

The Story of Your Life:
Using Narratives in Career Counseling

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Over the years, I have devised and developed a method for identifying the life theme that activates and characterizes an individual. As a career counselor I seek to help individuals turn their pain into progress. I aspire to help them transform their tensions into intentions, not pretention. The simple idea is to show them how to use the social role of work as a theater in which to advance their story, develop themselves, and become more whole. It is counseling focused on the whole rather than the parts. Unfortunately, the whole is harder to see than the parts. Accordingly, most career counselors start their professional lives looking at the parts. However as they gain experience, counselors become more interested in what connects the parts, the pattern that makes everything else about the person meaningful.

The heart of the counseling model is to identify a life theme by comprehending how a client is trying to actively master what they have passively suffered. This is the essence of Freud's ego paradigm which identifies the master motivation in life as turning externally imposed pain or "it" into personal strengths or "I." In turning it into I, the individual turns symptoms into strengths, and if given the opportunity the strengths can become social contributions. Adler (1956) called this movement from symptom to strength moving from "a felt minus to a perceived plus." Art Linkletter talked about turning lemons into lemonade and General McArthur spoke of turning victims into victors. Possibly the most elegant statement of this paradigm was penned by Milton (1667) in Paradise Lost when he described Lucifer's and his minions arrival in hell. Lucifer turned to his followers and said, "Our torments also may, in length of time become our elements" (p. 33). The theme of a life story

can be traced in looking to see how the individual turned symptoms into strengths, tension into intention, and torments into elements. To do this, I ask clients for stories that reveal their spirit. Character and its formation is made visible and becomes available for analysis through personal stories. Stories are modes of knowing that capture the richness, uniqueness, and complexity of what life means to a client. From these stories about their torments and elements, their preoccupations and projects, I look to find the theme.

If one truly believes that the whole is in every piece, any story a client chooses to tell the counselor would suffice. Nevertheless, there are certain stories that are easier for counselors to understand. It is these stories that I seek.

Early Recollections

The first stories I elicit from clients deal with the time when they were making their mind up about life. These stories reveal the key elements of their life theme. Consider an analogy to explain this point. Imagine that you are standing outside of a community theater and someone runs up and begs you to join a play in progress. You agree to do so and ask her what part you are to play. In response, she says that there is no time to tell you and she pushes you center stage as the curtain rises for Act II. There you stand. Think for a moment what you would do. You could retreat by running off stage, look to the director for orders, do a monologue that ignores the other actors, avoid attention by hiding behind a prop, try to get others to follow your script, stand still and do nothing, or watch what the other actors do and try to fit in. As strange as this may seem, we have all been cast into this situation. When our parents brought us home from the hospital, Act II began. Before we arrived, the play was in progress. Stated differently, before the individual was the community. Starting

at about age three or four, individuals start to decide what life means to them. The natural way to begin to construct a life plan is to look to family members and try to fit into the ongoing story by scripting our unique contribution to it. Other less-desirable solutions are to retreat offstage into psychosis, become dependent upon parental direction, develop a narcissistic monologue, shyly avoid attention by hiding behind fears and obsessions, psychopathically manipulate the other actors to fit or script, or stand still and depressively do nothing.

In their family of origin, individuals begin to script their lives to address the torments they experience at home, in school, and around the neighborhood. Some pain hurts more than all others and that problem becomes a preoccupation. Individuals become sensitive to this hurt and spend their lives trying to turn the problem into a strength. They compulsively repeat the story about the seminal problem. Hopefully, with each repetition, they take another step toward mastery. The strengths that they accrue in actively mastering what they passively suffered become the talents, needs, values, and interests which they implement in choosing an occupation. Their mastery and movement to a perceived plus actually explain the origins of the adaptive capacities measured by personality and interest tests as well as provide a window on the unique spirit and life theme that define an individual.

I start by asking clients to tell me three stories about their early childhood, in fact I ask them for the three earliest recollections (ERs; McKelvie, 1979) they can remember. These stories contain their blueprint for life, the essence of their spirit. To provide some practice at seeing life patterns, consider the ERs of four different clients. I choose these ERs simply because each occurred in car. The first client remembered driving along in a car with

her mother and grandmother during a violent thunderstorm. The thunder frightened her until her grandmother told her a beautiful story about rain being God's tears. She became reassured and learned to enjoy hearing thunder. The second client reported going on a n extended summer vacation with her parents. The drive was long and boring yet she enjoyed passing time by writing stories in a blank booklet her grandmother had given her for that purpose. The third client also remembered driving on vacation. She was dancing in the back seat and enjoying herself when her mother told her to sit down and be still. The fourth client remembered getting into the car parked in her driveway so they could attend Sunday service at their church. She stated that her mother purposely slammed the door on her hand.

Could these four stories actually portray a lifelong preoccupation, a sensitivity to certain torments and motivation for particular projects? Well try for yourself to guess at the preoccupation and life course for each of these clients. The client who heard the thunder had become a psychotherapist who used narratives and humor to help patients deal constructively with their fears and problems. The client with the blank booklet writes science fiction novels. The client who was enjoined to sit still and do as she was told selected a non-traditional career for women, against her parents directives, and as a pioneer she constructively stands up for her rights and those of other females. The fourth client suffered great paranoia and found it difficult to establish herself in a career because of her belief that other people sabotaged her. She decided to leave the world of work to concentrate on being a good mother and church volunteer.

With practice, a counselor can quickly discern life themes from ERs yet that is not the goal of career counseling. Instead, the goal is for clients to become aware of their life themes

and decide how to nurture or redirect their life projects. One technique for helping clients to do this involves writing headlines. After I have elicited three ERs from a client, I explain that effective headlines for newspaper articles always contain an action verb. Recall, to be alive is to move. Accordingly, a good headline summarizes the action in the story. I then ask the client to write a headline for each ER. We collaborate until the client is certain that the headlines fit. These headlines contain the gist of the life theme and, when read in sequence, reveal the direction of movement. We will use these headlines later when we discuss how to extend the life theme into the future and turn preoccupation into occupation.

In reading the three headlines, both individually and as a three-part sequence, the counselor can see the client's blueprint for life and chief preoccupation. The question is how to turn that preoccupation into an occupation, that problem into an opportunity, and that symptom into a strength. There are many possible methods for doing this, yet I prefer a simple one-- asking the client who they admire, but that is the topic of another paper.