Thirty Year Commemoration to the Life of A.R. Luria (1902-2007)

Edited by G.O. Mazur

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Life Without Narrative

Autobiography, Dementia, and the Nature of the Real

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Although it had been some time since I had consulted A.R. Luria’s extraordinary neuro-biographical inquiries (e.g., 1987a [1968], 1987b [1972]), my recent re-encounter with his work has allowed me to see more clearly my own debt both to his way of thinking and his way of writing. In a most basic sense, Luria has told us, in compelling and indeed beautiful form, that there is much to be learned about the human condition by exploring those sorts of brain-mind maladies that radically transform the very structure and meaning of a life. In trying to make sense of the ongoing flow of ordinary experience, there are aspects of its grounding features that will likely escape us; because it is simply ‘the way things are,’ they may go unnoticed, unheeded. But come face to face with calamitous pathologies of the sort Luria had dealt with, and the heretofore concealed may come into view. Another, more specific, feature of Luria’s work that looms large in some of my own thinking is his insistence on finding in memory a kind of ‘ur-faculty,’ a foundational key with which some of the mysteries of mind and self may be unlocked.
1. Luria’s Legacy

In *The Mind of a Mnemonist* (1987a [1968]), we encounter the pathological play of a prodigious memory and thereby discover the limits of limitless-ness. In *The Man With a Shattered World* (1987b [1972]), we encounter an amnesia that results not only in a time-warp but a self-warp, a literal deconstruction of the existential order of things. In both of these remarkable books, moreover, we find an approach to depicting the human condition that finds in narrative an incomparably valuable means of getting to the heart of what matters. ‘In this sense,’ Jerome Bruner (1987a [1968]) writes, ‘Luria’s humane yet naked account’ of the mind of a mnemonist

is in the spirit of a Kafka or a Beckett writing of characters who are symbolically dispossessed of the power to find meaning in the world. In his way, S., Luria’s patient in this book, takes his place beside Joseph K. in *The Trial*, or in the gallery of lost souls that Beckett has brought to life in his stories and plays. In this new dispensation, ‘pathology’ becomes not a domain alien to the human condition, but part of the human condition itself. Rather than dismissing the ill and the injured as beyond the pale of human explication, we ask instead about their subjective landscape, their implicit epistemology, their presuppositions. They cease being ‘cases’ and become human beings again. And they become part of literature as well as science. (pp. x-xi)

Paul Ricoeur (1991a) has written about the idea of ‘narrative intelligence,’ which, in broad terms, refers to the capacity of the experiencing individual to make meaningful sense of his or her life through narrative. Along the lines being drawn here, this idea of narrative intelligence applies not only to the workings – or non-workings – of those whose lives we seek to examine but also to the process of examination itself. Indeed, what we find in Luria’s own ‘Romantic science’ is an unparalleled example of just this kind of intelligence – one that looks across the course of a life and that seeks, in its aftermath, dimensions of meaning and significance that can only emerge by telling its story.

The task I have before me in this chapter is a weighty one, philosophically, psychologically, and, not least, personally. Philosophically, the task has to do with correcting a common, and in my view wrongheaded, conception regarding the relationship between experience and narrative. Experience, it is often said, simply ‘goes on,’ this way and that. Later on, after experience has passed, we often tell stories about it. From this perspective, such stories cannot help but distort and falsify the past even if they manage to beautify it along the way; they are an imposition of form and meaning on the flux, an effort to provide a kind of order – namely, narrative order – of a sort that simply (the story goes) does not belong to ongoing experience itself. Now, there is no doubt but that what goes on in the telling of ‘big stories’ such as memoirs and autobiographies is very different than what goes on contemporaneously, in experience (see Freeman, 2006, 2007). There is also no doubt but that stories of this sort can and often do distort and falsify the past. But this basic account, I want to argue, is problematic in at least two ways: in its depiction of ongoing experience as essentially non-narrative and its attendant assumption that such experience is preeminently ‘Real’ and, second, in its consequent assumption that narratives are irrevocably removed from the Real and that, as such, they are perhaps most appropriately regarded as ‘fictions,’ foisted upon reality in order, perhaps, to reassure ourselves that our lives are meaningful and that they possess some measure of rhyme and reason (see especially Freeman, 2003). I want to question this account, and I want to do so in a twofold way: first, by showing that narrative is woven into the phenomenological fabric of individual experience, at least among those with more or less fully functioning brains and minds; and second, by showing that, far from necessarily distorting and falsifying reality, narrative knowing is sometimes in service of the truth – indeed that narrative knowing is its very condition of possibility.

This brings me to the psychological dimension of the task at hand. The way I shall try to support this twofold argument is by drawing on the story of an elderly woman with dementia for whom the relative absence of narrative knowing has had grave effects on her very being (Freeman, in press). Interestingly enough, this woman had gone through a period that seemed to bear within it a certain promise: with the waning of her narrative self, she would become more present to the moment; whether that moment included a piece of music, a smiling great-grandchild, or a beautiful day, it seemed for a time that she could be there in a way that was personally meaningful and, in its own way, real. Through no choice of her own, she had engaged in what Iris Murdoch (1970) has referred to as ‘unselving,’ and with it, she had opened herself in an unprecedented way to the presence and power of the Other. Moving ‘beyond narrative,’ as I had put it, was therefore the requisite condition for her realizing the promise (so to speak) of dementia. But this promise has proven to be short-lived. For, as time went on and her narrative self became further diminished, so too did the possibility of her being-there, in the moment. Truly moving beyond narrative, therefore, far from opening the way to the Other, seemed instead to lead to the void. This led me to rethink my earlier conviction that she had moved beyond narrative. She hadn’t; it had existed, still, as the backdrop for her experience. *She* was the person having that experience – the music-lover, the great grandma, the one who would swoon over beautiful days and be grateful. But once *she* was no longer quite as there, the present moment had become autistic, one might
say, so thoroughly ‘unto itself’ that it had become empty and virtually meaningless. I shall fill in the details of this transformation in this essay in due time.

As for why the task of charting this transformation bears some personal weight, it is because the woman whom I have been describing happens to be my mother. This will surely affect the story I tell; among the fairly obvious reasons, I have been there to witness the transformation for years and thus have ‘privileged access’ to some of the issues at hand. But this essay will neither be about ‘my mother’ per se nor, emphatically, will it be about me or my relationship to her; this is neither the time nor the place. It will instead be about the kind of subject about whom Luria wrote: radically particular, and in that particularity, radically revealing about the human condition. It is not a privilege to watch one’s mother come undone. But in her better, more lucid moments, she would be glad to know that she was in fact making a small contribution to the world of learning. Ongoing immediate experience, shorn of narrative, is not to be elevated to the status of the Real. And narrative knowing, rather than being the fictive imposition it is sometimes imagined to be, seems instead to be integral both to selfhood and even those being-there experiences that appear, on a cursory glance, to entail the dissolution of the narrative self.

2. Narrative and Reality

‘We do not live stories,’ Hayden White (1978) has written, ‘even if we give our lives meaning by retrospectively casting them in the form of stories’ (p. 90). This is a familiar theme in certain quarters of thinking about narrative. White, I should hasten to add, is a ‘friend’ of narrative; he understands its value, even its necessity, in ordering human lives. But there is no mistaking the central thrust of his thought in this context: narratives are not truly a part of living, moment to moment, day to day; in a sense, they are what we do when we stop living, when we pause to reflect or to write about the movement of the past. Indeed, ‘there is no such thing as a real story. Stories are told or written, not found. And as for the notion of a true story, this is virtually a contradiction in terms. All stories are fictions’ (1999, p. 9). On one level, what White has to say here is surely true: to narrate, to tell the story of a life, whether implicitly, in reflection, or explicitly, in writing, is to go beyond the facts; it is to carry out a poetic act whereby the particulars of the life in question are ‘seen together,’ as interconnected parts of a whole configuration, episodes in an evolving plot (See Freeman, 1999; Ricoeur, 1981). As for the notion that all stories are fictions, this too makes sense. ‘How else can any past, which by definition comprises events, processes, structures, and so forth, considered to be no longer perceivable, be represented in either consciousness or discourse except in an “imaginary” way?” (White, 1987, p. 57).

White’s main focus, it should be emphasized, is historiographical; contra those who wish to frame history in a purely objective, scientific way, he has sought to remind us that history qua history is always and necessarily a literary artifact, a product not only of the ‘data’ but of the historian’s imagination, his or her capacity to make meaning. Hence the idea of poiesis: narrative knowing, far from being a dispassionate recounting of what was, is instead an imaginative, creative act, a “synthesis of the heterogeneous” (Ricoeur, 1991b). When it comes to life history, particularly the telling of one’s own history, the dimension of meaning-making intensifies still further, not least because of the psychological ‘investment’ involved. And the result is not only the inevitable generation of fictions but outright lies. If Michael Gazzaniga (1998) is right, the process at hand is virtually automatic, resulting in nothing less than the illusion of self’ (p. 1). It works roughly as follows:

Reconstruction of events starts with perception and goes all the way up to human reasoning. The mind is the last to know things. After the brain computes an event, the illusory ‘we’ (that is, the mind) becomes aware of it. The brain, particularly the left hemisphere, is built to interpret data the brain has already processed. Yes, there is a special device in the brain called the interpreter, that carries out one more activity upon completion of millions of automatic brain processes. The interpreter, the last device in the information chain in our brain, reconstructs the brain events and in doing so makes telling errors of perception, memory, and judgment. The clue to how we are built is buried not just in our marvelously robust capacity for these functions, but also in the errors that are frequently made during reconstruction. Biography is fiction. Autobiography is hopelessly inventive. (p. 2)

The interpreter, therefore, has the function of trying ‘to keep our personal story together.’ And, ‘To do that,’ Gazzaniga tells us, ‘we have to learn to lie to ourselves’ (p. 26).

Remarkably enough, Gazzaniga seems to be a friend of narrative as well. ‘We need something that expands the actual facts of our experience into an ongoing narrative, the self-image we have been building in our mind for years. The spin doctoring that goes on keeps us believing that we are good people, that we are in control and mean to do good. It is probably the most amazing mechanism the human being possesses’ (pp. 26-27). Simply put, ‘The interpreter tells us the lies we need to believe in order to remain in control’ (p. 138). And that’s just fine: ‘Sure, life is a fiction,’ he continues, ‘but it’s our fiction and it feels good and we are in charge of it. [...] We don’t feel like zombies; we feel like in-charge, conscious entities’ (p. 172).
In short, the interpreter, by establishing ‘a running narrative of our actions, emotions, thoughts, and dreams,’ [...] is the glue that unifies our story and creates our sense of being a whole, rational agent. It brings to our bag of individual instincts the illusion that we are something other than what we are’ (p. 174) and thereby ‘liberates us from the sense of being tied to the demands of the environment and produces the wonderful sensation that our self is in charge of our destiny’ (p. 175). Gazzaniga’s story is a strange one: We are other than what we seem to be, and the very condition of our selfhood is the tapestry of lies we need to tell ourselves in order to get on in the world. But this situation of deceit, far from being cause for despair, is instead cause for celebration: As long as we feel in charge and are convinced we are good people, all appears well.

There are, however, decidedly less friendly stories about narrative as well. In Crispin Sartwell’s *End of Story* (2000), for instance, he portrays narrative as a kind of prison, a discursive control mechanism for housing, and taming, recalcitrant experience. But it often comes up short: ‘Narrative comes apart at the extremes [...] in ecstasy, in writhing pain, at death.’ Such extremes notwithstanding, ‘[Narrative] has already also 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,’ therefore, ‘is not just the shattering moment, but the moment of indifference.’ So it is that we are given the following instructions: ‘Pull yourself away from significance for a moment and let yourself feel the sweet, deep, all-enveloping insignificance all around you.’ By his own account, Sartwell feels the need for meaning and significance as a ‘pressure, an anxiety, [...] as a project that can never be discharged’ and thus finds himself seeking some measure of ‘sucease from the voice in my head’ (p. 65).

This is easier said than done: the very desire to move beyond ‘project,’ as he puts it, can itself become project; it can become another entry in the self-story he has to tell in order to reassure himself that his life is worthwhile. But he wishes to move beyond narrative, beyond this pressing need to contain and control, and to just be. ‘To narrate an event is to divest it of its presence.’ For those caught in the thrones of narrative, ‘Nothing is happening now [...] What is happening today cannot be known until tomorrow, but the interpretation given tomorrow of today is indeterminate until the day after tomorrow, and so forth.’ White, you will recall, had insisted that we do not live stories; we simply tell them, in order to give our lives meaning. Sartwell tells us much the same thing: ‘we live on the earth and not in history’ (p. 87). As such, we would do well to keep vigilance over our narrative ventures. They cannot help but take us away from the fullness of the present moment, the radiant now of lived experience. By moving beyond narrative, into the earth-bound moment, we will thus move closer to reality and attain some much-needed solace along the way.

3. Dementia’s Tragic Promise

There was a time when my mother’s experience seemed to confirm Sartwell’s way of thinking about these issues. Indeed, as noted earlier, I suggested in some recent work the possibility that dementia, insofar as it entailed a movement beyond narrative, might actually bear within it a certain promise (Freeman, *in press*). This possibility was borne out of a quite basic dynamic I had observed in my mother; she would become most agitated and upset when her narrative self was on the line, when the very being she had always been was being challenged, thwarted, or denied; and she would become most at ease, even happy at times, when that same narrative self was in abeyance, such as on a summer night, listening to some good music, maybe with a glass of wine. Agitation would become serenity; consciousness of self would give way to consciousness of Other; the narrative she carried with her, still — that of a competent, self-sufficient woman, who had been the brightest of six children, who had picked up the pieces after her husband’s untimely death, who had managed a busy office and more — would be put on hold.

These latter experiences had been fairly rare. Much of the time, in fact, she had been ‘difficult,’ even ornery. She could still drive, she insisted; she could still take care of her papers; she could still take her medicine on her own. ‘I’ve been doing it for years, Mark!’ ‘Things are a little different now, Ma.’ ‘I’m not an imbecile,’ she might say. ‘You’re treating me like a child.’ Moving to an assisted-living residence didn’t help matters. She couldn’t stand the bus trips, or that everyone went to bed right after dinner, or that so many of them used walkers or wheelchairs. For a time, we would remind her that she had some challenges too; perhaps, then, we ventured, she wouldn’t be quite so down on where she had landed and who she had landed with. ‘You’ve got some pretty significant memory problems,’ we might say. But she would simply forget that she had these problems, which, in turn, would increase her rage at having been ‘put’ in assisted living. She would also forget where she put things: her purse, her wallet, her checkbook, her comb, her watch, her keys; the list goes on. Never, however, would she acknowledge having misplaced them. No; the cleaning lady must have put them somewhere, or they were stolen. We had a lock put on her closet door, just to reassure her that there would be a place where her things would remain safe and secure. And when we would locate her ‘stolen’ items, under a pile of clothes or tucked away in a drawer, she would simply be mystified. It was inconceivable that she had put them there, and nothing could convince her
otherwise. There is still a story in view at this juncture, the story of a competent, whole person who drives and keeps her own books and remembers where she put things. And the fact that aspects of this story were in the process of being challenged, radically, could be extremely upsetting. ‘Sometimes you just live too long,’ she had said. She was indeed a kind of prisoner of her own remembered narrative, and it had resulted in some very tough times.

But then there were moments that would take her away from herself and her story. My mother had always loved music and dancing, and good food and drink. My wife and I would therefore do whatever we could to get her to these happy spaces in her life. Sometimes there would be utter abandon; she would be at an outdoor concert, for instance, and literally be dancing in her seat – more than she ever had, more than she ever would have in the past. For a few moments, life would become worthwhile again. It was around this time that there had emerged a very disturbing thought: the more she would deteriorate, the less narrative there would be; and the less narrative there would be, the more she would be able to be present to the moment, just as she was at that concert. Therein was dementia’s tragic promise: the progressive dissolution of the self – not unlike Murdoch’s notion of ‘unselling’ – would pave the way toward an attentiveness to the Other: ‘We cease to be,’ Murdoch (1970) writes, ‘in order to attend to the existence of something else, a natural object, a person in need’ (p. 58). And through this very attentiveness, there would emerge new dimensions of connectedness, oneness. As Sartwell (2000) puts the matter,

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, [...] 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, therefore, serves to move one beyond narrative. Conversely, moving beyond narrative might serve the process of letting-go. I even flirted with the idea that there might be some relationship between certain dementia-founded experiences and certain forms of mystical experience. For obvious reasons, I was quick to qualify the idea: I neither wished to romanticize dementia nor to pathologize mysticism. But it might still be the case, I suggested, that each of these modes of experience, in their respective movements beyond narrative, offered some measure of deliverance from the noisy narrative self. Was it true? Would my mother become more and more enraptured with otherness as her narrative self continued to decline?

4. Rethinking the Promise

There was a brief time when she did indeed appear to be quite in love with the world. I had jotted down the experiences of one day, in particular, when everything seemed to have an almost mystical edge to it. It was one of those fall days in New England that demanded your attention. And so, my mother and I decided to take a drive, up a country road, toward Mt. Wachusett, which offers vistas of the lush valley below, the mountains of New Hampshire to the north, and, on a crystal clear day like this one, the Boston skyline. I tuned the car stereo to a local classical station. Up we went, climbing the road to the mountain, music playing, the sky blue, the leaves beginning to turn, shaking loose, skittering across the road. She is transfixed. ‘Beautiful.’ ‘It must be peak now.’ ‘Such a pretty road.’ ‘Beautiful, beautiful day.’ ‘What a day.’ ‘Spectacular day for a ride like this.’ ‘What a spectacular, beautiful day.’

It is not easy to make sense of these kinds of utterances. There are times when my mother speaks when words simply spill out, appropriately; even now, still, she often seems to know what to say – that is, she knows what’s generally said – in a given context. ‘What have you been doing today, ma?’ I might ask. ‘Oh, reading, picking up.’ But the books remain unopened and the apartment is in the same state of disarray it was in last time. I don’t mean to suggest that she is lying. Indeed, she can no doubt comfort herself with the fact that, in her mind, she may very well have been reading and picking up. But it is sometimes difficult to know what her words actually refer to. That was true of our ride together that beautiful fall day. At times, it was like playing a record that keeps on skipping.

But there were other times too, when the kaleidoscope of colors before her, suffused, no doubt, with her own distant New England memories, washed upon her in ecstatic waves, giving her a measure of reprieve from the onslaught of days, following one another in their sameness. Her repetition, in these moments, followed the movement of these waves, and each statement she made, even if exactly the same as the one uttered the minute before, was brand new. For a moment or two – and I assure you, only for a moment or two – I envied her. That day, I really couldn’t be there, with the world, like she was. I kept moving in and out, between the welter of colors and this or that issue that had to be thought about, between the incredible vistas and my mother’s fate. That day, for a few hours, she was... happy. Or something like it. I cannot pretend to know exactly where she was, but wherever it was, it did seem to bring her a kind of oneness, a full immersion into the world, untouched by all the chattering stuff inside our heads that keeps us from being present to things. Dementia’s tragic promise, intensified.
The promise, like the leaves, would begin to fade. Later on that fall, she was often agitated, and even went on several 'rampages' (as they were described by staff at her residence). The food was awful, and she let everyone around her in the dining room know it. She yelled at people, for who knows what infraction — enough so that one of her very few friends, an older Jewish man, whose wife was dying and who would 'kibitz' with her in language colorfully sprinkled with the Yiddish they both knew and loved, had scolded her for her rudeness and told her to 'act like a lady.' And then, yet again, there were the 'thefts' from her apartment. As for why the ever-present 'they' would take her beaten old watch but leave a new piece of jewelry behind, the reason was simple enough: they didn't have a blessed clue about what was of value and what was not. "Those people, what do they know?" Everything has an explanation, and the explanation inevitably has to do with what's been taken from her. She is of course right about this: so much in her life, once full and present, has gone missing.

There was one time when I got a call at work and was told that I had two choices: either come and get her for the weekend or she would get sent to the local psychiatric hospital, probably for three weeks or so, where, if all went well, they would come up with a pharmacological cocktail that would take enough wind out of her paranoid, rageful sails that she could return 'home.' We took her for the weekend, and she was basically fine. She did ask, 'Whose house is this?' at one point, probably because she was sitting in a room where she rarely sits. And so we took a little walk, through the kitchen and into the dining room, where many a meal has taken place and many bottles of wine consumed. Oh yes. Here. 'Geez, ma,' I say, 'you had me worried there for a minute.'

Things stayed fairly calm for a while. But then the theft fantasies re-emerged, and the yelling and rage. A new medicine would take the edge off things, but it would also leave her even more at sea. It was difficult to know what she would do all day. She could do some reading, but judging by the stack of books in her apartment, she couldn't quite get into any of them. So the pile grew. She did occasionally straighten up, but not much. And there were the occasional crossword puzzles, partially finished, a group activity now and then, and, when the spirit struck her, some small talk with her fellow residents. But it was also clear that there were long spells of nothingness, times in which she would sit, or lie in her bed, and just... be. She began to wear the same clothes, day in and day out; her hair would be unkempt, scraggily; she started to shuffle when she walked. Dosage would have to be recalibrated; there was the need to find some middle ground between her paranoid rage and this dreadful void. But this was also a new phase. Even after taking her off the medicines that might be sapping her spirit, she remained dulled and lost. I mean this quite literally. One day, when I stopped by her apartment for a while, the telephone directory was open to the page that included her name and number. On top of the page, she had scrawled her name. The ink was heavy and dark, the 'F' circled; clearly, she had written it again and again. And in the column of names, hers was underlined, roughly. Once again, I will not pretend to know exactly what was going through her mind at the time. But there can be little doubt that she was trying, somehow, to find what seemed to be irretrievably lost. She was just 'foggy.' 'I don't know what I did all day,' she would say. 'Got to get my head on straight. I have to get started, get my head on straight, start getting into a program of some sort.' She seemed at this point to have a memory of once having a narrative, of living the sort of life that would include schedules and routines, 'taking care of things.' But the narrative itself was distant, a sort of vaporous image that would occasionally waft into view, only to be abandoned in a matter of moments, when she would return to simply sitting and being, staring off into space.

I will confess, there was something of a 'silver lining' even amidst this deepening emptiness. For years, icy cold winter days in New England would bring out my mother's anger and resentment over the fact that she was living up in the frigid north rather than down in Florida, where she had been 'just fine' until we stuck our nose into things and insisted that she move. 'Sorry, ma, we really wanted you near us.' If we were lucky, her rage would dissipate. But things have been different over the course of the past couple of years. The 'good' news is that, even though she still can't stand the cold, not once has she mentioned going to Florida. The not-so-good news, of course, is bound up with this same fact: the resentment is largely gone, the insult, the felt impotence. I can't say that we miss her seasonal tirades; it could get rough. But we are beginning to miss her.

I still don't know what my mother does all day. I know that she sleeps more. She also eats more, as the fifty or so pounds she's put on over the past two years testify. For a time, she would unwittingly gorge herself; whatever was put in front of her, she would consume, forkful after forkful, in a steady, droning rhythm until it was gone. Buffets were particularly dangerous; she had no sense of how much she had consumed, and was ever ready to 'try that other dish,' even if she had already tried it. More recently, however, she has been rejecting much of the food that has been offered her; it's too sweet; it's too salty; whatever. When I was visiting a few weeks ago and sat with her during dinner, she complained about how tough the chicken was, how you could barely cut it. But she was trying to cut right across a bone. And her knife was upside down. Even upon making some headway with the chicken, she complained that it was dry and overcooked, and this despite the fact that it was actually, and visibly, quite juicy.
Things are darkening for her; there is very little anymore that is ‘right’ or ‘good.’ The only thing that comes close food-wise are desserts. The result is that she has taken to asking for multiples – some pie, then maybe some ice cream, perhaps even something else. So she continues to get larger and larger. Occasionally, she realizes this and bemoans it; hardly any of her clothes fit her, she’s having more difficulty breathing, and she’s been getting backaches from carrying such a big load. But when the waitstaff would try to dissuade her from eating that second or third dessert, she would become enraged and insist that she be served. In view of this, I sat down with her a short while ago and we drew up a contract of sorts, that both she and I would sign, that was mainly geared toward lessening her dessert intake. It went fine; we signed and that was that. The contract was to be kept right at her place at the dinner table to remind her of her agreement. But she balked at even this, despite the fact that her signature was right there before her. Her response was telling, indeed: the signature was forged. Phenomenologically speaking, she was speaking the truth. The person she was, then and there, didn’t sign that; someone else did. Beyond some extra sleeping and eating, in any case, it’s hard to know what’s happening. ‘Are you bored?’ I asked at one point. ‘No, not really.’ ‘Are there things you’d like to be doing?’ ‘No, I can’t really think of anything.’ She’s hit the nail on the head.

There still remain some moments when my mother is able to lose herself in such a way as to yield some pleasure. I took her to a couple of concerts recently that she really seemed to enjoy. She told me a while back about how she had stood at the window of her living room and watched a couple of squirrels running and chasing each other. And she is still transfixed by beautiful days. But she is growing much less capable of feeling the kind of oneness that she had felt before. Such oneness still requires a self, in contact enough with the world as to be able to draw nourishment from it. Murdoch’s ‘unselﬁng,’ therefore, is only partial; to be fully present to the world, there needs to be a being, there, to witness it and savor it, an ‘I’ who sees and feels; a self actively engaged with reality. It’s a matter of relation. As this ‘I’ begins to lose its foothold in reality, there comes to be less world to witness, and less nourishment, less sustenance. Is this why mom’s put on so much weight? Maybe she’s taking in what she can. I don’t know. What do know is that her ecstatic moments are growing fewer and farther between. We are therefore going to have to work harder to find things that can reach her. It is difficult to know how successful we will be.

Just the other day, I stopped by her apartment to say hello. She was sitting on a comfortable sofa, by the fireplace. As I walked toward her, though, I could see that she was anxious and uncomfortable. It was a good thing I showed up, she said. Why? She had absolutely no idea what she was doing there. ‘Do I stay here?’ she asked. ‘Yes, you live here; you have for a couple of years.’ None of it is familiar. ‘I don’t know where I am. I don’t know who I am,’ she adds. This is a remarkable insight: for a brief moment, she is still able to reﬂect, to take her own (confused) experience as an object of thought. But there is no connectedness, no narrative through-line. She is truly ‘in the moment.’ But without some semblance of a narrative self to condition and guide the moment, there can only be a kind of perpetual onslaught of presents, devoid of pastness and futurity alike and thereby essentially deprived of meaning, deprived of reality, deprived of truth. And she seems to know this. Had I not arrived when I did, she went on to say, she might have screamed.

My mother is bewildered; that really is the phase she is currently in. A short time ago, a staff member told me that mom had been looking for me, wondering whether she was still going to be living there. When my wife recently woke her up at 11 am, she sat up confused and disoriented. ‘Where am I? Who put me here?’ She’s also having difﬁculty recognizing and ‘placing’ (once-)familiar things. (She can look at something directly – yesterday, it was the bridge containing her teeth – and not be able to identify it.) When we had her over to our house for Thanksgiving, she took a nap and when she woke up she couldn’t recognize anything, and it had nothing to do with her being in a less-frequented room of the house; she was where she always was. Her confusion persisted even after she had been awake for a while. ‘Is this your place?’ she asked. It’s hard to imagine what her world must be like, so fleeting, so strange. Occasionally, I can wake up in the middle of the night, in a hotel room for instance, and have no idea at what I am or how I got there. Fortunately, after a few weird moments, I can remember and go back to sleep. But this is exactly what my mother cannot do. My sense is that it’s not at all like being in a ‘new place.’ That can be interesting and exciting. It seems rather more like being in an alien world. She is not at home, anywhere.

There are some lighthearted moments, even now. Not too long after signing that dessert contract, I asked her if she remembered what the contract was about. ‘Yeah, it’s to say I won’t be a pig!’ When I asked her recently whether she knew how old she was and she said she didn’t know, I told her, ‘We could do what you do with trees!’ Her rejoinder was swift: ‘Count my wrinkles!’ And when we talked for the umpteenth time about our Thanksgiving plans and she bemoaned the fact that she couldn’t seem to hold on to anything (‘What a head,’ she said), I told her it was okay. ‘You’ve got a memory problem, ma. You’re still capable of enjoyment; you just can’t remember some of it.’ ‘Can’t enjoy it twice,’ she replied. For a brief moment, ‘she’ is back: a self, a narrative self, with some awareness of the world she has come to inhabit. The truth resurfaces; she is disturbed once again. But there is not nearly as much frustration and anger as there
had been. The reflective moment passes, and she’s back to gazing out the window, watching the world drift by. There is neither pleasure nor pain. There are just moments, essentially shorn of meaning. These ongoing moments, you will recall, are what some theorists have portrayed as ‘reality.’ They appear to be quite wrong about this.

5. Narrative Intelligence and its Demise

There is, again, a significant difference between life itself, in its ongoings, and the kinds of stories we sometimes tell about our lives when we look backward and try to make sense of it all. As I go about the daily round, I am not constantly narrating, in the sense of trying to figure out where the latest episode might fit in the larger scheme of things; I am simply living. But this process of ‘simply living’ is itself thoroughly permeated by narrative—at least in those of us who have more or less fully functioning brains and minds. David Carr’s (1986) work is particularly useful in this context. As noted earlier, there is a tendency in some of the narrative literature to consider the kind of organization brought about by narrative as ‘fictional’ and, in turn, to speak of the ‘reality’ of moments, strung together in sequence. But, ‘Where is reality here, and where fiction? The reality of our temporal experience,’ Carr insists, ‘is that it is organized and structured; it is the “mere sequence” that has turned out to be fictional, in the sense that we speak of a “theoretical fiction”’ (p. 25). As Carr goes on to argue, ‘the flow of conscious life, like the temporal objects (events) we encounter around us, is lived as a complex of configurations whose phases figure as parts within larger wholes’ (p. 28). We must therefore ‘correct the view that structure in general and narrative structure in particular is imposed upon a human experience intrinsically devoid of it so that such structure is an artifice, something not “natural” but forced, something which distorts or does violence to the true nature of human reality’ (p. 43).

Ricoeur (1991b) moves still farther in this direction in his own reflections on life narratives when he considers ‘life as a story in its nascent state ... an activity and a passion in search of a narrative.’ It is for this reason that he wishes ‘to grant to experience as such a virtual narrative which stems, not from the projection of literature onto life, but which constitutes a genuine demand for narrative’ (p. 29). We are ‘entangled’ in stories, Ricoeur insists; narrating, of the sort we do when we pause to tell those larger stories that comprise our lives, is a ‘secondary process’ that is ‘grafted’ onto this entanglement. In this sense, the actual stories we tell about ourselves are most appropriately understood as a continuation and extension of those ‘unspoken stories’ we routinely live. ‘Our life,’ therefore, ‘when then embraced in a single glance, appears to us as the field of a constructive activity, borrowed from narrative understanding, by which we attempt to discover and not simply to impose from outside the narrative identity which constitutes us’ (p. 32). Ricoeur has done well in this context to articulate the interrelationship between the ‘narrativity’ that is part and parcel of life itself, the actual narratives we tell about our lives, and the narrative identity that grows out of the two. It is precisely this interrelationship that has been broken in my mother’s case. ‘Our life’ is no longer her life, and the ‘attempt to discover ... the narrative identity which constitutes us’ is only minimally operative. Her life, to the extent that it can be ‘embraced in a single glance,’ yields something quite different than the panoramic landscape of the past we might ordinarily see. Indeed, much of her current bewilderment has to do with the fact that, in that glance, she can see virtually nothing at all. Or, to put the matter different, what she sees is exactly that: nothing. Little wonder that she sometimes has no idea whatsoever where or who she is. And little wonder that she is very frightened.

In The Feeling of What Happens (1999), Antonio Damasio writes of the developmental transformation from a ‘core self’ to an ‘autobiographical self’ and, in the case of phenomena such as dementia, the reversal of this very transformation. With the waning of her autobiographical self—i.e., the narrative identity about which Ricoeur speaks—came the resurgence of the core self. Damasio refers in this context to T.S. Eliot’s Four Quartets, which speaks of a music ‘heard so deeply that it is not heard at all’ and that allows for ‘the fleeting moment in which a deep knowledge can emerge — a union, or incarnation’ (p. 172). Damasio’s idea of a core self is thus congruent with the tragic promise I referred to earlier: for a time, there seemed to be enhanced opportunities for precisely this sort of union. It should be emphasized that, for Damasio, the core self still partakes of narrative, though of a wordless sort. In this sense, the kinds of experiences my mother could sometimes have, narrative-free though they may have appeared, were contingent on just the sort of ‘virtual narrativity’ about which Ricoeur had spoken. This narrativity — more specifically, this narrative intelligence — remains operative; it is why she can occasionally step back from the flow of experience and say something about it — even if that something has to do with its very emptiness. But it has become muted, and so in turn has the fullness and intensity of her experience. She is not yet living a life without narrative. But she seems to be on the way. She therefore seems to be heading to the land of moments, stripped of order and organization, stripped of meaning, intelligibility. Perhaps that will be okay, in a way. Perhaps the wholesale shutting down of narrative intelligence will be a ‘blessing.’ Tinne will tell. But I certainly wouldn’t want to enshrine this disease-induced condition of momentary nothingness into the real and true order of things. On
the contrary, the real, the humanly real, is itself inextricably bound to narrative. My mother's life shows this with painful clarity.

Luria's passionate devotion to exploring the humanly real is manifested most visibly in his excursions into Romantic Science. 'Classical' scholars, he had written, 'are those who look upon events in terms of their constituent parts.' Their focus is on 'units,' 'elements.' Important though this approach is, it can also lead to 'the reduction of living reality with all of its richness of detail,' such that 'the properties of the living whole are lost.' Those who subscribe to the notion that reality is comprised of moments are in this sense classical in their orientation. Romantic scholars, on the other hand, 'seek to preserve the wealth of living reality, and they aspire to a science that retains this richness' (cited in Sacks, 1987). On the face of it, Romantic Science may appear 'softer,' indeed less scientific than the kinds of approaches that have come to be enshrined in academic psychology especially. Following Luria, however, the Romantic approach may actually be deemed more scientific — at least in those contexts where it is important to be faithful to the wealth of living reality. For, insofar as the primary aim of science is to practice fidelity to the phenomena, in all of their richness and ambiguity and depth of meaning, it may be that a portion of it will need to look precisely in the direction Luria had proposed. This is not only for the sake of creating more readable, poetically resonant work. It is for the sake of disclosing the truth that narrative is uniquely prepared to speak.