

DRAWING LIFE

Narratives and the Sense of Self

THOMAS J. COTTLE



Drawing Life

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Narratives and the Sense of Self

Thomas J. Cottle

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For Luke, Nicole, Anna, Katherine, and Gemma

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Preface

On the occasion of my last birthday, a friend asked how it feels to be growing old? Her question was utterly appropriate and to the point. In response, I proffered first, the old bromide that in my head I feel about thirty, but my body tells a wholly different story. Then I joked that when people intone, “Well, you’re only as old as you feel,” I reflexively remark, if that’s the case, then I’m *really* old!

And then, for some reason, I found myself reflecting on my resume, what academics call a curriculum vita. Only logically, we think of this document as containing the genuinely significant aspects of our lives, listed in chronological order no less. But as I spoke, it dissolved into a metaphor of the life cycle. In the early stages, one focuses on one’s name, birthdate, and address. The next stage involves the listing of schools one has attended. The following stage is defined by one’s publications and presentations, living representations, surely, of genuine accomplishment. At least they prove that one did something, which has to mean that one was there, somewhere. But old age, I began to think, the birthday cake now mostly consumed, is captured in the vita’s final lines where one reads: The author of this vita is married to someone, and the father of several children, and the grandfather of even more children.

That’s the way it concludes, the vita, and the vita. And that’s the way, perhaps, it is meant to conclude, even if it does take some of us a rather long time to realize what, in the end—a perfect turn of phrase—emerges as life’s genuinely significant milestones, not all of which have to be conceived as public accomplishments. I realize that I am swimming against waves of social media counting on us to broadcast every passing thought, fancy, and impulse to people we don’t even know. Apparently, however, I belong to a more silent age. No, that is not right. I belong to an age where I was taught

one keeps a host of secrets and goes public when one assumes the role of huckster or protester.

Those of us choosing the academic life were also taught that it was not only permissible but essential to go public. The publications, the results of our inquiries were part and parcel of the university's mission, not to mention the basis of our own academic advancement. Everyone in our line of work knew that phrase, "Publish or Perish," and who in his or her right mind would decline the opportunity to avoid perishing through the act of writing! "Teaching breathes life in to you," a friend once counseled, "but publishing keeps you from perishing." I remember thinking, but aren't those two end-points identical? Apparently not. Apparently too, I chose the second option.

Over the years I have written about the lives of people, young and old, who quite frankly just caught my attention. Often I knew precisely the hook that lured me. It was their unemployment status, a dangerous secret a child was keeping, or illness. It was poverty and homelessness, or a premature death of a family member or friend. It was, perhaps, a certain school story, the words of a student, teacher, staff member, or administrator. More often than not, the lure evoked in me an almost childlike sense of unfairness in someone's life, an unfairness that ought to have been prevented by someone, or something, and thus the overriding theme of injustice. Perhaps this sounds puerile, but it gives the reader a taste of a certain stirring I feel when I have heard someone's account and walk away mumbling, "That just doesn't seem fair." So perhaps the final notion hovering above the first two sections of the book is, ineluctably, the notion of justice. Which means that life itself rests on, or ought to rest on a premise of justice.

Returning to the idea of a curriculum vita standing as a metaphor of the life cycle, the first two sections of this book capture some of the penultimate sections of my life. It contains as well, however, some of the reflections from those final stages, those moments when one reflects not on an individual life perhaps, but on what, generally, a life is meant to be. In this regard I am put in mind of Robert Kegan's (1982) significant observation that what makes the activity rendering us truly human is the act of making meaning. More specifically, an event occurs and the very act of constructing a meaning of that event causes it to find a home in our memories as experience.

Kegan's notion dovetails with the writing of the late philosopher Michael Oakeshott (1989) who suggested that what human beings seek to discover in this process of making meaning is precisely the meaning of being human. Equally significant, Oakeshott alleged that this activity is a function of instruction; teachers of all varieties contribute to this determination of our humanness, and not all of them are found in the classroom. Truly we are what we have learned.

As I look back upon the work appearing in the following pages, I see all too clearly quite a few of my own teachers, and again, not all of them found

in classrooms, but all of them surely contributing to my efforts to figure out this being human thing. Hopefully, the reader will hold in mind that the people offering me bits of their lives, people whose words are presented in this volume stand among my important teachers. Together we are at work attempting to discover meanings, transform events into experiences, and feel this provocative idea of we are what we have learned. So perhaps this book is about sharing some of the results of our ruminations and reflections. Perhaps too, it is not exactly the case that experience is the best teacher. Rather, we require teachers to help us to forge enduring experiences from events, which in turn, serves as yet another form of pedagogy. I think in this context of Jung's notion that ideal psychotherapeutic enterprises, and research interviews as well, commence with both persons confessing either aloud, or in silence, and conclude with both souls feeling transformed. Not so incidentally, between confession and transformation, Jung asserted that both persons experience the acts of explanation and education, this last word being one that would have pleased Professor Oakeshott.

There is no question in my mind that those seeking to collect the stories of people and pass them on to a public we believe must hear these stories and hence learn of these lives, are somehow educated and transformed by the work. But let me state this more emphatically: I cannot believe that one listening to the kinds of narratives reproduced in the book could not be transformed, somehow, by the accounts. At very least, recalling the words of Emmanuel Levinas, surely they must sense a certain stirring—that word again—within themselves, a stirring I have attempted to reveal in the book's final section. This stirring, Levinas instructed, is hardly an esoteric idea. It implies that we feel an urge to move toward the other and through this movement feel a call to our own humanness. The stirring, in other words, is the sensation of the other being inside us. It is funny to think that the pregnant woman is not the only one able to experience life stirring within her.

In the end, I suspect we all draw life from the stories told to us, or read to us, by a host of not merely storytellers, but story teachers. As many have written, perhaps all we are is contained in the stories we tell, to others and ourselves; it is the quintessentially creative act of which we are all capable. Which means that much of what we are is also constituted in the stories that have been told to us, stories that, in my mind, literally breathe life into us, and, as many have alleged, continue to live inside us aiding in our constant efforts to draw life.

Finally, a few words of appreciation—no matter how meager they often sound in the acknowledgement passages of a book—for those people who have not only made my work possible, but my life possible, which in part means they have allowed me to conjure that metaphor derived from the curriculum vita.

The first thank you's go to the people the reader is about to meet. In all cases, I have changed the names of these people as well as certain identifying features in order to preserve anonymity. The promise of anonymity notwithstanding, it takes courage to open a few windows on one's life to a stranger, especially when thorny, unresolved, and outright painful portions of a life may now be viewed. (The young ones, incidentally, often appear undaunted; they frequently bargain with me to use their real names.) In the most practical terms, these encounters take a lot of time. But then I burden these people further by asking them to read what I have written in order to check not only for correctness of fact but correctness of tone. I suppose I wish to know (and want to hear from them) that I have properly represented them. Funnily enough, after almost four decades of interviewing people, I still haven't settled on a proper term for them. Are they informants, subjects, respondents, interviewees? Years ago, in a review of my work, the late author, literary critic and editor Theodore Solataroff remarked that he too, could not decide what to call them. He settled on the word "friends."

Love and thanks go to Paula and John Wehmiller, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Andy Kaplan, Daniel Frank, Robert Coles, and the late Jack Ellison and Charles M. Olin.

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Now, finally, we reach the end of the *vita* where in my life there is first Kay Cottle, extraordinary teacher and even more extraordinary wife, mother, and grandmother. Then, in order of appearance, there are our three children, Claudia, Jason, and Sonya, their spectacular partners, Tony, Rachel, and Scott, and then, best of all, the five grandchildren to whom this volume is dedicated. Talk about drawing life!

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I. Stories of Adults

On Narratives and the Sense of Self

Encountering a narrative of any variety, hearing the words or even reading the words of another on a page, is essentially an interchange wherein we respond not only to the words of the Other, literally resonate—implying to echo the Other—to the words of the Other, but to our own responses to these words. It is these responses that constitute our own portions of the narrative, our roles, one might say, in it. For inevitably, narratives evolve as acts of an interpersonal nature; they forever remain forms of human encounter. Every narrative, moreover, every encounter offers the possibility of ratifying the narrative of the Other or refusing to do so, acts, it may be argued, akin to affirming the Other or disaffirming the Other.

The invitation or the call of the narrative is to hear another's story without immediately responding with our own stories. For in truth, we tend to hear another's story with our own stories, our lenses, as it were, shaping and refining the content and tone of what we are encountering (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). This means that in encountering the narrative we are constantly shaping and refining our senses of the other person, or at least that part that he or she offers to us through the narrative. We are at the same time shaping and refining our own lenses. In forming our reactions and making our interpretations, however, we constantly run the risk of pushing our stories against the stories of others and in a sense demanding that others rethink their stories in light of our stories. At very least, we are asking, if not insisting, that others interpret their stories in light of ours. Too rarely do we remove our lenses and simply allow the words of the Other (what philosophers call their otherness) to pour into us. Either way, the narrative inevitably invites an encounter.

Said differently, we run the risk of making the story of the Other become what we wish or need it to become, not necessarily what he or she wishes or

needs it to become. In this way, we now are free to imagine that we can explain the story and the storyteller too, for that matter, to ourselves and to the world. It is a process of engagement one might call an act of disaffirmation, an act in which we fail to ratify not only the story of the Other but, even more significantly, the teller of the story. Let me offer an illustration of what I am saying. A man is found guilty of bombing an abortion clinic. Tragically, a doctor has died. When asked how he could commit so heinous a crime, the man responds, "I did it to save lives." Now, listen to the mutually exclusive stories evolve, each resisting the Other, and the corresponding dance of what may be called mutual disaffirmation.

Our story: How possibly do you save lives by killing people?

His story: If I kill the abortionists no more babies will be killed.

Our story: They aren't babies, they're fetuses.

His story: They were living and the doctor killed them.

Our story: Abortion isn't about killing.

His story: If abortion isn't killing, then what is it?

Our story: Murder is killing. Abortion isn't murder. You never kill people to save people.

His story: What would you say to me if I said that I killed members of the Gestapo who were killing innocent Jews, gypsies, and homosexuals?

Our story: In that case you'd be a hero.

And so it goes, the stories colliding, each of us refusing merely to hear what the Other has to say, neither of us affirming the position of the Other, neither of us affirming the Self of the Other. Each of us departs the argument believing the Other to be dead wrong, pigheaded, dogmatic, outrageously ideological, or outright mentally ill. To repeat, in encountering the narrative free of one's own stories, the Self has been obliged to confront itself and hence, its own stories. We are stirred by another's words and possibly enlightened by them as well; the novelist V. S. Naipul noted that the function of a novel is enlightenment and evocation. Falling prey, perhaps, to what is called the "myth of vulnerability" wherein we imagine that people of certain groups or those having had certain experiences are so "damaged" they cannot speak for themselves (their selves), we begin to question the Other's narrative. We wonder aloud, could a child of that age really say that (Sasso, 2001)? Why would a woman tell this interviewer about that experience? Can we be assured that this girl will recount the same story three months from now, or even three hours from now? In this way, we question not only the methodology and findings of narrative research but our personal reactions to them as well.

Something else is beginning to occur, something that forms the basis of the ultimate act of affirming the Other through the narrative. As we listen to the Other, we begin to appreciate and experience directly what Robert Coles (1989) referred to as the “call of stories.” More precisely, it is this call of the Other through the narrative that compels us to it. In the words of the philosopher Emmanuel Levinas, we feel compelled to assume responsibility for the Other, to care for the Other. Not only that, but my genuine encounter of your narrative essentially makes me the person that I am. “Without me,” Levinas wrote, “[the Other] can do nothing—it is utterly vulnerable and exposed” (quoted in Cohen, 1986, pp. 27-28). Keep in mind that this idea stands in sharp contrast to Heidegger’s notion of *Dasein*, which held that being is essentially a closed system. “It can have no other lack,” as David Steiner (2001) wrote, “than that of a failure to regard itself.” It is this response to the call of the story ultimately resulting in the taking of responsibility for the Other that constitutes the fundamental act of encountering the narrative. Your story is safe with me; *you* are safe with me. Genuinely hearing your words means that I shall harm neither your narrative nor your being. Levinas observed that “the banal fact of conversation . . . quits the order of violence” (quoted in Baker, 1993, p. 4).

Notice here an important provision offered by Levinas: Namely, the response to the call of the story is not a willful act. The listener does not deliberate over his or her decision to respond to the storyteller by taking responsibility for him or her. To the contrary, the act is almost reflexive, more primitive, Levinas insisted, than reason or will. It is practically automatic, dare we even say instinctive. Thus, it is not reason alone that draws us toward the storyteller. It is the narrative, the words of the Other, that evoke that mental mechanism wherein we imagine we detect what Levinas called the summons of the Other and, more precisely, what he designated as the summons to self-recognition.

In truth, the narrative becomes the Other; it is as direct as the meeting of eyes or the felt sense of pregnancy. It is the trace of the Other, really a trace of his or her Self, captured in words, of the Other’s Self that we now have been called to encounter. Without thinking, if Levinas is correct, we respond by taking responsibility for the Other and thereby affirming him or her. Like the poem, the narrative embodies otherness, the few traces, again, of another Self, another poet who can be transmitted to us, if we find ourselves able to respond to the call, which in part implies laying down our internal lenses and momentarily putting aside our own insistent personal narratives.

Granted, a slew of heuristic problems hovers about narrative research, a prominent one being that no human expression, as powerful as it may seem, can ever stand for ultimate truth or moral law (Cottle, 2001a; English, 2000). No single narrative can ever represent the final statement of the Other, the final personification of the Other. As philosophers would no doubt warn, the

danger of a moral relativism forever lurks in the accounts of children and adults alike. Who is to say what the “real” story of any person may be? Each of us lives with an infinite number of narratives, stories within stories, any one of which we might share with a researcher, friend, or even stranger. We only imagine that others’ lives are constituted of that one telling tale (English, 2000; Usher and Edwards, 1996). Believing this makes life seem more comprehensible. For there is always that complicating matter of our stories being employed to “interpret” their stories, our life narratives serving as the bases of comprehending and explaining their life narratives, our memories serving to explicate their memories. We allege, in this regard, that my interpretation of your narrative in fact represents my encountering of myself, my effort to make sense of myself. That which I discover about you, really about your narrative, that I cannot interpret remains distinctly you. This is the part of you that I do not draw into my sense of Self.

The encountering of the Self of another, even third hand, as we do in reading a narrative, necessarily opens in us the impulse or temptation to respond to (affirm) or spurn (disaffirm) the presence of the Other. We are drawn to one person or one narrative, repelled by another; this is the essence of what John Locke referred to as toleration in his 1689 “Letter on Toleration.” We trust the words of one person—his or her narrative appears to be a faithful rendition of experience, a faithful rendition of his or her Self, a testimony perhaps—just as we doubt or openly repudiate the words of another; this is precisely the evocative quality to which Naipul referred.

If Levinas is correct, merely bearing witness to the “opening up,” the releasing of the traces of the Other, the expression of her otherness in and through the narrative, prompts our own natural response to assume responsibility for the Other and affirm her or resist taking responsibility for the Other and hence, disaffirm her. We accept with open arms the call inherent in the story, or we turn away. In either case, aware of our own deliberations or not, we discover that we have responded to the Other. Our response to the call of the story furthermore, may be said to be an “after-the-fact” experience inasmuch as we may be aware of it only upon recognizing that we have responded to it. We say, for example, “Listening to her account, I found myself crying.”

Our interpretation of the Other’s words, significantly, is in part an attempt to comprehend our own reaction to our response to the story, to the Self of the Other, or perhaps our lack of any response whatsoever. We say, “Listening to him, I found myself thinking and feeling absolutely nothing.” In contrast, sometimes when the movie ends and the theater lights come up, we find ourselves able to do little more than scan the credits as people all about us exit the theater. For a moment, we are not sure where we are, what we think, what, precisely, we make of what we have just experienced, and how we feel about it all. As one of its many functions, the interpretation of a

narrative is a reaction to a reaction; it is a reflection, a form literally of recognition. To repeat, interpretation represents evidence of the Self temporarily communicating with itself, and sometimes, as they say, the lines of communication even between the Self and itself break down, leaving us unable to make sense of the Other's narrative or, more significantly our response to it.

If what we have been purporting about affirmations and disaffirmations holds any truth, then the narrative provides us evidence of a trace of what we live with in our daily decisions to assume responsibility for another person, stranger or acquaintance, or instead look away from him as if he did not truly exist. The claim, philosophers might argue, of the "moral ought," the claim of beneficence, is that I should do good (Fain, 1998). I should assume responsibility for the stranger, the homeless one, the injured one on the side of the road when I feel myself compelled to engage in what is called "rubbernecking," the faceless one in the narrative, and most assuredly the one I know. But in some cases I do not wish to. Apparently, I am not ready to do so; I do not need any more burdens in my life; I cannot tolerate this scene; I want to turn off this one narrative and all that it has evoked in me. Besides, I could get hurt stepping out of my car on a busy highway. Better to glance quickly, hope I catch a glimpse of the body but not the gaze of the injured, and drive on. Better to acknowledge that police officers and paramedics are the ones who should be in attendance listening to this one narrative anyway.

In some respects, in this act of disaffirmation, I tend to resemble those parents who, having given birth to a child with a disability, selected to never lay eyes on the child and leave her in the hospital, a practice that, because it was once advocated by physicians, became an all too common event years ago. At any moment, I may choose not to meet the eyes of the Other or attend to the words constituting her narrative and in this way disaffirm her. How easy it is not to acknowledge the presence of the unseen narrator, precisely because she is unseen. At any moment, I may choose blindness and deafness, which in this instance means that I refuse to wonder about the Other, just as I resist reflecting on where my own thoughts and feelings might lead me and hence, what it is that I may become as a result of choosing blindness and deafness in the face of the Other. I choose, in other words, as Levinas (1969) wrote in a discussion about God, actually, that much of life is not about what I have to learn but about what is "already-known that has to be uncovered or freely invented in oneself, and in which everything unknown is comprised" (p. 96). In the end, the summons of the story contains a directive that I must commit myself to understanding these "after-the-fact" experiences living within me. This act represents a fundamental way in which I affirm myself.

The internal stirring I cannot deny, the precious remnant of the story, and the individual I have just encountered, represent the traces of my decision to assume or abdicate responsibility for the Other, not to mention self-knowing. They represent the traces of the Other within me, which, again from Levinas,

allow me to know me, or at least derive a renewed sense of Self; I arrive before you as listener and respondent, not yet as self-knower. They represent my willingness or unwillingness to make the history and the narrative of another my history and my narrative as well, which is to say allow the narrative to call up in me that which is not yet known to me. In this regard, every encounter with a narrative represents an invitation, a calling to confront the Other constantly lurking in my own being. For in the encounter, I also experience you encountering both you and me; this too is part of the power of the narrative. To reject the gaze or the words of another and thereby engage in the act of disaffirmation is an endeavor on my part to preserve the nature of the perception and knowledge I have of the world and myself. It is an attempt to solidify my identity and keep myself from ever changing, ever becoming (Hirsch, 1982). “The active identification of beings,” Levinas (1969) wrote, “by which the ego posits itself as world center constitutes its very selfhood” (p. 92). So it is that some allege that the free and open encountering of the story of the Other, the Self, really, of the Other, forms the conduit to self-knowledge and hence, a viable identity. Once again from Levinas: “The Other appears to me not as an obstacle, not as a menace I evaluate, but as what measures me” (1969, p. 92).

In contrast, to reject any offer to engage myself in the narrative of the Other becomes, perhaps, a striving to remain precisely as I am forever, a perfectly lovely mental conceit that in effect would render me immortal. In fact, my sense of my own uniqueness, as Erikson (1968) observed, ought to render me immortal. Yet now I discover that no amount of pretending wholly absolves me of the feelings associated with turning away from the Other; I cannot merely rubberneck and drive off. To a certain degree, a form of social contract established in part through the narrative has been constructed. It is the guilt perhaps, the shame perhaps, that lingers and becomes part of my sense of Self, my identity; already, I feel my own personal fable to be crumbling. This one encounter has permanently transformed me; I am held hostage—Levinas’s term—by the Other; I am now a part of his or her narrative, which in turn means that I cannot keep myself constant, unchangeable. Ineluctably, I am altered by the mere presence of the Other or more precisely, by having encountered the Other. Because the encounter implies an alteration in my definition of Self, it stands responsible for my ability to recognize that I am constantly changing, becoming, and thus cannot achieve immortality. The mere look of the Other, the mere words of the Other, as Levinas suggested, bring me news of the fact that life’s story ultimately is tragedy. In a sense, the recognition of this fact too is the result of encountering the narrative of the Other.

In sum, we may think of the single human narrative as carrying the perceptions, the history and self-knowing, the humanness of another, possibly even a stranger, as a significant form of personal encounter. Even more,

because every personal encounter, even the story of another told to me by a middleman, a qualitative researcher or biographer, by definition carries the possibility of evoking in me a consideration of or reflection on my solitude, my humanness, my finitude, I necessarily respond manifestly to the narrative and latently to my response to it. It is this self-reflection that allows me to comprehend my commitment to and responsibility for you. Even third hand, the narrative demands that my self confront itself over questions of being and becoming, assuming responsibility for another, or rejecting the summons to take responsibility of another. It demands that I choose to act morally or not. I wish neither to be devoured by another nor to devour the Other. I do not wish to experience the discomfiting jarring that is my sense of Self modified by another. I resent the account of the injured stranger, the homeless one, the refugee, for making himself or herself visible to me and thereby altering my journey. Suddenly, I find myself angry at the television networks for constantly showing me video of starving children in Sudan.

In simplest terms, as yet another common expression has it, encounters with narratives become “tests of character.” More precisely, they serve as a provocation to examine the character of myself, the engraved mark of myself that I wear on myself—for character means an engraving instrument. In affirming the Other, we provide a cornerstone for him of what we call character. The narrative, in other words, literally calls attention to the Self of the Other as well as our own Self. It moves us to wonder about the sort of being we are or may become; this is one of the gifts and responsibilities of affirmation. For in the encounter with the narrative of the Other, we are moved once again to wonder how it is that we came to recognize or comprehend the mere notion of our being human in the first place and being-no-more in the last place. The narrative, the unborn child, the child with the disability, and most assuredly the stranger who throws his or her gaze upon us, causes us to “know” that we have a being, that we are a being, and that this being constantly evolves if only because it is constantly being called by the narratives of others. But evolves into what, we wonder, as we contemplate the idea of (our) becoming? And let us also be reminded that this contemplation of our own being represents an essential ingredient of the personal narrative we ourselves are creating and on occasion offering up to others.

The ideas presented here are not at all esoteric; in fact, they are what we think about everyday. We hear a woman tell us, for example, that she recently experienced a miscarriage and thoughtlessly we seek to comfort her with the words, “It’s not all that bad; you can always have another child.” We pass a homeless man on the street and we think, “If I were a good person, I’d stop and speak with him.” Or “How could he possibly have gotten himself into this position?” Or “Hey, his life’s not *my* business.” We read the account of a child and we muse, “I should really work with the underprivileged, perhaps become a teacher or social worker.” Or, “This child’s words are touching and

all that, but I don't know her so I don't have to do anything about it. I'm not the one who caused her parents to divorce. Besides, for all I know this one account may be pure fiction!"

Given the fact that no individual is ever a means to any end but inevitably the end in itself (its Self), I do not know whether any character of any novel, short story, play, or narrative does not stir in me the sensations associated with yet another confrontation with myself. I do not know but that even an encounter with the words of a person through a brief narrative does not put me in touch with the "fact" that there is another human being "out there" whom I cannot completely know, just as there is another human being "in here" whom I cannot completely know (Nietzsche, 1886/1965). Once again, our responses to the narrative derive not only from us, but from the Other whose presence assures that I am here.

As we have noted, it is in the encounter that Levinas discovered the source of the ultimately ethical response. Surprisingly, ethical behavior for Levinas did not derive from logical reasoning nor sit somewhere in the mind ready, somehow, to be activated. Rather, it appeared to be born in the encounter with the Other, an encounter, again, with the narrative of the Other. This is precisely what makes every encounter a potential miracle, or at least a calling into question of the nature of the just act. That we would move toward another as we do when we act empathically or have called up in us (a call, as it were, to our humanness) such a series of ethical considerations merely by hearing the words even of a stranger, and thereby feel these words and this stranger as a stirring being inside us, actually transforms our senses of our selves. Now, in an ethical confrontation with our selves, a confrontation caused by encountering the Other's narrative, we initiate a conversation with our selves: "I probably should have stopped on the highway. The worse that would happen is that I could do nothing for the person. So I would be delayed ten minutes. What's ten minutes out of a lifetime?"

Let us take the argument one step further by asking this question: If Levinas's assertions are correct, if I do not respond to the words of the Other, thereby disaffirming her, am I fated to forever live with the knowledge that I am neither a good nor just person, or even worse, perhaps, not a fully human person? In a sense, the answer to this question is the question itself turned inside out. That I even ask it bespeaks my awareness at some level that in my own personal narrative I have already begun to question my ethical posture and with it the nature of my being a good person. That I even ask the question, or move on in my life with a freshly born discomfort, must imply that my character and my humanness have been called into question; I have called them into question. More precisely, they have been called into question through the narrative; it constitutes a portion of the original summons of the story.

In a word, the narrative, like any artistic product, evokes the matter of our humanness along with those vexing questions involving our definitions of Self at the very deepest levels of our capacity to reason and feel. The narrative possesses the potential to push us inward to those places that feel to us to be the farthest limits of our self-knowing; it feels as if we cannot go any further within ourselves or gain a better sense of ourselves. Painful and difficult as it may seem, this inward turning to ourselves may denote the best that we can do as sensate beings, for it may represent our attempts, however meager, to make sense of the traces of meanings and sensations of our humanness or merely recognize the traces of the face of our humanness, our own internal miraculous being. It may also be the best we can do in our encounters with the traces of others, friends or strangers, as we seek to construct a sense of Self.

Returning for the moment to the notion of self-affirmation, we suggest that a fundamental essence of affirmation as received in the encountering of the narrative is felt to be something we might call a life force. Said differently, in genuinely hearing the narrative of the Other and thereby affirming the Other, I am at the same time sanctioning his right to feel a life force, which in turn means that he can feel or sense something that together we experience and define as transcendent. This felt sense of transcendence, an utterly human experience, in other words, is predicated on the ability to feel comfortable with that which is metaphysical, that which is nonmaterial and bodiless but that is born in us, nevertheless, in the most palpable of narratives. In the act of affirming the Self of the Other and hence our own selves, we now imagine that we can see the unseeable.

Now hold on just one moment, we argue. How exactly can I know what is not there to be known? How do I develop a sense of comfort with sensations originally stimulated by the encounter with the narrative of the Other that derive from a place that would seem to exist even beyond my exterior, or interior? How could I be moved by something beautiful such as a poem, or even define something as beautiful, or come to the conclusion that something exists beyond me, beyond even that which my senses tell me constitute my exterior? What does it mean to experience first, through the encounter of the narrative, and then through the act of affirmation, the sensation of rising above and beyond myself? And what might Robert Kegan (1982) have meant when he wrote that “what the eye sees better the heart feels more deeply” (p.17)?

I suggest that this metaphor of rising above myself or developing an appreciation of the transcendent represents an extension of an appreciation for the connection of the Self and otherness through the narrative and the ensuing affirmation. For that matter, it may well be the essential ingredient constituting human connection. It rises above the concrete and the physical characteristics typical of popular culture and pure entertainment; surely, it

finds no home in acts of distraction wherein we find ourselves disconnected from ourselves (Cottle, 2001b). In fact, that is what distraction is meant to accomplish: The whole point of entertainment, although not art, is to take our minds off of ourselves, and others.

More precisely, the transcendent suggests a cognizance of the traces of the authentic Self of another, not just his or her otherness. To be affected by what we experience as art is not merely to be moved by the otherness of the artist; it is to be affected by something that comes as close as possible, perhaps, to her Self (Schinneller, 1968). We call it her “soul,” possibly because we append something sacred such as the act of creativity to it and because the product of the soul transports us to what we feel to be the realm of the timeless, immortal, and hence transcendent. Perhaps too, we call it the soul because we do not directly encounter the artist, only his or her narrative, only his or her product calling up something within us or, perhaps, calling us to engage in these most personal of self-reflections. Nonetheless, in recognizing the impact the product has had on our senses of ourselves, and that which we now imagine to be beyond ourselves, we assume that the product in question, the derivative of the artistic narrative, must be the Self itself. Art is the child of the Self, the Self as it is created by itself and given to others, which further suggests that in our minds, some of us believe ourselves and our souls to be one.

When I am “touched” or “moved” by a narrative or any piece of art—the two words implying something more profoundly affecting than mere physical sensation—I am experiencing something that I tend to imagine is a oneness with the Self of another. Borrowing from Martin Heidegger and Rollo May, I do not own art as much as I am art. I do not encounter a narrative, in this context, I am narrative, for narrative is but a living form of my sense of Self, which derives in part from what philosophers call being-for-the-Other, or what we are calling my encountering of your narrative. I have been touched, in other words, by a nonphysical force, something that is there but not there as part of the life force of the Other. The writings of the Other sit there motionless on the desk. They cannot literally reach out to me, although that is precisely what I feel; the true artist, as Stephanie Dudek (1993) observed, does not take a stand. The artistic product itself, therefore, becomes the affirmation. I comment, “This book speaks to me.” I do not literally touch the words, only their representation in print, although I may feel the desire to directly encounter an author and have her inscribe her name in my book, our book.

Again, the narrative does something more than merely strike my senses. It stirs a part of myself, something perhaps even beyond my sense of Self that I cannot put into words. Perhaps Foucault (1963/1973) was wrong; perhaps not all of life is built around language. Not all of the call of stories can be put into words. Not all of what resides in the Self or constitutes the Self can be

put into words. All the while knowing that I am not physically aligned with the picture or the writer (the Other), I have entered the realm of the transcendent, a realm human beings “naturally” appear to covet. I am in touch with the mystery of the life force whose location I now imagine extends beyond the parameters of my sense of Self, but whose presence in my imagination has been made possible by (that is to say called up in the first place through) the form of affirmation deriving from genuine encounters with narratives.

Some psychologists, Erich Fromm (1941) among them, believe that the need for the transcendent is inborn. Perhaps this is so, although I would suggest that it is developed through constant acts of affirmation just as it is destroyed by constant acts of shame, a sentiment that Erikson (1950) designated as rage turned toward the Self. Is not rage, after all, the seemingly natural response to disaffirmation, the natural response to the recognition that the Other has not heard or, more severely, repudiated our narrative? Would I not rage against myself if others chose never to hear my words? But if in fact the need for the transcendent is inborn, might it be activated by the earliest encounters with parents who normally are the first persons to encounter our expressions, our narratives, however primitive and inchoate they may be? Someone, after all, has to respond to our earliest narratives, our first cries. Might the need for the transcendent be activated, in other words, by the parents’ original affirmation of the newborn?

But now let us turn this whole argument on its head and suggest that the narrative and more generally art itself may be affirming. That is to say, we might well imagine that in the absence of interpersonal affirmations, in the absence of the Self affirming the narrative of the Other, the Self may just be affirmed by some metaphysical connection to the narrative, to art generally, and hence artists, themselves an intriguing representation of what ego psychologists call a self object. From writers, painters, dancers, musicians, some of us discover our first tastes not only of the metaphysical but of the power of human encounter and affirmation itself. Surely, the words of another can put me in touch with my aliveness, my life force, and with it the realm of the transcendent as much, perhaps, as the direct affirmations of my parents and teachers. At least one issue, one component of the equation is called into question: Namely, there is no reciprocity to the encounter in art, if literally we mean by this term sharing a glance, having our eyes and our words connect. Art does not literally return the look as much as it prompts the Self to return its own look at itself. I am reflected in the narrative; I not only see myself seeing, I see myself reflected back from the narrative. I see its beauty, its temperament, its emotions, and ideally, my own as well. But because it fails to see and recognize me, art cannot pledge to take responsibility for me. It only prompts the idea of responsibility by revealing the ideal good or sense of beauty of my self and the Other. It prompts, in other words, the felt sense of affirmation and with it the life force.

As an inevitable and ironic correlate of the transcendent experience, the encounter with the narrative of the Other and the ensuing affirmation or disaffirmation also ratifies a right to feel a death force, a life-no-more. The comedy and tragedy, signifying life itself, live within each other and both reside within the Self. Of course we laugh at the tragic and cry at the comedic. But how can this be so? If, as Earls and Carlson (1993) wrote, the parent deeply and authentically affirms the child, and the child affirms the parent as well, then surely the child begins to discern the simple beauty of “merely” being alive. Affirmation is not so much biological drive or that energy (Freud’s libido or life instinct) connecting us to all animals as it represents the essence of the felt sense of a life force (Freud, 1930/1961; Karlsson, 1998). At very least, through the narrative the child has encountered the outlines of what arises in him or her as the idea of being alive, an idea that well may be born in the moments Margaret Mahler (1975) called “hatching,” the period when the baby, now four to nine months old, begins to differentiate itself from its mother and hence, differentiates its narrative from its mother’s narrative. In a sense this may mark the birth of self-consciousness. So, given this position, where might the idea of death enter this idyllic scene?

It enters, I believe, by arousing in the child the fundamental truth of existence, the fundamental punch line of all narratives, namely, that we all die. Much to a parent’s chagrin, finitude is known to the child, even the most manifestly solipsistic, grandiose, or narcissistic child. We hardly need Freud’s seminal studies to remind us of the sheer terror awakened in the child by the thought, not even the action, the anticipation, not even the reality of separation, the breaking apart of narratives. Surely, these represent among the earliest encounters with tragic demise. The mother leaves the room for the barest instant and the child completely falls apart—an apt expression; the integrity of the Self unravels. The Self feels as if it were disappearing along with the mother. It literally disintegrates or feels itself to be disintegrating. But the mother returns and in the bat of an eye the child’s Self, as it were, or sense of Self is reassembled, it resumes its integrity; it feels safe and sound once again, all sense of defect having vanished as if nothing had happened. This implies, moreover, that the integrity of the Self is founded in connection, as both Bowlby (1980) and Basch (1980, 1988) theorized, or more literally, the ability of the Self to locate another in its own presence and thereby feel life emanating from the association with another with which it is eternally connected in part through the narrative. My mother is not only always “out there,” she is always “in here” as well. That is point number one. Point number two takes the form of a question: Might it be that “in here” and “out there” are the same? Perhaps “it” is always “in here.”

From this point on in the child’s life, a point marked perhaps by the mere capacity to remember the mother and those earliest moments of separation, the child knows more than the anxiety of separation; the child knows the

terror of ending, the terror of the narrative ending, of something being no more, of mother being no more, of Self being no more (Weinstein, 2001). Merely to satisfy any one of our sensations, thirst, for example, is to call up in us the memory of thirst. Without this memory there is no satisfaction of the original need. An old joke tells it all.

A man is noisily groaning in a train car and disturbing his fellow passengers: “Boy, am I thirsty. Boy, am I thirsty.” To quiet the gentleman and relieve the tension in the car, the conductor finally brings him a glass of water. All is at last quiet until once again, the gentleman is heard groaning, “Boy, was I thirsty. Boy, was I thirsty”

Extending the argument, we allege that in genuine affirmation, if only by encountering my narrative, hearing me face to face and “experiencing” or recalling the form of affirmation I provide you, you are able to experience the richness of the life force and render it a part of your narrative, yourself. But just as this felt sense of living is called up in you by genuinely encountering the narrative, so too is its twin, “lifelessness,” the reality of disconnection leading ultimately to the felt sense of finitude, to the Self, in other words, feeling its finitude. To affirm you means that having my presence as part of your self, somehow makes you feel safe. Knowing that I not only hear your words but ratify them as well, and with them you, tends to make you confident that you are safe. But notice here that safety implies as well a freedom to confront the existence in yourself of your own demise. My encountering your narrative and with it my affirmation of you now makes it possible for you and me to reminisce on the subject of separation and tragedy. Both of us, after all, can remember our earliest thirsts and longings. For me to be present in your narrative is also for me to be no longer present, for you can imagine my absence even as we encounter one another, just as you can imagine my presence long after I have died. Said differently, my mere presence, you will eventually learn, cannot guarantee you immortality. Thus, even as we celebrate our encountering, our connection, we mourn its and our own anticipated ending. Every narrative, after all, has its conclusion.

What we both have learned, therefore, is that as wondrous as the existence of your otherness in me and my otherness in you may be—that truly we are each other rather than have each other—as wondrous as our mutual affirmations may be and as essential as these affirmations are for the perpetuation of the life force that both of us comprehend and represent to ourselves, they will not keep us away from ultimate tragedy. Through its narratives, the Self is not only about being affirmed or disaffirmed, made to feel proud or humiliated, as Basch theorized. It is also about beginnings and endings that are always in sight; our minds would have it no other way. Like it or not, this remains one of the ineluctable dividends of affirmation: Birth and rebirth sitting right alongside demise and death. That the narrative must commence suggests that it must also conclude. Not pure metaphor, the notion bespeaks

the reality that cells die even as they reproduce, wither away even as they grow in complexity.

The instant of my arrival necessarily evokes the impending instant of my departure. We both cherish most the moment of connection, the instant marking the beginning of the longest stretch of time we will enjoy together; it is the rebirth of our coupling (and hence the revered self object). At this precious point we are on the first page of the narrative. By tomorrow, however, by tonight even, we are aware of our time together running out, the coupling not weakening exactly but its tenure, on this occasion anyway, diminishing, which serves as a reminder that our personal time is also shrinking. Even as we commence reading the first page we tend to glance at the last page if only to see how much is left to be encountered, if not to secretly inspect how it all comes out in the end. No amount of affirmation can modify this reality; it is the history and destiny of our mutual encounters and affirmations that cause this to be the case.

In every airport, arrivals and departures are displayed on separate screens, but the screens are always mounted side by side. Passengers come and go. Who can say in the busy airport who is arriving, who is about to depart? Who, in a quick glance, can determine who is moving on, who is being left behind? We know only that lovers cry at reunions as well as departures. They cry as well in encountering narratives of reunions and departures or merely recalling them.

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