1. Researching Trust and Health
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2. Health, Illness and Culture
Broken Narratives
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“SOMETIMES YOU JUST LIVE TOO LONG”

I shall begin this essay by referring briefly to two conversations I recently had with my mother, who suffers from dementia. In the first, she was complaining, yet again, about her living situation. Just over a year earlier, she had moved into an assisted living residence. She had done so reluctantly but (more or less) willingly: Given some of the difficulties she had been having with cooking, cleaning, and other such activities, and given as well the occasional loneliness of living by herself, she had come to see that she might be better off elsewhere. But this has brought difficulties of its own, not the least of which concerns the fact that most of the time she has no idea at all why she is there and resents it immensely. A new woman just moved in, she told me last week. And apparently, every time she’s finished with dinner she asks my mother where the Bingo game is being played. “She asks the same question over and over again!” my mother complained angrily. “She’s stupid!” “It’s got nothing to do with stupidity,” I tell her; “it sounds like she’s got some memory problems, and if truth be known (I add, as gently as possible), they’re similar to yours.” My mother is momentarily speechless, both knowing and not-knowing at the same time. And then a couple of minutes later she tells the same story once more, displaying through her own repetition the exact same malady she has just condemned.

I, too, am speechless.

The other conversation was quite different. My mother had left me a panicky telephone message about people coming to visit her, but she was confused about the details and needed to speak with me. “I think Lissy (her daughter-in-law) is picking me up tonight to take me to the Cape,” she said. I told her I seriously doubted that; having spoken to Lissy just the night before, I knew that she had plans to take my mother to the Cape 2 weeks later. A day earlier, she had been convinced that her sister was coming to visit the following day and that my brother, Ken, and his wife were visiting a week from then. “No,” I had told her, “I am quite sure Ken is coming to visit tomorrow.” Did that mean that she was having multiple visitors tomorrow? “Call your sister,” I said, “and see when she’s coming, this week
or next; and then, call me so I know who’s coming when.” Her sister was in fact coming the following week. So, Ken was visiting tomorrow, her sister next week. Fine. But just after things had settled down, she had received the call from Lissy. This was what led to her coming undone. It was information overload; everything was getting jumbled together; the visitors were the same and the dates of visit were the same but they had become severed from one another. And so, when she woke up the next morning, and tried to piece together this awful, confusing puzzle, panic set in. At this point I simply tried to calm her down and reassure her that only one person, Ken, was coming to visit this weekend. Her sister was coming the following weekend, and Lissy, the one after that. Just to make sure, I told her I would call Lissy. Yes, she was planning to visit in 2 weeks. So I called my mother back right away to confirm the situation. It was at that moment that she broke down, bewildered, over the very being she had become. “Oh, Mark, what am I going to do? Sometimes you just live too long . . .”

“I WANT TO BE A PERSON”

My mother currently exists in a kind of liminal psychic space. Despite her occasional recognition of her difficulties, as above, she either downplays them (She’s actually spoken lightheartedly of having “CRS” [Can’t Remember Shit] syndrome) or is (virtually) unaware of them. She also remains vehement about her abilities. “I know I can still drive just fine,” she will say. “I’ve always taken care of my own papers.” “I’ve never been late with a check.” If I question these abilities—“Ma, there’s a chance you’ll get lost when you’re driving.” “Your papers are in a state of chaos.” “Actually, you have been late with several checks”—her response is often swift and to the point: “You’re treating me like a child.” Or: “I’m not an imbecile.” I sometimes find myself trying to explain to her that things are different now that some of the things she used to be able to do, very competently, she can no longer do. “I want to get some kind of job,” she announced recently, maybe office work of the sort she had done years ago. “That really may not be the best job for you at this point,” I told her. “There are some things you can do just fine,” I said, “but other things are harder for you now.” Generally speaking, however, it doesn’t sink in. It is difficult to determine whether this is a function of incomprehension or denial or both.

As nice as it is, the assisted-living residence where she has landed undoubtedly adds to the problem. “Bus trips to get ice cream?” “Bingo, every night!” “Everybody goes upstairs to bed at 8 o’clock!” Many of her peers have walkers or wheelchairs and look very old and fragile. She doesn’t look like them at all; she’s attractive and moves briskly, still confident in her step. Consequently, these people, and the activities they pursue, annoy and sometimes upset her. We therefore find ourselves looking for ways to help her, unsure whether “adjustment” is the answer or something else entirely.

“What do you want?” I asked her recently. The answer: “I want to be a person.” When she had lived alone, she said, she had been a “free agent,” able to walk over to the local drugstore, to come and go as she pleased. And she could drive. Now, however, there was that rickety old van. And there were all those old people. To paraphrase her: It’s all just nothingness.

There is an image still in view, of a full and whole person: independent, free, of sound mind and body. There is a story that can be told about this person. It is the story of a child whose parents were too poor to keep her and who therefore sent her off to a children’s home—which she had quite loved—for a couple of years. It is the story of a teenager, a bit shy but the smartest in the whole class; of a young woman, competent and hardworking, going it alone, while her husband was away in India during the war; of a middle-aged woman, prematurely widowed, who, after years of being a homemaker, had to go out into the work world once more, where she excelled, rising to the position of office manager, in charge of lots of people and able to make the whole outfit run smoothly and efficiently. This story still seems to be with her. How dare anyone suggest that she could no longer balance a checkbook! She had balanced books for a living, and was damn good at it! On one level, the continued presence of this story is surely a good thing. But it is also the source of much of her current frustration and sorrow.

For better and for worse, she simply forgets many of the things she has been unable to do; she has minimal memory of her lost purse or checkbook (or whatever) and, if we apprise her of these losses, she generally seems not to believe it. Not unlike many others with dementia, what she often does, in fact, is convince herself that these things must have been taken from her, perhaps stolen. It cannot possibly be me, she is in effect telling us; it has to be someone else—maybe one of the workers in her residence. She believes this despite the fact that we have managed to locate, eventually, every single item she has lost. The same is true of plans we might make together. Recently, for instance, I asked her whether she wanted to spend some time with my brother Ken, whom I introduced earlier, and his family. It would be a change of scenery. Plus, her great-granddaughter would be there. “Sure,” she said. “That sounds wonderful.” We even spoke about what weekend she might go. But she forgot all of this. And when she (re)learned that she would soon be leaving to visit my brother and his family, she immediately became convinced that we had orchestrated the entire thing behind her back, as usual, treating her like a child once again. And there was, there is, nothing one can do to convince her of the truth. For the most part, we no longer even try.

There are also times when she “remembers” things that didn’t happen. Just recently, in the wake of yet another misplaced purse, she told me she had left it at my house when she had been over for dinner. This simply wasn’t true. But in her mind it was, and remains so; and as a result, my wife and I become magically transformed into the purse snatchers: It’s our fault that she doesn’t have that purse, and we really ought to take the time to find it. Here, too, there is absolutely nothing that can be done to move her from
Music and great-grandchildren, among other things, provide an occasion for what Iris Murdoch has referred to as “unselfing,” a process wherein the otherness of the Other displaces ego concerns. “We cease to be,” she writes, “in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need” (1970, p. 58). Here is another passage that nicely spells out Murdoch’s perspective:

I am looking out of my window in an anxious and resentful state of mind, oblivious of my surroundings, brooding perhaps on some damage done to my prestige. Then suddenly I observe a hovering kestrel. In a moment everything is altered. The brooding self with its hurt vanity has disappeared. There is nothing now but kestrel. And when I return to thinking of the other matter it seems less important. (p. 82)

The world has returned, and it has done so at precisely the same moment that the (autobiographical) self and its narrative about “disappeared.” What are the implications of this unselfing process about which Murdoch speaks?

BEYOND NARRATIVE

This process would seem to lead us beyond narrative, if not for the whole of our existence then at least for a significant portion of it. I am reminded in this context of Crispin Sartwell’s recent book End of Story (2000), which is essentially a diatribe against narrative. Much of our experience, Sartwell reminds us, escapes linguistic articulation. It therefore strikes him as ironic, and wrong, that so much attention has come to be devoted to narrative as a lens for understanding the human world. In addition, however, there is the idea that narrative, in its fetish for organization, order, coherence, is an oppressive force that we would do well to move beyond. Sartwell even offers a kind of confession early on in the book:

I’ve tried to live my own life with an extreme degree of coherence; I’ve tried to understand my own life as a teche, to dedicate it to the realization of well-defined goals. I’ve tried to rationalize my life: both to live it rationally and to convince myself that I have lived or am living it rationally. I reached a point at which I came to experience the need to do that as a torture. I came to experience the recalcitrance of myself to my will, came to experience the immensity of my own horrible and lovely irrationality. I came also to experience or to admit the recalcitrance of the world to my will. The latter recalcitrance I could initially narrate as a series of “barriers” to my life-plan. But I reached the point at which I wanted to learn to let the world be instead of trying to transform it into an instrument of my will. (pp. 15–16)
This “torture,” and the liberation that followed as Sartwell sought to move beyond narrative in his own life, apparently provided him with a lesson about the underside of narrative itself: It can become a kind of prison that reduces the bountifulness of experience and subjects it to willful control. There is thus the need for “letting go,” for disordering one’s world; only then will the “ecstasy” of experience be made possible: “The moment of ecstasy is a moment of vertigo, a vertigo that responds to letting go of one’s projects into an all-encompassing present moment” (p. 22).

As Sartwell goes on to argue, drawing especially on Bataille’s *Inner Experience* (1988), itself a kind of diatribe against “project,” against “the putting off of existence to a later point” by virtue of one’s recourse to “discursive thought” (p. 46), narrative is undermined, deconstructed, by the sheer force of certain modes of experience: “Narrative comes apart at the extremes . . . in ecstasy, in writhing pain, at death” (Sartwell, 2000, p. 65). But that is not all: “[Narrative] has already come apart everywhere, all the time, wherever people are breathing, or walking around, or watching TV, and not getting anywhere narratively speaking. What narrative is inadequate to is not just the shattering moment, but the moment of indifference” (p. 65). Sartwell even offers us some instruction in this context:

You cannot narrate if you cannot breathe, so shut up for a moment and take a deep breath. Pull yourself away from significance for a moment and let yourself feel the sweet, deep, all-enveloping insignificance all around you. And take comfort in your own insignificance; take comfort in the triviality of your culture; take comfort in the triviality of your life-project and your failure in realizing. (p. 65)

Take comfort in the fact that, even though you can’t drive, or get a job, or maintain your own books, and that consequently you’re no longer a Person, you’re still alive, well-fed and well-clothed, able to find meaning in music or joy in your great-grandchild. Sartwell’s message is ultimately a quite simple one: *Just chill.* Forget about all that “significance” stuff; indifference will undoubtedly leave you a good deal more content with your lot in life. I have been tempted to think in similar terms to Sartwell myself: *Get over it; get over yourself,* with your still-kicking projects, your aspirations and fantasies. But this is precisely what my mother cannot do. She’s in too deep.

Sartwell can surely identify with this problem. He speaks of feeling the need for meaning as a “pressure, as an anxiety, and furthermore as the project of having some project, and hence as a project that can never be discharged. I live like this,” he admits: “busy trying to finish whatever’s in front of me as quickly as possible. Then finished. Then feeling empty, subject to attack from my own head. Then inventing or accepting a new project. And so on. I work by projects toward the extinction of project, then can’t live there and go on to a new one” (p. 65). So it is that he must tell himself: *Just chill.* But it’s hard: Whether we’re narrativists or antinarrativists, the pressure for meaning, for significance, remains much the same. All he can do, therefore, is try to find some relief. As he does: in caring for his children (who he’s “not trying to make . . . into particular sorts of people”), in playing the accordion or the harmonica (neither of which he’s trying to “master”). “OK,” he avows; playing these instruments is “still trying to do something.” So perhaps there’s a narrative in there somewhere (the college professor who, much to his chagrin, gets so caught up in trying to defeat discursive thought through discursive thought that he’s got to find devices that provide some measure of “surcease from the voice in my head”). “But the point is that the purpose is achieved precisely at the moment that it fades from awareness, those moments are the extinction of project sought by project” (p. 65). He wishes he “could live more, that [he] could play more,” that there could be “deeper and longer forms of immersion” (p. 66). I wish this for my mother, too. In her case, however, it would seem that there is only one thing that could make this wish come true: the very dissolution of her own autobiographical identity—which, of course, will only happen if and when her dementia has run its destructive course. Shall we wish for *this?* It would indeed likely provide her some “surcease” of her own. At the same time, she will also have moved that much closer to oblivion (indifference?) and death. What a strange situation. Is there anything to do now, in the face of her more liminal state of being?

**DECONSTRUCTING THE CULTURAL STORY**

I have some misgivings about Sartwell’s rendition of narrative: Narrative need not be as coercive and controlling as he sometimes suggests, and, whether we like it or not, it surely remains intimately connected to what we generally think of as selfhood. (Perhaps this is why Sartwell’s own account of how he has tried to move beyond narrative itself takes the form of a narrative.) My mother’s recent experience, however, has allowed me to see his argument in a somewhat different light. It is quite possible that by moving beyond narrative, beyond the confines of storylines that do indeed serve to oppress her, she too will experience something like liberation.

It is precisely here, at this juncture, that cultural reality becomes particularly salient. For, in the background of so much of my mother’s frustration and discontent is, as suggested earlier, a highly robust image of who and what she ought to be—manifested in the form of an equally robust, if deluded, image of who she actually is now. Perhaps this is a universal phenomenon. Perhaps, that is, human beings, wherever we may find them, reject quite naturally their cognitive decline and spontaneously devise strategies for convincing themselves and others it’s not happening. It is also possible, however, that a portion of my mother’s response to her current situation is the product of a culture that, in a distinct sense, refuses to
admit the reality of decline, and death, into its midst. “Stop Aging Now!” is a phrase that one sometimes sees in conjunction with plastic surgery and skin creams designed to remove all traces of time, all the wear and tear of growing old.

There is a dual cultural narrative at work in this context, therefore, operating behind the scenes of consciousness. There is the narrative of the vital, self-sufficient Individual, who resists the kind of fragility, vulnerability, and dependency that growing old sometimes brings in tow. It has come as something of a surprise to see just how potent this narrative is in my mother’s case. It is highly resistant to modification too: As of now, there remains little room for building in a sense of fragility or vulnerability, little room for admitting that things are changing. In part, this is no doubt because of the unconscious dimension of the narrative at hand. It is not something she can look at, hold at a distance. Rather, it is working through her, permeating her being. In some earlier work (Freeman, 2002, 2006), I have spoken in this context of the “narrative unconscious,” which has to do with those parts of our history that have not, or not yet, become an explicit part of our story.

There is an added feature of the narrative of self-sufficiency as well, one that seems extremely potent in American culture in particular. In the present case, it has to do with my mother’s fervent wish not to be a “burden” on anyone—especially, of course, her children. One of the reasons being unable to drive is so frustrating to her is that others—most often, my wife or me—have to do it for her. “I hate to rely so much on you,” she often says. “I hate to be a burden.” “It’s not a big deal,” we may say in response. “It’s just part of life.” But it’s not part of the life—part of the narrative of life—that she has employed throughout the years. I have even tried to deconstruct this narrative with her: “People can rely upon one another,” I might say; our lives are intertwined; we’re not nomads but relational beings, and it really is okay that we’re doing this with you and for you. “Thank you, thank you, thank you,” she sometimes says when we return her home. She is extremely appreciative for the “buggy ride,” as she calls it. But she very much wishes she didn’t have to take it. The narrative of self-sufficiency looms large for her.

This narrative is reinforced by another, with which it operates in tandem: the narrative of inexorable decline—which may culminate in “narrative foreclosure,” as I have called it, wherein one becomes convinced that “the story’s over” (Freeman, 2000). Old people, with their walkers and their wheelchairs, surround my mother. People sit in the lobby, slumped over, dozing, waking briefly when there are passersby. Some of them do seem to have little to do, little left to live for: Their story is over—or at least that is how they see it. And part of the reason why they see it this way may be linked back to the image of that vital self just considered. They are the inverted image of that self, beyond vitality, beyond self-sufficiency—in some ways, my mother has suggested, beyond personhood itself.

She is vehemently not-them. The nightly Bingo that they play downstairs, in open view, really gets to her. At the end of the day, there are only mindless games, camaraderie created by random numbers. Time for them is not to be lived, but passed. There is no story to be told after such days; they are just like the one before and the one before that. My mother sometimes seems to resent these “nonpersons” with their nonstories. In her eyes, they have crossed the line, and the image of them sitting there, night after night, is painful to behold. I suppose one could say that, on some level, they exist in the moment. And it’s quite possible that they are less troubled by their existence than she is hers. But this is hardly an occasion for envy.

**Dilemmas of Being**

As of now, she is simply not ready to go there. That is, she is not ready to join the ranks of these seeming nonpersons and, painful thought it is, is thus holding fast to what remains of her own personhood, her own autobiographical identity. She still wants to live a life that is worth telling about, one in which meaningful and significant things happen, and can be communicated to other people. This brings about problems of its own. Sometimes, a trip will be planned—a river cruise, to take one recent example. The hope is that the trip will serve as an Event—that is, a meaningful and significant enough episode to be recounted, gratefully. “How was the trip, ma?” We nervously await her answer. Sometimes, her face is filled with excitement and she eagerly tells the story of the day. But more often, it proves to be disappointing. “We just sat in a boat. We really didn’t do anything.” And the picture can become darker still due to the fact that she may not remember much about the trip at all. She often complains about there being a lack of activities where she lives. She’s right; there ought to be more. We have come to realize, however, that many of the activities that do take place—and which she apparently participates in—are quickly forgotten, thereby leading her, again and again, to the conclusion that there is simply nothing to do there. “But ma,” we might say, “you do do things there.” Materially speaking, this is true. Psychically speaking, however, it is false. And it’s her psyche that is leading the way.

In a distinct sense, we become the selves we fashion through the imagination. My mother has thus become the self that she has imagined through the events, the non-events, and the forgotten events of her life. She complained recently about feeling like “nothing.” This is no doubt because there is so much “nothing” in the past that she daily looks back upon when we ask her what she did and how it went. (It is getting close to the time for us to stop asking these kinds of questions.) She often can’t remember what went on in a given day and, as noted before, concludes that there has been nothing at all. Or there are hazy scenes, built up out of memories and fantasies, today’s images and yesterday’s and maybe tomorrow’s. This
hazy nothingness is what there is, and it doesn’t resolve itself very well in the form of a story worth telling. Nor does it lead to the kind of self she remembers having been and still wants to be.

Some of what I am describing here is likely a function of the biological process of memory loss as it is found in dementia. Short-term memory declines before long-term, and as a result personal identity is less rooted in the near than in the distant past. This brings us closer to the heart of the existential problem at hand: There remain memories of the vital, self-sufficient self my mother once was. Indeed, those memories remain compelling enough to enter the present: In her own mind, there’s a significant part of her that is that self, still. At the same time, however, this vision of the self cannot be confirmed and sustained by the day-to-day reality she lives. For, that reality, bound up as it is with the passing events of the day, is much more transient, much more evanescent. It seems that there is nothing to get hold of. Or, to put it just a bit differently, all that can be gotten hold of is: nothing. It’s the juxtaposition of these two realities, tied to the distant and the near past, the self that was and the self that is, that makes things so difficult.

There are three dilemmas—let us call them “dilemmas of being”—I want to refer to in summing up the present situation. On the one hand, my mother is tired and frustrated, feeling at times that her life has gone on long enough. She has no interest in spiraling downhill, descending into madness like some of the people she has known through the years, and wants to avoid it all costs. On the other hand, she remains committed, strenuously, to pressing on, being her own person, keeping herself as connected to the world as possible. This, again, is surely a good thing on some level. But the fact that she has so much difficulty actually doing it—that is, conducting her life in the way that she wishes, the way that she once did—makes for a difficult time. She has thus come to be decidedly ambivalent about nothing less than being itself. As I have suggested, one of the deep sources of this ambivalence is the culture in which she has lived, with its narratives of self-sufficiency and decline, vitality and loss. She is caught in the middle of these narratives, and at times she cannot help but feel torn about the very substance of her life.

There are times when the admonition to “just chill” is quite appropriate. There are also times when it is possible to deconstruct the cultural story in some small way: Maybe it’s okay to be vulnerable, to need people, at least once in a while; maybe the self-sufficiency thing can be taken down a notch. By and large, however, these strategies are not particularly effective. For one, they require a kind of self-consciousness, even a kind of historical consciousness—that is, an awareness of the ways in which cultural narratives have become constitutive of identity—that my mother does not have. (There’s just so much I can implore her to engage in deconstructive thinking.) For another, her commitment to the narrative of self-sufficiency, and her dread of the narrative of decline, remain powerful forces in her own ongoing work of being. And work it is: There is hard labor involved in keeping her identity going, challenges every step along the way. We feel an obligation to help her with this labor, to support her in her ontological work. Deconstructive excursions aside, this generally means supporting the narrative of self-sufficiency and helping her maintain her independence to the greatest extent possible—even while recognizing that this very support, this very affirmation of autonomy, may very well have the unintended and undesired consequence of adding to her frustration and anger. “Maybe you can get a job,” I’ll say. “There’s nothing preventing you from walking to the store.” “There’s plenty, still, for you to do in the world.” At the same time, of course, I know how difficult all this really is for her. In all likelihood, she is not going to get a job, or walk to the store; and concretely speaking, it is no easy task to determine what she can do, at this juncture in her life, that would be as meaningful and significant as she wants it to be. She simply cannot do some of the things she wishes to do or imagines that she can. And this hurts.

The second dilemma of being brings us back to some of the rather more frightening territory I began to explore earlier. As committed as we may be to affirming my mother’s autonomy and helping her retain her sense of independence and efficacy, I confess that there are in fact times when we “look forward” to the future—when a portion of her preoccupation with independence, self-sufficiency, efficacy, meaning, will be left behind in the wake of the disease. Needless to say, perhaps, it is very strange to think about this next stage, when she will have essentially left narrative behind. Her arrival at this stage will signify a state of profound loss: In all likelihood, she will no longer know who she is—surely not in the sense that she used to know herself, years ago, and probably not in the sense that she knows herself now, in this liminal state I have been discussing. Gone will be that sense of rootedness in a history, in my history—my past, my story, my identity as this person—that for so long characterizes a “normal” self, at least in the modern West. In a distinct sense, she will no longer be here, and we will need to learn to mourn her loss, even while what remains of that earlier person sits at the table, right across from us, moving in and out of familiarity, recognition. My brothers and I dread this future. But she may very well be suffering less, or at least in a different way, than she is now. For, also gone will be that backdrop of expectations and images—and storylines—that right now is causing so much pain.

Will she ultimately be in a “better” place at this point? It is of course difficult to say. It all depends on what remains after narrative, and autobiographical identity, have been left behind. Insofar as she is left with a kind of perpetual nothingness—a state of suspended animation, as it were—it will hardly deserve to be called better, save in the most cursory way. She will have arrived at the land of those “nonpersons” considered earlier: The end of narrative would thus spell the beginning of oblivion, of the very absence of Other, of world. And even if it is possible that she would be “just fine,”
subjectively, her frustration and anger having subsided, rendered essentially irrelevant, it is hard to think of this sort of destination as a better place.

But there is another possibility too, and it has to do with the idea of an ontological or spiritual identity that may continue to exist even after autobiographical identity has been left behind. In discussing this distinction with a colleague, I was introduced to a similar distinction made by Antonio Damasio in *The Feeling of What Happens* (1999). During the course of development, Damasio suggests, there is a movement from a “core self” to an “autobiographical self.” In regard to the former, he writes:

You know that you are conscious, you feel that you are in the act of knowing, because the subtle imaged account that is now flowing in the stream of your organism’s thoughts exhibits the knowledge that your proto-self has been changed by an object that has just become salient in the mind.

You know you exist because the narrative exhibits you as a protagonist in the act of knowing. You rise above the sea level of knowing, transiently but incessantly, as a felt core self, renewed again and again, thanks to anything that comes from outside the brain into its sensory machinery or anything that comes from the brain’s memory stores toward sensory, motor, or autonomic recall. You know it is you seeing because the story depicts a character—you—doing the seeing. (pp. 171–172)

Damasio refers to T.S. Eliot’s *Four Quartets* in this context, which speaks of a music “heard so deeply that it is not heard at all,” and which states that “you are the music while the music lasts.” Eliot, Damasio suggests, was apparently thinking of “the fleeting moment in which a deep knowledge can emerge—a union, or incarnation, as he called it” (p. 172). Damasio’s core self thus bears within it a spiritual possibility, connected with the very ineffable nature of “being the music”—or the great-grandchild, the glass of good wine, “anything that comes from outside the brain into its sensory machinery.”

It should be noted that, for Damasio, the core self is itself bound up with narrative—albeit of a wordless sort: “Knowing springs to life in the story, it inheres in the newly constructed neural pattern that constitutes the nonverbal account. You hardly notice the storytelling,” he avows, “because the images that dominate the mental display are those of the things of which you are now conscious—the objects you see or hear—rather than those that swiftly constitute the feeling of you in the act of knowing” (p. 172). It is difficult to know what to make of this conceptualization: While narrative, or narrativity, may well be a precondition of sorts for achieving the kind of “union” about which Damasio speaks—there remain operative “those less particularized dimensions of history,” as I put it earlier, “that become sedimented in the form of our interests, inclinations, and passions”—it is not entirely clear that “storytelling” is involved. Be that as it may, this notion of a core self, of a self that is “renewed again and again” through its encounter with the Other-than-self, remains an important one.

Now, in the healthy mind, Damasio continues, something does in fact last after the (proverbial) music is gone:

In complex organisms such as ours, equipped with vast memory capacities, the fleeting moments of knowledge in which we discover our existence are facts that can be committed to memory, be properly categorized, and be related to other memories that pertain both to the past and to the anticipated future. The consequence of that complex learning operation is the development of autobiographical memory, an aggregate of dispositional records of who we have been physically and of who we have usually been behaviorally, along with records of who we plan to be in the future. We can enlarge this aggregate memory and refashion it as we go through a lifetime. When certain personal records are made explicit in reconstructed images, as needed, in smaller or greater quantities, they become the autobiographical self. (pp. 172–173)

Whether Damasio is right to speak of “aggregates” and “records” is open to question; his terminology bespeaks a kind of substantialism that runs counter to much current thinking about autobiographical memory and the autobiographical self. Nevertheless, the distinction at hand, between the core self and the autobiographical self, is a useful one, in regard to both development and the process of decline as it is observed in dementia and related maladies. In the early stages of development, Damasio suggests, there may be “little more than reiterated states of core self.” With continued experience, however, “autobiographical memory grows and the autobiographical self can be deployed” (p. 175). The process of decline, in turn, moves in the reverse direction: “When the loss of memory for past events is marked enough to compromise autobiographical records, the autobiographical self is gradually extinguished and extended consciousness collapses. This happens in advance of the subsequent collapse of core consciousness” (p. 209).

If Damasio is right, the core self remains—for a time—after the demise of the autobiographical self. This brings me to a final dilemma of being, having to do with this idea of the autobiographical self. More and more, I have come to think of this self as a “mixed bag.” Some of the reasons have been referred to, both explicitly and implicitly, in this essay. It can bring pride and pleasure, gratification over one’s achievements, and much more. But it can also bring regret and disappointment, shame and frustration, particularly when one’s self doesn’t measure up to cultural and personal expectations and ideals. Following Damasio’s line of thinking, the culprit in these situations is none other than the autobiographical self. There is a distinct sense, however, in which the culprit may also be said to be narrative itself. Moving beyond narrative may therefore serve to resolve the dilemmas of being that have been considered herein.
DEMENTIA'S TRAGIC PROMISE

Moving beyond narrative may also clear a space for just that sort of “union” considered earlier. It is a striking fact—and one that is well known to mystics, artists, and many others—that the experiences that move us the most, those sorts of ecstatic or transcendent experiences wherein one feels truly at one with the world, generally entail what Murdoch had referred to as “unselfing,” putting aside one’s ego and thereby letting in the world, in all of its profound otherness. I have come to speak in this context of “the priority of the Other,” seeing in mysticism especially a profound and important challenge to the legacy of the self (see Freeman, 2004).

Murdoch’s preferred vehicle of unselfing is great art, which “teaches us how real things can be looked at and loved without being seized and used, without being appropriated into the greedy organism of the self. This exercise of detachment,” as Murdoch calls it (somewhat problematically, I think; she seems to be considering a process rather more relational), “is difficult and valuable whether the thing contemplated is a human being or the root of a tree or the vibration of a color or a sound” (1970, p. 64). Why is it so difficult? The reason is clear enough: “We are anxiety-ridden animals. Our minds are continually active, fabricating an anxious, usually self-preoccupied veil which partially conceals the world” (p. 82). We are also narrating animals. By all indications, this is part of the problem too. Narrative anxiety “infects every aspect of life,” according to Sartwell.

For while the disciplinary matrix inscribes us, it also makes us anxious: anxious to please it, anxious to allow ourselves to be inscribed, anxious that we have not been thoroughly enough inscribed, anxious that our inscriptions have not been recently-enough updated, anxious that some present moment is not being turned to account, anxious that we are failing in our rationality, anxious that we are not perfect instruments, anxious that we are not perfect masters of instruments, anxious at our indifference, anxious at our ecstasy, anxious of being found out, anxious of losing ourselves out, anxious of incoherence, anxious about the future of projects, anxious about living in the present, anxious about the sacred. (2000, p. 66)

Sartwell goes on to acknowledge that “The lack of narrative is a kind of madness”—or at least can be. “But too much narrative is also a kind of madness” (p. 67). With this madness in mind, Sartwell moves in a similar direction to Murdoch:

The deepest human needs and their satisfactions ... take the form precisely of a letting-go, or a languorous lapse into silence. We take pleasure in eating a good meal, but not because it leads us toward salvation, or even because it leads us toward happiness considered as a property of a whole life, but because it calls us into a present enjoyment wherein the imaginative reconstruction of the temporal flow is suspended. (p. 67)

Letting go brings one beyond narrative, or least that dimension of it that is tied to the autobiographical self. Does moving beyond narrative, as it is operative in the autobiographical self, facilitate the process of letting go? Or, to put the question somewhat differently: Does moving beyond the autobiographical self facilitate the deepening of the core self?

It is possible that the challenge of achieving the state about which Murdoch and Sartwell speak is made easier in dementia: With the removal, or at least the diminution, of the “self-preoccupied veil” that conceals the world, perhaps the world can more readily be uncovered (see Heidegger, 1971). Perhaps it is even possible that the ontological/spiritual identity I spoke about earlier and that Damasio seems to be considering in his idea of a core self may be further realized in this condition. Perhaps, that is, there is some sort of opening into the “beyond”—the world beyond narrative—that can allow this to occur. Murdoch speaks in this context of the “spiritual role” of music, for instance, and how art, more generally, “perceives the veil and gives sense to the notion of a reality which lies beyond appearance” (p. 86). She also speaks of the connection between such experience and mystical experience.

Let me be clear about this. I certainly do not wish to equate the later experience of dementia with mystical experience. This would be to romanticize dementia and to pathologize mysticism. Nevertheless, it may be that each, in their quite different ways of moving beyond narrative, offers a kind of deliverance, a reprieve from the anxiety and pressure of the autobiographical self. Whether this process of autobiographical unselfing has the redemptive outcome we are hoping for, only time will tell. For now, we have to work together to find resources, internal as well as external, to help my mother through some difficult days. Eating good meals together, as we often do, will undoubtedly help the process along.

REFERENCES
