

COMPOSING A LIFE STORY

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There are advantages in having access to multiple versions of your life story. I am not referring to a true version versus a false version, or to one that works in a particular therapeutic context as opposed to others, or to one that will sell to *People Magazine* as opposed to ones that won't. I am referring to the freedom that comes not only from owning your memory and your life story but also from knowing that you make creative choices in how you look at your life. It can be very difficult to recognize the ways in which one situation or event in your life is linked to others. When you are able to see multiple levels of changes and consistency, you are empowered to make your own decisions.

When I was working on my memoir of my parents, *With a Daughter's Eye*, I found an example of this in my father's life. Some of you may know my father, Gregory Bateson, as a great anthropologist, a great thinker. But in the middle of his life, he went through a difficult period that went on for some time. From year to year he didn't know whether he would have a salary, whether there would be anything to live on. His career at that time must have seemed totally discontinuous. First he was a biologist. Then he got interested in anthropology and went to New Guinea. He made a couple of field trips that he never wrote up. Then to Bali. During the war he wrote an analysis of propaganda films and worked in psychological warfare. Then he did a study of communication in psychotherapy. Then he worked on alcoholism and schizophrenia, and then on dolphins and octopuses. Somehow he turned into a philosopher.

One of the things that I realized while I was putting together the memoir is that only when he drew together a group of his articles -- all written in very different contexts for very different audiences, with apparently different subject matter -- and put them into the book called *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, did it become clear to him that he had been working on the same kind of question all his life: The continuous thread through all of his work was an interest in the relationships between ideas.

The interruptions that forced him to change his research focus were absolutely critical to pushing him up the ladder of logical types, so that ultimately he could see continuity at a very abstract level. His insight, his understanding of what he had been working on all his life, was a result of a sometimes desperate search for a continuity beyond the discontinuities.

When I started writing *Composing a Life*, the issue that I wanted to write about was the issue of discontinuity. Part of my interest in this was based on two events in my own life. One was that I had just gone through the experience of losing, in a rather painful way, a job that I cared about. I had been forced to change jobs before, because of my husband changing jobs, and I had had to adapt to that situation. So what I set out to do was to look at a group of women who had been through a lot of transitions and who were able to cope with the changes. I was asking the question, "How on earth does one survive this kind of interruption?"

The other circumstance that made me focus on the issue of discontinuity had to do with my experiences in Iran. At the time of the Iranian revolution, my husband and I had been living and working there for seven years. We, and a great many of our friends, had to make fresh starts; many Iranians became refugees. The way they interpreted their situation was absolutely critical to their adjustment. I could see very clearly, among them, that there were those who came into the refugee situation with a sense that they had skills and adaptive patterns that they could transfer to the new situation. They were emphasizing continuity. Other people came into the refugee situation feeling that their lives had ended and they had to start from zero. You could see that the choices people made about how to interpret the continuities and discontinuities in their lives had great implications for the way they approached the future.

There are three meanings that "composing a life," as a phrase, has to me. Two of those meanings refer to different arts, in that I see the way people live their lives as, in itself, an artistic process. An artist takes ingredients that may seem incompatible, and organizes them into a whole that is not only workable, but finally pleasing and true, even beautiful. As you get up in the morning, as you make decisions, as you spend money, make friends, make commitments, you are creating a piece of art called your life.

The word compose helps me look at two aspects of that process. Very often in the visual arts, you put together components to find a way that they fit together and balance each other in space. You make a visual composition of form and color. One thing that you do in composing a life is to put together disparate elements that need to be in some kind of balance, like a still life with tools, fruit, and musical instruments. This sense of balance is something that women have been especially aware of in recent years because they cannot solve the problem of composing the different elements of their lives simply by making them separate, as men have. Of course, less and less are men able to do so. But for a long time it was possible for men to think in terms of a line between the public and the private. A man would go to the workplace and then, at a certain point, he would switch that off and go home to a different world where the atmosphere was different. He could switch gears from one aspect of his life to the other.

But it hasn't been possible for women to separate their commitments in quite the same way. It is one thing in the traditional nuclear family for the husband to go to the office and stop thinking about his family during the day because he has left his wife in charge. It is quite a different thing for both parents to go off and feel that they can completely

forget what is happening with the family. Many women have the sense that the combining of different areas in their lives is a problem that is with them all the time.

What this has meant is that women have lived their lives experiencing multiple simultaneous demands from multiple directions. Increasingly men are also living that way. So thinking about how people manage this is becoming more and more important. One way to approach the situation is to think of how a painter composes a painting: by synchronously putting together things that occur in the same period, and finding a pattern in the way they fit together.

But of course "compose" has another meaning in music. Music is an art in which you create something that happens over time, that goes through various transitions over time. Looking at your life in this way, you have to look at the change that occurs within a lifetime -- discontinuities, transitions, and growth of various sorts -- and the artistic unity, like that of a symphony with very different movements, that can characterize a life. Those two meanings of composing a life -- one that relates to visual art and the other that relates to music -- will crop up again in this essay. But what I want to emphasize is a third meaning, one that has to do with the ways in which you compose your own versions of your life. I'm referring to the stories you make about your life, the stories you tell first to yourself and then to other people, the stories you use as a lens for interpreting experience as it comes along. What I want to say is that you can play with, compose, multiple versions of a life.

For instance, most people can tell a version that emphasizes the continuities in their lives, to make a single story that goes in a clear direction. But the same people can also tell their life stories as if they were following on this statement: "After lots of surprises and choices, or interruptions and disappointments, I have arrived some place I could never have anticipated."

For example, one version of my life story goes like this: I already thought of myself as a writer when I was in high school, and there hasn't been a year since college that I haven't published something. Now I spend half the year writing full-time and half the year writing and teaching. Many of my students are future writers.

That's one version of me. The other version goes like this: I planned in high school to be a poet. But I gave up writing poetry in college. The only writing I did for years was academic publish-or-perish writing. When I became unemployed because of the Iranian revolution, shortly after my mother died, I dealt with unemployment by starting to write a memoir. I suddenly found that I could write nonfiction. Now I'm considering switching again and writing a novel. Both of these are true stories. But they are very different stories. One person told me that there had been so much discontinuity in her life that it wasn't hard to think of a discontinuous version, but it was painful to tell it. I think that is a problem many people have. Because our society has preferred continuous versions of stories, discontinuities seem to indicate that something is wrong with you. A discontinuous story becomes a very difficult story to claim.

I would say that the most important effect of my book, *Composing a Life*, has been to give people who feel that they've been bumped from one thing to another, with no thread of continuity, a way of positively interpreting their experience. You might be uncomfortable with your life if it has been like the *Perils of Pauline*, yet many of us have lives like that. One strategy for working with that is to make a story that interprets change as continuity. One of my favorites was someone who said, "My life is like surfing, with one wave coming after another." He unified his whole life with that single simile.

Of course, in composing any life story, there is a considerable weight of cultural pressure. Narratives have canonical forms. One of the stories that we, as a culture, respond to is the story in which the hero or heroine's end is contained in the beginning. For example, there is a film about Henry Ford that I happened to see recently on television. In one scene, he sees his first horseless carriage as a little boy and falls in love with it. In other words, you have an episode in childhood that prefigures all that is to come.

Think about how many biographies you have read in which the baby who grew up to be a great violinist loved lullabies, or loved listening to the radio: stories about talent that was visible from the very beginning.

Another popular plot is one that we can think of as the conversion narrative. It's a simple plot. Lives that in reality have a lot of zigzags in them get reconstrued into before-and-after narratives with one major discontinuity. One very interesting example of this is the *Confessions of St. Augustine*, which tells the story of his life before and after his conversion to Christianity. The narrative structure requires that he depict himself before conversion as a terrible sinner, that he devalue all that he did before he was converted, and that he dredge up sins to talk about so that he can describe a total turnaround.

Reading this book today, what strikes me is that St. Augustine after his conversion to Christianity was not that different from St. Augustine before his conversion to Christianity. He pursued a reasonable intellectual life.

He was a seeker. He experimented with different things. After his conversion, it is true, he disowned his mistress, who had borne him a son, which is construed, in this story, as a sign of virtue. But he continued to be, as he is throughout the narrative, profoundly self-centered. The universe was apparently organized around bringing him to God, and other people were very peripheral. In that sense, you can follow the same story throughout the book.

The conversion narrative can be a very empowering way of telling your story, because it allows you to make a fresh start. The more continuous story, in which the end is prefigured in the beginning, is powerful in different ways. But

what I want to emphasize are the advantages of choosing a particular interpretation at a particular time, and the even greater advantage of using multiple interpretations.

The availability of multiple interpretations of a life story is particularly important in terms of how different generations communicate with each other.

When we, as parents, talk to our children about our lives, there is a great temptation to edit out the discontinuities, to reshape our histories so that they look more coherent than they are. But when we tell stories to our children with the zigzags edited out, it causes problems for many of those children.

A lot of young people have great difficulty committing themselves to a relationship or to a career because of the feeling that once they do, they're trapped for a long, long time. On the other hand, they feel they've got to get on the right "track" because, after all, this is a long and terrifying commitment. I think it is very liberating for college students when an older person says to them, "Your first job after college need not be the beginning of an ascending curve that's going to take you through your life. It can be a zigzag. You might be doing something different in five years. That's something that young people need to hear: that the continuous story, where the whole of a person's life is prefigured very early on, is a cultural creation, not a reflection of life as it is really lived.

The ways in which we interpret our life stories have a great effect on how our children come to define their own identities. An example of this occurred in my own life when my daughter was about to become a teenager. She said to me, "Gee Mom, it must be awfully hard on you and Daddy that I'm not interested in any of the things you're interested in." I said, "What do you mean?" She said, "Well, you're professors. You write books about social science. I'm an actress. I care about theater." I said a secret prayer because it was clearly a very tricky moment. Maybe she needed to believe in that discontinuity. Maybe it was worrying her and she needed to get away from that discontinuity.

But what I said to her was, "Well, to be a social scientist, to be an anthropologist, you have to be a good observer of human behavior. You have to try and understand how people think and why they behave as they do. It strikes me that that's pretty important for a good actor." She has been telling that story ever since because it gave her permission, first, to pursue what she deeply wanted to pursue without feeling she was betraying me and her father. But it also gave her permission to use anything she might pick up from us by giving her a way of construing the cross-generational relationship as a continuity.

The choice you make affects what you can do next. Often people use the choice of emphasizing either continuity or discontinuity as a way of preparing for the next step. They interpret the present in a way that helps them construct a particular future.

Much of coping with discontinuity has to do with discovering threads of continuity. You cannot adjust to change unless you can recognize some analogy between your old situation and your new situation. Without that analogy you cannot transfer learning. You cannot apply skills. If you can recognize a problem that you've solved before, in however different a guise, you have a much greater chance of solving that problem in a new situation. That recognition is critical to the transfer of learning.

If you create continuity by freezing some superficial variable, the result, very often, is to create deep change. This is something my father used to talk about in relation to evolutionary theory. He used the example of a tightrope walker.

The tightrope walker is walking along a high wire, carrying a very light bamboo rod. To keep his balance, he continually moves the rod. He keeps changing the angle of the rod to maintain a constancy, his balance in space. If you froze the rod, what would happen to him? He would fall off. In other words, the superficial variation has the function of maintaining the deeper continuity. In evolution, the deeper continuity is survival. For the tightrope walker, it's staying on the high wire.

Among the people I've talked to, it's clear that those who stay the course with their commitments are those who are able to ride the changes and to adapt. At some fundamental level, they are able to bridge all the superficial changes, and to say, "My commitment is the same commitment that brought me here in the first place." They are people with an extraordinary capacity to translate.