

Moving from Your Spiritual Autobiography to Your Soul Mythology *Dr. Daniel Robinson*

Workshop Outline

Movement 1: Why Write My Spiritual Autobiography?

1. *What is a spiritual autobiography and why write mine?*
2. *What questions might I decide to answer?*
3. *Which question shall I focus upon today?*
4. *What is the theme of my response?*

Movement 2: Why Write a Myth about My Soul?

1. *What do ancient myths tell me about life?*
2. *What do ancient myths invite in me?*
3. *How are my personal myths unique?*
4. *What are the steps in developing my personal myth?*

Movement 3: How I Tell My Personal Stories Tells Me What?

1. *How does my lived experience influence my storytelling?*
2. *How do I choose to tell my stories?*
3. *What other interpretive versions can be told?*
4. *How do I choose my story's interpretation and personal meaning?*

Workshop Instructions

Movement 1: Why Write My Spiritual Autobiography? (30 minutes)

1. *What is a spiritual autobiography and why write mine?*
2. *What questions might I decide to answer?*
3. *Which question shall I focus upon today?*
4. *What is the theme of my response?*

1. What is a spiritual autobiography and why write mine?

A *spiritual autobiography* is a collection of stories that represent a reflection upon significant events, influences, people, places, and other experiences that have contributed to the shaping and development of who you are and possibly your spiritual life.

Your *spiritual life* is that part of yourself that includes and transcends the normal five physical senses. Spiritual life includes: quietude, walks in nature, movements e.g. yoga, readings, medications/prayers, reflections, beliefs, feelings of connectedness, etc. A good example is reflecting on why your favorite song appeals to you.

Reflection is a lot about recalling special stories in your life and noticing how these may have affected you in a significant way.

Significant Stories may involve your relationship with family, friends, teachers, coaches, ministers, and all others who may have contributed to your spiritual quest.

Where do I begin? Challenging and joyful experiences are often included as turning points in our personal spiritual autobiography. You may start with any story you remember that occurred at any point along your journey. Stories about poor choices, mistakes, and struggles in which you learned a life lesson may have contributed to your spiritual awareness just as much as “mountain top”, mystical, and other joy filled experiences.

Why write my stories? How we experience our stories, how we tell them, and noticing how we choose to reflect upon them can greatly effect how we feel about our life and what we believe. Many students over the past 10 years conclude their spiritual autobiography by saying that this has been one of the most important exercises they have been asked to do during their life. Feel free to comment on what life events or process you might have experienced that helped you establish your belief, doubtfulness, or unbelief in a transcendent spirit. Studies have reported that 95% of all Americans believe in some form of a higher power, however, many people go through periods of time when their faith wanes as well as strengthens. You are not expected to say that you believe anything other than what you truly believe.

Do I have to share my stories? Of course you have the option of keeping your stories private or to decide with whom you feel comfortable sharing. You may want to just share how you felt during the process and how this process might impact how you view your spiritual life and how it might affect your ongoing spiritual journey. When listening to the stories of others, hold the sacredness of these in strict confidence with accepting, non-judgmental silence.

2. What questions might I decide to answer?

Select at least 3 questions to briefly answer and write a few words that describe a story that immediately comes to mind. Feel to answer your own questions.

- What significant events have shaped your life, your values, and your beliefs?
- Were there particular times when you were drawn into a deeper relationship with your Soul, your image of a Greater Divine Spirit, and/or your understanding of a spirit that is available to you personally?
- Are you aware of a mystical experience that transcended your concept of the natural laws of nature or when you felt something very special happened to you?
- Were there times in your life when you experienced “distance from” and/or disbelief in any form of a Divine Spirit?
- Has this image or name for a transcendent being/spirit changed over the years and why? If so, why?
- What form(s) of meditation or prayer have you experienced? How do you currently experience prayer?
- What forms of activities contribute to or are used in place of meditation or prayer e.g. music, candles, a quiet walk in the woods, climbing mountains, walking on the beach, etc.?
- What books and authors have you read that inspired or helped shape your understanding of your Soul and/or a divine spirit? Any particular authors or topics that are drawing you at the present time?

- Have you experienced any dreams or visions that are remarkable?
- Have there been times when you felt that you had “turned the corner in your soul”?

3. Which question shall I focus upon today?

Close your eyes, tap into your instincts and allow one of your stories to rise to the top. If you feel that you have been noticing this story or a similar story coming into your life recently then trust the process that this one is the one you feel led to explore more deeply today. If this is not the case, repeat the process until you feel comfortable.

4. What is the theme of my response?

What do you feel this story has taught you? Have you noticed a thread in the story that you have lived at various times in your life?

Movement 2: Why Write a Myth about My Soul? (30 minutes)

1. *What do ancient myths tell me about life?*
2. *What do ancient myths invite in me?*
3. *How are my personal myths unique?*
4. *What are the steps in developing my personal myth?*

1. What do ancient myths tell me about life?

“Myths are often experienced as explanations of the cosmos and how to live. Additionally, myths continue to intrigue us because of their rich symbolic, metaphorical, and narrative appeal. Some people believe classical music, movies, and even novels have filled the places myths used to occupy culturally.

What is Myth? By Mary Magoulick (first published 2004; revised 2015), faculty.gcsu.edu

2. What do ancient myths invite in me?

Include some or all of these narrative characteristics in your myth:

1. *Symbols that explain the natural world*
2. *Characters are humans, animals, or supernatural beings*
3. *Setting is somewhat like but different from this world*
4. *Plot has metaphysical explanations between real and imaginary*
5. *Actions bend or break natural laws*
6. *Theme teaches values and core meanings*
7. *Evokes the presence of Mystery*
8. *Duality characters that we try to reconcile*
9. *Rituals emerge*
10. *Seeks big questions like “Who are we?” “What is our purpose?”.*

3. How are my personal myths unique?

1. Could the understanding of myself be limited by my own mythology arising from the serendipity of my lived experiences?
2. Do I hold onto to the past or fight to free myself from the past?
3. Might writing a myth unearth new views about my ideologies?
4. Could a transcendent myth help me grasp my earthbound stories?
5. Might I live into the future not through the eyes of my experiences but through the lens of 'yet to be lived' experiences?
6. Might my imaginations be similar to my ancestors?
7. Do I seek to connect with "My People"?
8. Who do I invite to come with me?
9. Where are my shadowlands?
10. Where am I hiding my gifts?

4. What are the steps in developing my personal myth?

1. Before I begin, do I want a protagonist telling my story?
2. Why do almost all novels, movies and myths have a protagonist?
3. Could I write a meaningful and interesting story without a dualistic mind, but using my unitive mind?
4. Are we striving for wholeness within ourselves in which dualistic views about right and wrong are a hindrance, possibly even a block?

Writing a Myth that Lies Unseen within My Life Stories

1. Select an important, powerful story from your Spiritual Autobiography that reflects where you feel that your Soul is inviting you.
2. Write what might be the core theme of a myth or imaginary story that explores the selected theme.
3. Identify who is the myth's lead character, is it you or someone else? Is this character a human, an animal, or a mythical being?
4. Write a paragraph describing what the lead character represents in the story.
5. Who are the others? What might they represent?
6. Where might this be happening as if it were a nighttime dream? Write a paragraph describing the scene(s)?
7. When in all of time is this mythical story emerging?
8. Let the characters write their own role in the myth.
9. How is the myth's story reflecting the theme's details and how are they woven together?
10. What are some deepening questions that invite your soul to go wandering and wondering?
11. How does the lead character choose to end the story?

You may want to consider the following themes developed by *Richard Campbell: Writing Your Legacy – The Step-by-Step Guide to Crafting Your Life* .
 (Richard teaches Legacy Writing to adult learners in Ontario, Canada. He can be reached at richard@guidedlifestories.com. I appreciate him approving the use of this information.)

- Forks in the Road
- My Family, My Self
- The Meaning of Wealth
- My Life's Work
- Self-Image and Well-Being
- The Male-Female Equation
- The End of Life
- From Secular to Spirit
- My Life Goals
- My Legacy Letter

I have selected 5 of these themes that you may find helpful in writing your myth:

Legacy Theme 1: Forks in the Road

Sometimes we make choices that take us down roads we later regret or feel gratitude, does any particular experience stand out to me? Did something happen as a child that changed the course of my life?

Legacy Theme 2: My Family, My Self

What was it like to grow up in your household? Is there one family member that stands out for you? How did this person influence you?

Legacy Theme 4: My life's Work

Has there been a dominant trade or profession that has taken you through your work history? How did this come about and where has it led you? Did your early dreams have any influence on what work you would end up performing?

Legacy Theme 5: Self-Image and Well-Being.

How has your emotional and physical health affected the life you live. Have you struggled with body image? What was that like?

Legacy Theme 8: From Secular to Spirit

Did your earliest religious or spiritual beliefs follow you into adulthood? What changed, and how? Did you ever fall away from your beliefs? What happened?

Legacy Theme 10: My Legacy Letter

If you were to write a Legacy Letter, who would be the recipients? Your children, grandchildren, your community? What values have you lived by and how have they guided you to this moment in your life?

You can certainly develop your myth using any format that best expresses your essence. Song lyrics with a haunting melody speak to me for some reason. Some of those that speak to your Soul may flow to its own rhythm. I share this little free form myth that came to me one hot Spring night about how my dad passed along his gift of Scottish storytelling.

A Fox Went Out on a Chilly Night

With a bit of nostalgia in my longings
Like riding the railroads of yesteryear
I became keeper of family stories
Far from my mother's reach
Dad ran out for a pack of Camels
Finding bourbon under the seat
Of his '55 Buick that summer night
I knew it made him human
To light up on his way out
To drank one down on his way back home.

Listening to funny stories of his youth
My face hot from the fire
I held onto what lay beneath the smiles
With his light blue eyes twinkling
Ghosts of imagination rather than fact
Untrackable and whistling into the night
He found himself lost in memories
I soon found myself lost as well
Inside yarns spun like glassy silk upon time
Forever woven inside him and I.

Daniel Robinson

Movement 3: How I Tell My Personal Stories Tells Me What?
(30 minute Discussion)

1. *How does my lived experience influence my storytelling?*
2. *How do I choose to tell my stories?*
3. *What other interpretive versions can be told?*
4. *How do I choose my story's interpretation and personal meaning?*

(Assembled from an article by Christian Jarrett, a BBC Journalist, BBC Website May 27, 2019 The Essential List; Kate McLean, Western Washington University, Journal of Personality and Social Psychology; Dan McAdams, Northwestern University, The Psychology of Life Stories.)

Multiple peer reviewed studies show that how I interpret and talk about the main events of my life can have profound effects on who I become. The way I tell my story, particularly to myself, will shape who I am. How I interpret events and tell their stories have profound effects on what kind of person I become. Studies show that the stories I tell about myself reveal who I am, construct who I become, and sustain my mental health and sense of wellbeing through time. These narratives lend meaning to my existence and provide my sense of identity.

1. How does my lived experience influence my storytelling?

What is the possibility that changing my self-authoring style can benefit my sense of wellbeing? Narrative Therapy is the process of helping people re-interpret their personal stories in a more constructive light.

2. How do I choose to tell my stories?

Do I choose to tell my stories with Motivational and Affective Themes which look at how much autonomy and connection with others I express and whether they are dominated by: A. Good situations turning sour or B. Bad situations that turn out good?

Or do I choose to tell my stories in an Autobiographical Reasoning perspective that find meaning in what's happened, and discern links between key events and ways we have and haven't changed?

Or do we focus the sharing of our stories focused on Structure that describes timelines, facts and context with much reflection?

3. What other interpretive versions can be told?

Are my stories used to explain my beliefs, my attitudes, and my actions? Are my personal narratives linked to my personality? Does my interpretation of the stories evolve with retelling or does it stay constant?

4. How do I choose my story's interpretation and personal meaning?

Several aspects are linked to wellbeing:

1. People who tell more positive stories and stories with more elements of redemption (for example, that time that you lost your job, but ended up switching career paths into something you enjoy much more) tend to enjoy greater wellbeing, more life satisfaction and better mental health.
2. People whose stories express a greater sense of being a protagonist in the events of their life have more meaningful communion with others.
3. Engaging in more autobiographical reasoning and having greater structure to one's life story correlates with greater wellbeing.

4. Conversely, telling stories with more “contamination”, less autonomy and communion correlates with lower wellbeing.

(Jonathan Adler, Franklin Olin College of Engineering and his collaborators, including Iliane Houle, University of Quebec at Montreal reviewed 30 published investigations into life stories.)

Some findings suggest that if you modify your story as you tell it, perhaps you can change the kind of person you are. There is evidence that increases in the positive features of one’s life story precede benefits for wellbeing.

Does this mean that if you can revise your life story, such as by considering the positives that came out of negative experiences, you might be able to develop a more robust and healthy personality?

As philosophers have long argued, there is a sense in which we construct our own realities. The world is what we make of it. Usually this liberating perspective is applied by psychotherapists to help people deal with specific fears and anxieties.

What is my role as a healthcare provider in encouraging patients to examine how they tell their stories?