COMPOSING A LIFE STORY

This essay is the edited and retitled transcript of a talk on my book *Composing a Life* given at a Common Boundary Conference in the early 1990s, later published as a book on the "power of stories to transform and heal." This piece reflects on the uses of memoir and how telling one's story plays a role in composing a life, for future possibilities are always understood in relation to an interpretation of the past. I have included it here as a bridge connecting what I have written about my parents to what I have written more generally about the shapes of lives and how they can be studied.

—MCB, 2004

There are three meanings that "composing a life," as a phrase, has to me. Two of those meanings compare living 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 compartmentalize their lives. 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 part of the day off and go home to a 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 elements together and finding a pattern in how they fit.

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. Examining 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.

In addition to these two meanings of composing a life — one that relates to the visual arts and the other that relates to music — I want to emphasize 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 lenses for interpreting experience as it comes along. What I want to say is that you can play with, compose, multiple versions of a life.

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 given 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.

In the postmodern environment in which we live, it is easy to say that no version is fixed, no version is completely true. I want to push beyond that awareness and encourage you to think about the creative responsibility involved in the fact that there are different ways to tell your stories. It's not that one is true and another is not true. It's a matter of emphasis and context. For example, one of the things that people do at meetings is to introduce themselves. I was at a conference recently where, in the course of two days, I introduced myself three times in different breakout groups. One person who had been there all three times came up to me and said, "You know, you said something completely different every time." Of course I did. The contexts were different.

Imagine the choices you have in saying things about yourself and about other people. These are real choices, but they are made in the presence of a set of conventions. Think of a self-introduction as a literary genre. There are things you include and things you don't. Those decisions are related to who you're talking to and where you are, as well as who you're talking about.

You can do the same with versions of your life history. 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 someplace I could never have anticipated." Every one of us has a preference for one of these versions, but if we try, we can produce both. My guess is that there are a lot of people reading this who think of themselves as growing and developing and moving on smoothly. That's part of the intellectual context many of us are in. But some of us experience our lives as discontinuous, interrupted processes.

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 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's 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 recent 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 kind of life 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.

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.

One of the most striking examples here is the way people talk about divorce. Some people approach a divorce by emphasizing what was wrong with the marriage all along: "Finally we got a divorce. But it's been awful for twenty years." I think some of the anger that develops in divorce situations comes from a need to re-create a continuity. But then there are some who don't need to create continuity by tracing the problem back. They emphasize the discontinuity and view the problem as absolutely new. Perhaps they would tend to focus on loss in that situation rather than anger.

When I started *Composing a Life,* the issue I wanted to explore was discontinuity. Part of my interest 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 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 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.

Much of coping with discontinuity has to do with discovering threads of continuity. You eannot 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 the new situation. That recognition is critical to the transfer of learning.

It can be very difficult to recognize the ways in which one situation or event in your life is linked to others. 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 lasted 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 World War II 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 — to 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. So even when I was working on the memoir, I was picking at this question of continuity and discontinuity, and examining the incredible gains that can come from reconstruing a life history by combining both interpretations.

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's or heroine's end is contained in the beginning. For example, there is a film about Henry Ford that I happened to watch 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.

One of my favorite examples is a story from the life of St. Teresa of Avila, a Counter-Reformation saint. When she was a child, part of Spain was still controlled by the Moors: part of the country was Catholic, and part was Muslim. When she was ten or so, she set out, with her younger brother, for the territory controlled by the Moors in order to be martyred and go to heaven. This becomes an appropriate story to prefigure a life of self-sacrifice and dedication to God. Many biographies and autobiographies have this pattern.

Another popular form 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 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 he did before he was converted, and that he dredge up sins to talk about so he can describe a total turnaround.

As I read 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, an act that 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.

A more complicated conversion story is *The Autobiography of Malcolm X.* Much of the book tells of how Malcolm X, who had been a small-time crook, was converted in prison to the Nation of Islam, Elijah Muhammad's American Black Muslim movement. About two-thirds of the book is written as a conventional conversion narrative: "I was deep in sin and then I was saved by Elijah Muhammad."

But then another big discontinuity occurs. Malcolm X becomes disillusioned with the corruption within the Nation of Islam and isolated by the politics around Elijah Muhammad. He separates from them, making a pilgrimage to Mecca and couverting to orthodox Islam, and starts his own Muslim organization in the United States. So in this book you have the image of somebody who developed an interpretation of his life to support the validity of one particular message of salvation and then had to flip over into another one. It's an extraordinarily interesting and unusual story because tbe conversion happens not once but twice.

One very common example of the uses of the conversion story shows up in Twelve-Step programs. Twelve-Step programs essentially convey the message that if you can construe your life in such a way as to support a turnaround, we will help you construct a new life. But you have to define yourself, as St. Augustine had to define himself, as a sinner, or as Malcolm X had to define himself for his second conversion, as having been duped. An emphasis on a turnaround becomes the condition for moving on to the next stage.

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 how the 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. 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 young people need to hear: that the continuous story, where the whole of a person's life is prefigured very early on, is often 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 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.

As parents, we also need to be flexible in how we construe our children's lives. Recently, I was in Israel visiting on several kibbutzim. Many of the older people on the kibbutzim are in distress about the fact that their children do not want to "follow in their footsteps." Their children want to travel. They want to live in the city. They want to go to the university. Some of them even want to leave Israel, to emigrate.

I started having a series of conversations with the older people in which I would say, "Tell me about your parents. Were they farmers? Did they live on a kibbutz?" People would say things like "Oh no. My father was a tailor in Poland. He lived in the city." Then I would ask how their parents felt when they became socialists and Zionists and came to Israel. In many cases the answer was "They were appalled." Sometimes the answer was "They were thrilled that I was doing something they never could have done."

What the parents I was talking to did not realize was that their children were indeed following in their footsteps. Their children were doing exactly as they had done: leaving the location, lifestyle, and convictions of their parents and going out to do something new in a new place.

The continuity and the discontinuity are at different logical levels in each of these examples. If you can be aware of those different levels simultaneously, you can have an advantage in coping with your life. Otherwise, it may happen that when you are trying to achieve continuity, you actually create the opposite effect. You may be looking for continuity in the wrong place.

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.

I found an interesting example recently of a group of people who were able to maintain a deep continuity in their lives through many superficial changes. They were members of an order of Catholic nuns between the ages of fifty-five and sixty-five whom I was invited to address at a convention. They had all joined the order before the reforms of Vatican II. When they joined, nuns lived in convents. They wore black habits and white headdresses. They never had friendships. They were told what to do in every way.

Then came the reform of the religious orders. It is well known that at that time many nuns left their orders. Some of them left because they felt there was too much change; others, because they felt there wasn't enough. But the interesting thing to me was the question of who stayed.

Among the people I talked to, it was clear to me that those who stayed were those who were able to ride the changes and to adapt. At some fundamental level, they were 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 were people with an extraordinary capacity to *translate*. The people who were fixated on the habit or the details of ritual couldn't stay when they lost those things.

It's worth giving some thought to what kinds of things deserve to be held steady and what kinds of things it's most adaptive to vary. I think you can argue that one way of looking at addiction is that the addict is trying to keep something steady, a certain level of intoxication, that is, in fact, producing profound and worsening change. An addiction is a constancy of the wrong kind.

When you are able to see multiple levels of change and consistency, you are empowered to make your own decisions. I think this is true of diversity in general. I want to offer one final example from my own life. People who have one famous, successful parent are often locked into the problem of whether or not they succeed in living up to the model of that person. One of the things I gained by having two famous and very different parents is the freedom to be myself.

For a long time, I thought that my interests had nothing to do with theirs. When I went to college, I was fascinated with linguistics. I read the

work of Edward Sapir and Benjamin Whorf and decided that linguistics was going to be my life's work. Nobody had told me that linguistics as done by Whorf and Sapir is a branch of anthropology. So I walked, as a total innocent, into the family business. But I opened up a branch in a new neighborhood.