters to friends to help them, and keeping notebooks in order to reactivate for oneself the truths one needed” (Foucault, “Technologies,” qtd. in Lynch 509).

The truths one needed. Writing itself, as a spiritual practice that was an essential part of caring for the self, was also a means to truth.

This, to me, is a radical view of the potentially transformative power of writing, and it is a view that is at odds with the prevailing conception of writing as textual production that deeply informed my own perspective on and practice of writing for most of my career—and continues to characterize mainstream writing instruction. For most of my career as a writer, it would never have occurred to me to write without the explicit goal of producing a text to be read (and, ideally, for which the writer is paid). I wrote about the power of this idea that writing is textual production in an article called “A Thousand Writers Writing,” in which I described my initial resistance to the practice of writing for its own sake at meetings of the National Writing Project, with which I was involved from 2004 through 2017. Why, I wondered, would anyone write without intending that text to be published and read? Lynch’s discussion of writing as a practice of care of the self is one answer to that question, and he draws on Foucault to show how that practice of care of the self is also a form of truth-seeking.

In that same passage that Lynch quotes, Foucault describes the impact of this practice of writing that is intended to find those “truths one needed”: “A relation developed between writing and vigilance. Attention was paid to nuances of life, mood, and reading, and the experience of oneself was intensified and widened by virtue of this act of writing. A whole field of experience opened which earlier was absent” (Foucault, qtd. in Lynch 509). In other words, this practice of writing transformed the writer’s experience of self in the world. Lynch emphasizes that “this practice of writing does not simply record experience but rather reveals a hitherto hidden field of experience” (509). It is through the regular act of writing-in-the-moment, then, that the writer is able to realize a way of being, a “hidden field of experience,” that previously was inaccessible. In this kind of writing practice, the production of a text to be shared is neither the goal nor a necessity.

This is what Lynch means when he describes writing as a spiritual exercise. He explains that spirituality is “a set of practices that allows the subject to engage that business [of living] more fully,” practices that Foucault argued “are not for knowledge but for the subject, for the subject’s very being, the price to be paid for access to the truth” (Foucault, *Hermeneutics*, qtd. in Lynch 509). As Lynch emphasizes, these practices “are designed to reshape subjects themselves. This formation, Foucault argues, was required *in order to access truth*” (509; emphasis added). To put it somewhat differently, writing, when engaged in as a spiritual

practice that is part of one's effort to care for the self in the act of living fully and mindfully, can be a way to access truth.

Lynch goes on to trace the history of this kind of writing practice in thinkers like Marcus Aurelius, showing that there is a long tradition in which writing becomes a means to transform the self in the pursuit of truth and in the conduct of an ethical life. Lynch is primarily concerned with how “these historical practices of writing might provide resources for addressing the underlife—or at least the inner life—of teaching” and how “writing as a spiritual exercise may address the kind of serious problems that we bring to our late afternoon classes and those that follow us home” (512). But in pursuing that goal, Lynch has also illuminated the potential power of writing as a spiritual practice for living our lives more fully and ethically outside the enterprise of teaching. He proposes that for the scholar and teacher “writing can offer both an ecology and an exercise through which the writer prepares for the real thing, including the network of obligations to which we submit as teachers of rhetoric and writing” (513-14)—the very same network of obligations that can lead to those daunting questions about why we are here, questions that give rise to sometimes crippling self-doubt. Writing as a spiritual practice, Lynch believes, enables us to live in the shadow of those questions as part of the ongoing effort to seek truth in our lives, truth that, I think, resides in that very shadow, truth emerging from our struggle to confront questions that are paradoxical and perhaps without ultimate resolution. And the practice of writing—a practice focused on the experience of writing-in-the-moment rather than the production of text—might be both a *means* for seeking truth and a *locus* of truth.

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Madeline was a dedicated teacher for more than half a century. She studied education, received advanced formal training as a teacher, and taught in at least fourteen different parochial and public schools in four U.S. states and in Africa. Her commitment to her students and to the broader project of education as a means of both self-improvement and social progress seems beyond question. In view of her experience and commitment, it seems reasonable to assume that she must have confronted the kind of self-doubt as an educator that Paul Lynch describes. But did she? I have no way of knowing. I like to think that she did, and I like to think that she might also have lived in the shadow of the question—What am I doing here?—as Lynch advocates. Maybe she even came to understand the need to care for the self that Foucault describes. For if she did, it would make for a perfect story. It would fit perfectly this story I am trying to write about her as a woman who devoted her life to her students' well-being and whose career as a teacher was inextricable from her lifelong mission of advocacy for social justice and racial equality. If Madeline did indeed experience those moments of doubt, it would help explain the confidence that I observed in her, her unshakeable conviction

that her mission was right and good, no matter how difficult or fraught it might be. For confronting and working through such self-doubt can strengthen the educator's resolve and deepen her commitment. Knowing that she experienced this kind of doubt would also enrich my sense of her as an intelligent, empathetic, and complicated person whose dedication to teaching was not simplistic, not driven by a dogmatic certainty, but rather characterized by a more nuanced, genuine, complex commitment that inevitably would have given rise to troubling questions and self-doubt of the kind Lynch examines. It would mean that there must be some truth in my sense that she was indeed the dedicated educator and extraordinary person I have always believed she was.

In this version of the story I am writing, then, this perfect story, it seems reasonable to expect that Madeline might have confronted some version of this doubt in writing her obituary, which might have prompted her to avoid mention of her two decades of service as a Catholic nun as well as her activism for civil rights during that time. Is it possible that she had doubts about those years, about serving the Church as a nun, about the Church itself, despite her faith? Doubts about emphasizing that significant period of her life in her obituary?

In my efforts to determine the facts of her service as a Bernardine sister, I reviewed articles in several Catholic newspapers from the 1960s, when she was assigned to the mission school in Liberia. Skimming through those newspapers brings into stark relief how stridently anti-communist the American Catholic Church was in those days. For example, the April 20, 1961 issue of *The Advocate*, which described itself as the "Official Publication of the Archdiocese of Newark, NJ and Diocese of Paterson, NJ," and which contains a brief report about Catholic schools in Liberia that mentions the school where Madeline taught, includes a column by Bishop Fulton J. Sheen titled "Communist Tactics." Bishop Sheen was something of a celebrity among American Catholics at that time, and I have vivid memories of my grandmother, a devout Catholic, listening to his radio broadcasts and reading his columns. In "Communist Tactics," Sheen warns about "communist persecutions in Congo" and describes violent abuse suffered by Catholic nuns at the hands of perpetrators whom Sheen does not explicitly identify but evidently assumes were communist police officials. The same issue of *The Advocate* features an editorial cartoon depicting two dictators, one of whom is a figure resembling Fidel Castro, the communist leader of Cuba, trying to chop down a giant wooden cross labeled "The Church in Latin America"; the cartoon's text reads, "Good Heavens, it's like a rock!" ("Good Heavens"). The September 11, 1959 issue of the *Catholic Standard and Times* of Philadelphia reports on the impending visit to the U.S. by Soviet leader Nikita Khrushchev; in its lead editorial, the newspaper warns that, on the eve of Khrushchev's controversial visit, Americans "are being propagandized on Khrushchev's plans for 'coexistence' and his 'plans for peace,'" and the editors remind readers that they "should recall Khrushchev's long record of broken pacts and his brutal tactics of murder and oppression" ("America's Need"). Elsewhere on the same editorial page columnists

question President Truman's judgment for inviting the Soviet leader to visit the U.S. There seems to be little doubt that this anti-communist fervor energized the Church's efforts in the mid-20th century to establish missions in Africa, Asia, and South and Central America, where the Soviets were trying to establish their own political influence. I don't know what Madeline's views were in this regard, but as a young nun assigned to teach in a newly established Catholic school for girls in Cape Palmas, Liberia, she was, wittingly or not, a soldier in her Church's campaign against the godless communists.

Liberia seems to have played a special role in the Catholic Church's long-standing efforts to establish missions throughout Africa. The nation emerged as a state from a colony founded in 1821 by Black people who were formerly enslaved in the U.S. It became an independent nation in 1847, nearly a decade before the start of the American Civil War. *Encyclopedia Britannica* describes Liberia as "the only Black state in Africa never subjected to colonial rule and ... Africa's oldest republic" (Pettersen). I could imagine that such a history would have made Liberia a special place for Madeline, a place uniquely associated with freedom and racial equality. And hope. But even if Liberia never suffered directly at the hands of European colonial powers, as so many African nations did, it was nevertheless a place subjected to religious colonialism. The first Catholic mission was established there in the 1840s—just before Liberia became an independent nation—and the Catholic missionaries encountered great hardship and resistance, including, according to one scholar, "an environment that was predominantly Protestant and anti-Catholic" (Creary 28). The Catholic Church did not give up, however. In 1927, the Vatican established diplomatic relations with Liberia, and over time various Catholic orders founded churches and schools throughout the nation. Sacred Heart Boarding School for Girls at Cape Palmas (which today is the city of Harper) was founded by the Bernardine Sisters only a few years before Madeline taught there from 1963 to 1965. One year before she arrived there, Cape Palmas was granted status as a Vicariate Apostolic, a designation that precedes the establishment of a formal Catholic diocese, with its own bishop as its Vatican-appointed leader. In this sense, one might see Sacred Heart School not only as the Bernardine Order's effort to establish its own mission in Liberia but also as part of the Vatican's greater designs to spread Catholicism throughout Africa.

I cannot help but wonder whether Madeline, who was the thirty-something Sister Mary Marlene at that time, was aware of these circumstances and, if so, how she felt about the whole matter. Did she embrace the mainstream Catholic Church's anti-communist stance and see herself as a soldier of Christ against the atheist communist threat? Or was she focused on serving young girls of color in Liberia who might not otherwise have had access to the schooling she helped provide them? Given her political views in her later years, it seems unlikely that she would have been oblivious to the larger historical and geopolitical context within which Sacred Heart School was founded and operated. But even if she was blind to that larger context, the paternalism of the Church's efforts should at least have

caused her some uneasiness and doubt—and the more so because that paternalism was infected with an implicit and insidious racism that she must surely have noticed. In the same 1961 newspaper column by Bishop Fulton Sheen that I mentioned earlier, Sheen cautions his readers not to ignore or rationalize the communist persecution of Catholics in Congo: “Do not say: ‘Oh! these Africans are only one stage removed from barbarism.’ That has nothing to do with the persecution. Were the communist soldiers of Spain one generation removed from barbarism? Or the Chinese? Or the Polish or Hungarian governments? It is not a primitive civilization but communism which accounts for modern savagery” (Sheen 7). It isn’t clear to me whether Sheen himself espoused the insulting racist notions that Congo represented “a primitive civilization” and that “Africans are only one stage removed from barbarism” or was simply acknowledging such views, which would have been widespread among his Catholic readers (as they were among the nuns in the Catholic primary school in Pennsylvania where I was a student and, alas, among my family, friends, and neighbors in my community in those days). Sheen leaves these views unchallenged in his column, but his statement is a disturbing reminder that such racism was part of the conversation about communism, even as many Catholic leaders and organizations officially supported the desegregation of American schools and other efforts to promote racial equality in the U.S. In 1963, the year Madeline was sent to Liberia, the American bishops issued a pastoral letter urging the nation’s Catholics to embrace racial harmony and to become involved directly in efforts to eliminate racial conflict in the U.S. (“U.S. Bishops”). At the same time, those same church leaders were pursuing efforts to establish missions in Africa and elsewhere around the world, efforts tinged with racist paternalism.

If Madeline was not mindful of these complexities when she was sent to Liberia to teach in the Bernardine school there, I have little doubt that she eventually became aware of the extent to which her own church perpetuated racist views and was implicated in racial oppression. Maybe that is ultimately why she left the convent: not so much because her superiors refused to allow her to continue to engage in advocacy for civil rights and racial justice but rather because she came to view the institution of the Church itself as part of the problem of racism that she was fighting against. Maybe her experiences as a teacher in Liberia and elsewhere helped her realize that her work as a teacher, a White American Catholic nun, was not a simple matter of doing good but was more complicated than that.

If so, that would also be a perfect fit for this story that I am writing about Madeline. Knowing her as I did in her later years, I find it difficult to believe that she would not have had some doubts, even a crisis of conscience, about her role as a foreign teacher in a Catholic mission school in Africa. She must at least have had some second thoughts. Perhaps she shared Freire’s concerns about “bringing salvation” to students whom she so sincerely wished to help and empower. Or perhaps she fell into the very trap that Freire warns the liberatory educator about: viewing herself as the enlightened (White) one sent to save less fortunate

Africans. And maybe her growing realization about such a trap, after so many years of teaching in Bernardine schools, gave rise to the kinds of doubt that Lynch wrestles with in his essay. Maybe Madeline asked herself that same question, “What am I doing here?” And then realized that she had to leave the convent.

I hope she did. And I hope that she revisited that question when it came time to write her own obituary, some ten or twelve years after she retired from full-time teaching and five decades after she taught in Liberia. And if she did confront such doubts as she was writing her obituary, she might well have also experienced some profound truth about her life in that moment of writing. Perhaps we can glimpse that truth not so much in what the text of her obituary includes but what it leaves out. Maybe she felt no need to try to capture that truth in that text; maybe realizing that truth in the moment of writing was enough. We cannot know either way. But I suspect the experience of writing her obituary was a profound one for her—in ways that we can only speculate about. And if she went to her grave having grasped some truth about her life—about life—it might well have been a truth she was able to realize in that moment of writing.

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.

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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

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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.

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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.

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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.



# 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 Gamrott 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-cremations 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.

# Chapter 7. Writing as a Tool for Living

In an important sense, this story in its ongoing (re)patterning is (re) (con)figuring me.

– Karen Barad, “*Diffraction Diffraction*”

In September of 2000, I sent a letter to Madeline to apologize for missing her retirement celebration, which took place that summer. I have vivid memories of missing that event because my wife and I took our two sons on a vacation to the west coast to visit some old friends. My first scholarly book, *Literacy Matters*, had just been published, my first writing textbook had been released a few years earlier, I had recently earned tenure, and I was energized by the prospect of building a scholarly reputation in my field. I was also, unawares, entering a period of unsettling questions about writing and teaching that eventually shook the foundations of my longstanding belief in each as an unequivocal *good* (as I explain in Chapter 2). I had yet to begin thinking seriously about the significance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a potential source of the transformative capacity of writing, but in retrospect I can see the beginnings of those ideas in the writing I was doing at that time (especially in my 2001 *Kairos* article “Computers, Literacy, and Being”). I understood my work as a small part of ongoing disciplinary conversations about how to enhance the effectiveness of writing instruction and thus contribute to the larger project of improving education. In the midst of these developments, I sent Madeline a copy of *Literacy Matters*.

In this moment, as I am writing these words, I do not recall sending her my book. But I must have done so, because I refer to it directly in that letter of apology that I sent to her in 2000, which I discovered among some old files as I was working on this book some two decades later. In the letter, I explained that I wanted to send her a book as a gift to commemorate her retirement, but I couldn’t find the right one. So I sent her a copy of mine. Here’s part of what I wrote in that letter:

When it became clear that I wouldn’t be able to attend your celebration, I spent a lot of time trying to find a book to send you as our gift to mark the event. Many titles seemed appropriate but yet not quite right. In the end, I decided to send you my own book, partly because its subject seems rather fitting and partly because it represents an effort to reveal a little about myself as a teacher to you. I suspect you’ll find some of the more academic sections ... somewhat tedious. But I think the message of the book is one that you’ll relate to. At least I hope so.

Leaving aside the stilted, self-serving prose (in a personal letter, no less!), what strikes me most about this passage—and the letter as a whole—as I reread it now,

is what it reveals about how I understood writing—and myself as a writer—at that stage of my career. As I conceived it then, my book was a record of my scholarly work, a text with a “message” that I hoped would resonate with Madeline. My letter seems to reflect a view of the text as unproblematic container of meaning—a version of the “strong-text” conception of literacy, whereby the text becomes a vehicle for conveying my intended meaning (see Brandt, pp. 13ff.).

This is a conception of writing that I explicitly rejected in my scholarly work as I embraced the poststructuralist critique of writing that gained prominence in the field of writing studies in the 1980s and 1990s. A central tenet of that critique is the instability of meaning, which cannot be encoded in a text but must always be constructed and reconstructed in the complex interaction between writer and reader, an interaction that is unavoidably shaped by the multifaceted social, cultural, historical, political, and ideological contexts within which that transaction takes place. In this formulation, meaning is not a fully formed thing that can be stabilized, encoded in, or contained by a text; rather, it is a function of the complex and over-determined process of meaning-making that occurs when a reader engages with a text. Yet my letter to Madeline suggests that as a writer (and teacher), I assumed that my intended meaning is indeed fully formed and stable, encoded in that text and thus available to Madeline exactly as I intended. As I think about it now, I see in that letter vestiges of New Criticism, in which I was trained as an undergraduate English major in the late 1970s but which I rejected as a doctoral student studying in the late 1980s, when the field of composition studies was being reshaped by the so-called “social turn,” the influence of postmodern theory, and, a few years later, the emergence of the post-process movement, which held that “neither writing nor reading can be reduced to a systemic process or to a codifiable set of conventions” (Kent, *Paralogic*; qtd. in Breuch 100). It is striking to me now that it took nearly another decade or so of my own writing and thinking, as well as my transformative experience as part of the National Writing Project, before I began to focus my attention on the writer *writing* rather than the writer’s writing—that is, on the writer’s experience in the moment of writing rather than on the text produced by that act of writing (see Yagelski, “A Thousand Writers Writing”). The evolution (or perhaps development) of this view, which I have described as an ontological view of writing, was, really, a lifelong process, a function of these many different experiences and my ongoing attempts to answer what seemed to me to be fundamental questions about the nature of writing, its function in education, and its role in our lives. In this sense, my development as a writer is the story of the evolution of my conception of writing more so than the development of literate skill or the acquisition of rhetorical knowledge. You can see that conception evolving in *Literacy Matters*; you can see how that text, along with my *Kairos* article that was published a year later, prefigured the theory I would advance in *Writing as a Way of Being*. But in 2000, when I sent *Literacy Matters* to Madeline, my focus was still on the writer’s writing. I was still obsessed with the production of text. And I was still emphasizing textual quality in my own teaching.

I do not recall whether I ever had a conversation with Madeline about *Literacy Matters* or about writing and teaching in general. But I know that if I had, it would have been a very different conversation in 2000 than it would have been a decade or so later, by which time my conception of writing had shifted away to a focus on the experience of writing. I suspect she might have resisted this view of writing—and teaching writing—that I was beginning to develop, a view laid out in detail in *Writing as a Way of Being*, which was published more than a decade after her retirement. Although Madeline and I shared a fundamental belief in the transformative power of education and although we embraced the same progressive vision of education as a vehicle for social progress, I doubt that our views about how to tap that power and realize that vision would have coincided. I think we might have agreed on the *why* of education but not so much on the *how* of schooling.

Madeline, I now believe, held views about institutionalized education that were much more conservative and traditional than her progressive political ideology and commitment to social justice might suggest. If she and I had spoken about teaching after her retirement, I suspect she would have pushed back against my growing ambivalence about mainstream writing instruction, which I critique in *Writing as a Way of Being* as “narrowly focused on specified discourse forms (such as narrative, analysis, and dubious forms like the insufferably resilient five-paragraph essay) and a relatively limited set of conventions related to style and mechanics” (25-26). She probably would have defended the traditional skills-based, grammar-focused approach to teaching writing that I had rejected as ineffective and exclusionary. And she probably would have argued that a pedagogy that emphasizes the power of writing to give students voice and enables them to claim agency, as I advocated in *Literacy Matters*, is absent the rigor that is necessary for the students she had taught for so many years to master “standard” English so that they could succeed in mainstream schools: students of color from low-income homes, from communities with few of the resources and advantages that my own children enjoyed when they were school-aged, students for whom the experience of racism characterized their daily lives and circumscribed their opportunities. Madeline, I think, would have espoused the reasoning of scholars, notably Lisa Delpit, who saw in the progressive pedagogies of the Whole Language and writing process movements reflections of White privilege that ultimately rendered those pedagogies less effective for students like Madeline’s.

In her influential book *Other People’s Children*, Delpit calls into question the emphasis on developing *fluency*, rather than technical skills, that characterized the writing process movement as she experienced it in the 1980s and 1990s, when its advocates, such as Lucy Calkins, were gaining prominence and influencing literacy instruction in K-12 classrooms across the U.S. The conception of fluency that energized the movement, according to Delpit, was a narrow and exclusionary White, middle-class conception—embraced by White, middle-class teachers—that did not encompass the kinds of fluencies demonstrated by Black children

in so many American classrooms: “Maybe,” Delpit muses, “these writing process teachers are so adamant about developing fluency because they have not had the opportunity to realize the fluency the kids already possess”—fluency in rap music, for example, or “the verbal creativity and fluency black kids express every day on the playgrounds of America as they devise new insults, new jump-roping chants and new cheers” (17). Black teachers, argues Delpit, recognize this fluency, which is why they focus on academic *skills* that in their view represent “the next step, the step vital to success in America—the appropriation of the oral and written forms demanded by the mainstream” (18). These teachers, Delpit says, appreciate the need for their students from under-represented backgrounds to develop the skills necessary for appropriating mainstream discourse forms because they themselves—teachers from under-represented backgrounds—“have been able to conquer the education system *because* they received the kind of [skills-based] instruction that their white progressive colleagues are denouncing” (19; original emphasis). As I reread Delpit’s book now, some thirty years after she published it, I hear Madeline’s voice in Delpit’s words, and I suspect Madeline would have echoed Delpit’s argument, if she and I had had the chance to discuss it.

I wish we had been able to have that conversation. I can imagine my younger self earnestly defending the ideas of my earliest mentors, Donald Murray and Donald Graves, both of whom were giant figures in the writing process movement and whose work profoundly shaped my own perspective on writing and teaching. Indeed, Murray’s conception of writing as a “process of discovery through language” (“Teach” 15), which I had naively considered obvious and even simplistic when I first encountered it as a new graduate student in the early 1980s, significantly informed my effort to articulate an ontological theory of writing in *Writing as a Way of Being*. In my imagined conversation with Madeline, I would have advocated an emphasis on many of the principles I learned from Murray and Graves: teaching writing as a process of inquiry, giving students choice in their school-based writing, fostering student voice and agency, focusing on discovery and inquiry before craft and skill, exploring experience through the process of writing. And Madeline, I am fairly sure, would have mounted a Delpit-like argument in favor of skills development: we must first help students master the conventions of mainstream academic prose, emphasizing the importance of form and correctness; student voice emerges from competence, which is the ability to apply the rules in order to use writing as a tool for success in mainstream society. But writing is so much more than learning and applying the rules, I would have argued, so much more than producing sanctioned textual forms on demand for school success. Understood as a practice of being, I would have said, writing can become a powerful tool to help students find their way in a complicated world; it can be a vehicle for exploring their experience in order to better understand themselves in relation to that world. It can be a process of telling true stories about their lives as part of our individual and collective quest to live better together. Your students deserve access to this transformative power of writing, I would have told her, and instruction that

emphasizes skills-development and ignores the experience of writing-in-the-moment might prevent them from realizing that power. In other words, conventional skills-focused instruction can be a means of continuing to oppress your already marginalized students, of rendering them powerless.

As I imagine that conversation now, I can see how much my own conception of writing has evolved over time, how my focus has shifted from text to experience, how different my arguments about what and how and *why* to teach have become in the forty years since I began teaching writing—even as my fundamental Freirean commitments to improving human life through literacy education have remained intact. Indeed, it may well be that those commitments are the key factor in this evolution of my thinking about writing. That is, those commitments enabled me to see validity in the critiques of mainstream schooling and writing instruction by Freire and those in my field, such as Berlin and Brodkey and Shor, who prompted me to rethink my views about—and my practice of—teaching writing. Those commitments, it may be, opened me up to the ontological possibilities that I began to see in writing as I explored Zen and as I encountered alternative writing practices through the National Writing Project. Those commitments pushed me to confront my own complicity, as a White man, in the edifice of institutionalized education that helped perpetuate the racial inequality and social inequity that Madeline devoted her life to fighting. To put it differently, my commitments to the sanctity of human life and to a belief in justice and equality and compassion, values that somehow I embraced very early in my life, no doubt in part because of my Catholic upbringing, seem to have shaped how these many other professional and scholarly influences affected my understanding of what writing can be and informed my views about how it should be taught. As I note in the Preface to this book, Dippre and Smith, in promoting lifespan writing research, argue that “a defining feature of the ‘span’ of life is the differing contexts across which and with which a writer moves” (27), and they emphasize “the transformative possibilities of context” on the writer and their writing. It now seems evident to me, as I approach the end of a long career, that one crucial constant across these many and varied contexts has been these fundamental commitments that energize my vision for a more just and humane world—commitments, I believe, that Madeline and I shared, though they manifested very differently in our lives. My writing, that is, has evolved as *a function* of these commitments.

If Madeline would have been open to my advocacy for writing instruction that places value on the experience of writing-in-the-moment and its transformative potential, and for a pedagogy that engages students in writing about their lives as a process of truth-seeking, I believe it would have been because we shared these commitments. And indeed, her life experience, especially as a White woman who married a Black man, would have enabled her to understand, in ways that I could not, the potential of writing as a vehicle for empowering marginalized students, for engaging them in the process of truth-seeking whereby their true stories become part of the struggle for a better world, and for facilitating their well-being as

humans who must engage in that struggle in an effort to help envision and create that better world. Our shared commitments, I hope, might also have rendered *me* more sensitive to *difference*, to which I had often been blinded because of my own privilege as a White man, and enabled me to appreciate the need to account for difference in my efforts to understand the transformative power of the experience of writing.

That need was highlighted for me by one of the scholars who served as an external reviewer for my bid for promotion to full professor in 2015. In an incisive evaluation of my scholarly record, that reviewer noted that my efforts to articulate an ontological theory of writing seemed to ignore the matter of cultural difference, as if the experience of writing has nothing to do with the writer's identity or positionality within an inherently racialized and gendered world. Those comments gave me pause (and rightly so), but the problem was more poignantly brought to the fore ten years later, as I was finishing work on this book.

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On a lovely late summer day in February of 2025, I find myself in a conference room at the University of Auckland in New Zealand, engaged in a spirited conversation with Professor Barbara Grant and six doctoral students who are members of a writing group that Barbara has run for more than a decade. Three of the students represent national identities from the Global South: Colombia, India, and Pakistan; one student hails from Canada, another from China (though she now has New Zealand residency), and the sixth, who is from Lebanon, has spent a significant part of her professional life teaching in the Persian Gulf. All six are women, with scholarly interests that include gender and Indigenous memory and academic identity. They are here because they have been part of Barbara's group, where they share their writing but also their experiences and concerns and fears as scholars-in-training. They are here because this writing group has provided a community of diverse writers with like-minded goals who share the challenge of writing their way as outsiders into an academic world that has traditionally been White and Western and male. I am here because they have read an article I co-authored a few years ago with Dan Collins, "Writing Well/Writing to Be Well," which they have invited me to discuss. I am White and Western and male.

In 2024, as I was finalizing plans to be a visiting scholar at the University of Auckland, Barbara extended a gracious invitation for me to meet with this group, and in anticipation of my visit she shared my article with the group members. Now, in early 2025, we are finally together, and the students share their feelings about how that article, with its focus on well-being, resonated with them. For those students, the perspective on writing that Dan and I promote in that article was affirming; it helped them put into perspective their own struggles with academic writing. But at the moment, we are not talking about that piece. Instead, we are talking about an uncertain and treacherous present that seems to portend an

uncertain and treacherous future—for all of us, but perhaps especially for these deeply thoughtful and engaged doctoral students, all of whom are seeking to become part of academe at a time when academe, like truth, is under a sustained attack fueled by the global rise of fascism.

Each of these students tells a different version of the same basic story about the obstacles they face as women, all but one of them women of color from outside the West, who are seeking entry into the institution of higher education, which they have experienced as a fossilized enclave of Western White male privilege. Indeed, as each of them describes her individual scholarly project, I hear them as part of a collective effort to challenge and transform that exclusionary and threatened institution: one project examines the value of Indigenous ways of knowing that have long been excluded from scholarly inquiry in mainstream academic disciplines; another explores the implications of the rise of a data-driven culture that seeks to quantify education in ways that are ultimately exclusionary; a third investigates how age, ethnicity, sexuality, and the COVID-19 pandemic have influenced women's perception of their bodies, not often for the better. Although these students participate in Barbara's writing group primarily to share their academic writing, which is an essential tool for their professional success, their writing has taken other forms as well and has come to serve as a way for them to understand their experiences and to navigate the challenges they so poignantly describe.

Caro, for instance, who is from Colombia, describes how rethinking writing as a means to well-being has begun to transform her own writing practice and, more movingly, her sense of self as a Latina woman from an Indigenous heritage in South America. In an email she will send to me a few days after this meeting, she will write, "Before learning about your work on writing and well-being, I was really struggling with my own writing. I felt stuck, I read a lot, kept journaling, but nothing related to my PhD was moving forward." She will go on to discuss a presentation that she participated in with some of the other members of Barbara's group. After that presentation, which explored "whether and how well-being might be possible in the academic practice of writing," something shifted for Caro, and she was able to complete a paper on the colonial legacy of academia, a project that is both professional and deeply personal (and which will be published a few months after my visit; see Peña). At this moment during the writing group meeting, we are discussing the potential implications of pursuing an academic career on our sense of self, and I mention Richard Rodriguez's *Hunger for Memory*, which chronicles his journey to academic success as the son of Mexican immigrants, first in Catholic schools in California and then as an undergrad at Stanford and a master's student at Columbia and eventually as a doctoral student in English literature at Berkeley. Rodriguez writes movingly about losing his connection to his Mexican heritage and even his first language of Spanish, and he eventually decides that the personal price he was paying for success in the White, monolingual institution of academic English studies was too great, and he leaves

academe altogether. In her follow-up email to me, Caro will thank me for recommending the book, and she will write that “it’s made me realize that part of what was holding my writing back was the sense of separation it brings from my family and hometown. But I’ll keep going, I’ll keep writing, knowing that my ancestors, my family, and my hometown are significant to the voice I’m trying to find as a scholar.” In the writing group discussion, Caro confides that academic writing has long been a struggle for her, but that story is changing as her perspective on writing and her writing practices are changing. Like her peers in Barbara’s writing group, Caro tells a story of struggle as someone from a background that has traditionally been excluded from the profession she wishes to enter. The challenge she describes is one in which her effort to find her voice as a scholar cannot be separated from her identity as a woman with indigenous roots from postcolonial Colombia. Like her peers, she is coming to understand that she is writing her way into and through this challenge.

Heather Falconer, who has written provocatively about systemic bias in STEM fields, illuminates this challenge:

What people do (and say/write) within a given situation is dictated both by what they are physically and cognitively able to do, as well as what they believe they are permitted or forbidden to do based on historically and culturally situated storylines (Bonilla-Silva, 2018, p. 97). Storylines are developed in response to the experiences and encounters individuals have had along their journeys to this moment, but they are also informed by the ways individuals are oriented. (Falconer 31)

In her research, Falconer examines “how race and racism, gender and patriarchy, and class and classism are systematized into the epistemologies, discourses, and practices of STEM disciplines” (28), but her conclusions apply to academe more broadly. And they reinforce what the doctoral students in Barbara’s writing group at the University of Auckland describe as they share their stories. Falconer argues that “experiential knowledge (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2019, p. 6) is central to understanding the lived experiences of historically marginalized people in STEM. We cannot know the felt experiences without *listening* to their stories (Collins, 2000). Ignoring such stories, or writing them off as outliers, causes harm” (28). The students in Barbara Grant’s writing group, all of whom represent identities that have been historically marginalized, refuse to allow their stories to be ignored in this way. For them, writing has become an essential way to be heard, and writing their own true stories is a means for them to insist on being *seen* as well. In doing so, they not only challenge norms of academic writing, but they also engage in writing as an act of truth-seeking.

I endorse and applaud these efforts, and one way I can do so as a White Western man near the end of his career is to *listen*. Silence in the face of injustice can be complicity, but as I have written elsewhere, “intentional, aware, deliberate,

responsible, mindful silence” can be a way of being with others, a vehicle for compassion and empathy (Yagelski, “Writing, Silence, and Well-Being” 16). As Cheryl Glenn and Krista Ratcliffe note in their volume *Silence and Listening as Rhetorical Arts*, silence can be conceived as a “moral posture and rhetorical tactic”—not to be confused with ‘passivity or quietism’” (1). In this sense, to listen in silence to the women in Barbara Grant’s writing group is to give them space to claim agency. And that can be an act of hope. For despite the dark clouds blown into our lives by the ill winds of fascism, I have hope that the projects these women are pursuing will have their intended effect of changing academe, of making it more inclusive, more responsive to the stunning diversity of the world. I think of recent work I have encountered that lives in this same space occupied by these students. Sharin Shajahan Naomi, for example, has written poignantly about decolonizing knowledge, in part by writing in unconventional forms and for the explicit purpose of challenging the exclusionary traditions of academic work: “As a feminist, Bangladeshi, and spiritual woman, I realized that to bring out the non-western voice and view, I had to craft non-western ways of writing. This non-western way is crafted through alternative epistemology, subjectivity, and style of narratives” (12). Naomi goes on to describe her experience of writing her dissertation in this “alternative” style as a spiritual one, and she argues for an Asian contemplative epistemology, which she defines as “a form of knowing that comes from meditative ways, including mindful states, profound silence and stillness, openness, intense focus and clarity, creating detachment with the contents of mind,” which “can be reduced neither to reason nor emotion (Ferrer, 2002). Hence, it can hold both, while at the same time it is beyond” (13). According to Naomi,

This way of knowing, if combined with critical insight, gives a new insight into self, reality, and social actions (Burggraf, 2007; Klein, 1995). It can bring a new interpretive angle to human experience from a holistic critical perspective. This mode of inquiry includes the use of arts, poetry, photographs, and creative writing in research in ways that share a subtle level of human experience. (13)

Significantly, the scholarship that emerges from this approach is ontological as well as epistemological: “My epistemology presented a subject that refused to identify a singular self with mastery and command over the readers. Instead, there was a dynamic intersubjectivity in my writing through multiplicity and dialogic selves which works as an antidote against conventional western cartesian subjectivity” (14). In other words, a self emerges in the act of writing, which lends significance to the experience of writing. For Naomi, this perspective on academic writing transforms the text as well as the reader’s engagement with the text:

My writing was not to be read, but to be experienced. In this experience, multiple meanings become available and a range

of emotional, psychological as well as intellectual responses are invoked. Neither the author nor the readers controlled the meaning completely. As a result, knowledge could flow from the co-construction of reality. (14).

To my mind, the students in Barbara's writing group are pursuing scholarly work in this same vein. They are redefining scholarly writing even as their experiences as writers are redefining them as human beings. And there I see cause for genuine optimism about the future.

In the writing group meeting in Auckland, I say so. I tell them that I believe that they themselves and the work they are doing represent the future, a better future. But it is clear to me that the students are skeptical, even as they embrace this view of writing as transformative and see great value in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, even as their own writing is transforming academic discourse. Sensing their skepticism, I offer the disclaimer that perhaps my optimism is a function of my own identity as a Western White man at the end of his academic career and the privilege that identity affords me. There is an awkward pause. They smile, affirming my comment. They all remain hopeful—in a Freirean way—but their struggles as women whose identities have excluded them from the privileges I enjoy are too real, too immediate, too raw, for them to share my optimism. Despite this uncomfortable (for me) realization, the moment reaffirms my belief in the value of the experience of writing, and it leaves me hopeful about the future. It also leaves me shaken.

A few months after that visit to the University of Auckland in early 2025, one of the students, Manal El Mazbouh, published an article in which she argues that academic writing must be more than the production of texts that conform to narrow standards of quality and reflect exclusionary conceptions of knowledge-making. She asserts that academics have “an ethical duty and a practical incentive to enable writers to be ‘composers of text,’ so ‘academic’ writing can fulfill its transformative imperative of enabling change for social justice as opposed to fulfilling the ‘performativity’ of a hollowed-out semblance of an academic text” (27). In other words, academic writing should not erase the writer but become a vehicle for agency in the pursuit of a greater vision for a better future.

Manal's argument might be understood as yet another way to say that how we conceptualize writing matters, and it rekindles my optimism. She focuses on “academic” writing, which is appropriate given how important it is for aspiring scholars to gain entry into their chosen academic fields through their scholarly writing. But it is also appropriate because conventional standards for academic writing—and school-sponsored writing more broadly—have long served normative and exclusionary purposes. As I have argued in my previous work (“A Thousand Writers”; “Writing as Praxis”; *Writing as a Way of Being*), by enacting a Cartesian conception of writing, whereby the writer is separated from the

writing, and by valorizing a certain kind of text, mainstream school-sponsored instruction devalues the experience of writing and thus robs the act of writing of its transformative potential. Manal uses the term “zombification” to describe this dynamic, a startling usage that is also apt in this context. As she demonstrates, academic writing can render the writer invisible—a lifeless zombie—because the conventions of academic writing demand the production of a specialized kind of text that erases the identity of the composer of that text under the guise of presenting objective or “true” knowledge. In other words, the conventions of academic prose purportedly enable the sharing of knowledge that is untainted by the writer’s biases or shaped by the writer’s identity. This set of standards would seem at first glance to be egalitarian, for in theory all writers are equal in the sense that their identities shouldn’t matter; what matters is the validity and reliability of the knowledge they are communicating via the text. In practice, however, erasing the identity of the writer potentially reinforces the marginalizing of those writers whose identities are already marginalized.

If the obsession with a certain standard of textual quality for academic writing is potentially exclusionary (as other scholars, such as Inoue, also claim), then valuing the experience of writing-in-the-moment repositions the writer, placing them at the center of an act of writing and displacing the text itself. That, in turn, can lead to a more inclusive approach to writing instruction.

Manal and her colleagues in Barbara’s writing group in Auckland speak passionately about the personal toll academic writing has taken on them. They speak just as passionately about what they have begun to learn about the potential of writing as a process of truth-seeking and also as a vehicle for well-being. Some months after my visit to Auckland, Manal shared her article with me, and in her email she described the joy she experienced in writing her way to a truth about academic writing that previously eluded her. The experience was both revelatory and transformative for her, and it has energized her academic writing as she continues to seek entry into her chosen scholarly discipline.

I wish I were able to share *my* experience in Barbara Grant’s writing group with Madeline. I suspect she would see in those women kindred spirits. But I would also want her to see how writing for them is not simply a matter of textual production, of learning rules for producing texts that conform to established academic standards that can exclude and marginalize. Writing has become for them a powerful tool for living, a way of being in the world, a means to powerful truths for living better together. And writing could be all these things for students like those Madeline once taught. What Manal and Caro and their colleagues shared about the transformative impact writing has had on them I have seen with my own students—though it is only in recent years that I have been able to recognize this impact of writing on them and have begun to teach in a way that is intended to foster it.

In 2013, I had the good fortune to be appointed director of the Program in Writing and Critical Inquiry (WCI), which I helped design as part of a revised general education curriculum at the University at Albany (SUNY), where I had been a faculty member since 1995. In the role of WCI director, I regularly taught sections of the required first-year writing course we offered in the program. It was during those early years in WCI that I began to incorporate into my teaching numerous ungraded, low-stakes writing practices that afforded my students opportunities to use writing to explore and make sense of their own experiences—and to do so free from the pressures of meeting standards of form and correctness in academic writing. (I have described these practices in a 2021 article titled “Pedagogical Uses of Writing to Support Well-Being.”) Some of these practices, such as impromptu written responses to a text during a class discussion, had been part of my pedagogy since my first years as a writing teacher, but in WCI I dramatically expanded the type and frequency of these practices and made them central to my pedagogy. These activities provided my students with regular and varied opportunities to write in ways that I believe mattered more to them even than the academic skills and knowledge they might have acquired in the course, no matter how important or necessary those skills and knowledge might be. Semester after semester, I watched my students embrace these opportunities and engage in writing more deeply than I had seen in my classes in the past.

If I were able to do so today, I would share with Madeline stories about the impact that these writing practices had on my students—stories in which I think she might see her own students. Stories about students like Camille,<sup>6</sup> the eldest daughter of a single mother from New York City, who became the first person in her family to attend college but who struggled with a sense of guilt about leaving her two younger siblings without their older sister to help care for them; who fought against the feeling that she didn’t belong in college, a feeling well documented in the psychological and sociological research as the Imposter Phenomenon, which afflicts young people of color, especially those from low-income backgrounds (Cockley et al.; Peteet et al.). Camille felt inadequate to the task of producing prose that meets the conventional standards for academic writing at the university level, yet her writing in my first-year writing course examined, in in-depth analysis of the kind valued in higher education, the social, economic, and academic obstacles facing students like her from low-income single-parent households and at the same time gave voice to her fears and hopes and dreams as one of those students. She told me at the end of the semester that what she learned most about writing in the course was *the need to write what is true*.

Or Sophia, the daughter of Ecuadorian immigrants, who also struggled with the sense that she didn’t belong at my university—not because she doubted her academic skills but because she felt alienated from college life that she saw as antithetical to her strong conservative Catholic faith; who wrote about

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6. The names of the three students discussed in this chapter are pseudonyms.

her multi-dimensional and conflicted identity as a young Latina woman and first-generation American; whose writing confronted the question of whether she was “American” at all—a sincere and painful inquiry into her own lived experience that resulted in a more nuanced sense of self and a more confident embrace of her complex identity; who, like Camille, embraced writing as a powerful tool for understanding herself as a young woman becoming.

Or Josh, a young White man from a small Hudson Valley community who literally came out in one of the essays he wrote for my course, an essay in which he told the story of struggling with his sexual identity as a high school student in the face of what he felt were oppressive gender norms and the expectations of the family he loved to be masculine in a way that was consistent with those norms. By the time he enrolled in my writing course as a first-year college student, he had come to terms with his sense of identity and embraced the opportunity that attending college presented him to define himself anew.

All three of these students, like so many of their classmates, used their formal academic assignments as opportunities to confront challenging questions that mattered in their young lives: How does growing up in a single-parent household affect one’s academic prospects? How do religion and culture affect one’s identity and sense of belonging? How does one define oneself as a sexual being in the context of familial and societal expectations that become obstacles to that identity? But they also took advantage of the many opportunities I gave them to engage in less formal writing as a way to make sense of their experiences: regular ungraded, sometimes impromptu writing activities without any rhetorical exigency, without the pressure of evaluation, and without concern for the form and quality of the text. In those moments, the students wrote to describe, articulate, and understand their experience of themselves in a world whose challenges they were trying to meet; they wrote to give voice to their evolving sense of self, to *be* in the moment of writing. And, as Camille told me, *to write what is true*.

I would share with Madeline these stories of students who were eager to embrace the opportunity to write as a way to live their lives. But I would also emphasize that it was relatively late in my career that I made these opportunities available to my students, as my evolving conception of writing as a way of being and my interest in illuminating the importance of the experience of writing began to reshape my pedagogy and, more important, my sense of purpose in teaching writing, which I now believe is to make available to students the transformative possibilities of writing in order to participate in the larger shared project of imagining, creating, and sustaining a more just, peaceful, and humane world. Had Camille or Sophia or Josh or their classmates in the last decade or so of my career taken my classes in the 1980s or 1990s, they would not have had such experiences; rather, they would have been expected to focus exclusively on learning to produce “good writing” without regard to the impact their writing might have on their own lives, their own sense of being in the world—that is, their focus would have been solely on the text, not the experience of writing and what it can offer them as a tool for living their lives.

What I witnessed with my students in the WCI program seems to be validated by a large body of research from psychology that I came across rather late in my career, during the period (2012 to 2022) when I was designing and directing the WCI program and, as part of that role, investigating methods of enhancing students' writing self-efficacy and, more broadly, their well-being (see Yagelski, "Pedagogical Uses of Writing"; Yagelski and Collins, "Writing Well/Writing to be Well"). This body of research has illuminated the impact of what researchers in psychology call "expressive writing"—that is, expressing in writing one's feelings about traumatic or stressful experiences. (This "expressive" writing is not to be confused with *expressivist* writing or rhetoric, which refers to a particular school of thought in the field of writing studies, associated with influential figures such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray.) The preeminent authority on this so-called expressive writing is social psychologist James Pennebaker, who, along with his research team, has studied the impact of expressive writing, or "written disclosure," on physical health and emotional well-being since the mid-1980s. Pennebaker's research and the thousands of studies by other researchers who followed his lead document the powerful impact that writing about one's experiences can have on the writer's emotional, psychological, and physical well-being.<sup>7</sup>

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7. In 1986, James Pennebaker and his co-author, Sandra Beall, published the first report of an experiment in which they found that writing about traumatic experiences—such as the loss of a loved one or a serious illness—was associated with "long-term decreases in health problems" (Pennebaker and Beall 280). Their experiment seemed to provide evidence that "the mere act of writing about an event and the emotions surrounding it is sufficient to reduce the long-term work of inhibition" (281). In other words, this kind of expressive writing could diminish some of the deleterious physiological and psychological effects of suppressing one's memories of and feelings about a traumatic experience. Serendipitously, in studying the impact of disclosing trauma, Pennebaker and Beall stumbled upon the potential power of *writing* about a traumatic event—as compared to oral discussion of such an event. As they tell it, "we seem to have provided some subjects with a new strategy for coping with both traumatic and significant daily events. ... [Some subjects] had begun writing about their experiences on their own after having participated in the experiment" (280). One such participant later told the researchers, "It helped to write things out when I was tense, so now when I'm worried I sit and write it out ... later I feel better" (279).

A voluminous body of research has reinforced Pennebaker and Beall's original conclusions about the potential benefits of what is now widely referred to as "expressive writing," not only in therapeutic settings but in a wide range of other contexts as well. For example, studies have found that expressive writing not only contributed to improved grade point averages (Lumley and Provenzano) but also reduced depression in college students (Gortner, Rude, and Pennebaker). Expressive writing also has been shown to have various medical and physiological benefits (Booth, Petrie, and Pennebaker; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, R.; Petrie et al.), including improving symptoms in patients with PTSD (Sloan and Marx). One study even found that expressive writing "may reduce cancer-related symptoms and improve physical functioning in patients with RCC [renal cell

What emerges from this research is a description of writing as a powerful tool for living, a means of understanding and dealing with common but often difficult life challenges. In this arena, writing is not about the production of text or even about communicating ideas or information. It is about how we experience ourselves as beings in the world, about how we make sense of our experiences in the world. Pennebaker notes that for participants in his experiments, “Much more happened than just a recording of traumatic experiences, however. *The writing exercise often changed their lives*. There was something remarkable about their expressing themselves in words” (“Telling Stories” 3; emphasis added). Pennebaker believes that the kind of writing participants in his studies did was fundamentally narrative in character, which helps explain its impact on participants: “the act of constructing stories appeared to be a natural human process that helped individuals understand their experiences and themselves” (3) and “is associated with

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carcinoma]” (Milbury et al. 663). In summarizing this research, Pennebaker and Evans note that expressive writing has been shown to help patients “deal with traumas or other emotional upheavals” and “to bring about healing” (1).

Significantly, the writing reported in these studies had *no* rhetorical exigency. As Pennebaker notes in summarizing the main findings of his studies, “The effects of the writing are not related to the presumed audience. In most studies, participants turn in their writing samples with the understanding that only the experimenters will examine what they have written” (“Telling Stories” 6). The quality and rhetorical effectiveness of the texts that participants produced in these studies was thus irrelevant. What mattered was the *experience* of writing.

Some recent research in neuroscience may lend credence to the view that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can have a significant impact on the writer. For example, one research team tracked brain activity with MRI imaging technology while writers were engaged in different writing tasks (Erhard et al.). As participants “brainstormed” ideas for a story, an area of the brain was activated that is known to be associated with “the integration of interoceptive information and emotional experience” (Erhard et al. 22). In other words, this writing activity stimulated neural pathways involved in regulating physiological sensations, such as hunger, and emotional states like happiness or sadness. Expert writers in the study were also shown to experience a kind of “flow” while composing, whereby technical language skills and rhetorical decisions were performed “in an automatic, unconscious and intuitive way” (21). This phenomenon has been documented in other studies showing that the “experience of flow” requires “a state of transient hypofrontality that enables the temporary suppression of the analytical and meta-conscious capacities of the explicit system” (Dietrich 746). That is, as they write, experienced writers enter a state in which they temporarily ignore rhetorical considerations. This research seems to suggest that removing the rhetorical exigency from an act of writing, even if only temporarily, might suppress a writer’s “analytical and meta-conscious capacities” and enable that writer to experience writing-in-the-moment without the anxiety associated with writing that some researchers have described (Daly), which is tied to rhetorical concerns; freed from those concerns, the writer’s consciousness is perhaps engaged in a deeper, more profound way—the “flow” that this research identifies—that goes beyond cognitive or analytical problem-solving and encompasses the writer’s emotional and physical states of being.

mental and physical health improvement” (11). He concludes, “A constructed story, then, is a type of knowledge that helps to organize the emotional effects of an experience as well as the experience itself” (11).

Interestingly—and perhaps paradoxically—the solitary act of writing about challenging experiences seems to have social benefits. Participants in Pennebaker’s studies who wrote without a rhetorical exigency “about emotional topics” or “traumatic experiences” rather than “superficial topics” subsequently engaged in more positive social interactions, such as “talking more to their friends, laughing more, and using more positive emotions in their daily language” (14). These findings lead Pennebaker to conclude that “writing about emotional topics has an immediate positive impact upon the subsequent social interactions of those who write with others in their community” (15). This kind of storytelling, he suggests, “helps us maintain a stable social and emotional life” (15).

As I see it, this intriguing research on expressive writing constitutes powerful evidence of the powerful impact that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can have on the writer writing, on the writer *being*, on the writerly self *becoming* in the moment of writing. It is striking—and dismaying to me—that the view of writing that emerges from this research is not really evident in mainstream education or even in much of the scholarship in the field of writing studies. In formal schooling at all levels of education, writing continues to be conceived, taught, and practiced primarily as a rule-governed communicative skill that is necessary for success in the classroom and, eventually, the workplace. Even when we allow students to write about topics that matter to them, to tell their own stories, we tend to do so in the service of developing proficiency and technical skill and learning to produce a narrow range of specified textual forms, rather than as a way to help them make sense of their lives and to navigate the challenging waters of contemporary life—or to find truth in their experiences in the world. Indeed, in my experience in classrooms at all levels of education over four decades, rarely, if ever, are students invited or allowed to engage in writing as a practice of living or truth-seeking. That should change.

This is the case I would have made to Madeline: that writing is a tool for living, and when engaged in as a practice of living, it can also be a practice of truth-seeking. Students like Camille and Sophia and Josh were not just confronting difficult or traumatic or even mundane experiences when they were writing; they were also realizing truths about themselves and about living. In the past decade and a half, I have written much about how students like them have used writing as a way to realize truths about their lives (“A Thousand Writers”; “Writing as Praxis”). And in doing so, I have posed this question, a question I would pose to Madeline if she were here today: If writing can be a powerful vehicle for transformation in these ways, and if writing our about our experiences in the world can be a means of identifying and sharing the truths we need to live together, why would we teach it as anything else? Why would we narrow the scope of what writing can be so that we teach it as little more than a rule-governed communicative

skill, in the process stripping it of its transformative power? To teach it as such is to send students—young people like Camille and Sophia and Josh—out into a dangerous and complicated world more vulnerable, I believe, without the power of writing as a tool for living to help them confront the dangers and complexities that they will surely face in their lives. And it leaves them without the vital sense of the importance—and challenge—of writing their stories as part of a broader exigency for truth-seeking.<sup>8</sup>

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8. I have argued elsewhere that giving students access to the transformative power of writing as a tool for living—valuing the *experience* of writing in instruction—and helping students develop technical and rhetorical skills as writers are not mutually exclusive goals (see Yagelski and Collins). Some empirical evidence has emerged in recent years that underscores this argument but also illuminates potential benefits of giving students opportunities to write as a way to understand their experience in the world and as a tool for living their lives. For example, in his study of an adolescent L2 writer whose first language is Chinese and who engages in various “expressivist” forms of writing to negotiate past trauma and struggles with identity, Jonathan Litten concludes that “[the student’s] work constitutes a passionate response to functional literacies, demonstrating the potential for writing instruction beyond mastering steps in process or technical mastery. Her work speaks on behalf of a writing pedagogy that honors the connection between her writing and her being” (406). Although the focus of Litten’s study was on examining the student’s use of writing to confront the complexities of identity, Litten essentially documents the student’s efforts to write about her past as a way to understand herself—that is, to try to write a true story about her life—while developing the kinds of competencies traditionally emphasized in mainstream writing instruction.

Other studies illuminate the impact of writing about topics of personal importance on students’ academic performance in content-area learning. One randomized double-blind study of 399 students in an introductory college physics course, in which participants in the treatment group wrote about “their most important values,” found that these brief ungraded writing exercises “reduced the male-female performance and learning difference substantially and elevated women’s modal grades from the C to B range” (Miyake et al. 1234). Significantly, “The writing exercise [used in this study] is brief (10 to 15 min) and is unrelated to the subject matter of the course” (1235). Previous research using the same kind of writing “intervention” with 243 middle-school students found that the exercise “significantly improved the grades of African American students and reduced the racial achievement gap by 40%” (Cohen et al. 1307). As in Miyake et al., participants in the treatment group in the Cohen et al. study identified a value of importance to them, such as friendship or proficiency in art, and “wrote a brief paragraph about why their selected value(s) were important to them” (Cohen et al. 1308). Like participants in Pennebaker’s studies of “expressive” writing, the students in these studies wrote without a rhetorical exigency or concern for the quality of the text, but the effects of these brief ungraded writing activities on their sense of self-efficacy seems to have resulted in greater academic achievement in the specific content area courses in which the students engaged in the writing. These varied bodies of research representing different areas of inquiry (e.g. psychology, writing studies) provide compelling empirical evidence that engaging in writing as a means of exploring personal experience or expressing personally important ideas or opinions can support subject-matter learning and skill development as well as writing

This is what I would say to Madeline. And as I am writing in *this* moment, I'm not sure she would have agreed. For in writing this story about her, I have been encountering truths that are reshaping the story as I am writing it.

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For all Madeline's activism and progressive ideology, which I deeply admired and which endeared her to me, she also had, I am realizing, a more conservative sensibility in some respects, especially when it came to education. As I suggested earlier, I have doubts that she would have embraced critical pedagogy, as I have, and I suspect that she also would have been skeptical about my advocacy for a pedagogy that emphasizes the experience of writing and the practice of writing as a vehicle for truth-seeking. Our respective conceptions of *truth* would likely have diverged, as I think is clear from anecdotes I have shared, such as her visit to the shrine at Częstochowa in Poland or her funeral service, that underscore her deep Catholic faith. For her, I suspect, the questions I have raised about truth in this act of writing would have been largely settled—primarily because of her religious beliefs. As a result, she likely would have resisted my conception of truth as contingent, a function of a sustained, shared process of truth-seeking, as I have tried to articulate it in this book. She and I shared, I believe, a fundamental vision of the possibilities for a better future, a belief in equality and social justice and tolerance, and a hope that human beings can learn to live together peacefully and humanely; we shared a sincere belief in human dignity and the sanctity of human life. But our views about the role and value of institutions in realizing this vision differed, I now think.

Madeline seemed more comfortable than I am with certain structural components of the status quo, such as institutionalized mass education and the capitalist economic system that controls it. If she knew of Freire's work, she likely would have shared his vision for a better future through education but rejected much of his critique of mainstream schooling, a critique that profoundly shaped my own

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ability more generally.

In other words, emphasizing the potential power of the experience of writing does not preclude the development of traditional writing skill in formal instruction. In recent years, a number of writing studies scholars have advocated for pedagogies variously described as "trauma-informed" (Nguyen), mindful or contemplative (Muir and Mathieu; Peary), or emphasizing wellness (Cochran) that reconceive the mainstream writing classroom such that the focus is on student well-being, broadly defined, while retaining traditional goals of skill development. As Nguyen puts it, such courses are designed "to achieve a two-fold learning outcome: (a) develop academic writing competence and (b) through learning to write, discuss and support student well-being" (iii). To my mind, such approaches are consistent with the general argument I have advanced in this book about the need to emphasize the experience of writing in instruction and to encourage students to write their own stories as a process of truth-seeking.

thinking about education and literacy and energized my work as a teacher and scholar. After her courageous—and, as I now see it, complicated—decision to leave the convent after two decades, during which she taught in various Catholic schools, she began a decades-long career as a public school teacher, serving in mainstream public schools in the Washington D. C. area. Nothing I have learned about her service as a public school teacher and nothing in my memory of my conversations with her or with relatives who knew her suggests that she tried to foster in the public schools where she taught the kind of progressive change she tried to implement in the Catholic schools where she taught as a young nun—efforts that ultimately contributed to her leaving the convent. Surprisingly (to me, at least), Madeline seems to have followed a rather conventional career path as a classroom teacher after leaving the convent. Maybe she believed that her work in mainstream public schools that primarily served students of color was consistent with her social justice ideals and her earlier civil rights activism. In other words, as a public school teacher in urban Washington D.C., Madeline might have found what she had been seeking but was unable to find as a nun teaching in Catholic schools. It may be that she had found the right institutional home for doing work that reflected her beliefs in racial equality and the promise of a better future, trading one institution (Catholic schools) for another (public schooling). It may be that her early anti-establishment activism ultimately led to her becoming part of the establishment.

That is a truth that is emerging in this moment. It is a truth that has emerged from the multilayered and complicated story I am trying to write about why Madeline made that life-changing decision to leave the convent. Earlier in this sustained act of writing, I found myself describing that decision as both messy and beautiful. I now see it as both straightforward and complex, simple but nuanced, whole yet unfinished. It is as straight and crooked as the doorframe that I see differently out of my healthy eye and my damaged eye, as I have described it in Chapter 5.

And the truth about that decision will continue to evolve as I write.

And this, perhaps, is the central truth that is emerging from this writing: that the truths we need might be momentary but are nevertheless essential and always, like our very being, in the process of becoming, never static, never settled once and for all. In this regard, the contingency of truth is not a flaw or weakness but a strength, a source of its value, its power. As Blackburn notes, our efforts to engage in a genuine process of truth-seeking inevitably lead not to a final, objective Truth but rather to contingent truths that we must constantly revisit and refine and adjust and sometimes even reject and replace as we continue to engage in the shared—and fundamentally ethical—project of seeking “better” truths by which to live. Writing, I have come to believe, can be an integral part of this process of truth-seeking and thus a powerful tool for living. Writing is a way not only to confront and explore important and often troubling questions about living but also to live with those questions rather than to seek final answers to them, to inhabit rather than resolve and forget them. The contingent nature of truth and the

need to constantly seek “better” truths by which to live places an ethical burden on the writer, who must live with uncertainty even as they seek to move past it. Trying to write a true story about Madeline is to embody this necessary uncertainty and, more fundamentally, to *enact* the contingency of truth. For if truth is always in the process of becoming, then we must continue writing in order to bring truth into being. In this moment. And the next.

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And in this moment I am thinking once again about philosopher Crispin Sartwell’s rejection of *telos*—the view that human life has purpose—and his suspicion of narrative as a way for us to construct “the teleological ordering of time and of the lives that take place in time” (8). In this moment, I find myself returning to his call for us to “stop struggling to reduce everything to means which we can annihilate into ends” (124) and to embrace the present, acknowledging the joys but also the limitations of being human: “What’s hopeful about our entrapment in the human, conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality and of historical time, is precisely that it is a delusion” (132). The hope Sartwell sees lies in recognizing that language is merely “a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth,” nothing more. So use it as such, he exhorts us, and let go of the almost irresistible impulse to wield language as a tool to impose order on an unavoidably chaotic world. “Learn to let the world be,” he advises (133). And learn just to *be* in that world.

Earnest though this wish might be, Sartwell confides his own struggle to live it. In his effort to reject *project*—to reject the idea that our lives must fulfill some special purpose—he argues that “the point is not to let go of project, but to see that none of us lives by and large in and for projects, except as a self-delusion and avoidance of life” (65). He himself does so, he tells us, by caring for his children and playing music, which, he acknowledges, might seem like projects but which he sees primarily as normal human activities in which to immerse himself. In such activities, he claims, “purpose is achieved precisely at the moment when it fades from awareness; those moments are the extinction of project sought by project” (65). To be fully immersed in the present, in other words, is to be free of the tyranny of *telos*.

And then he writes this:

I guess what I’m writing this book to wish is that I could live there more, that I could play more. When I take up more and more of my past life into a narrative, I find there a distance. This effort reflects a need to put things in order, and then I lose a succession of present moments; that is, I lose precisely what I am trying to hold into the narrative. What I am writing to recommend to myself is deeper and longer forms of immersion. The

distance I purport to achieve in the narrative—when I think of myself as a character, think of myself outside myself—is a distance from myself. (65-66)

Sartwell wishes to live, even if only momentarily, outside of telos, outside of project. To do so would be to engage in “deeper and longer forms of immersion” in those moments when he lives seemingly without project, in a present not defined by project but rather by *being*. His book is his effort to articulate and justify this wish, to engage in the very kind of project he so earnestly rails against in order to be free of the impulse to engage in project. And in that regard, the book as project paradoxically takes him further from his wish. In the introduction to his book, Sartwell acknowledges that the book is a project rather than the “inarticulate” howl of just *being* that he seeks, a howl that is “not a sign of anything” but “a sonic and *existential* event” (8; emphasis added). “If there could be a book that was a sheer howl,” he writes,

I would try to write it, but instead this book I am actually going to write will itself prowl among texts; this book I am going to write is itself locked into the order of the sign and into teleological order. This book displays my entrapment in language as clearly as anything could, and in that sense it confirms what it attacks. . . . [T]his book is the disease I am trying to treat; it tries to cure itself above all. I am the person farthest away from the cure that I myself prescribe; this book is an attack on myself, on itself, a structure devoted to its own annihilation. (8)

What Sartwell does not quite see, does not recognize, I think, is that although his book might be “locked . . . into the teleological order,” the *writing* is not. The act of writing his book, the moments of writing, are a kind of enactment of his desire to live in the present, to be outside of project, to reject the need to impose order on his life and just *be*—like caring for his children or playing music—even if the writing is part of his project, even if his project is writing to produce a text that rejects project. In those moments of writing, he is realizing his vision of letting go, of being fully present in the moment. The experience of writing-in-the-moment *is* a letting go, an immersion in the moment, which is what he seeks. He appropriately sees the *book*—that is, the production of a text—as a project, but he does not seem to realize that the *writing*—the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment—is the realization of his wish to be outside of project, even if only momentarily. And this is in part because he sees written language, like all language, as a prison house because of its inability to fully capture experience. But the experience of writing-in-the-moment is not inherently an effort to capture or represent experience but rather to *experience* the moment itself, to be immersed in that moment, to let go in that moment of writing, even if a text is eventually produced. And, paradoxically, this letting go is possible *because* of language: an

act of writing is an immersion in language that enables the writer to *be*; it is an act of becoming whereby the writerly self is brought into being in that moment of writing (see pp. 112ff. in *Writing as a Way of Being*). For the experience of writing-in-the-moment is not the production of text. They are not the same. Moreover, that moment of writing, that immersion in the moment of writing, is an implicit rejection of the understandable human impulse to impose order on our experience, a kind of letting go of the impulse to narrativize our experience that Sartwell seeks to avoid, for it encompasses past and future as well as present. In that sense, the experience of writing-in-the-moment enables us to be in that moment and outside it at the same time, to transcend time in precisely the way Sartwell desires. Even when ostensibly writing a narrative, even when writing true stories about our lives, we are momentarily free from the impulse to impose order on experience when we are immersed in that moment of writing.

What I wish to say to Crispin Sartwell, then, is that the writing and the text are not one and the same. The text might be a project—or a reflection of project, of *telos*—but the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment need not be. And his experience in writing that text is *not* the text; it cannot be contained in the text, as he himself argues. But the experience occurred nonetheless, and its impact on him remains, whether the text—his book—is a project or not. What I wish to say to Crispin Sartwell is that a potential solution to the problem he sees with his book—the problem that his book is an enactment of the very same kind of project he wishes to reject—lies in reconceiving writing as an ontological act and thus freeing the act of writing itself from rhetorical exigency and the tyranny of textual production. In doing so, he can free himself from *project* even as he engages in a project.

As for Sartwell's worry about narrative and our collective obsession with constructing coherent stories to give order and meaning to our lives, I would say this: the truths we might identify in the process of trying to write stories about our experiences in the world have value even if the stories themselves are inevitably constructions, partial and incomplete, even delusional, incapable of fully capturing experience or imposing order on chaos, as he argues. The value of these stories lies in helping us identify truths we need to live better together on this earth, in that chaos. We need not succumb to the delusion of narrativizing experience, which Sartwell wishes to reject, by creating narratives to understand experience and seek truth in it. Writing our stories as part of the process of truth-seeking is not the same as the narrativizing he criticizes. We can write stories in the ongoing effort to identify truths by which to live better together while at the same time recognizing the potential dangers of using narrative to sustain delusions of order and control. In other words, the act of writing true stories can be a way to use narrative in the service of truth-seeking while acknowledging its limitations and resisting its dangers. We can use narrative to identify truths we need without seeing the narrative as truth.

This is what I would say to Crispin Sartwell. To my mind, his provocative critique advances our collective understanding of the need to reconceive writing as more than the production of text.

This is also what I would have said to Madeline in my imagined conversation with her about teaching and writing. I would point to some of the promising ways that writing is being reconceived today by contemporary scholars, such as Marilyn Cooper, who notes that “studies in cognitive ethology, cybernetics, and neurology have undermined the belief that writing is merely thought on paper, thought on screen” (47). Like some other contemporary theorists (Boyle; Crawford), Cooper draws on current thinking in physics and psychology to reject the simplistic but widespread view of writing as a verbatim reflection of thinking; she challenges the idea that writing is a function of complex cognitive processes that reflect intention. “We know that the thinking involved in writing is not only limited to rational conscious thought,” she writes, drawing on physicist Karen Barad’s theories, “but is *as much a behavior as any action or feeling*. We think with our bodies ... and everything we make, from texts to technologies, are material entities entangled in one reality” (47; emphasis added). All of this is embodied in the moment of writing, in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, no matter what sort of text, if any, might result from that act.

I would say this again, too: To conceive of writing exclusively as a means of producing a text is to miss the potential power of an act of writing. It is to ignore the transformative capacity of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. It is to limit the possibilities of writing as a process of truth-seeking. I did not grasp this truth about writing for the majority of my career as a writing teacher and scholar. I wish I had. But I also know that it is unavoidable that one’s conception of writing will evolve over time, shaped by experiences and forces far too numerous to describe. I have been writing this story about Madeline as a way to document the evolution of my own thinking about writing, and as I have tried to show in writing this story, how we conceive of writing matters, not just in terms of how and what we write but, more important, *why* we write.

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In late 2022, nationally syndicated columnist Michael Gerson published an essay in the *Washington Post* in which he wondered why Americans who are Christians would support the decidedly un-Christian politician Donald Trump. In trying to make sense of Christian support for a candidate who seemingly rejects so much of what Christians believe and value, Gerson presented the teachings of Jesus Christ as a progressive message about how to live rather than as a theology. “Jesus,” Gerson writes,

thought He could implant a new way of life on Earth. Defying most historical practice and precedent, He sought to reform human affairs in ways that privilege the poor, the prisoner, the blind, the oppressed. He wanted to put the joy, freedom and healing of outcasts at the center of a new era. At least trying to

live under the inspiration of this good news lends purpose to our days and nobility to our failure.

In this essay, Gerson rejects the notion that Christians who seek social or political influence should align themselves with “groups that fight for their narrow rights — and certainly not those animated by hatred, fear, phobias, vengeance or violence.” Instead, Gerson calls on Christians “to be ambassadors of a kingdom of hope, mercy, justice and grace”—in other words, to live their lives according to Christ’s message of love. “God’s call to us,” Gerson goes on, “—while not simplifying our existence—does ennoble it. It is the invitation to a life marked by meaning. And even when, as mortality dictates, we walk the path we had feared to tread, it can be a pilgrimage, in which all is lost, and all is found.”

Reading Gerson’s essay in late 2022, I could not help thinking of my cousin Madeline. I began writing this story in order to identify truths about Madeline’s life and to determine the extent to which she lived a meaningful life, as philosopher Todd May defines it. Gerson’s essay seemed to articulate a compelling way to define Madeline’s life as meaningful, a way in which she herself might have defined it. And as I am writing in this moment, I see more clearly how this effort to write a true story about her life and to understand her decision to leave the convent has also been a way to try to understand my own life—and what it might mean at this moment in time, when I am at the end of a career that I would like to describe as meaningful. This story about Madeline is also a story about the evolution of my conception of writing as an ontological act and, ultimately, a process of truth-seeking. It is an effort to declare the importance of understanding writing in this way—and to assign meaning to my lifelong effort to understand writing. Such an effort might simply be a reflection of my own arrogance, an act of hubris, of ego, maybe even of desperation—a reflection of my need to see value and purpose in my work, the very same desperate need to see my life as *project* that Sartwell fervently wishes to resist in his life.

That is a truth that has been emerging in this experience of writing this story—*these* stories. If Madeline’s story is complicated, so is mine. It reflects an effort to find or construct meaning that might not exist, to declare some sort of value to this lifelong project of mine that might be as fleeting and insubstantial as this moment I am experiencing right now. In that sense, this writing is a *howl* of the kind Sartwell describes, but a *howl* that proclaims, “This matters! *I* matter!” It is a *howl* that fades as soon as it is made. As Sartwell might say, this story of my evolution as a writer and scholar is my doomed effort to engage in a project that reflects purpose and to claim significance in that project, and it is a delusion.

If that is so, so be it. I acknowledge and embrace the delusion, even as this project of trying to write true stories about Madeline and about myself is a futile attempt to deny that delusion. For if the conception of writing that I have been trying to articulate and enact in telling Madeline’s story has any validity, and if writing a story about her as a way to tell my own story has illuminated—for you

and for me—the potential of writing as a process of truth-seeking, then perhaps this effort—which is really nothing more than one moment that encompasses every other moment of writing that has defined my life and my career as a writer and teacher and scholar—is worthwhile.

But it is also true that this act of writing is its own justification. In this moment, that is really all that matters. I *am* in this moment of writing. And this moment of writing also brings Madeline into being. Her own lifelong mission to serve others continues in this story, in this moment in which I am writing this true story about her life. And although this story, this text, might be finished, the writing continues.

Afterword. Writing Hope into Being

The last few years have taught me to suspend my desire for a conclusion, to assume that nothing is static and that renegotiation will be perpetual, to hope primarily that little truths will keep emerging in time.

– *Gia Tolentino, Trick Mirror*

In May of 2010, my youngest sister, Cindy, died suddenly of a cerebral aneurysm. One moment she was sitting on the sofa in her niece’s apartment with one of my other two sisters as they were getting ready for a Memorial Day picnic, and the next moment she was unconscious and convulsing on the floor. By the next morning she was gone. She was forty-four years old.

To say that we were all shocked—including her husband and three children (ages twelve, sixteen, and nineteen at the time)—is to state the obvious, and perhaps to demonstrate the inadequacy of language to convey the wrenching experience of those moments and their aftermath. Rarely have I felt or witnessed such profound grief and unbearable emotional suffering.

As family and friends gathered over the next few days in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where Cindy and her family (and most of my extended family) lived, my brother-in-law asked me if I would deliver the eulogy at the funeral service. The following morning I took my laptop to a coffee shop, sat down at a small corner table, and, with brilliant sunshine streaming through the shop windows, wrote.

The shop was busy, with a steady stream of people coming and going. Some people were sitting at the small tables haphazardly arranged around the shop, chatting or reading their phones, others came in and left after buying their drinks. There was a constant buzz as I sat there, alone in that crowded space, writing.

The text of the eulogy that I delivered a few days later at Cindy’s funeral service is 1389 words long. But I wrote much more than that while I was in the coffee shop. Grief-stricken and still stunned by what had happened, I sobbed quietly at times as I wrote. I also laughed to myself through my tears as the writing took me back to joyful moments I had shared with Cindy or brought forth precious memories of her hearty laugh, the sparkle in her eyes, and her love of silly jokes. Those moments of writing were visceral, physical beyond the movement of my fingers over the laptop keyboard. In those moments, I was overwhelmed by an excruciating sense of loss, and at the same time I felt a powerful joy and a deep sense of gratitude for having had such a loving, wonderful sister. I relived past moments and worried about future ones. I felt guilt as well: for not being at the hospital bedside in her final moments, for missing so many opportunities to spend time with her over the years, for being oblivious to the emotional pain she had endured over many years. Anger, too: that her life could end so suddenly

and seemingly capriciously, leaving her three children without their mother, her husband without his wife of more than two decades, her two sisters without their best friend, my parents without their youngest child. What does one do at such moments? How does one make sense of such monumental loss?

It seems trivial to say that one can write. But I did. My writing in that moment was a coping strategy, the value of which is born out by a mountain of evidence documenting the therapeutic benefits of writing to deal with trauma (as I noted in Chapter 7). But my writing in that moment—my *experience* of writing in that moment—was more than therapeutic, more than a means of coping with trauma. My writing was also a way to *be* in that moment and in the countless other moments, past and future, that were contained in that moment of grief and joy and death and life. The text of the eulogy that I produced in that moment was ultimately irrelevant. It eventually served its purpose at the memorial service a day or two later, and near the end of the time that I sat writing in that coffee shop, a sense of rhetorical exigency took hold as I anticipated delivering the eulogy to my grief-stricken family at that service. But that text was/is finite, finished, fixed in time. And mostly forgotten. Yet the experience of writing in that moment was not timebound, for it encompassed past and future. And it goes on—in *this* moment of writing.

Writing that eulogy was, in obvious ways, an emotional experience, an angry crying out at death, a desperate wish that death could be rejected or reversed, and then a visceral letting go, a submitting to grief, an embrace of past moments of pain and joy, the almost physical remembering, the deep and excruciating pain and joy of love. But it was also ontological, for an *I* was emerging in that act of writing about my sister, whose presence in the writing infused my own being in those moments. Indeed, we were both brought into being in that writing. And the story I was writing about her all-too-short life brought forth truths about her life and my own—about life itself—that went beyond anything that might be contained in the text of the eulogy: truths that informed the way I was making sense of her life and death—and my own—in that moment. How deeply *I lived* in that moment while I was writing that true story of my sister's life and death!

And as I am writing in *this* moment, I am living again in that moment of writing, more than a decade ago, and some truth is emerging in this writing that I am doing in this moment: truth that encompasses and perhaps transforms whatever truths emerged in that moment in 2010. Paul Ricoeur notes that memory is the presence of something absent (*La Mémoire*), and in that regard, the absent moment when I was in that coffee shop in 2010 is present in *this* moment of writing many years later—not because the writing calls forth an existing memory but because in this writing memory itself is brought into being, (re)created for *this* moment, in this act of writing. Cindy, my absent sister, is present in this moment of writing, not merely as a memory, for this act of writing *embodies* the memories of her that are brought into being by the act of writing itself. Her physical absence is transformed into a presence by this act of writing in which I am engaged right now. She *is* as I am writing right now. And while this text I am creating in this

moment—this text that you are reading at some point in my future, that was written sometime in your past—might bring her into being for you and might, too, convey some kind of truth about life and death and loss and love, there is, I think, some other truth that is emerging in this moment of writing, a truth that is contained in *this* moment, perhaps fleeting and momentary, perhaps not, a truth that is distinct from whatever truths might be available to you in this text you are reading right now, no matter how much they might overlap. In *this* moment of writing, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment, I am. I am alive. And at this moment of writing, I am living a truth that is emerging from the writing itself.

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A main premise of this book is that truth, in some form, resides in the *experience* of writing-in-the-moment, and I have been writing this story about my cousin Madeline in order to explore, understand, and enact that premise. If the premise is valid—if truth does indeed reside in this experience of writing this true story, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment; if truth emerges in this act of trying to write a true story—what might that mean? What might it mean for each of us, individually, as we try to write true stories about our lives, about each other's lives? What might it mean for the ways in which we conceptualize and teach writing? And what might it mean for the ongoing struggle over truth as we seek ways to live better together on this earth we share?

The answer to such questions that I have come to through this process of writing, the answer that this writing has led me to in this moment, is something like this: If we conceive of writing as an ontological act and embrace the possibility that truth might reside in the experience of writing-in-the-moment, then writing—not exclusively or even primarily as a matter of textual production but as an experience of ourselves *being* in the moment—can be a powerful tool for living. And writing as a process of truth-seeking can be a means of learning to live better together: more fully, more peacefully, more mindfully, more compassionately, more humbly, more humanely. Indeed, writing Cindy's eulogy in 2010 and writing this true story about Madeline now—writing, too, about my life as a writer and scholar—are all of a piece, part of this same ongoing process of truth-seeking, of confronting the complexities of human life through writing stories about *these* human lives in order to identify truths about these lives and about human life—truths by which we might live better together.

The answer to these questions, then, is that we must write. We must write, mindfully and ethically, as a way to *be* in the moment and to share the truths that emerge from that writing.

As my understanding of writing has transformed over my career, and as the focus of my professional work has shifted from textual production and the communicative power of text to the ontological dimensions of writing and its potential for individual and collective transformation, I have begun to see, all around me, people using the power of writing as a tool for living: my students and colleagues,

friends and relatives and people I have never met, psychologists and therapists and medical professionals of various specialties. I see countless instances of people engaged in writing to live, of people living in the moment through writing. And in that collective experience of writing-in-the-moment, I also see a powerful form of truth-seeking. And what I am seeing constitutes hope in the face of the despair that threatens us in this post-COVID, post-truth moment in history, when a resurgent fascism—an ideology that requires othering, an ideology founded on hierarchies that are enabled by duality—threatens the possibilities for—indeed, the very idea of—peaceful co-existence and the shared project of truth-seeking.

Freire has described hope as “an ontological need” (*Pedagogy of Hope* 9). I have long embraced that view. And for me, hope is embodied in this act of writing, in this experience of writing in this moment—indeed, in writing itself. The evolution of my understanding of writing and its role in our lives has brought me to this moment of writing, in which hope resides. This writing, then, brings hope into being, *is* an act of hope. And in this moment, it does seem to me that the kind of hope that Freire described encompasses truth—indeed, *requires* the existence of truth, for if the possibility of truth exists, then hope is always alive.

Somehow, I think, writing can be a way to both: hope and truth. The experience of writing-in-the-moment contains both. *Is* both. And I am writing this story not only to identify some truth in Madeline’s life—and my own—but also to find hope, to feel it and embrace it, to bring it into being and to nurture it, to share it. And to shoulder, as best I can, the ethical responsibility that writing as genuine truth-seeking places on the writer. I think I have always known that Madeline was, for me, both hope and truth. She lived a certain kind of truth, and she represented hope that we can find that truth and live it in a way that improves the world. To me, she *embodied* hope: hope for a better future. She lived by that hope, by her deep belief in the possibility of a more tolerant, equitable, humane, and peaceful world. And writing a true story about her has given rise to another truth: that I need her story if I am to maintain hope in *this* moment, when I am confronting, like so many other people, misanthropy and despair, when the belief in human progress and goodness that has driven my career as a writer and teacher and scholar is shaken by the rising hatred that I see all around us, the violence, the racism and bigotry, even nihilism, against all of which Madeline fought in her own career. Everywhere I look today I see this hatred and racism and bigotry infecting our political and social and cultural lives, giving rise to violence and conflict, pushing me toward despair.

Madeline’s story—her true story—can, I fervently hope, bring hope, bring *us* hope, in this moment, and help us stave off despair and find the resolve to continue the difficult but necessary and never-ending project of trying to live better together. Writing can—it *must*—be a vehicle for this hope, exactly as Freire believed. This experience of writing this story in this moment *must* be a way to bring hope into being in this moment. And the next.

And so I continue to write.

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Madeline Was Our Sister

In *Madeline Was Our Sister*, Robert P. Yagelski explores the related propositions that writing about our experiences in the world can be an essential act of truth-seeking and that truth might reside in the experience of writing-in-the-moment rather than in the text or subject of the writing. A blend of theoretical inquiry, memoir, and narrative, Yagelski focuses on the process of writing a true story about his cousin, whose extraordinary life as a Catholic nun and activist raises complex questions about meaning, identity, family, and faith. That process becomes the vehicle for an extended inquiry into the ontological nature of writing and the relationships among writing, narrative, memory, and truth. In writing a story that encompasses his own evolution as a scholar and writer, Yagelski enacts the argument that the experience of writing-in-the-moment can be a transformative process of identifying the truths we need to make sense of our lives and to live together more humanely in a complicated and often treacherous world. Yagelski demonstrates how writing, as a practice of truth-seeking, can become a tool for living at a time when the very idea of truth is intensely contested. This inquiry has implications not only for how we think about writing as an act of meaning-making and narrative as a vehicle for truth-seeking, but also for longstanding debates about writing instruction, literacy education, schooling, and the never-ending struggle to determine what is true in both our public and private lives.

Robert P. Yagelski is Professor Emeritus in the Department of Educational Theory and Practice at the University at Albany (SUNY). He was named the inaugural Dorothy G. Griffin Professor of English Education in 2021, the first endowed professorship in the UAlbany School of Education. He is the author of two scholarly monographs, five college composition textbooks, numerous scholarly articles on writing theory and pedagogy, and a children's book.

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