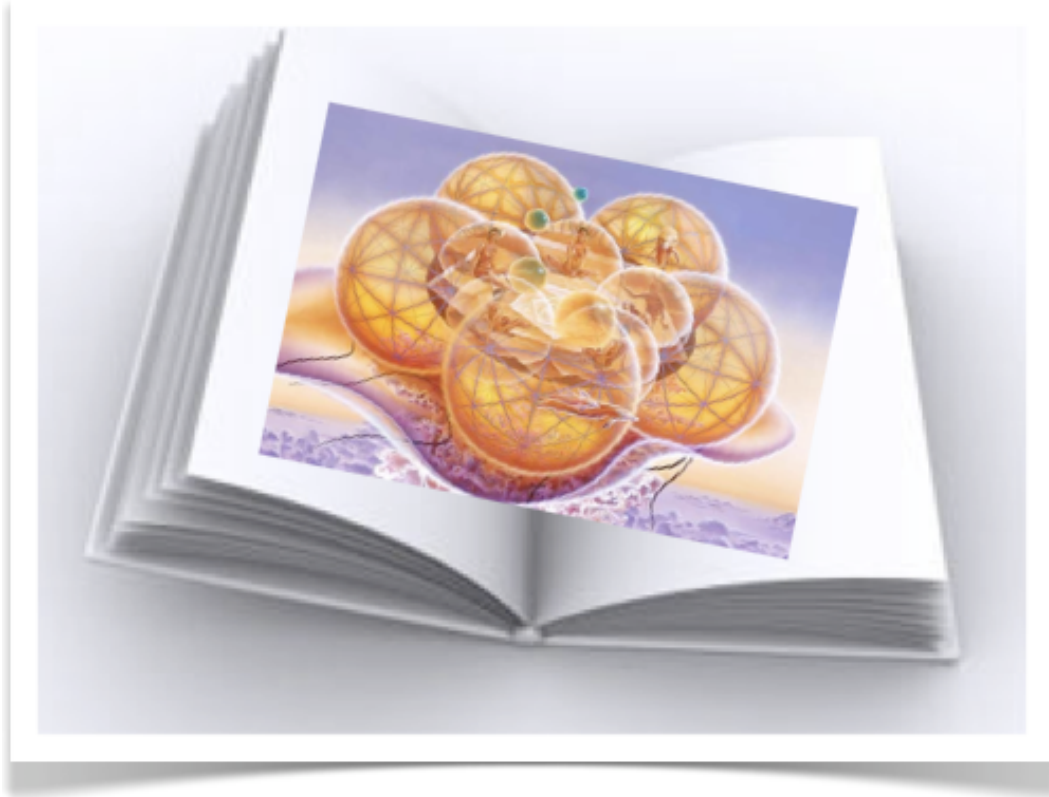




Guidelines for Writing Your Personal Myth



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Imagine you are sitting with your grandchildren and telling them about your life. Or, imagine you are telling your life story to your favorite, most compassionate, therapist, or imagine you have just received a mysterious email from some alien intelligence beyond Earth, and they want to know about you and your life.

What would you tell them?

Who are you? What does it mean to be a human being? Where did you come from? Now that you are here, what is the purpose and meaning of your life? When it's all over, what will happen to you, where will you go?

Each of us has a story to tell. Each of us *lives* a story—the story we believe about ourselves and about the world. The way we answer these questions shapes the meaning we give to our lives.

However, our personal stories are embedded in the larger story that society teaches us to believe. This larger story is what scientists and philosophers call the “dominant paradigm.” In our modern Western culture, the dominant paradigm takes its cues from the findings and theories of science—and science, in turn, takes its cues from the dominant philosophical worldview. In short: Metaphysics shapes science, science shapes society, and society shapes our personal beliefs. Together, all of this forms the basis of our personal myth—who we believe we are and who we believe we can be.

Most of this shaping of beliefs takes place below the level of awareness. Not only are we often unconscious of the beliefs we hold, we are also often unconscious of how society’s paradigms shape our beliefs. Furthermore, the deep metaphysical assumptions that shape science and society are themselves often unconscious and unquestioned.

We inherit our stories—from our parents, from our teachers, and by a kind of social “osmosis.” But sometimes—especially in periods of profound social change—elements of the dominant story no longer seem to work for us. We can feel uncomfortable with the paradigm because it does not seem to have a place for the full range of our experiences and personal beliefs. At such times, our personal stories or myths clash with the dominant paradigm or myth. Something has to change. Do we need to change our personal beliefs or does the dominant paradigm have to change? Or perhaps both?

To answer these questions we need to do some “myth archaeology”—we need to dig deep into our heritage of beliefs and excavate those hidden assumptions that have given shape to our society’s paradigm. We must learn to identify and understand the fundamental assumptions that have given shape to our culture’s beliefs about the nature of reality, and what it means to be human.

But that is only half of the task. We must also do the same “archaeological” work on our own personal stories. We must dig deep into our belief systems to reveal the assumptions that form the soil for our own personal myths.

So, begin by contemplating and answering the questions posed above . . .

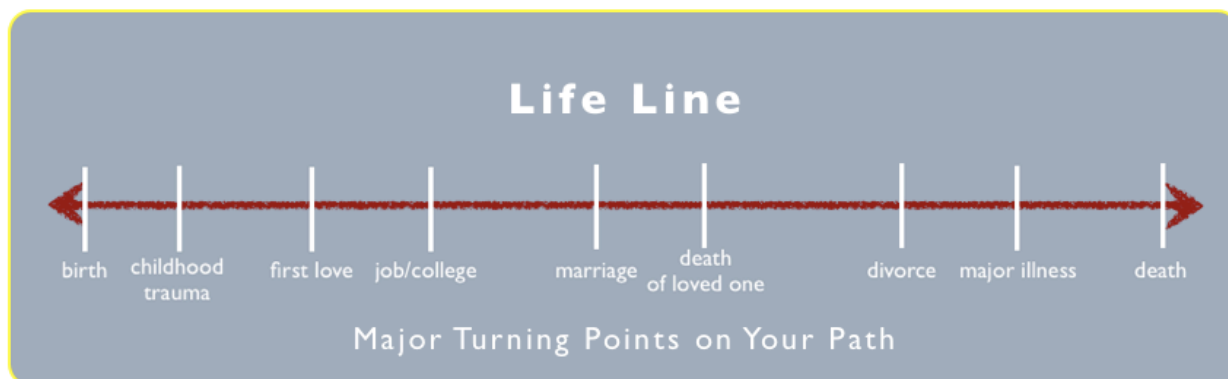
Who are you? What does it mean to be a human being? Where did you come from? Now that you are here, what is the purpose and meaning of your life? When it's all over, what will happen to you, where will you go?

. . . and start to tell your story for your grandchildren or your distant ET.

But don’t just rely on facts—especially not the facts you have learned from your culture. Write your story in the third person, as though you were writing about a fictional character. What are this character’s aspirations? Show how this person’s story has brought her or him to this point in life. Now, use your imagination to unfold the future, to tell the rest of the story in a way that honors your own personal myth.

Be concise. Focus on the main highlights and turning points in your life. Tell the story in 500 words (that’s about two pages of double-spaced text). For some people, it helps to visually map their “life line” (see

example below). On a large sheet of paper, draw a long line and mark the major highlights on your life's path—from your past on into your future (add dates).



Who Am I?—Personal Myth & Time Capsule

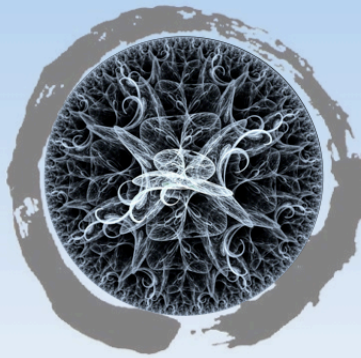
You will write your story as one of your course assignments (see *syllabus*). Begin now, thinking and writing about it. Start to document the highlights and turning points of your life. Be honest. Don't hold back. Notice if your writing lacks authenticity. But keep doing it anyway. This is private, and will not be seen by others.

As the weeks go by, return to your myth and annotate it with commentaries based on what you have learned from your assigned texts and/or from dialogues with fellow students. Keep developing your story week by week. Keep commenting on it. Share your story with others in your class.

After a while, you should have 20 or 30 pages (perhaps more, perhaps less). Now focus on the essentials. On 1-2 pages, write out the main points that express the essence of who you are, and who you see you can be. Write for your time capsule (to remind yourself of who you are now for some future incarnation). Go all out: No-one else will read this but you and your future self.

Now put that one page aside, and write another 1-2 pages expressing who you are and who you see you can be—this time writing for others to hear. Your second 1-2 page “Who Am I?” is your personal myth that you would like the world to know about you (your first 1-2 page “Who Am I?” is your own private “time capsule”).





Further Guidelines

For some people, writing and sharing their Personal Myth can be a source of anxiety because they want to be authentic but also wish to protect their privacy. Here's what I suggest (echoing the guidelines above): First, write out your own story as you would tell it to your favorite therapist, or as a "time capsule" for your future-self to discover and read at some unspecified time in the distant future. *This version is entirely private.* Next, condense it down to one or two pages. *Still for your eyes, only.*

If you have difficulty editing out the parts you would prefer not to share with others, remember this: *It is all a story in any case.* We construct our history in our memories, and our memories are notoriously selective. (That in no way reduces the pain—or the pleasure—we still carry within us.) However, since it all is a story, we can let imagination run free. To a great extent, all the stories about ourselves are creations of our own imaginations (which is not to say they can be dismissed as mere fictions). *Memory is a form of imagination.*

The point of this exercise is to get us to become more aware of the stories we tell about ourselves (our "personal paradigms"), and to realize we can take responsibility for how those stories continue to live in us and shape who we are today. Writing out our Personal Myth is an opportunity to realize the extent to which our own *imaginative creativity* shapes our stories. If you have any hesitation about sharing your story as you remember it, then exercise your own creative imagination and visualize an *alternative* story (the "road not taken"). Write *that*. Memory is imagination directed toward the past. Intention is imagination directed toward the future.

In any case, writing your Personal Myth is an opportunity for authentic self-expression. You may have to dig a little deeper to find and express that authentic part of you that is whole, powerful, and magnificent. I have no doubt it is there.

Let your creative imagination have free play, and tell your story as though you were God creating the narrative of your life.

Note: Whatever is true about *your* story is also true—one way or another—about everyone of us. Having the courage to authentically express ourselves can be liberating—for us and for others. However, choosing the limits of self-revelation is entirely up to you. Remember, too, it may be easier to write your Personal Myth in the third person—as though you were telling someone else's story from a God's-eye view—you are!