Self-Authorship, Storytelling, And Narrative Coaching As A Reformation/Liberation Of Individual And Collective Identity

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Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics, College of Liberal and Professional Studies in the School of Arts and Sciences in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the University of Pennsylvania
Advisor: Erek J. Ostrowski, PhD

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Self-Authorship, Storytelling, And Narrative Coaching As A Reformation/ Liberation Of Individual And Collective Identity

Abstract
This capstone explores/examines my personal journey of learning and development with the use of narrative coaching, storytelling, self-authorship, and self-definition as tools for identity creation. It explores supporting literature to inform stories that have yet to be told. It contributes to overarching literature and commentary on the individual's ability to create themselves with ownership and understanding of agentic identity. Exploration of authenticity, creativity, and intuition as constructive tools are presented here and juxtaposed with the psychology of narrative identity and narrative structure.

Keywords
storytelling, self-authorship, self-definition, coaching, narrative coaching, narrative identity, narrative structure, agentic identity, growth, personal development

Comments
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SELF-AUTHORSHIP, STORYTELLING, AND NARRATIVE COACHING AS A
REFORMATION/LIBERATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

by

Ashley Simmons

Submitted to the Program of Organizational Dynamics,
College of Liberal and Professional Studies
in the School of Arts and Sciences
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Science in Organizational Dynamics at the
University of Pennsylvania

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

2021
SELF-AUTHORSHIP, STORYTELLING, AND NARRATIVE COACHING AS A
REFORMATION/LIBERATION OF INDIVIDUAL AND COLLECTIVE IDENTITY

Approved By:

______________________________
Erek J. Ostrowski, PhD, Advisor

______________________________
Linda Pennington, PhD, Reader
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

This capstone discusses self-authorship as a powerful tool for personal development, transformation, and self-actualization. Psychologist Robert Kegan presents self-authorship as a personal ideology and identity that coordinates and acts upon one’s own beliefs and values. This identity authors the individual and the way they navigate the world, allowing them to achieve personal authority (Kegan, 1994). I have spent the past two years in this program solidifying this personal authority, and I explore it now alongside the lenses of storytelling and narrative coaching in this work.

Over the course of my studies within the work of writing and identity development, I have found merit in being aware of the narratives and stories we tell ourselves in our lives. These narratives can either make or break us, imprison or liberate us, stifle or develop us. Characters come along the way to test the narratives, to push them, or to encourage them. As I traverse through reading, I have found I must be aware of myself so I can become aware of others. When I cultivate this sense of awareness, I allow myself to expand into unimagined possibilities. When I embrace myself as a wholly, complex human being, I permit more simplicity in the most ironic way.

Finding meaning in my stories and my life helps me do what I am intended to do as I expand myself. I can contribute to others’ stories in equally meaningful ways. Remaining open to other narratives helps me expand my knowledge and my ever-evolving self to welcome side tales, larger stories, series, and sagas untold. I have affirmed myself with the help of this program and am now certain I always have the
power to edit my story. I can rewrite, highlight, and choose whatever I see fit. Choice can never be taken away from me as the freedom to choose exists within my mental willpower.

Woven in and throughout this capstone is the work of psychiatrist, philosopher, and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning* (1946), Frankl writes, “Everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s way” (Frankl, 2006, p. 69). Frankl further demonstrates that mental circumstance prevails overall and allows ultimate freedom. Choice is an inherent component of Frankl’s studies within logotherapy. Logotherapy focuses on “finding meaning” as an individual’s primary motivational force in life. According to Frankl, meaning provides motive for living and persisting on through various external obstacles. I present Frankl’s work in this capstone because it has become a driving force for me in defining my own meaning and motives in my life. I applied Frankl’s principles of logotherapy to the external obstacles I encountered and cultivated a stronger internal sense of self. Through this internal identity work, I strengthened, reformed, and liberated my external identity.

The work of this capstone is organized through three aforementioned lenses of applicable theory: storytelling, self-authorship, and narrative coaching. These tools serve as the ingredients to compose this recipe of self-actualization I have embarked on throughout the Organizational Dynamics (OD) program. I align each lens with my professional and personal experiences to explore their power and present the shifts they allowed me to make.
One of the key questions I explore in this capstone as a portfolio paper was to ask why my journey would be beneficial for someone else to read. So much can be written on this point but for now, I respond that it allows me to make room. By being here, I have made room for myself in all the spaces I tried to fit in and adapt to before I participated in the OD program. Now I see that I don’t fit those preconceived notations, and I’m happy to be an anomaly. I revel in my uniqueness and the stark ways in which I stand out. I marvel at myself. By being here and by conquering the fears of being the only Black student in several classes, I make room for those who come after me. I contribute to a narrative that is larger than my own, understanding that every big thing is composed of smaller parts that still hold so much value. *What does it mean to be a Black woman in this space?* I ask myself. *What does it say for others?* By being here, I remind myself of my value. I remind myself of my own value, the value of others, and the value of life, relationships, experiences, and the unknown. I did not know what would unfold before me during my time here in Philadelphia, though I did have an idea. I realize now the idea is all that I need to begin writing. The idea is the genesis of stories unread and untold. The idea is what is needed most in the vast sea of conforming and monotony that beckons us all. The idea is all I need to take the next step.

Documenting my journey throughout this OD program is paramount to any grade, degree, or credential I’m given. I knew I wanted something that would push me to be more of myself and to yield opportunity and creation; that’s exactly what I’ve found. I now document this story in real time, in much the same way I write the preface to stories I have yet to actualize. I share what I’ve learned with the readers who will come in the months and years ahead, focusing on how the tools for personal growth already exist
within us. The journey itself reveals each tool, as well as its power, to aid in the overall adventure.

This capstone reveals some personal truths, explores the experiences of learning those personal truths with trust, and highlights my individual power to write a story of my life that liberates my identity. This identity mapping revolves around the many social constructs presented in this personal journey, while pairing them with social commentary to contribute to stories at large. The socialized systems, institutions, and organizational dynamics are not to be dismissed. Instead, they are to be unraveled because they can add fuel to the fire of freeing oneself mentally, physically, and more.

The personal experiences explored in this capstone are my own, yet I believe many other young Black women can relate to and benefit from seeing my learning illuminated in this way. While I explore self-authorship as an asset, I equally examine the nuances of the Black experience that are inhibited by the theory. The core of my examination is to orient myself toward overcoming limitations from colonized theoretical practice and to emphasize storytelling in the African American tradition as preservation and liberation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I specify this exploration with Black feminist thought as a crucial framework in navigating self-definition (Collins, 1990). This capstone cannot hold the entirety of its truths without attention to my experience as a Black woman authorizing myself in this way.

Okello (2018) calls attention to expanding the conversation from self-authorship to one of self-definition. This expansion adds to my work as self-authorship advances agentic identity. Agentic narrative identity—used interchangeably with agentic identity and narrative identity—refers to the internal, evolving life story that individuals construct
by integrating stories of their past, present, and future to provide their lives with unity, meaning, and purpose (Bauer et al., 2008). In understanding the stories as a contribution, the individual allows their identity to attain agency as it both creates and is created. This cyclical creation aids self-transformation (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Narrative, Identity and Practice – NIP Framework*

Note: Source: Trine Flockhart, 2011

Okello (2018) pays homage to Black feminist theory as supporting revolutionary acts of self-transformation (Guy-Sheftall, 1995) while self-definition reassigns dignity and agency to minoritized groups. With Okello’s work and Black feminism in mind, my contribution to this literature within academic prose is an act of revolution on its own.

Stories may have been told previously but they were not mine, and that is my own, unique power. Black feminism also supports self-definitions as a part of the
collective with attention to the self being inherently connected to others, calling for intersubjectivity and collective accountability (Collins, 1990; Guy-Sheftall, 1995). Pizzolato and Ozaki (2007) note this distinction in self-authorship with attention to minoritized groups, namely African Americans, expanding beyond an individual definition of “Who am I?” to a collective definition of “Who are we?” This aspect is a component of my intentions as a storyteller. By owning my story, I make way for others to do the same (hooks, 1989).

In the following chapters, I unpack the process of my growth over the past two years studying in the OD program at the University of Pennsylvania, as well as navigating the years of my early 20s. I recount my previous thought processes and reference literature that aided in my expansion in thinking beyond my own internal limitations. By examining my internal limitations, I was able to overcome external factors and grow personally and professionally.

Making Meaning

I entered the OD program in the summer of 2019 in pursuit of a growth mindset. Still relatively new to the working world, I sought to understand the dynamics of various environments. My job at the time was working as an administrative assistant in an office environment that did not permit room for professional growth. The lack of growth opportunities in an environment I anticipated as constantly evolving and learning caused me to create a narrative of self-abnegation instead of self-actualization. It is the shift from self-defeatist thinking to self-liberating thinking that allowed me to actualize the growth mindset I wanted.
When I came to Philly, I quickly observed many things about life and about the city. Philly bustled with diversity and creativity, full of various cultures and dynamics. Among these dynamics was the in-your-face classism that showed itself in the vivid differences between each quadrant of the city. I worked in West Philadelphia’s affluence and lived in North Philadelphia’s detriment. I walked on glimmering, glittering streets in the day, cleaned by Black and brown janitorial staff, and stepped over needles and empty pill baggies at night as I made my way home. I saw the beauty of the University of Pennsylvania’s campus and felt the connection to the same-complexioned custodial staff members who kept it that way. I wondered about the institution itself as a place of employment; I equally wondered about the lack of people of color in managerial/leadership positions.

The story that was reflected to me from the individuals in my office was not one that honored me or my career goals in the slightest. The characters before me were not supporting characters to my main character narrative and “hero’s journey” arc (Hutchens, 2015). As it was, the story revealed I would wind up exhausted, spending all of my time and energy angry at the world as an oppressed Black woman (hooks, 1989). All the while I was watching Black people being murdered in a city without adequate attention to the systems that were functioning just as they were designed, with a continuous disregard of Black lives. I found this disregard of my Black life mirrored in the language, culture, and structure of a nondiverse, noninclusive office environment that preached systems of progression but did not enact them. Tajfel and Turner’s (2004) social identity theory supports the formation of my own identity in relation to those around me and purports that the groups to which one belongs help establish a sense of belonging and identity in
the social world. I understood the group I belonged to, yet Tajfel’s identity theory in the context of my new environment showed me that I, in fact, did not belong where I was.

I kept to myself in an attempt to stay focused, but this introversion resulted in me not fitting in with the office culture. I took this feeling of exclusion as a personal attack, never even thinking at the time to bother asking the more pressing questions: What is the office culture? Why didn't I fit in?

Nkomo (as cited by Hannum et al., 2010) homes in on the in-group/out-group phenomenon in her work. “In-group” is defined by Nkomo as the group to which an individual feels solidarity or interest with, whereas one’s “out-group” is composed of those who do not belong in the “in-group” (Nkomo et al., 2005). Nkomo explores her salient identity as an African American woman and juxtaposes the significance of her identity when placed in an environment void of others like her. She notes that in these environments, being an African American attains more personal significance than it would to others.

In-group and out-group dynamics were not only implicitly present in my organization of primarily White women, but they were also explicitly acknowledged through commentary about my lack of “fit.” My identity as a woman proved to be a dominant factor within my organization; however, this dominance quickly became subdued when the component of race intersected with gender. As a Black woman, I was misunderstood. Whereas I was once considered a part of the “in-group,” I was then moved to the “out-group” (Hogg & Terry, 2000). This insight is relevant to my self-authorship journey because existence as an anomaly is intrinsic to that of the Black person (Du Bois, 1903). Yet, my story did not have to end here because of this
sociopolitical and historical fact. I could further define myself and bask in both self-
authorship and self-definition (Okello, 2018).

I also worked in an organization that serves generations of affluent, White college
graduates. My position as a Black woman and as a first-generation, low-income college
graduate made me unrelatable among people who did not share my background. I found
solace in those who could understand some component of my identity, even if not in
intersectional ways. Intersectionality, a term coined by Crenshaw, is an analytical
framework that provides “the examination of race, sex, class, national origin, and sexual
orientation, and how their combinations [play] out in various settings” (as cited in
Delgado & Stefancic, 2012, p. 57). This framework is an imperative aspect of my story
because it provides a lens in understanding my individual experiences and detailing my
identity. I have found the only pathway to liberate my identity is to first acknowledge it
in its totality, leaving no part pushed to the side. Intersectionality provides access to this
pathway.

I knew from my previous staff members’ comments and my own observations
that I’d entered an office that had preexisting issues prior to my arrival. It appeared to be
rooted in the monocultural environment, riddled with outdated ideology and structure.
However, this knowledge did not prevent me from merging my identity with the
environment for a period of time, which was long enough to have an effect on my overall
mental and physical health.

I reflect on this experience and remark on Zimbardo and Haney’s (1971) Stanford
prison experiment. My purpose in noting this experiment is to direct attention to the
psychological effects of perceived power and environment on one’s mental health, even
when that individual is aware of the circumstances and the workings of that environment. I also note this insight as the beginning of this work’s dialogue around storytelling and the ways stories help us make sense of our environments, those around us, and our lives.

Zimbardo and Heney’s experiment presents these questions: What story were those volunteers telling themselves as they were assigned the roles of prisoners? What about those who were assigned the roles of guards? At what point did the volunteers forget their participation was voluntary? What story frees them from their chosen imprisonment? What story does the same for any individual in an environment where they are told they are “less than” their perceived or assigned superior?

Working in my office in a role I was told I was overqualified for—a role in which I knew I was underpaid and overworked—made me feel strangely inadequate. I noticed early on that all of the other administrative positions were filled by Black people, specifically Black women, who adhered to “office culture” by straightening their hair, wearing wigs, and dressing with dull clothing that was business-casual appropriate. I came in young, excited, and eager to be a part of the team with my big, natural afro and bright, floral button-downs. Over time I became unrecognizable not only to myself but to those around me. I became the antithesis of the loud-mouthed, strong-willed, creative, passionate, driven, dedicated leader I knew myself to be. It took time to recover this character and to see myself beyond that space.

My employment in that organization, and in any organization, does not equate to my value or identity as an individual. In the words of Dr. Linda Pennington, “You can be ‘in’ a place without being ‘of’ it.” While I would prefer to find meaning and passion in all my work, I realized I don’t have to be that way. I am now aware of my existence in a
system I did not create, and I am setting myself up for the most opportunities I can yield within the actions I take and the narratives I entertain. Embracing self-authorship and narrative asks: What story was I telling myself? What story was I accepting about my life? Why had I made myself into this tired, weaker character? What opportunity was in it (Baxter Magolda, 2008)?

I realized being surrounded by oppression had me accepting the role of the oppressed instead of the role of the liberated. I became so aware of the intricacies of the system that I adopted the system instead of adapting myself (Collins, 1990). Conformity had somehow managed its way in, even if not fully in. It clouded my mind with a fog, latched itself to my limbs, and carrying me through the days. Paying so much attention to everyone else’s story of the world had me dismissing my own story and forgetting myself. Liberating myself beyond this story and embracing the potentialities of my own agency, a political act in and of itself, expanded my power beyond the definitions rooted in White paradigms (Collins, 1990). With this new awareness, I move forward in self-knowledge and self-pursuit.

This pursuit of myself within the OD program allowed me to break free from the puppet master of conformity that threatens us all. This program has allowed me to learn, in a matter of two years, many insights about organizational politics and the human beings navigating them; these same insights would have taken me decades to otherwise learn in the working world. While I didn’t know how introspective the program was, I knew it was introspective to some degree and considered that to be a good enough foundation for forward movement. Yet again, the value is not in the credentials. Finishing
here with a Master of Science is not nearly as impactful as me finishing as a master of myself.

I’ve known what it means to take something from an idea, to trust that idea enough to let it begin to actualize into reality, and to work through the idea until it becomes, in fact, a part of the world and is no longer only an idea. I demonstrated that process externally by moving to Philly, something that was once only an idea. What I’ve learned here is how to do that internally, within myself. I have learned what it means to truly embody creation and to be part of something bigger than myself. I have learned I may only be a part of something more by first being all that I am. I have learned to remove what only conflates but does not expand the overarching story as I carve, chapter by chapter, who I am.

Goals of This Capstone

This capstone aims to illustrate the nuances of self-authorship while following along my own personal journey of growth. The reader can learn how I came to be fully responsible for myself and my life by owning my intersectional identity and writing talents to harness both into an applicable and agile skillset. I aim to add to the literature that empowers one to understand this individual narrative as a contribution to the collective, as all narratives are. Narratives and stories are our way of making sense of the world around us and crafting the world at large. By witnessing my story and the process of attributing full value to self, the readers can find value in their own story.
Structure of This Capstone

This chapter introduces the three lenses explored in this capstone and their relevance to my journey, alongside a review of the supporting literature. It revolves around my previous mindsets and what led me to study in the OD program.

Chapter 2 provides a conceptual framework for the lenses presented within this capstone. This framework roots my experiences, learning, and interpretations in theories and literature that are examined throughout the remaining chapters.

Each portion of Chapter 3 shares an aspect of the three foundations of narrative coaching: narrative structure, narrative identity, and narrative skills. Chapter 3 also explores how the stories and narratives present in my life contributed to my development—primarily through coaching. In this chapter I explore how my own story and experiences can be a contribution to others, and how my story can help them write their own story. The work of Drake, Baxter Magolda, and Bruner provide clear definitions and background for the real-world applications of narrative coaching. By studying this work, and acting as both the researcher and the research, I found nuanced ways to actualize it and, therefore, to actualize myself.

Chapter 4 explores storytelling in the African American tradition, Afrofuturism, and Black feminist thought. It revolves around the origins of my strength in self-authorship and self-definition, which are unique to my lived experience as a Black woman. This chapter also reinforces this strength as revealing universal truths by first acknowledging the storyteller’s value and considering that strength alongside others. It asks where strength may be found for future stories, and how looking to the future is intrinsic to Black feminist and Afrofuturist frameworks themselves.
Chapter 5 explores divergent thinking in nurturing a growth mindset. It considers the developmentally effective experiences, literature, and knowledge that served as the foundation for the mindset shifts made throughout this journey. These mindset shifts derive from my professional experience and contribute to my personal development.

Chapter 6 expands on the future stories touched upon in Chapter 4. It asks what those future stories will be and how they will continue to help others beyond the presentation of this capstone.
CHAPTER 2

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

This section of my capstone details the conceptual framework that supported my creation of a self-authoring identity. In this section, I provide a brief overview of the core theoretical lenses explored in the chapters to follow. Those lenses are: Self-Authorship, Storytelling and narrative, and Black Feminist thought.

Self-Authorship

Self-authorship has been explored by many theorists, including two leaders in this area: Kegan (1994) and Baxter Magolda (2008). Both of these leaders have examined self-authorship and defined it via stages and progressions. The premise of this theory is to establish a personal identity, comprising one’s own beliefs, values, social relations, and internal systems. This identity then authorizes an individual to author their own life. They can then use it as a navigation system to build a coherent self. The major guides to self-authorship are rooted in “developmentally effective experiences.” These experiences delve into the crucial process of “making meaning” and eliciting the value to form opinions and make conscious decisions.

Baxter Magolda (2008) presents three key yet interwoven components of self-authorship. She details these as “trusting the internal voice, building an internal foundation, and securing internal commitments” (Baxter Magolda, 2008, p. 269). These foundational components expand on Kegan’s (1994) work by articulating the developmental self as self-authoring, an essential stage of growth and maturity. Kegan (1982) writes about this internal and intellectual maturity and explores “the natural emergence of the self” found in self-authorship (Kegan, 1982, p. 186). He later expands
on “exercises of psychological self-definition” as leading to self-authorship, which is further considered by Baxter Magolda (2009).

Both Kegan and Baxter Magolda explore the process of self-authorship, specifically for the college student and young adult’s self-defining phase of life. The uniqueness of this stage of life presents the opportunity for an individual to explore their own voice and internal motivators as they traverse through life experiences that contribute to their development (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009). Baxter Magolda argues the importance of “an internal orientation [as a] developmental capacity for students to achieve collegiate goals” (Baxter Magolda et al., 2009, pg. 109). Yet, despite the prevalence of self-authorship in young adulthood, individuals of any age could have this experience by paying attention to the stories being used to provide meaning to one’s life.

In this way this research extends Kegan’s work, emphasizing the internal compass that self-authorship calls upon. Whereas Kegan questions whether the culture of self-authorship itself supports a person’s exploration of their meanings, purposes, capabilities, achievements, responsibilities, and beliefs, Baxter Magolda examines the environments in which this exact culture thrives (Kegan, 1982, p. 259). Kegan’s questioning contributes to further consideration of self-authorship, homing in on the authoring component and the consistent presence of stories, whereas Baxter Magolda’s work focuses on the settings for the stories in question. These stories work in tandem with the aforementioned exercises of psychological self-definition and aid the individual in establishing a distinguished sense of self and internal voice.

Storytelling
Storytelling is the social and cultural act of telling stories and sharing narratives, values, education, and life experiences as a form of cultural preservation and creation (Booker, 2004). The act of telling stories has been used historically as a way to describe, interpret, and share experiences (Drake, 2017). Storytelling embodies the core of the human condition in that it connects to three of the core human psychological needs, namely love and belonging, esteem, and self-actualization (Maslow, 1962).

The human condition depicts the characteristics and events that formulate human existence, such as birth, growth, emotions, aspiration, conflict, and mortality (Welch, 2021). Stories portray human experiences and are composed of main elements that aid in constructing various narratives including plot, characters, narrative point of view, setting, conflict, theme, and narrative arc (Coulter & Smith, 2009). Coulter and Smith address the use of literary elements to create narratives while analyzing common themes within stories. Their examination of these commonalities demonstrates attention to the universal nature elicited from individual storytelling.

With more attention to themes than to details, stories attain a unique quality to bridge cultural, social, racial, and age gaps (Delgado et al., 2012). Learning from stories primarily stems from experiences; however, the act of storytelling itself allows the storyteller to extract lessons (Davidson, 2004). Through the act of telling a story, a storyteller garners awareness of the story being told in both implicit and explicit ways, while also gaining awareness of their unique story and experiences. This awareness uplifts the individual, therefore contributing to uplifting the collective. The story listener benefits from this process and their capacity to learn increases; they delve into human connection and are influenced by the story being told. Consequently, through effective
communication and conveyance of ideas and experiences, stories increase opportunities to share human life, reinforcing individuality, humanity, and community simultaneously.

Doty (2003) writes on the ability to use stories to uncover knowledge and consequently affirm community and presents stories and storytelling as a “part of the solution” to “re-engage commitment, rebuild trust, and re-activate knowledge of skills” (p. 2). This focus on commitment, trust, and knowledge is mirrored in Baxter Magolda’s (2008) three elements of self-authorship, connecting the two frameworks further. Doty points out that through the practice of making the implicit, internally known aspects explicit, stories provide routes to breaking barriers, acknowledging and eliminating biases/prejudices, and re-assigning identity and selfhood. The story, now made explicit, is more tangible and therefore more malleable as it promotes creation. Doty also connects stories to the four phases of Kolb’s learning cycle (1984) in that the reflection that follows the concrete experiences in storytelling encourages the following steps of abstract conceptualization and active experimentation. These steps then return to concrete experiences and the cycle repeats (see Figure 2).

Kolb’s learning cycle is likened in the learning loop frameworks first presented to me in DYNM 720. Argyris and Schon developed single-loop and double-loop learning frameworks on Argyris’s “theory of action” (Argyris, 1999). Single-loop learning is the process of adjusting an action and its consequences to correct a problem. Double-loop learning takes the process a step further by considering the underlying causality to correct a problem, then leading to changed action. Triple-loop learning, which is inspired by single-loop and double-loop learning, is an elaboration of previous learning loops. Triple-loop learning provides insight for learning by reflecting on how an individual or group
began to learn. These learning loop frameworks aid in uncovering knowledge about the self and others that storytelling fosters, paralleling the processes in narrative theory and narrative coaching.

**Figure 2**

*Learning Cycle: Kolb’s Model*

*Note: Source: “Experiential Learning Model”, David Kolb 1984*

Stories and narratives provide a route to the meaning making work that is explored in self-authorship and that is the core of narrative coaching. The way stories are told and the use of the elements within them to construct a narrative add to identity creation and self-creation. Storytelling actualizes in many forms including oral storytelling and specifically dance, songs, poetry, chants, folklore, epics, myths, and more.
Stories are the foundation of narrative coaching and narrative theory; they are the core of what makes us human (Drake, 2017). According to Drake, narrative coaching is defined as working with stories to develop greater awareness, agility, authorship, and accountability. Narrative theory aids the client in viewing themself as a narrator to illuminate the distinction between “I” (as subject) and the “Me” (as object) (James, 1927). This approach aligns with Kegan’s (1994) subject-object theory in adult development and supports the processes of growth. Through the lens of narrative theory, human experiences are organized and given meaning through storytelling (Polkinghorne, 1991). Narrative coaching allows people to develop themselves in real time, pushing them to focus on their story in the present tense and reminding them of their agency in writing their story. The narrative coaching process encourages the client to formulate new stories after identifying with their current ones as they reform how they think about themselves to lead to what they think about themselves, transforming their behavior in the process. These behavior shifts lead to self-definitions and contribute to a self-authoring identity.

Black Feminist Thought

Collins (1990) makes vital contributions to a better of understanding of self-definition specific to Black women. According to Collins (1990), Black feminist thought is defined as a field of knowledge that focuses on the perspectives and experiences of Black women. She presents the connections between Black feminism, the Black woman’s experience, self-definition, empowerment, and rearticulation. She calls upon the work of many other Black woman feminists and activists—namely, Audre Lorde, Ella Surrey, Fannie Barrier Williams, Marita Bonner, and Sojourner Truth—to emphasize the
presence of a collective Black woman consciousness and resistance. However, she
distinguishes that this collective consciousness and resistance is the individual Black
woman’s responsibility while being influenced by the myriad voices around her. Collins
(1990) noted, “Other Black women may assist a Black woman in this journey toward
empowerment, but the ultimate responsibility for self-definitions and self-valuations lies
within the individual woman herself” (p. 112).

Collins (1990) then continues to provide examples of Black women storytellers
who have used their various mediums as contributions to this movement of empowerment
and change, including Alice Walker’s book *The Color Purple*, Zora Neale Hurston’s
book *Their Eyes Were Watching God*, and Ntozake Shange’s book *For Colored Girls—*
all of these stories capture the journey of self-definition, self-valuation, and self-
empowerment. Each literary work highlights this journey in a different way: in Walker’s
work writing liberates Celie’s character, in Hurston’s work Janie finds value through the
oral storytelling woven throughout the book, and in Shange’s book listening to many
women’s stories affirms the sense of community and sisterhood. These works, alongside
this book by Collins, reinforce what Collins calls “the significance of rearticulation”
(Collins, 1990, p. 111). She clarifies yet again that this rearticulation is not in the name of
reconciling with opposing Eurocentric and hegemonic values, but instead to “[put]
language to everyday experiences” and provide value that “[transcends] the limitations of
race, gender, and class subordination” (p. 111).

Collins (1990) also makes an assertion that connects Black women’s invisibility
to their enhanced intellect and self-knowledge. She examines the concept of the outsider-
within, noting that this unique experience of ostracization “serves many African
American women intellectuals as a source of tremendous strength” (p. 94). Collins relates this to Audre Lorde’s observations that the hypervisibility that renders the Black woman vulnerable equally gives the Black woman a “peculiar angle of vision.” It is this way of seeing that elicits the strength needed to transcend race, class, and gender oppression.

Collins’s work provides a framework to merge the overarching themes in this capstone of self-authorship and self-definition through storytelling with the practice of narrative coaching. This approach strengthens the power of the individual consciousness that builds the collective, creating a cycle of empowerment and self-knowledge that conquers such ostracizing social realities.

Another prominent voice contributing to this capstone is that of bell hooks, an author, professor, feminist, and social activist whose work focuses on feminist theory and sociopolitical classifications. hooks’ writing is entrenched in an examination of intersectionality, specifically in terms of race, capitalism, class, and gender as they relate to oppressive systems. In a collection of essays by hooks (1989), she offers insights on racism, feminism, politics, and pedagogy in a conversational, yet informative, tone, which influence the content of this capstone. As she transcribes the details of her various experiences, hooks explores language, voice, and storytelling as key to an understanding that is not isolated to the self but instead lends to others as theoretical essays intertwine with the personal essays in this work. The combination of both literary styles leads to discoveries that shift the experiences of oppressed, marginalized, colonized, and exploited individuals from silence into speech and then further into action (Delgado et al., 2012). This shift is the crux of identity creation, allowing one to mull over the past as
they play with the present and imagine the future. Through this approach new possibilities are envisioned, new narratives are considered, and new growth is achieved.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) support stories and storytelling as a functional tool within for upholding or dismantling social constructs. Critical race theory serves as one of the frameworks presented for many of the claims made in Chapter 3, juxtaposed with my personal experience. These authors consider stories as providing a “deeper understanding to how Americans see race” and how “history and myth preserve culture, bind [groups] together, and remind [them] of [their] common destiny” (p. 44). Their approach attests that “powerfully written stories and narratives may begin a process of correction,” transferring focus to “neglected evidence” and accentuating “common humanity” (p. 50). They also support the assertions made within this capstone to offer storytelling and narrative as bridging gaps to combat alienation and push toward collective liberation.

Throughout the following chapters the above theoretical lenses are used to fully extract the core of my transformation within this OD program. Grounding this work in education provides the basis for its praxis. The theoretical lenses serve as pillars to my various pivots. Applying the previously mentioned frameworks and my experiences, I conclude that the developmentally effective experiences that formulate self-authorship are founded in learning processes. This learning is actualized through the act of storytelling, which is then compounded with tools such as narrative identity and narrative coaching to return to a self-authoring identity.

This self-authoring identity, along with the narratives and stories that accompany it, pave the way to reformation of individual identity and collective identity in the same
vein. I have been able to extract this learning with attention to my unique identity, acknowledging the totality of that identity with Black feminist thought as an informative and transformational instrument to self-definition. I expand on these core theoretical lenses alongside my own stories of past, present, and future in the following chapters, in the hope that doing so will provide the foundational knowledge necessary to illuminate my story for readers while informing those seeking to pursue a path similar to mine.
CHAPTER 3
NARRATIVE AND COACHING

Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, “Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, fabulous?” Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There is nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We are all meant to shine, as children do. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others.

—Marianne Williamson

I have found the most important story for me is the story of my persisting and constantly evolving self. Yet, I have also learned to permit pause and patience in the in-between, to allow myself to be human and flawed, confused and complex. It helps me make more room for what is yet to come. Black feminist frameworks would help me understand my previous approach to perseverance and resilience, without considering my humanity, as a result of survival in a White/Eurocentric society (hooks, 1989; Collins, 1990). I expand on these frameworks in this chapter and explain how paying attention to my humanity was an essential aspect of recrafting my narrative throughout my coaching journey. In creating a new counternarrative that aligns with the kind of life I desire, I make room for more of myself. This counternarrative came about through the work of coaching and being coached in the Organizational Consulting and Executive Coaching (OCEC) cohort of the OD program.

The OCEC cohort was unique in its design because it allowed me to further develop multidisciplinary skills within an understanding of myself and my organizations.
I found it advantageous to my understanding of organizational dynamics, top-down management structures, and bureaucracy, as well as expanding my skillset in my consulting and coaching work.

While both components of the cohort were crucial to my personal and professional development, the executive coaching component was deeply transformative for my internal orientation. This internal orientation complemented my self-authoring identity.

I learned several theories and frameworks at the onset of the OCEC cohort that resonated with me, including positive psychology, humanistic theory, cognitive behavioral therapy, mindfulness, somatic coaching, and narrative coaching. Still new to the OD program and seeking to learn things that I had not learned before, I attempted to divert away from the world of writing and narratives as I developed myself as a coach. My undergraduate studies were in English and creative writing, so I aimed to introduce something new to my toolkit. My attempts were futile as each professor in this program guided me back into my lane, shifting the focus to my strengths. This shift became a perfect match for me as I uncovered that focusing on my strengths is how I can expand my toolkit. Over time I found coaching practice to reflect my orientation toward self-improvement. Narrative theory became the tool to inform that improvement.

Courses in the program aligned with my desired praxis and future goals. Various classes showed me how relevant storytelling is in life beyond being a form of artistic expression. In the course entitled Organizational Essentials For Leadership taught by Professor Jean-Marc Choukroun, I expanded in learning from my consulting experience in the OCEC cohort. This course touched upon storytelling in organizations in terms of
senior leadership, marketing and branding, and decision-making. As I move forward in my career and personal development, it is valuable to explore these directly applicable areas of storytelling within the business setting because it expands my understanding of the practice. This expansion contributes to the growth of my skillset and capacities as a storyteller. For me, narrative is no longer only writing personal stories; it is also writing and upholding the stories of brands, company missions and visions, and more. All of this work is done in the name of aligning intention with impact while considering the behavior in between to support this alignment.

I return now to narrative coaching as the key to ensuring that intentions align with impact. Narrative coaching and narrative theory shine the light on stories and behaviors. By paying attention to stories and behaviors, I could see that my intentions or goals could have the impact and outcomes I desired. My experience as a client in the OCEC cohort solidified the work I was already doing in studying in this program. My coach used humanistic psychology, narrative coaching, cognitive behavioral therapy/coaching, and positive psychology in our coaching sessions. The experience of being a client served me well in learning more about being a coach because it helped me develop myself more as a human. I was able to see through both lenses and therefore was able to empathize with my client when coaching. One of the most transformative parts of being coached by someone whose identity seemed the entire opposite of mine was that my coach simply listened to my story. He did not try to change it, he did not try to rewrite it, and he did not try to decode it; he simply listened, asked questions, and learned who I am. As he learned, he guided me further in the direction that led to my authenticity, not letting me
run to the shadows of my own darkness. My story was uplifted in this space as I verbalized it, explored my own epiphanies, and learned to be more present.

When I look back on my time in this program, I see I wanted freedom and the opportunity to have choices. With coaching and attention to storytelling, I learned that this sense of freedom and choice was already within me.

Many people marvel at how I can solve a Rubik’s cube, but the irony of this ability is that a Rubik’s cube is built on a set of key algorithms that are repeated to get to solid colors on each side. So really, almost everyone can solve a Rubik’s cube. I mention this because the Rubik’s cube became a reference point for me in understanding the world of consulting, systems, and processes. Right before the end of solving a Rubik’s cube, all of the colors seem to converge in a way that would make the previous work done in solidifying other solid colors and sides useless. Yet, it is trusting the system in place and the algorithm that leads to the final outcome.

Through consulting work I learned to understand my own mind and trust my process because discipline and structure permit my creativity. With attention to an underlying system, I could ask questions that allow various pivots and embrace flexibility. This approach also showed up in coaching in another way. My clients came to me with their own systems in place, functional or not, seeking to understand how they could improve as we set goals in the beginning of our engagement. The SMART goals framework was a helpful tool in considering specific, measurable, attainable, relevant, and timely goals that added to their systems. However, another tool was through questioning. For example, I would post these questions: “What’s working? What’s not working? What are your hesitations? What can I do in my role to help you in this space?”
Another course that provided a new lens to storytelling was entitled Developing Emotional Intelligence Through Art, taught by Professor Charline Russo and Master of Science in Organization Development (MSOD) alumna Claudia Tordini. I decided to join this course at the end of my studies within the OD program because I wanted my final classes to fuel me with as much excitement and engagement as my courses within the cohort. This class far exceeded my expectations and opened an entirely new part of my mind that I hadn’t realized was underutilized. I’ve noted before that I am a writer, but I don’t spend much time drawing, painting, or engaging in other media that involve colorful expressions of emotions. This course’s difference became its strong suit as it affirmed for me that art, emotions, and creativity can have a place in business environments when cultivated intellectually.

Attention to my emotional intelligence connects with the human-centered design taught in the OD program as I am an inherently feeling individual. Feelings are a crucial area of focus within my coaching and narrative work as I best consider how to serve my clients. The feelings my clients carry with them throughout their day illuminate the stories they tell about their jobs, themselves, and their lives. This class’s expansion of storytelling specifically came from Fredrickson’s (2009) work on positivity and positive psychology. Fredrickson (2009) presents positivity as possessing six key factors: (1) positivity feels good, (2) positivity changes how your mind works, (3) positivity transforms your future, (4) positivity puts the brake on negativity, (5) positivity obeys a tipping point, and (6) you can increase your positivity (p. 277).

I find this approach connecting back to my coaching work as positive psychology lends itself to both myself and my client. As a coach, I can see how positivity shapes the
way I approach my coaching or consulting engagement as much as it shapes the way I approach life. For my client, positivity can become a redemptive tool, offering second chances in areas of frustration, confusion, or perceived failure. Fredrickson’s (2009) remarks on positivity as an upward spiral in her work, connecting the spiral concept and spinning in an upward motion to a sense of continual improvement. The spiral itself may be chaotic in nature; however, the attention to moving up and towards the positive, instead of downward and toward the negative, provides space for compassion, the furtherance of self-awareness, and liberates stories across time.

After more consideration I found that both Fredrickson’s (2009) work and Drake’s (2017) work allowed me to ask myself several questions, when held up against the light and unloaded from my backpack full of years of stories: What are the patterns in each of these narratives? What shape are they each taking? What story is most important? In this new light of storytelling, I can deconstruct resilience and embrace something more remarkable. I can allow myself to be human in the ways that stories before may have not permitted (hooks, 1989). I now author myself to be both strong and human. I embody that the presence of one characteristic does not negate the presence of the other characteristic. It is possible, and has been my experience, that others’ stories about me do not honor who I know myself to be, which further drives me to ask the question: Who am I now so that I may become more? (Drake, 2017). I create the story of myself that authors my life by first embracing all that I am. Narrative coaching helps me do so.

In my role as a coach, I ask my clients the toddler’s age-old question of “why?” to encourage curiosity about the stories in their lives. Asking this question has helped dive
into the world of meaning making and assigning meaning to various experiences, relationships, and aspects of the self that contribute to stories at play (Kegan, 1982).

One coaching client, in particular, found that asking why helped them also ask the opposite question: “why not?” to consider a counternarrative. This counternarrative eliminated preconceived limitations on their stories and lives to extract new possibilities (Collins, 1990; Delgado et al., 2012). In this way the process of questioning our stories, as narrative coaching/theory calls for, allows us to create new stories, to extract the valuable pieces, and to establish a core identity that can navigate whatever new journeys come to be.

Self-definition and narrative coaching tie in with self-authorship through the process of asking questions and regarding our stories with more care (Drake, 2017). By asking questions about the stories we carry, we open ourselves to deeper inquiry and deeper capacities to be human. We equally open ourselves to more self-definitions and press further into a self-authoring identity.

The intention of self-definition being the individual’s responsibility, while being influenced by the collective community of self-liberated individuals, is part of the reason I resonate so deeply with narrative coaching. Narrative coaching provides a focus on the individual’s story, shifting the focus from the coach as a practitioner to the client’s story and its many components. It is inherent to my own cultural traditions of storytelling to uplift the story of whomever comes after me. I empower others through the power I self-actualize as a Black woman from the similar work of other Black women.

Narrative coaching becomes the playground for this identity creation, of which self-authorship and self-definition are the children running around the playground.
Narrative coaching and narrative theory pave the way for a liberated identity that can play with the various tools on this playground of agentic identity. I have run around this playground as both coach and client. In order to play a defining role as a change agent and narrative coach and to empower the stories of others, I had to first shift how I saw myself and my role as a coach (Drake, 2017). This shift could not have been done without first analyzing my own stories. After much analysis and sifting through what stories are most salient, I've identified three stories that are core to my self-exploration for the purpose of this capstone, which I briefly describe.

I engage in meaning making—that is, assigning value to my experiences—to extract the following common themes: self as instrument, divergent thinking, embracing the whole human, and narrative coaching, as well as more themes as people interact with the storygrounds around them.

One coaching client and I created a post-session review document composed of session recaps, highlights, and suggested readings entitled “Giving & Creating Language” as we noted the importance of words in their life. This document served as a reference for our coaching sessions and an affirmation for their future work in crafting their own narrative. This document also gave my client a sense of validation that what they were experiencing and learning about themselves outside of our coaching engagements was real. They found the language they had been searching for in coaching sessions and were now able to speak of themselves in different ways, which they noted felt more authentic to who they are. This approach also had a beautiful cyclical effect as they found themselves using the same language and the curious, open-ended question approach in coaching within conversations with their friends and family. They were able
to use takeaways from our sessions and expand their learning beyond themselves to encourage and nurture others as well.

Another coaching client enjoyed how I would ask them why they used certain words when they spoke about themselves and their life. I asked them to “join me” in the metaphorical room of our coaching sessions as we “put things on the table,” the option always there to pick them up or leave them where they lay. The “table” and the “room” became places to spell everything out and to help it all make sense. The table and the room were places where I could play with narrative coaching and tie in positive psychology in questioning my client’s use of language.

We examined their daily habits and practices and how each informed various mindsets. Creating action items—such as journal prompts, sentence completion exercises, goal-setting strategies and more—was a matter of applying cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) and narrative work in tandem. I began to stop feeling as if I had to spew theories at people to sound credible and instead began to act on these theories. I would name them later, which felt the most empowering. Instead of prefacing with an intimidating concept of pursuing cognitive behavioral therapy, I would do the reverse and say, “What we just did is called CBT” or “You just explored positive psychology!” This approach left my client marveling at themselves. They felt capable and audibly “wow”ed. In the quieting of thought through questioning, they began to hear themselves differently. Then they began to speak.

My clients find that words are creation. They find out they can change their lives by changing the way they speak about themselves. Changing the way they speak changes the way they see, and changing the way they see changes the way they act as they explore
agentic identity. This insight reflects Burke’s work on story grammars as clients make use of language (as cited in Wildflower et al., 2011).

Over time I found that not only did my clients enjoy the use and attention to language in our sessions, but they began to mirror the language I used in coaching. They began to mimic the same process of questioning, starting statements with my “I’m curious to see...,” “I wonder...,” and “What would it be like if...?” One of my clients remarked that I gave them the language to identify negative reinforcement and their inclination to choose negative reinforcement when regarding themselves. They told me that I gave them tools to help them navigate their niche, to be more intentional in thinking about their thought process, and to be more present with their voice:

My actions used to depend on others’ perception of me, but now I feel more present and empowered. I’ve been trying to comb out like, this is who I am and this is what I need. Before, I was on autopilot—a year ago, I wasn’t critically thinking. Now you’ve given me the language to see the things that I was either afraid to talk about or felt weren’t important enough to talk about and validated them to be real. That gave me my own sense of individuality.

This client has progressed after almost a year of coaching sessions to seek the nuances that therapy can provide but also shared that coaching provided the foundation of knowing themself, which allows them to show up in therapy. They shared that they wouldn’t have sought a Black woman for a therapist and would not have been able to bask in the pleasures of being seen the way they are now, had I not been representative as a Black woman and coach.

I also found that my anxiety could not serve me well as a coach. If I sat rooted in nervousness and in my own internal questioning, I failed to be present with the client in front of me. I had times when I felt intimidated by the fact that I wasn’t sure if I could help or guide my client with the concerns they presented. I was reminded in those
moments to take a deep breath and ask the client where they wanted to start and what
would be the most helpful. Simply asking the question: “How could we use our time in
this session to best serve you with everything you’ve just shared?” helped them regain
focus so they could tell me what I could do in my role as a coach. I also found myself
stuttering when my client hadn’t completed action items they were enthused to complete
from one meeting to the next.

They would occasionally remark about feeling their life and mindset felt cyclical,
despite what appeared to me as progress in our meetings. I didn’t know how to support
them in stopping the cycle when they were struggling with doing the work in between
sessions. I started to remedy this situation by asking them to look at the finer details as
opposed to the overall moments of “success.” Again, language became a key factor in
their storytelling and self-exploration. How could they begin to redefine success so that it
was familiar instead of seemingly inaccessible? What small moments would become
monumental when we did this together? It was the small moments that proved to be the
most powerful for them to confidently navigate their self-coaching journey afterward. It
was the small moments that helped me feel confident to do the same for myself.

My clients shared with me that they felt supported in being themselves by seeing
the way I showed up as myself in our sessions. They noted my use of language,
mimicking back to me my speech patterns now engrained in their heads. One client noted
my coaching style, stating at the end of our engagement: “I need to Frankenstein you into
me.” In the spirit of “playing” with the moment and with analogies, we found that they
would regard my hands as reminders to write more, my mouth and eyes to describe things
and create visceral reactions with multiple descriptions and analogies for impact, and my
ears/eyes for hearing or seeing unnecessary doubts in their own language and noting where to pause. It was strange but immensely flattering to hear from not one but three clients that they wanted to keep a “little Ashley” with them at all times, walking alongside them as they traverse the world. I am glad to have walked alongside myself.

I’d been running from the sound of myself and seeking it at the same time. Over time, and with direction from my professors and peers, I fell back into what I had somehow left behind: language and stories. When I remark on my emotional milestones alongside my intellectual theories, I find language to be a common thread. To have the words to speak about oneself in a way that reflects more, never less, is truly empowering.

Paying attention to narrative structure helped my clients notice the pieces they were using to craft their stories, in addition to the language used. Narrative identity asks them to share their examination on how they construct themselves within those same stories. Understanding the components of the story, along with the self as the key character, reinforced agency to rearrange the narrative as needed, alongside reorienting the self. Narrative skills are enhanced in this process, giving them the agility to work in the “field” (namely, in the world) as they explore the playgrounds of their stories. The unconscious becomes conscious and verbalized, the implicit becomes explicit, and through this work they increase their awareness and actualize their own power. In raising this awareness, they can see how they narrate their stories and selves to those around them. Over time their stories take on a new shape, and their language changes as they change themselves.

My work environment served as a playground of its own. Initially, I gave the story of my professional experience an extreme amount of weight; it weighed heavily on
me as I carried it around. Frankl’s (1946) words about control come to mind: “Forces beyond your control can take away everything you possess except one thing, your freedom to choose how you will respond to the situation” (p. 69). I was telling myself the story that I saw reflected to me from that environment and found it was not a story I wanted for my life. I unraveled my work experience and the organizational dynamics at play primarily in Chapter 1, though the lessons carry throughout my life experiences. This process is mirrored in my executive coaching clients’ processes as they learn to separate their identities/stories from those of the organizations with whom they work.

I also gave weight to the story of me navigating the professional world as a young adult. I viewed this approach, in part, as an inhibition instead of an attribute. I thought that because I did not have the years of experience, I lacked the knowledge. Yet, knowing that I knew nothing (Plato, Apology, Section 21d) became a strangely affirming component of my journey. It aided me in continuing to learn and to welcome a growth mindset, while also gathering the strength to trust my intuition that had led me to this point. Courses in the OD program—such as The Devil’s Advocate: The Power of Divergent Thinking, Making Meaning From Experience and Establishing Frameworks, and Consulting and Coaching Process: Knowing Yourself—provided more tools for this mindset development explored in Chapter 4.

Lastly, I gave weight to the story of my identity as a Black woman in a negative context. I couldn’t see that resilience and humanity could coexist because that was what the world was telling me, and I accepted the myth as truth. Being Black meant being resilient, but it did not mean being human (hooks, 1989). I began to consider these questions: How could I make room for both? How had room already been made in the
past for the future? This approach led to my exploration of Afrofuturist work and a deeper reverence for Black feminist theory, which I explored in Chapter 2. Dr. Janet Greco’s course entitled Myths to Media: Stories on a Mission also added to my meaning making as I examined these questions: Which stories about and around my identity are myths? Which stories do I want to uphold? How do those stories help me carve out who I am?

This story and its shifts attain weight and relevance as it is core to my unique way of making sense of the world. hooks (1989) stated: “I write these words to bear witness to the primacy of resistance struggle in any situation of domination...to the strength and power that emerges from sustained resistance and the profound conviction that these forces can be healing, can protect us from dehumanization and despair” (p. 8). Through writing, I witness; through witnessing, I narrate; through narrating, I create; with creation, I liberate.
CHAPTER 4

STORYTELLING IN THE AFRICAN AMERICAN TRADITION

In resistance, the exploited, the oppressed work to expose the false reality—to reclaim and recover ourselves. We make the revolutionary history, telling the past as we have learned it mouth-to-mouth, telling the present as we see, know, and feel it in our hearts and with our words. — hooks (1989, p. 3)

Storytelling in the African American\(^1\) tradition is a form of expression, a form of cultural preservation, language, and a necessary factor for freedom (Delgado et al., 2012). Afrofuturism is only one of many tools for this storytelling, placing a focus on the present moment while also considering future opportunities alongside past lessons. Afrofuturism is a literary, musical, and artistic practice focusing on futuristic themes inherent to Black history, livelihood, and culture. The mention of Afrofuturism in this paper is to provide a tangible example of the creative persistence that is inherent to African American livelihood and freedom, directly connected to a history of suffering, enslavement, and abnegations.

This creative persistence renders itself primarily in the form of stories and the aesthetic art of Afrofuturistic work; however, it also becomes a multifunctional tool, aiding in the creation of narratives far beyond what is presently visible. This component of the movement, connected to Black feminist thought, is rooted within the African American tradition and demands room for individual and collective liberation. Stories become power because of their focus on difference, which may not be tangible at that

\(^1\) I use the term African American and Black interchangeably. Note: This use distinguishes the Black American experience from that of other African American experiences of the diaspora.
moment. Through a shift in this focus, thoughts, intentions, actions, and beliefs equally shift to align, therein making the story in question more likely and realistic. Reality is then literally manifested with creative and intellectual intent, coupled with action and persistence.

The story of African Americans in the United States is one that is continuously being authored. This authoring occurs not only out of pleasure but out of necessity. When captured by European slave catchers, then stolen, transported along the Atlantic Slave Trade, and enslaved in what would become the Americas, enslaved Africans were stripped of many aspects of identity (Collins, 1990). Separated from their families and brutalized, these enslaved people were dehumanized and deprived of their language, culture, human rights, and more. One notable factor was the deprivation of the enslaved African’s name, forcibly assimilating it to something more familiar and recognizable to the European tongue (Collins, 1990).

I touch upon these points to note that the undesired reassignment of a name removes a core part of a person’s external identity. A name is a way of identifying and distinguishing who one is; yet, in many cultures, a name tells a story. It is a keeping of tradition to remark on a specific date, time, or place of birth, a family that one belongs to, a personality trait one possesses, or more. Reassigning names and igniting violence, cruelty, and punishment, when met with the resistance of one affirming what they know to call themselves and what they know to be true to themselves, seems to be a historical repetition.

Devoid of language, identity, and basic humanity, many enslaved Africans sought routes of survival. It is the renaming of a self and the reclamation of an individual’s story
that is my focus here. Enslaved Africans would later become African Americans, and the Europeans intent on their enslavement would become White Americans.

Many African Americans are recovering history in the fragmented pieces it was broken into (Collins, 1990). Sharing pieces with one another becomes a way of making sense of it all, celebrating a unique and nuanced history, and learning deeply about the self and the community’s capabilities. One example is something as simple as cowrie shells worn in Black protective hairstyles. These adornments may seem as if they could be a simple, aesthetic choice, but further research on cowrie shells reveals their significance. Cowrie shells have been used in many cultures worldwide—notably Chinese, Brazilian, African, and Indian—as either a literal or figurative form of wealth (Moffett et al., 2019).

Once a monetary unit highlighting luck, prosperity, and power, the shells are worn in the hair or used to decorate clothing. These shells, as are many other objects passed to African Americans, are popular in West African culture as an adornment. My personal history with cowrie shells is seeing them worn in the various hairstyles of myself and friends growing up, which serves as one example of the power of storytelling to urge the question of “Why do we...?”

At some point cowrie shells became mass-produced, now purchasable in local beauty supply stores in Black communities and seen as hair jewels. However, with storytelling, what was once lost in terms of its significance and cultural assimilation can then be reclaimed with inquiry and intention to tell a story of wealth.

I return the focus of my capstone to make a connection: When I discover myself, I pave the way for another to embark on their own journey of self-discovery. The more I
learn about who I am and share as I do, the more others may see themselves mirrored in me. I exemplify this by seeking expansion and opportunities for growth as I did with this program. I exemplify this by approaching every day with intention to show up as my best self, to push through the discomfort of the unknown knowing simply that it leads to discovery. I did not start this practice. My self-liberating story comes from the similar stories of those who came before me for generations and precede this present world. I did not start this practice, but I do uphold it. It is the foundation of my work to “pay it forward,” looking always to the future with the past as a tool and the present as a movement.

Imagining a world where a Black girl could become woman as she was the first college graduate in her lineage, and then the first Ivy League graduate in her lineage, was not a story that started with me. I picked up the baton as I ran my own leg of the race, calling on the work of laps run prior. Someone in my lineage foresaw this future and helped orient me toward liberation in my unique way. I could suggest this imagining started with my mother’s story of me, but it pushes far beyond her, too. This is the essence of Afrofuturism in action and in body. While it may seem as unrealistic as cyborgs or flying cars, it is the essence of foresight and imagination that encompasses Afrofuturist work. As I considered feeling trapped and stuck in my work environment, underpaid and burdened with the weights of student debt as a first-generation college graduate, I wondered at my own power. At some point somewhere in my ancestry, someone knew my story would not be one of enslavement, even as they were enslaved themselves. They worked to make it so. This insight left me asking the question: If they could tell a different story of my life, why couldn’t I tell it for myself?
Agentic identity is birthed here as I found I don’t have to be any less than what I desire. In my questioning, I found that I could move forward. I didn’t need to exist in enslavement or, as it has been called by numerous individuals, adopt a slave mentality (Delgado et al., 2012). I was given a different route to self-freedom. I honor that freedom by continuing the practice of storytelling so that future freedoms may come.

It is important to note that storytelling in the African American tradition is unique in the way that stories are upheld primarily through oral tradition, as opposed to written stories (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Enslaved Africans were not allowed to read or write and were brutalized and punished if they were found possessing any form of literacy or competency. This literacy was seen as a threat to the captors and slaveholders as knowledge served as the route to potential liberation. Enslaved Africans were also stolen from various different tribes, making them unable to communicate with one another about their enslavement. This stripping of language reinforces the omnipresence of domination within enslavement (hooks, 1989).

To overcome this obstacle, a shared language was needed. They took to using drums and other tapping rhythms, sounds, and songs as communication (Banks-Wallace, 2002). Gospel music’s origins are rooted in antebellum slavery as hidden messages were woven within the lyrics, illuminating routes to freedom and encouraging resilience in the face of adversity. Gospel music later influenced the Blues, which emulates this sense of freedom and resilience (Collins, 1990). It is for this reason that cultural preservation through storytelling in the African American tradition exists so prominently in music, fashion, dance, spoken-word poetry, and other forms of oral or physical expression (Banks-Wallace, 2002). In carrying on this tradition, I ask myself and my coaching
clients to be hyperaware of the language used when we speak of ourselves and tell stories about our lives. The oral tradition perseveres in the shapes of our mouths, the intonation of our voices, and in the volume with which we speak about ourselves as powerful, capable individuals. To dismiss the importance of this power is to dismiss the importance of the self. To dismiss the importance of the self is to dismiss the importance of a life.

Storytelling in the African American tradition also considers generations yet to come, as much as it considers past generations. I often grappled with studying at the University of Pennsylvania because I didn’t want to be studying at yet another predominantly White institution. I didn’t want to have to explain my experiences as the only Black student in classes. I didn’t want to have to explain myself. I asked myself repeatedly, “Why am I here? What is this for?” Little did I know that making meaning would become such an essential component of my coaching journey. A coaching session with a classmate revealed the answers through a question: If a student that looked like you and had the background you did came into your office and asked why they were here, what would you say to them? I told him I would tell them, “You are here for a reason. You are here because you put in the work to be here, and you belong. You are here to give yourself access to the life you deserve.” This answer and approach reinforce not only the power of narrative, but also the power of persevering beyond the self and further into individual and collective identity liberation.

My presence alone rewrites the narrative, calling upon the work of ancestors in the past as the preface for generations to come. This focus on something larger than myself became a part of my “why” by which I could accept the purpose of whichever “how” (Frankl, 2006). My work environment’s antics and dynamics were no longer an
obstacle; they were an opportunity to remember life beyond the moment and beyond myself. I remembered and refocused: This is not only my story, it is ours. In seeing larger I was also able to see human, to rehumanize myself “once feeling most colored when thrown against a sharp white background” (Hurston, 1928, p. 2). Human again and finding opportunity in the othering, I persist.

Figure 3

*Untitled (I Do Not Always Feel Colored)*

Note: Source: Glenn Ligon, 1990.

Self-Definition

By authoring myself I ascribe an identity that is self-validating. I no longer need to receive validation from external sources as I am enough when I say I am. Over the course of this program, I learned that many of my experiences with unknowingly seeking
external validation came from trying to adhere to a system that would leave me othered. I wanted to know my place in a social and professional world that was not even created with me in mind. The irony of this approach is that I stopped making room for the fullness of myself.

White supremacy’s fixation with admonishing/diminishing the value of lives that do not adhere to its standards, specifically Black lives, is an important factor in this liberation of individual and collective identity (hooks, 1989). White supremacy is not only present in antebellum slavery, Jim Crow, and police brutality; it exists in bureaucratic organizational dynamics and spaces of erasure that do not allow the individual to explore their unique identities without feelings of unbelonging or oppression (Baldwin, 1963). These spaces are currently analyzed for their lack of diversity and inclusion, calling attention to the need for inclusion coaches and diversity work in organizations (Ward, 2016). It exists in police brutality as much as it is present in microaggressions and calls for the necessary work of abolishing preexisting systems that do not consider diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because Whiteness is the majority, minoritized groups that exist outside of this scope of Whiteness do 10 times as much work to give full value and weight to their experiences when constantly compared to the standards of White counterparts (Du Bois, 1903).

The organizational politics that are so often headache-inducing and suffocating are rooted in white supremacy (Nguyen, 2020). This notion is supported by Richard Delgado and Jean Stefancic (2012) who provide the language to further our understanding of sociopolitical environments. I emphasize critical race theory here as it posits that racism and racial disparity are a result of complex social and institutional
dynamics as opposed to premeditated or purposeful prejudices (Delgado et al., 2012). My point is that the issues I encountered as a Black woman were not the mission of any one individual but were the design of an entire social, political, cultural system. Counter storytelling aids in deconstructing and reconfiguring this design. Counter storytelling is one of the five tenets of critical race theory, permitting alternative narratives that oppose the hegemonic point of view inherent in the White gaze. With this tenet and the movement of critical race theory in mind, I can focus on the distinctiveness of my experience as permitting a self-authoring identity.

I had been writing about self-authorship as collectively liberating but continuously hit a wall while doing so. The issue for me was that self-authorship without attention to self-definition was limiting. Self-authorship as an identity that authors one’s life is freeing, but without focusing on defining oneself, something is lost (Okello, 2018). It is only when I become self-defining, self-valuing, and self-loving alongside my self-authoring that I can truly liberate not only myself but others (Collins, 1990). In alignment with counter storytelling, I resist notions that I alone am not of value and humanize myself; this resistance of dehumanization combats the core components of domination in white supremacy (hooks, 1989). Otherwise, this definition is a constant battle against others’ definitions that may not do justice to who a person is.

Black feminist thought paves the way for unified liberation psychologically, emotionally, physically, and more. Beyond this seemingly cyclical space of whitewashed identities characterized to fit in a larger in-group dynamic of Whiteness is the freedom to simply be. Diversity—whether through race, gender, sex, class, age, or ability status—could not exist alongside white supremacy (Delgado et al, 2012). The notions of white
supremacy reject anything that is not coated in sameness. This rejection is oppression, which is the reason why it is important for me to specifically write this story with an intersectional identity as a Black woman. I not only understand oppression from a racial lens as a Black person, but I also equally understand it from a patriarchal lens as a woman. I see the world through the lens of my own experience and through the lens of the White gaze. This gives me the impetus to further develop what Du Bois (1903) described as double consciousness into triple consciousness. Double consciousness has previously attained a negative connotation as an internal conflict experienced by subordinated or colonized groups in an oppressive society (Du Bois, 1903). Despite this definition, I offer now, alongside the work of Du Bois, that this way of experiencing the world can also be an attribute. Triple-consciousness is that I see through the lenses of my Black experience, the White gaze, and through a gendered lens, i.e. the male gaze. It is this triple consciousness that awakens my need for a divergent narrative road mapped through divergent thought. It is one that can see me as I am, instead of as others would have me. This approach further defines my self-authorship and further empowers my self-definition.

Since Black women are at the bottom of the sociopolitical totem pole—too much Blackness for the White women, too much woman for the Black men—Black feminist intention does not leave an identity behind (hooks, 1989). In freeing themselves they pave the way for freeing others. To liberate the Black woman is to counter White male dominance and hegemony. It is to establish a counternarrative that flips the story entirely, therefore allowing for the freedom of a multitude of identities that exist in between the Black/White binary. Collins’s (1990) term outsider-within attains relevance again as it
provides a unique approach to social, political, and intellectual truths. Such
marginalization gives the most paradoxical advantage: to think of and see the world
through a differing lens and to be empowered in this space to do the same with the self.

The class I took alongside The Devil’s Advocate: The Power of Divergent
Thinking in my first semester in the program was called Strategies to Confront Bias &
Enhance Collaboration in 21st Century Organizations. Given that I was in a difficult
space mentally and had practically lost my faith in organizations because of various work
experiences, I wanted to learn how to overcome the space and see where I could invite
growth in. This second course helped me learn more about the organizational dynamics
that was so new to me. It helped me identify various biases I held, and biases held by
those around me, to make up the stories we were all telling about ourselves and one
another. Whether we had considered it or not, our biases and prejudices became a story of
their own, and they had us each playing a specific character in the tale we told. This
course helped break that tale into pieces and examine it to make sense of the parts.

While I found much value in the conversations with my classmates and sessions
held by Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion consultants who were guests to the class, I still
wanted to push further into understanding where those biases stemmed from. Why were
so many organizations struggling to create and support collaborative spaces? Who were
the people that occupied these spaces and what about their identities made them “strange”
and not the “norm”? What was the norm anyway? Moreover, how could coaching and an
understanding of the dynamics help us confront them?

In my examination and experience, I found that this harkening to a White,
heteronormative, and hegemonic society stems from patriarchal dominance and from
power and control now normalized in a 40-hour work week. This power and control originate in white supremacy and capitalistic agendas that feed off of having one group at the top of a totem pole and others beneath to maintain structure (Delagdo et al., 2012; Nguyen, 2020). This insight bleeds over into the biases that exist in organizational environments and creates human conflicts, therefore making way for the necessary work of organizational dynamics and human-centered approaches.

Here is where my disregard for structural thinking fits in perfectly, as the structures around me were not created with someone like me in mind. Yet, my social thinking continues to consider people and to provide value to their lives. For me, by putting people first, I could then help improve the systems the people were part of instead of the other way around. People first and human-centered, my identity was free to exist in its totality and in the stories that honor its uniqueness. Narrative coaching, asking myself questions, assigning value to my stories, and defining myself paved the way to this freedom.

Others may undergo the same process of liberation by embracing the complexities of their own identities and reveling in the process of creation as much as they revel in the product. With the support of the frameworks mentioned throughout this capstone, this liberation can be done regardless of what parts of these identities may be oppressed.

Talking Back and Speaking Up: Taking Up Space

When I was 12 years old, my mother gifted me with a book called *When to Speak Up and When to Shut Up*. Her reason for doing so was that I spoke too much in the wrong moments and not enough in the right ones. I was so offended by this gift, and whatever lesson was rooted in her gifting it, that I committed one of the cardinal sins I’d
established as a booklover: I threw the book in the trash. Now, with significantly more emotional maturity, I am aware that she was only trying to communicate a lesson and aiming to do so via a medium I enjoyed. Yet, at the time none of that was a concern of mine.

In my culture, “talking back” is a disregard to the power dynamics that exist between an authority figure and a subordinate (hooks, 1989). Speaking to authority as if one is on an equal playing field as that individual depicts disrespect and dismissal. It highlights that the individual “talking back,” giving “back talk,” or “mouthing off” is not caring of the reverence reserved for the authority around them.

I mention this as it is the premise of hooks’ (1989) language in her work and is also mirrored in my experience in my work dynamics. This unspoken rule in approaching authority followed me as I was often chastised for speaking in spaces where it was expected for me to not “speak out of turn” or speak up at all. At one point I was told to “respect my elders.” I found this admonition to be surprising in a work environment, therein dismissing the fact that I was among colleagues with equal status. This remark left me feeling infantilized and dismissive of myself.

This experience contributed to me silencing myself in the name of surviving the unwelcoming environment, yet it did not contribute to self-preservation as I thought it would. I only sought to navigate the environment, but instead I’d abandoned myself. By reclaiming language and entertaining resistance, I reclaimed selfhood and identity. I used language as an asset, relearning the words to regard myself with confidence and with the right to speak in the spaces I entered. Making room and taking up space becomes a common theme in self-reclamation as it necessary to perform authentic diversity, equity,
and inclusion work. Again, this self-authorship permits identity liberation. It was only through recovering and authoring myself that I was able to tell my story, and it was my storytelling that led me to see my experience was not isolated. In this newfound space and awareness, I found my identity freed, and I found myself intent on journeying back as much as needed to help do the same for others.

If there is anything I want a Black student or individual reading this to know, it is this: Speak loudly of yourself with the pride you rightfully deserve. It is in our ancestry to liberate ourselves instead of waiting to be liberated. It is in our ancestry to author our lives. By embracing all that we are and all of our authenticity, our uniqueness, our pain, and struggles, we are equally able to embrace our superpowers. We empower ourselves and others to author their lives by reminding them of themselves and their wholeness. We remind ourselves we are whole. We remind ourselves we are human and that our stories are worth telling.
It did not really matter what we expected from life, but rather what life expected from us. We needed to stop asking about the meaning of life, and instead to think of ourselves as those who were being questioned by life—daily and hourly. Our answer must consist, not in talk and meditation, but in right action and in right conduct. Life ultimately means taking the responsibility to find the right answer to its problems and to fulfill the tasks which it constantly sets for each individual.
—Viktor Frankl (1946, p. 122)

This chapter follows my process of nurturing a growth mindset with attention to divergent thinking. I note the courses, tools, and assessments that helped me continue to develop intellectually and emotionally, encouraging the goals I’d set at the beginning of this journey.

I entered the OD program with the goal to further cultivate a growth mindset. I believe this objective became a core component of the foundation of my self-authoring identity. I have always been one to push outside of my comfort zone. I abhor stagnation and constantly search for ways to improve myself so I can be all that I can be.

In my post-undergraduate haze, I found conformity breathing as if alive, a heavy, vicious, ominous black, venous monster in the corner of every room. It woke with me every morning with the morning light streaming through the blue curtain in my first apartment, moving me through the motions of brushing my teeth, dressing for the day in the same dark, business-casual attire, and making my way to the wet, moldy, crowded train station.

Conformity followed me as I walked down the sidewalk in a constantly overcast sky crowded by skyscrapers to work in an office of people who were doing the same
thing day in and day out. It curved over my shoulders as I curved over my desk enough so that my spine and neck curved with me, now requiring concerted efforts of daily stretching and expensive massages to undo the damage. I searched for some break from the monotony and the steady static, the droning in my mind as days sped by me faster than the trains at Broad Street, screeching just the same. It made me wonder if this is what adults had warned me about when I was younger when they said life was short. Time was flying and I couldn’t have possibly felt more weighed down. Nothing was pushing me to be anything more than what I was. I realized I had to push myself.

It seemed fitting that when I chose my classes for my first semester in this program, the DYNM 551 course entitled The Devil’s Advocate: The Power of Divergent Thinking was the first one to be added to my schedule. In my search for something to help change my external world in some way, I turned inward. I began to wonder about these questions: What was I doing that was working? What wasn’t working? What could I do differently? How did different lead to better, happier, or more? What did more of me look like when I imagined her? How could I welcome her in?

In this first class with Dr. Janet Greco, I was given the opportunity to write memos. The memo format was beneficial and distinguished because it allowed me to practice the process of writing stories to various characters in my life. These characters could be friends, family, colleagues, or even my past, future, or present self. One memo I wrote helped me explore the power dynamics in my work environment in a way that uncovered space for empathy, knowledge, and applied theory. In this memorandum I explored change agents and change recipients, calling on learning from Ford and Ford (2008). Through an emphasis on the importance of language, semantics, and the change
agent approach, these authors allow readers to expand on their conceptions of understanding resistance as not inherently negative or dismissive, but instead in need of reconstruction and understanding for its own potential benefits.

Ford and Ford (2008) focus on the individual’s point of view and the ways that one’s biases ultimately influence the collective. They highlight that change is typically seen in favor of the change agent (or individual bringing about change) and against the change recipient (the individual receiving or responding to change); it offers both an alternative viewpoint and expansion on the overall narrative. The authors purport that change agents do not only receive resistance from change recipients but play a key role in creating the resistance they find so unfavorable. They equally explore how resistance serves as a resource to change and values the existence, engagement, and strength of change and its implementation. Resistance has been essential to my journey thus far. Whether I am resisting notions of a more exhausted self, a more exhausting environment, conformity, or a story that does not serve me, I am moving with resistance.

Resistance was also a way for me to fine-tune my understanding of my identity. After many months of public displays of lynchings, shootings, exhausted Black bodies, and murders of Black women in their sleep, my exhaustion became revolutionary. Following the protests for the murder of George Floyd in June 2020 showed many organizations that other stories in the world were not being told, and those stories were costing people their lives. As much as I listened, knowing the story of the Black experience like the back of my hand, I grew tired of the same story of agony and death. I set out to write a new one, just as much in-kind. I resisted that the story being shown to me everywhere—on the way home, on TV, on campus, on my phone first thing in the
morning, in the elevators, on the trains—and I resisted that story was the full story. It fueled me to be a change agent and to revel in creation.

This work in identifying change agents and change recipients also helped me understand the power of my influence when connected to divergent thought. It contributed to my confidence in writing my own story. Dr. Greco’s class was structured with the objective to provoke the mind and promote divergent thought. This approach to both self and the world is exactly what I needed at the beginning of this program. I needed to break away from the narratives that were not reflecting the life I desired and to align myself with ones that felt authentic and compelling. By shifting my thoughts, I can shift the value to my own narratives. By focusing on my own narratives and value, I command authority.

With divergent thought as a tool on my side and playing the devil’s advocate to better understand the humans I was interacting with in my work environment, I realized something freeing. Limiting organizational structures may present obstacles to advancement and growth but obstacles do not mean advancement and growth is impossible. This realization was the beginning of new behavior and action. I also solidified another realization: Organizational dynamics is essentially the work of human dynamics. Human dynamics revolve around stories and storytelling, and that is why this work is important. When we understand stories, we understand people. When we understand people, we can begin to do the necessary work within organizations.

Kindred and Agentic Identity

A book by Octavia E. Butler published in 1979 entitled Kindred is a neo-slave narrative that examines the nuances of slavery in the antebellum south through the
science fiction genre. Butler, born on June 22, 1947, grew up in a diverse community in Pasadena, California, that gave her a dual point of view of racial segregation. Consequently, common themes in Butler’s work include the exploration of one’s past and self, violence, race, slavery, gender, and family. Through the science fiction genre, Butler uses time travel as a tool for her main character, Dana, and her self-exploration and comments on issues from the past, present, and future for the African American.

The literary and cultural aesthetic of Afrofuturism positions science fiction as an exploration of the narratives of individuals of the African diaspora. Afrofuturists use the aesthetic to create and examine self-identity, the climate of the world, and the future. This principle is indicative of the concept of Sankofa, a word deriving from the Twi language of Ghana, which translates to “go back and get it.” The word symbolizes revisiting the past, despite the turmoil that accompanies this pursuit, for the purpose of harvesting what is of value and bringing it back to the present to progress. This work and concept are embodied in narrative coaching and narrative theory.

In an interview Butler (1986) stated that the main component of science fiction that drew her to the genre was “the freedom of it; it’s potentially the freest genre in existence. It tends to be limited by what people think should be done with it, although less now than in the past” (p. 14). This freedom grants Dana the genre as a tool for exploration of her identity, and a simultaneous broadening of African American literature and culture. Afrofuturism persists as a genre not only of resistance, but of thoughts that diverge away from the norm to permit new realities. This newness reinforces the attention to agentic identity seen in Butler’s work.
Another component of *Kindred*’s affiliation with Afrosfuturism, agentic identity, and storytelling leans toward the theme of alienation. Alienation within the Afrosfuturistic represents the disconnect and denial of Black history in the past and present. A direct connection to the alienation of enslaved Africans in America, this aspect of the story explores the traditions of slavery severing the ties of Africans from their home countries and tribes and the erasure of individual identity. This alienation ostracizes the Black individual; the work done within the Afrosfuturistic aesthetic allows for reclamation of a stolen identity.

Dana’s alienation reimagines the past to reshape the present, just as Butler’s (1986) novel reimagines and re-presents contents of the science fiction genre and the cultural diversity that can exist within it. Butler (1986) states in her interview that through Dana’s character she was mainly trying to express “various kinds of courage” (p. 15). This notion of courage ties back to the theme of perseverance and survival commonly present in Black work and literature. Over time Dana’s place in the past becomes more than the confusion she initially feels and progresses in and out of an adventure at her discretion, to provide her with agency and an understanding of herself that she did not previously attain. Through this journey, Butler reinforces her goals of creating a courageous character and utilizing the science fiction genre’s freedom to represent the Black woman in literature and through storytelling.

Much can be said about the use of science fiction as a tool in crafting a new reality and commenting on social constructs. However, Butler’s work focuses on the necessity to craft a space for the underrepresented and the misrepresented. Freedom allotted through the genre directly links to African and African American traditions of
reaching back into the past and returning to the present with something new and valuable. In this case the individual (i.e., Dana) does not return to the present with any particular object of value, but something that surpasses the materialistic: a sense of self.

In crafting this space for her character and for those who can relate to aspects of Dana’s journey, Butler emphasizes humanity and human relationships. This kind of emphasis is woven throughout the OD program as various frameworks help build relationships for collective personal and professional success, first calling upon the individual identity.

I am grateful for the ways this OD program has shown me the value of human relationships. It has revealed the beauty in authenticity and being a “full human” in a Carl Rogers way that shows more of my chosen character. I have been able to examine who I am, why I am, who I author myself to be, and what roles I have in the lives of those I cross paths with and vice versa. This insight encourages me to navigate my many “hows” with freedom and agility.

Readings such as *The Theater of War: What Ancient Greek Tragedies Can Teach Us Today* by Doerries (2015), Douglas Stone and Sheila Heen’s *Thanks for the Feedback: The Science and Art of Receiving Feedback Well*, and Rogers’s (1961) *On Becoming A Person: A Therapist’s View of Psychotherapy* have permitted me to be more of myself, to find the lessons in my mistakes, and to better understand that mistakes are part of what make me a human being. An example of this came from a coaching engagement. A client shared with me that my use of roleplaying as a narrative coaching technique actually made them feel more anxious instead of supported. When the moment arose that we mapped out in our roleplaying scenario, they were wrought with the stress
of doing or saying something wrong due to the specificity in our roleplaying scenarios. I took this feedback as an opportunity to adjust and pivot so we could collaborate on how to best honor their story. In the past, I would have taken this feedback from my client as a personal attack on myself and my skillset. In doing so, I would have paralyzed myself as a practitioner and a creative, uncertain as how to move forward. In changing my thoughts, I granted myself the ability to make mistakes and to be receptive to feedback. I found ways to continue helping them author their story while also authoring my own.

Doerries (2015) wrote these words:

In the months and years that followed, I saw these ancient stories—filled with conflict, ambivalence, and loss—no longer as subjects of academic study but as lived experience. The extreme emotions that they portrayed now seemed like a natural extension of my own. (p. 55)

My unique mistakes and the lessons in them are what make up my journey and my story.

In a world that often discounts my nuanced experiences and dismisses my humanity as a Black woman, giving myself permission to be human and flawed—instead of strong, perfect, and desirable—is an act of resistance. It is resistance that shakes things up and dares to be seen as blatantly as the melanin of my skin. It is a reminder that my power is not in fitting in but in standing out in the crowd, while standing firm in myself and empowering others to do the same.

Divergent thought, promoted and nurtured through the creative makeup of my mind, allowed me to tap into self-trust in a way I had not done previously. By allowing myself to entertain a multitude of thoughts in a way that felt constructive and creative, I could then contrast the overwhelming thought patterns inherent to anxiety. Anxiety often made my mind spiral into overthinking that would keep me up at night. Not only was I physically unable to sit still as I shifted from project to project to keep myself busy, but I
could never seem to find mental rest. However, with coaching, and over time, I learned that my desire to stay moving and to always work on something new was simply my creativity in action. Coaching asked me to pause and be still in the present moment to see what was happening in the mass of my mind. From pausing, I found that what once felt like compartmentalized, fragmented thoughts was actually my multi-disciplinary skillset, capable of cross-functionality. What was once an emotional spiral shifted into recentering, making assumptions shifted into listening intently, and judgement shifted to understanding. I could be and do many things, and I was free to embrace them all in doses, instead of feeling overwhelmed from their onslaught. I understood that while I could not change the environments I was in, I could change the environment within. This internal work became the strength I needed to navigate my external world. Thought was no longer my enemy but instead my companion; now I was free to dissect the aged flavors when swirled and sipped and free to put down when desired like a glass of aged wine. I grew to regard the uniqueness of my mind with reverence instead of regrets, no longer harping on the past or future. This shift helped me live in the present and make decisions with certainty and flexibility as I embraced life like clay, moldable to my will, so long as I was willing to do the work.

Frankl (1946) is a transformative component of my journey to divergent and self-trusting thought because his memoir entertains the notion of persistence beyond circumstance and common thought. Frankl’s work is a direct opposition of collective despair as its introspective tone asserts individual willpower. Despite being faced with the pure evil present in the Holocaust, Frankl’s focus in writing his memoir homes in on anti-conformist thinking and psychological self-preservation. His emphasis on choice as
an internally and externally transformational instrument demonstrates that overcoming imprisonments is not impossible. This construct is mirrored in Black feminist thought as the strength to conquer obstacles is found in sharing stories and experiences (Collins, 1990).

I write anything I write to let others know that they are not alone. This insight originates from my own experiences of feeling alone and wanting to contribute differing behavior—a result of divergent thought—to break the cycle. hooks (1989) expressed this sentiment when she noted that reading others’ stories helped her “feel less alone” (p. 61). She also noted her intent in writing was a desire to inform black female graduate students “who despair, who are frustrated, who are fearful that the experiences they are having are unique.” She validates that their distinct experiences are real and painful but not insurmountable. This push of affirmation and resilience was intended to reassure and uplift current and future generations from her own experiences of pain and her lessons. She ends one of her chapters as follows: “perhaps these words will give solace, will intensify the courage, and renew their spirit.” This quote echoes my objective in sharing my story in this way.

Emergenetics

I have had to refine my self-trust in order to do this transformative work as a coach and a creative. Learning to trust myself without pause permits me to step away from the spiraling thoughts within my mind and to move into dynamic action. One of the enlightening aha moments that led to my refined self-trust was the Emergenetics profile conducted in DYNM 720. I didn’t have high expectations of the assessment and figured it would elicit more generic results, but I was quickly shown otherwise. Founded by Dr.
Geil Browning, this assessment provided an individualized examination of behavioral and cognitive attributes to help those taking it better understand their strengths and themselves. My Emergenetics profile was the first eye-opening component of my work within the OD program. The breakdown of the profile into each attribute deepened my self-trust in a way that would only expand throughout the remainder of the program.

After answering only a few questions that I thought could not have elicited the results they did, I found that I am a highly conceptual (yellow) and a social thinker (red). I’d already felt the conceptual aspects of my mind and constantly entertained intuitive, imaginative, and unconventional thought patterns. My attention to intuition as a guiding principle and even a coaching tool is expanded on in Chapter 3 of this capstone. The social part was a bit more of a surprise to me because I felt more withdrawn from socializing at that stage of my life, constantly turning inward.

I am an introvert and relish my alone time to dive deeper into the vast worlds my imagination creates. However, with the help of this assessment, I was able to see myself with new strengths and skillsets. I found depth in my external relationships by first finding depth in my relationship with myself. I have always enjoyed helping and connecting with others, but I am now equipped with a toolkit that allows me to do so in a way that prioritizes authenticity. This toolkit has shown itself in interviews and new relationships. When I had interviews in the past, I sat and answered all of the questions from the interviewer enthusiastically. I would ask general questions at the conclusion of the interview, like “Can you describe your work environment?” but they were nothing spectacular. Now, with attention on the human in front of me and an appreciation for the self-work I’ve done over the course of this program, I ask questions such as: What
brought you to the organization and what keeps you? What three words come to mind when you think of your goals for this role? Which team values are most important to you? These questions are clear markers of my growth, and they help shift the dynamic from an interview to a conversation. The thought attributes connect to my exploration of divergent thinking as the conceptual and analytical parts of my mind collaborate and nurture a growth mindset.

Another surprising finding of this assessment (which I think should be conducted for every student in the OD program) was that I am a highly analytical (blue) thinker. When I hear analytical, I automatically think about numbers, and I could not have considered myself further away from anything dealing with numbers in the past. The Emergenetics profile clarifies that analytical thinking focuses on rationale, inquiry, and seeking clarity in various interactions. Analytical individuals desire the logic and aim to be objective in their approach. They also hold onto structure and guidelines, learning as they go along. Strangely, I ranked in the lower percentile as a structured thinker (green). I found this finding surprising because I prioritize organization so heavily. Not aligning with the structured mindset meant that I did not have an affinity for corporate or bureaucratic structures, which is also fitting.

After reading more of my profile, I did find it to be an extremely accurate assessment of who I am. The mention of the analytical, social, and conceptual attributes categorized me as having a tri-modal profile and harkened on my use of a dual thinking preference. Analytical derived from the left brain, while social and conceptual derived from the right brain. I feel like this falls into alignment with what I know about myself and my mind. As I have mentioned throughout this work, I experience the world in a dual
sense. I have referred to this before as the “two Ashleys.” This is not to say that I am fragmented or that my thoughts run rampant in disarray, as I once thought they did.

Instead, this approach shows the duality of my mindset allows me to view the world through lenses that give perspective and clarity, while also allowing for imagination and invention. One side of me exists as grounded and rational, the other side lives creatively and free flowing; the two are in an eternally blissful tango. One is externally performing while the other sits at the internal sidelines, ready to tag team and tap in whenever needed.

I am often questioned about why I chose to study something so liberal and creative in my undergraduate work as a double-major of English and creative writing, but then turn to OD as a graduate student. I respond equally as often that it is the combination of the two subjects that work in tandem with my mind and my strengths. I am not only creative, but I am structural and disciplined, logical and rational. It is the structure and discipline that fuels my creativity as much as my creativity supports my rationale. I have learned, with the help of this assessment and the OD program, to regard my uniqueness with reverence and inquiry. Yes, I use both the left and right side of my brains in almost equal parts. No, I cannot be placed into a box of either solely creative or analytical; I frequent both approaches and make more room for myself.

The second component of this profile focused on behavioral preferences. My behavioral preferences displayed that I am extremely expressive, assertive, and flexible. Yet another tri-modal preference, this finding helped me understand why I act the way I do. While it may seem contradictory to the introvert aspects of my personality, I am talkative and lively. I have a loud personality that lends itself to being considered “third
third” in the level of assertiveness through this assessment. I am inherently drawn to leadership roles in teams and often take charge if needed. Yet, I am also highly flexible. This finding was the more comforting part of my behavioral findings because it reinforced my sense of agility.

I value being an agile thinker and remain open to new possibilities. This agility ties into my conceptual thought patterns and increases my capabilities as a coach. I can understand my clients even when our backgrounds may not be the same, and I actively make room for all of their individuality to exist in our shared space. Creating this room falls into leading by example and shows them that they can do the same for themselves once we are no longer together.

The largest takeaway of this strengths-based assessment is that it validated what I knew to be true about myself but often dismissed. This kind of tool serves as an amazing asset for any individual, team, or organization because it helps people actualize their potential by identifying what that potential is and how it could grow in time. Considering a humanistic approach and human-centered design in the way of Rogers (1956), this approach to an individual in terms of positive psychology is one of the best ways to support an individual’s personal development.

The beauty of this assessment was also in the fact that I provided the answers to all of the questions about myself. It was enough to already know myself as much as I did. The Emergenetics profile simply helped me further make sense of what I already knew. I believe the same is done within coaching, specifically with narrative coaching. Narrative coaches help their clients make sense of the stories they use to author their lives and themselves (Drake, 2017). They cultivate a narrative identity that permits the fullness of
their stories—complexities, side tales, and all. These stories can liberate or constrict as the author sees fit once they realize they are the one doing the writing.

The class that included our Emergenetics profiles followed with each cohort member arranging themselves in various groups based on the colors that corresponded with their attributes. We were able to observe and interact with why one’s personality assigned them a certain color primarily without having read their entire profile. Yet, we were also able to provide the opportunity for them to exist in a different attribute and skillset. This interaction carried over into my coaching work later in the cohort. While I could identify my client’s strengths and primary thinking patterns, I can still remind them that they have room to venture into areas unknown and find strengths in those as well. They can connect with their preferences and still create at the same time.

The same notion applies to teams and organizations. Strengths and strong suits can be identified to reveal, empower, and inform while also demonstrating other potentialities for the team. I have found that this work ties into narrative coaching and storytelling because highlighting strengths highlights a different narrative. When leading with strengths in the forefront of the mind, a story is told that sees these strengths as the focus and authorizes the story to continue in that direction (Drake, 2017). With this tool in mind, I can ask: What kind of story do I want to tell about myself? What kind of story do I want to tell about my mind, now knowing it more deeply? What kind of story do I help tell of others, now with a better understanding of these attributes? How have I increased my capacities as an individual, as a teammate, and as a member of various organizations when I lead with my strengths? How do I help my clients do the same?
I better understand myself and my identity with assessments such as this one. Through understanding, I reform and liberate my identity. My actions help others feel capable of doing the same for themselves. Many of my clients tell me that my presence in our sessions helps them feel comfortable being their full selves. We’ve thrown our heads back in unified laughter as they note my quirks and unique ways of speaking, lining them up alongside their own. I embrace my personality and skillset as a creative in a professional space, seeing that creativity is the tool to move from knowing to doing. This program has wonderfully provided me with the knowledge needed to be all that I can within the relationships I build. Yet, it has also reminded me that I am the instrument to making that knowledge real and tangible as I connect with others. Collectively, we can reform and liberate as we tell a different story of our minds, our preferences, our attributes, and our potentialities.

I would do a disservice to the transformative power of self-authorship and storytelling if I did not remark on philosopher Descartes’s (1637) Latin statement “cogito, ergo sum,” translated to: “I think, therefore I am” (p. 73). Descartes’s phrase became a foundation of Western philosophy, which constituted the philosophical thought and work of the Western world to distinguish the internal self from external components (Kline, 1967). The distinction of the internal and external is mirrored in self-authorship and subject-object theory (Kegan, 1994). I mention Descartes to emphasize the power of the mind. Descartes’s philosophy allows that our thoughts give power to who we are in the world and the stories we tell ourselves, therefore becoming self-authoring. The stories we tell ourselves become our realities, and those realities become the lives we live (Drake, 2011).
The constant pursuit of a growth mindset is what gives me a story to continuously
author. In my moments of encountering stagnation or outdated ways of thinking, I have
sought solutions to revive these mindsets and welcome something new. Growth mindsets
and opportunity for growth were reinforced within consulting work in the OD program.
Consulting showed me how to make sense of systems and to understand my role as an
integral piece of a larger whole. Coaching helped me find value in relationships and the
process of personal development underlined in a growth mindset. I found I could
combine the two mindsets to nurture where I felt the need and to continue to change my
life.

Dismantling Internal Myths

My second and final class with Dr. Janet Greco was DYNM 616, which was
entitled Myths to Media: Stories on a Mission. This course engaged with the origins of
myths, the concept of myth itself, and the role of storytelling in crafting reality. The
power in this course, for me, was to see how stories permit exploration of uncharted,
uncomfortable, or unfamiliar spaces. Through this exploration, more about life and
humanity is revealed. My classmates and I were able to connect in the virtual
environment for this course and dispel some of the myths we had begun to believe about
work, life, and school in a pandemic/postpandemic world.

Encapsulated in our own little “black squares” on Zoom screens, and even further
in our own homes for a little over a year at the time, we sought out to craft space for our
humanity by speaking on the deeper lessons of our experience. I called upon coaching
tools to curate five open-ended questions for my portion of a class project and conducted
30-minute interviews with my classmates. As I interviewed them on the overarching
lessons they discovered during their time in quarantine, encouraging them to consider their stories, we were able to experience in real time the interconnections of stories and humanity.

These interviews not only led to enriching and nourishing conversations that I believe we all needed in a virtual world, but advanced our attention to the humanity we all felt had been missing. In the face of productivity and gritting through the pivots of a pandemic, we all felt we needed a space to share our experiences, lessons, and the many things happening in between. Therefore, we dove deep into the introspection and rumination of our questioning, considering many things. The compilation of questions asked for consideration of myths, roles, and the characters we each played in our lives; an examination of contemporaneity and the elusiveness of time; and sharing, with ourselves and others, salient messages for stories to come.

The questions were:

1. What has been your biggest question about life during this time?
2. What have you learned about yourself?
3. Thinking back to a past time in your life, pre-pandemic or otherwise, what would you tell yourself knowing what you know now?
4. What would you tell your future self, knowing what you know now?
5. What do you tell yourself now?

By sharing our stories and acknowledging our unique backgrounds, we deepened our connections to one another. We toyed with the false ideas and the myths that had thickened in our spaces of isolation to see what happened when we came together. In this way we collectively created a counternarrative of a traumatic time that would live with us
all forever. We could see opportunity in the moment, noted by Dr. Greco as the Greek word “kairo,” meaning an opportunistic moment for decision or action, and we connected further with our human selves.

With a focus on Greek tragedies and the “stories beneath the stories,” our Myths to Media: Stories on a Mission course encouraged us to consider ancient sense-making tools to explore individuals, groups, and organizations. An examination of stories as myths and messages transitioned into stories as missions and action. This mission and action parallels Black feminist theory and storytelling, as well as in narrative coaching and self-authoring identity.

I have found my final courses in the OD program to be a creative way of both crystallizing and pragmatizing my learning. The creativity in these courses encourages me to move forward in this work, holding onto the growth mindset I sought out.

A growth mindset facilitates the space to be open to counternarratives and diverging stories that may make room for liberation and creation. In direct opposition of a fixed mindset that accepts qualities and narratives as unchangeable, a growth mindset seeks opportunities for improvement and change. Dweck (2006) offers her research within psychology to encourage the power of mindset as transformative and empowering. An individual with a growth mindset uses criticism, obstacles, and challenges as the sources of their self-improvement. The key to this self-improving approach is to shift the focus from the result of growth to the process of growth itself (Dweck, 2006). By examining the process with attention to detail, one then develops their skills, intelligence, and life.
This attention to the process has parallels in storytelling, narrative coaching, and narrative theory. With language as the key informing the process, one can navigate the mindset map leading to various golden treasures. These treasures return to Kegan’s developmentally effective experiences, constructing the journey of challenges and creating checkpoints as opportunities to extract value.

Narrative coaching, with narrative theory as its informant, proposes questions to a client that help bring awareness to the language used in the process. As the language and the lens transform, so does the individual and their story. With a growth mindset, one moves forward in a self-authoring identity, continually redefining the moments and experiences that are important to their individual journey with intention.

It is important to note that this intention is guided and encouraged with the help of narrative coaching and storytelling frameworks, as opposed to being left to run rampant into the world of perfectionism. Learning to distinguish the difference between a growth mindset and a perfectionist one allowed me to make peace with my anxiety. My anxiety fed on perfectionism and the obsessive need to make everything presently tangible and potentially imaginably right.

If I was to truly align with my intentions and desire for a growth mindset, I would have to absolve myself of the fixed nature of obsession and repetition in perfectionism. Perfectionism is defined as a personality style geared toward flawless perfection and often unattainable goals (Flett et al., 2002). This characteristic is driven by critical self-evaluations and an obsessive need for others’ criticism as measuring self-worth and accomplishment. However, the 360 Feedback process included in my executive coaching
experience noted the difference between criticism and feedback and helped me progress in a way that felt supported and realistic.

Perfectionism emphasizes a consuming cycle upon which there is no true satisfaction or endgame. This outcome was not what I wanted. I knew I had an end in mind. Yet, it was only through yanking myself out of the whirlwind of thought tornadoes, being guided to calmer seas, paying attention to the shaking earth inside of me, and quelling the rampant fire that I could clearly see that endgame.

While lucidity may have gotten lost amid the raging elements of my previous mindset, understanding that I was not stuck helped me transform into a new one. Navigating underlying paradigm shifts and examining implicit and explicit stories again flourishes in this space. Several things occurred when I did this: (1) I shifted from a perfectionist way of seeking validation to a growth mindset approach of being open to feedback, yet also being intrinsically self-validating; (2) I stopped overthinking and turned to constructive thought processes that contributed to behavioral changes; and (3) I gained literature and language to rewrite and author myself. These mindset shifts led to behavioral shifts that helped me change the quality of my life and my life experience. I began waking up earlier and with more energy to approach the day, now with a new mindset. My stress-eating as a coping mechanism shifted to healthy, conscious, intuitive eating that changed my physical appearance. I gave more attention to my physical appearance as these changes occurred, wearing brighter colors that made me feel good instead of the dark colors I’d been comforted by. As I looked good, I felt good, and my mindset helped me write a story that equally felt right for me. I asked myself the
questions that mattered, following the example of my coach’s narrative, humanistic, and positive approach, to elicit the answers that added value to my story instead of stifling it.

Myth would have one adopting the familiarity of what is fixed and seemingly known instead of what is potential and discoverable. Growth mindsets pave the process to potential, the result of which is growth itself. This growth self-assures, reigniting the importance of self-trust and the internal orientation of self-authoring identity. Instead of searching outside of the self for the keys to decode life’s treasure maps, one forms a self-repairing and self-loving internal compass. This compass is the only fixed aspect about me now. It is the lifeblood of all that I seek to embody as an individual learning and creating herself in this world. It is never directionless as the needle rotates on the dial, instead of knowing where and when to orient itself. It urges me forward both gently and out of necessity with this simple instruction: “Go. That way.” and “Trust yourself.” With a refined mindset now leaning always towards growth and listening, I welcome the vast opportunities before me. I learn to be in the present moment, writing my story with every step forward.
Learning to yield the opportunities of the present moment is what brought me to study at Penn and I am glad I trusted myself to embark on this journey. It has only revealed more of me in a way that allows me to connect with others and do the work I love. In coming to the end of this capstone, I return to Dr. Greco’s course, DYNM 616 Myths to Media: Stories on a Mission. My story and my journey are, without question, on a mission of their own. I do everything with intention and intuition as the tools guiding me further into myself, into self-trust and self-creation, and into more life. Here at the close, and the opening of new things, I name this final chapter Kairo, reiterating the definition as an opportunistic moment for decision or action. I am here with many opportunistic moments for decision or action forever before me when I align with my self-authoring identity, moving in my own uniqueness, and prioritizing love of myself and others. I am here for whatever the journey may bring, knowing I will bring myself along each step of the way.

It is this journey that changes us, and it is this change that empowers us to persist forward into more definitions to come. The constant persistence becomes a driving force, crafting an alternative reality and highlighting the opportunity in this shared experience. Humanity is redefined and reinforced as identities find freedom through self-definition and self-authorship, asking the questions of value encouraged through narrative coaching and establishing new norms of inclusivity. Engaging divergent stories helps me peer into the unfamiliar with a newfound inquiry to create and encourage, not dismiss and
subjugate. I am an abolitionist in this movement, dissecting the many worlds with foundations built upon exclusivity and privilege, as I bask in opportunity and stories untold.

The work done here is the catalyst for many things to come, as work in the past has catalyzed what exists here now. Now here with a deepened self-knowledge that is eternally freeing, I continue my journey in the way that only I can, lighting the torches of those who have only begun their own. I see the process entirely worthwhile, even with all of its gruesomeness and chaos, welcoming in the versions of myself that live on the other side of questioning. I find the answers within myself and find myself to be the answer. I am both the author and the book, revisiting this space as I am writing, freeing as I am freed, and humanizing as I allow more of my human self.

I am certain that I will carry the lessons learned over the course of this OD program with me forever. I have not only grown within my mind, but I have grown within the way I connect with others. I came into this program hyperaware of various organizational dynamics and wanting to learn how to navigate them, and I did. However, what I learned first was how to navigate myself. There are lessons that will never leave me as they are now ingrained deeply in the fiber of my being. I am now walking in a new self, a new body, a new mind, and a new way of being. I feel confidently aware of myself in a way that I did not attain before. I understand that my role in any organization does not reflect the whole of my being, but by being myself wholly, I can maximize my role wherever I go. I have shed relationships with organizations as I’ve pushed further into myself. I have shed relationships with people who have known and held me to past selves
as I’ve uncovered selves infinite. I have shed relationships with past mindsets to implement these mental shifts that allow me to author my life and play the role I want.

This process of creating a self-authoring identity has not been an easy one, but it has been completely valuable. I began this journey wrought with anxiety and confusion yet in persistent pursuit of myself. I did not want to live a life waiting for external validation of all that I was and instead wanted to find power within myself and my story. I wanted to show myself that my story was worthwhile, and it was to be honored and cherished with its many parts. I have accomplished this with attention to the story itself, attention to the author, and a newfound sense of respect for the journey. I could write about gathering tools for many more pages, but it is the living, the doing, the act of going out and being all that I know I am that allows me to become more. I embrace this as I give myself permission to be and walk in this permission. I walk in self-trust and uplift all that I am. I uplift those around me at the same time.

The OD program causes one to confront themself and see how they are part of a collective. This capstone has explored how this confrontation also liberates the individual’s contribution to the collective while deepening the relationship with oneself. This program has meant that I move forward with myself in a way I wanted from the very beginning. I have learned how to move fully in all of my authenticity and complex humanity. I have learned to speak of myself with confidence and certainty.

When I first started the OD program, I felt as if I was walking toward a version of myself. This self was an ideal self, a version of me that I would comfort and relish in the warmth of our embrace once we met and joined hands. She did not fear the sounds of
herself or the way she moved in a room, and she did not fear where she came from but instead marveled at it, giving each phase of herself the love and attention it needed.

I saw this self moving toward me as much as I moved toward her, and now we are one, each informing the other of moments past and moments yet to come. This is my self-authoring and self-defined identity. Together, she and I danced and sang our way into oneness until “we” became “I.” Now, I listen to the gut feelings, instinct, and intuition garnered from years and stories that preceded me, calling upon the new tools and theories learned in these two years, and taking up space in the rooms to make space for others. Now, I am my fullest self, transcending selves of the past and the social world around me to deepen this way of being human. Now, I breathe deeply, pausing in each inhale with a presence that is as grounded as the earth, aware of my power in each exhale. So long as I persist, I will have a story to tell, and as I have a story to tell, I continue persisting. I honor my life now in all that I do, and that will never stop. I could not have asked for more.
REFERENCES


TO: Ashley Simmons  
FROM: Ashley Simmons  
CC: Dr. Janet Greco  
DATE: Saturday, June 15, 2019  
RE: Dear Future Me: A Critical and Engaging Conversation with My Evolving Self

“You don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step.” - Martin Luther King, Jr.

I have been writing letters to my future self since the Fall of 2009. These letters have been full of school crushes, annoying things my mother was currently saying or doing, fears that I wouldn’t make it to my next goal, simultaneous motivation, and certainty that I will, and always, ending on asking for more love, patience, and kindness from myself. My 9th grade English teacher, Mrs. Hanson, began this assignment. She assigned the letters in the beginning of the year and returned them at the end. This allowed the time and space to reflect on who I was, what circumstances surrounded me, and what goals I had. Yet, this seemingly meaningless one-time assignment turned itself into much more. It became an engagement with the construct of time and understanding my present circumstances as fleeting. It became a reminder that I am constantly evolving, and it became the foundation to understanding that this is never a one-time assignment. There is never quite a completion of the self entirely; there are always goals, there is always space to grow and learn, and there is always a new journey as long as I am here to live this life. The only true constant is myself. Understanding myself and the power of my mind is the nexus from which everything else in my life derives. This is a lesson that presents itself time and time again, from year to year, future to future, and here it is both now and later at once: I must understand and own myself and my story in
order to contribute to the fullness of life that exists beyond me. This memo will serve as a letter to my future self of 2020 and for years beyond.

Dear Ashley of 2020: I decided to apply to the Organizational Dynamics program here at Penn in an effort to conquer my fears and invest in my current and future self. I chose this program because I feel called to leadership often and want to listen, learn, and observe new and more efficient leadership skills and techniques. So far, the program has been both as expected and challenging. One class in particular, “The Devil’s Advocate: The Power of Divergent Thinking”, has consistently left me with thrilling, buzzing headaches as I engage with sensemaking and apply new paradigms and tools to my experiences and organization. I have become more patient after only a few weeks of dissecting course material and participating in class discussion. A few models and readings have resonated in particular and I employ these in my forward movement. Jeffrey D. Ford, Laurie W. Ford, and Angelo D’Amelio’s “Resistance To Change: The Rest of The Story”, Liz Lerman’s Critical Response Process, Edward de Bono’s Six Thinking Hats, Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ Not In God’s Name, and Tom Kelley’s “The Ten Faces of Innovation” each interact with the concept of the self as the central point of outward change and development. Though each work differs in content and approach, the outcome is similar. In an organization, understanding the power of the individual is critical to collective success. In my application essay I wrote, “In the future, I plan to work within creative consulting, directing, and management. A career in consulting allows me to merge my love for creativity and working with others. I feel that being a consultant in any capacity requires a nuanced understanding of people and organizations. It requires deep reverence for an individual’s time, work, and mission.
Participating in the DLE program is the perfect opportunity to sculpt my current work ethic alongside additional skills for growth towards my career goals in consulting and management.” I understood that this program would teach me about how to further interact with and understand others in “nuanced” ways, but I did not consider how deeply it would require and teach that I begin this work within myself.

On my first day of class with Dr. Greco, I was burdened by the stress of my work environment and my recent performance appraisal with my new supervisor. I felt victimized in my role and, as a result, became heavily critical of my environment and those around me instead of analyzing myself. Class readings and discussion required that I alter my perspective and reassign power to myself. The article “Resistance to Change: The Rest of the Story” by Jeffrey D. Ford, Laurie W. Ford, and Angelo D’Amelio emphasizes the importance of language, semantics, and change agent approach by expanding on conceptions of understanding resistance as not inherently negative or dismissive, but instead in need of reconstruction and potentially beneficial. The article reinforced the individual point-of-view and how one’s biases influence the collective, while highlighting the ways that change is typically received. Change is typically seen in favor of the change agent (or individual bringing about change), and against the change recipient (the individual receiving or responding to change). The authors present that change agents do not only receive resistance from change recipients but play a key role in creating the resistance they find so unfavorable. They equally explore how resistance serves as a resource to change and values the existence, engagement, and strength of change and its implementation (Ford et al., 2008, 368). After interacting with this work, I began to understand myself as both the change agent and change recipient. I altered my
perception of my work environment and now view it as an opportunity and not at all as a burden. There is a lesson present that I need to learn and I am opening myself to the benefits of learning that lesson. I employed Liz Lerman’s “Critical Response Process” in interactions with my supervisor to optimize the benefits of Lerman’s intent with the process being “a method for obtaining useful feedback that allows the removal of emotional biases” and “enables neutrality in semantics and tone”. Through implementation of Lerman’s six steps (Statements of Meaning, Artist As Questioner, Responders Ask The Questions, Opinion Time, Subject Matter Discussion, and Working on the Work), I gained perspective and clarification on the dynamics at play between myself and my supervisor. However, above all of this, I gained an understanding of myself and how I am responsible for setting the precedent for how others interact with me. In writing to you I want you to remember this concept. You wrote it in your journal what would be 6 months ago now that “What you permit, you promote. What you allow, you encourage.” and, “A complaint is a choice to extend the suffering of our original problem”. These methods are vital to this stage in your life, and you are not nearly as old as you feel. It is okay to relax into learning and into simply being confused, instead of running with an idea of having it all together and then suffering at unanticipated failure. Accept failure and struggle as both preliminary and intertwined with success. Similar to the Chinese symbol for “crisis,” understand that with danger also comes opportunity. It is not your job to try to eliminate one reality and only welcome opportunity sans danger, but instead to accept the way things are and find merit in them. If you don’t you will continue to complain and you will continue to suffer and neither of those things gets you closer to your goals.
My mind often feels like a Q-storm of its own and I am hoping you have continued to calm and control it through this applied methodology. I can liken it to an internet browser with many tabs open causing the computer to run slower and slower because it’s overextending itself. Gaining this new knowledge has been like downloading a “pop-up blocker” extension to prevent new tabs from opening and allow my mind, and in turn my life, to run more smoothly.

Edward de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats” method has also gradually become integrated in my thought processes, and I think recalling this process will help you no matter where you are in life right now. De Bono’s Six Thinking Hats accentuates parallel thinking and effective thought processes for both the individual and the group. He presents that the process will always begin and end with a managing, blue hat to ask “How’s our thinking?”, onto the informative, white hat to ask “What do we know? What are the facts?”, then the emotional, red hat to ask, “How do we feel?”, then the discerning, black hat with “What don’t we like? What are the issues?”, the optimistic, yellow hat with “What do we like about this?”, and the creative, green hat with “What else might we do?” (de Bono, 1985). De Bono’s Six Hat Method provides a logical, reasonable, structured approach to group discussion, collaborative thinking, and goal-making. It can not only help you as you lead others in the future, but also as you lead yourself now and forever.

I didn’t anticipate this but the reading that resonated with me the most from Dr. Greco’s assignments was Rabbi Jonathan Sacks’ book Not in God’s Name. I acknowledge my own biases by partially perceiving a book by a religious leader to be overtly religious and thinking that I would have to weed out applicable
aspects. However, Rabbi Sacks’s book was more applicable than most I’ve come across and I think that is what made it enjoyable. Through its exploration of religion, violence, and philosophy, *Not in God’s Name* presents key lessons and behavior for ourselves as individuals and as organizations. The book urges readers to understand that we are part of a larger whole and therefore have a higher call of action that permeates our differences (Sacks, 2015, 194). It interacts with the power of narratives and welcomes multiple and diverging narratives to reveal full meaning (Sacks, 2015, 171). Finally, it pushes beyond dualism and the binary with a “radically different reading of these narratives” to establish community and camaraderie “in which brothers, with all their differences and dissonances, can at last dwell together in peace” (Sacks, 2015, 104). I think that Sacks’ book was a favorite because it didn’t necessarily deny anything. It welcomed everything as it is and not solely as it should be to then see what it could be, and this thought process harkens back to de Bono’s “Six Thinking Hats” as a parallel and lateral thought process to see potentiality through explorative thought. Recall films shown in class such as *Rashomon* and *Life Is Beautiful* that each reinforce perception as the ultimate power. Both post-war and during war, both films show that you can create life and find happiness. Ashley, it is okay to prepare for the wars that life will inevitably present. Yet, you still have the power to create the life you want to live with your thoughts and intentionality.

Tom Kelley’s “The Ten Faces of Innovation” helps you see what type of leadership persona you most identify with and provides space for various personas to call on as needed. You are one self comprised of many selves and it is understanding of the larger self “Self Biggie” that aids in direction of the other selves. Each self has their time
to be present and to learn, gain knowledge, and develop. This is not something that can happen all at once because you would feel completely drained and lose all energy to pay attention to any part of yourself. And maybe that is what has been happening -- maybe you’ve been trying to be too many selves at one time like the internet browser tabs. Focus on one thing, center, ruminate on the six hats process, and then move forward. Kelley’s work aligns with this memo by stating, “Individuals and organizations need to constantly gather new sources of information in order to expand their knowledge and grow…” (Kelley, 2005, 8). Welcome growth by constantly being willing to change and enjoy this ever-evolving self. You have all new tools to push you toward the success you desire. It is up to you to decide if and how you will use them.

I know you can often want this process to be one and done but return to this understanding and acceptance that it doesn’t work exactly how you want it to. Instead, it works in favor of you if you allow it. I am holding love for you always, in and beyond all time, so that you may hold love for others. I am hoping that you don’t rush through these moments with the desire to just get to the next thing and see them as the glory that they are to make up this blessing of a human experience. I hope that you feel better after reading this as I do after writing it and that you take the time to stop, listen, then proceed with thought that moves toward freedom and love. Know that a healthy amount of attention to the mind and the self is the core of success. Do not fixate, do not overthink, do not stress. Recall the metamorphosis as continuous and embrace that. You will never know everything and that is okay. You can, however, know yourself. Just allow yourself to show up and be fully present, to engage, to know yourself well enough that you can
conquer whatever comes before you, and to allow yourself to be part of something larger that invites others to do the same.