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LIFE CHANGE NARRATIVES: WHEN THE ROAD DIVERGES

by

Bernadene J Ryan

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree

of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

in

American Studies

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Logan, Utah

2013

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ABSTRACT

Life Change Narratives: When the Road Diverges

by

Bernadene J Ryan, Master of Science

Utah State University, 2013

Major Professor: Dr. Lynne McNeill
Department: English

Transformation events can be a change in a person's work, a change in philosophy, a sudden insight, or a break in a relationship. According to David Hufford and Marilyn Motz, narrating these experiences are ways in which people perform, construct, and communicate belief systems. The narrators within the context of this thesis experience their transformation through a career transformation. The narrators rediscover their initial passion and transform that desire into actions that results in a shift of career. Sometimes seen as inexplicable, nevertheless the narrators provide analysis and reflection on the influences that led to their change. Some of the actions or thoughts that the narrators incorporate in their stories demonstrate not only the progression of events but also the alterations narrators experience in their worldviews.

The context in which these changes occur is essential to interpreting and understanding the experience. Narrative components are filtered through an interpretive process that includes personal meaning, contrast with social norms and cultural beliefs and the impact on the receiver to enable narrators to justify their experience. It is the

reflection on these experiences through which people gain insight and establish relevance to events that seem sometimes beyond their control.

Stories from pop culture to ordinary citizens who change their lives daily demonstrate the pervasiveness of the transformational effect of states of crisis through which people journey. People's lives are turned upside-down through these experiences which place the narrator out of their normal element. There are two levels to these story types: external and internal transformation. At a superficial level there is the journey to change careers but at another level there is a relationship to opening up cultural expectations or acting generatively, as role-models. Narrators are effecting change through their positive attitudes and acceptance of the trials they encounter during their transitions.

Narrators discuss specific actions that create transformative life changes or philosophical shifts. My investigation studies how individuals are involved in transitional events in which they experience a disengagement from a previous life, spending some time in liminal space where they transition or regenerate into a new place in society. Part of my approach to this subject matter used theories introduced by Victor Turner (pilgrimages) and by Arnold Van Gennep (rites of passage). Regina Holloman proposes that rites of passage can occur not just as physical/material transformation but can occur psychically as well. Some of the narrative patterns that narrators use to construct these tales are identified within the context of folk belief and folklore scholarship.

PUBLIC ABSTRACT

Life Change Narratives: When the Road Diverges
Bernadene J Ryan

Transformation events can be a change in a person's work, a change in philosophy, a sudden insight, or a break in a relationship. According to David Hufford and Marilyn Motz, narrating these experiences are ways in which people perform, construct, and communicate belief systems. The narrators within the context of this thesis experience their transformation through a career transformation. The narrators rediscover their initial passion and transform that desire into actions that results in a shift of career. Sometimes seen as inexplicable, nevertheless the narrators provide analysis and reflection on the influences that led to their change. Some of the actions or thoughts that the narrators incorporate in their stories demonstrate not only the progression of events but also the alterations narrators experience in their worldviews.

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Bernadene J Ryan

“Two roads diverged in a wood, and I--
I took the one less traveled by,
And that has made all the difference.”

Robert Frost, *The Road Not Taken*

US poet (1874 - 1963)

“This is my life. It is my one time to be me.
I want to experience every good thing.”

Maya Angelou

US author/poet (b.1928)

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

During my undergraduate and graduate years studying folklore, it is the analysis of narrative that has provided me with the greatest insight into what the folk consider culturally normative, including their values and worldviews. From the structure, to the meaning, to the performance it is the narrative genre of folklore that provides a focal point from which to analyze the traditional oral form we use to transmit our life's events. Every day we have conversations but only a few actually develop the traditional story characteristics and artistry to become part of our repeatable narrative repertoire. These narratives are particularly meaningful if they have cultural relevance whereby ordinary events are made extraordinary through story. I became aware of the importance of the career transformation narrative as people began telling me their stories. Out of this experience emerged a series of stories through which I was able to discern a storied pattern; neither the stories nor the pattern have yet appeared in folk scholarship. The themes that emerge from these narratives when they are considered as a traditional form help us understand the process by which people both create and reflect transformation in their lives. This thesis is a collection and analysis of a type of life transformation narrative that pertains to drastic changes people experience regarding their career path.

The project includes an in-depth collection of four narratives; this collection includes narrators whose transformation may have begun while they were in their 30s while for other narrators the transformation occurred later in life. This analysis is not about mid-life crisis as the transformation can occur at any stage in life. The tellers are a

mix from each gender since in this modern age both men and women are able to realize their professional and career aspirations. This experience is a human phenomenon rather than a gendered journey, although each gender may look at the experience with a gendered worldview. While I concentrate on only a few stories, there are many more transformation stories that occur in our society. Similar to Gaylene Becker's study of disrupted lives, the career transformation stories whereby people transition to a new career, deemed lower on the social ladder, have an element of moral authority as they are "something in the order of disrupted life made good" (Becker 1997, 12).

Although the stories in this study are about radical career transformation, the changes that the narrators experience overlap all aspects of their lives. So much of a person's identity, personality, values, and beliefs are entangled with their connection to some form of a career; therefore, these personal narratives told by the narrators introduced in this thesis involve a reflection on both career and life.

These are personal stories told by individuals who experienced an intuitive leap of understanding, through ordinary but seemingly striking occurrences that have compelled them to change the direction of their lives, an epiphany of sorts. As Paulo Coelho writes in his novel *The Fifth Mountain*, "In the search for your destiny, you will often find yourself obliged to change direction." These transformation narratives help the teller rationalize their compulsion, whereby extraordinary action is explained. These narratives are often journeys about the discovery of self, a self that is trying to gain a deeper understanding of life and of the events in which the teller is the central figure or hero. Concerns and memories of the past are drawn on to make sense of the inner need to fulfill a perceived destiny.

In terms of discovering the usual listeners to these tales, I found their audiences not during the performances of the personal narrative by the narrator but through word-of-mouth. Many people had heard similar tales about career changers who seemed to circumvent societal expectations of success and were willing to steer me towards these tellers. Some had heard the story directly from the affected individual while others had heard it told as a “friend-of-a-friend” style of tale. Told as a legend, rather than a personal experience narrative, this demonstrates the cultural validity of this topic. Some of the words listeners used to describe their tellers’ tales were: “courage,” “difficult time of it,” and “I could never do that.”

Although for every narrative incident there is a performance aspect, I did not have direct access to the actual performances of these narrations to which a variety of audiences might be exposed. For this reason I have focused my analysis largely on understanding the tellers’ perspectives, not only through their narratives but also through the performances of their stories in terms of myself as the audience as well as their reflection on their tellings and perceived audiences. I also include some feedback from those who have connected to these stories and who steered me towards the actual teller. A question that I noted in my analysis was that if people want to change their lives or have their lives forcibly changed, how can they go about changing their paths to other than the more traditional and socially approved? And how do they create meaning from these new circumstances? This was important for me to be able to understand if there was a connection to traditional folkloric tellings and storied performance associated with both social and personal crisis. This would assist with, as Victor Turner maintains, the gradual building up of “a body of observational data” that “when submitted to analysis would

begin to exhibit certain regularities from which it was possible to elicit a structure, expressed in a set of patterns” (Turner 2009, 10).

A central point to this study is to gain an understanding of how people use the traditional narrative elements to construct stories about how they have navigated a particular life crisis that affects not only them but has had the potential to affect the wider society. Through an analysis of the structure of these socially relevant narratives dealing with a separation from cultural norms and a redefinition of that deviance in order to be reintegrated and accepted by society, I hope to provide a lens through which these narratives can be viewed folklorically. It is important to understand that unlike folktales, legends, and other “traditional” folklore genres, non-traditional texts like the personal narratives of career transformation stories, are not considered to be folkloric unless they are performed and varied, and/or unless they take on traditional structures. This thesis will show the traditional story pattern underlying career transformation narratives.

The major sections discussed include: situating the narrative within folklore scholarship and identifying the structural pattern inherent in the stories; a presentation of the narratives; and a discussion of the traditional elements that imbue these stories with a cultural context.

The **first** section, chapter 2, “Situating the Career Transformation Narrative Within Folklore Scholarship,” consists of a contextualizing of these career transformation narratives in the larger context of folklore’s personal narrative scholarship. Evaluation of the career transformation narratives demonstrates that there are four structural units through which these narratives cycle; this structural pattern is outlined at the end of this chapter.

The **second** section, chapter 3, “Narrators and Their Stories,” examines the elements of performance, textual elements, and narrator perceptions of the event and the telling. This section examines how an individual’s personal desire to tell their story is a traditional method people use to understand their life experiences. Donald Braid suggests that narratives are “thought with” and “thought through” in order to “make sense of the world” (Braid 1996, 6, 27). An analysis of the style and performance of these personal stories is used to discover the way that transformed individuals view themselves and their roles in society.

The **third** section, chapter 4, “Discussion/Conclusion,” discusses some of the functions and motifs of the stories that are revealed by applying the pattern identified in chapter 2. As well, this section provides some suggestions for future avenues of research.

CHAPTER 2
SITUATING THE CAREER TRANSFORMATION NARRATIVE
WITHIN FOLKLORE SCHOLARSHIP

This thesis reviews two bodies of scholarship: first, folkloric approaches to personal experience narratives, and second, structural analysis. These two bodies of folklore scholarship will help illustrate how career transformation narratives can be understood and analyzed as folklore.

PERSONAL EXPERIENCE NARRATIVE

There are many types of folk narrative, from anecdotes to parables to jokes. Often these kinds of story are included in the tellings of personal narratives. The study of personal experience narratives as a form of folklore began with Sandra Dolby-Stahl in the 1970s. As Sandra Dolby-Stahl observes "the personal narrative is a prose narrative relating a personal experience; it is usually told in first person and its content is nontraditional" (Dolby-Stahl 1989, 12). Although non-traditional it qualifies as folklore because the narrators often perform their story multiple times and no two of those performances is the same. We can also see a traditional story construction, even when content is individual and non-traditional; I will demonstrate this later by illustrating that there is a structure to career transformation stories whereby narrators construct their transformation stories using culturally influenced traditional story elements. This is patterning similar to other types of tales in folklore. Sandra Dolby-Stahl argues that

they [personal narratives] are a primary means by which a special kind of folklore is expressed....attitudes, values, prejudices, tastes....By describing a personal experience, a storyteller identifies a

specific situation he or she considers a showcase for his or her own actions. (Dolby-Stahl 1989, 19)

The narratives discussed in this thesis pertaining to a radical career change fall under the purview of the personal narrative in that they are part of a person's repeatable repertoire that showcase a culturally relatable personal experience. The personal narrative can be considered a "true" story that relates to a specific person's life events. It is literally true only in the sense that it is based on factual events that occurred within a specific person's life time; it is of course subject to that person's reflections and reactions to the event. As Richard Bauman notes, "...it may also be an instrument for....exploring, or questioning what went on, that is, for keeping the coherence or comprehensibility of narrated events open to question" (Bauman 1986, 5). Like testimonies of faith in religious conversion, stories these career transformation stories are a symbol of another of life's crossroads; in that sense, they are of interest to audiences partly because these stories hold elements of adventure and journey quests as outlined by both Vladimir Propp and Stith Thompson (Propp 1968, Thompson 1955).

Of all the informants for this study, there is not one that I knew well, so the text and context of their stories were unique iterations from what they might normally tell an audience who might be more familiar with their culture and life. In actuality, this is partly what makes the story folkloric; although the narrators have somewhat honed their stories through multiple tellings of the unique sagas of their life events, each performance of his or her story is distinctive in details and emotion. Because those I interviewed and I were strangers, albeit convivial, they are not able to make use of "kernel narratives" as described by Susan Kalčik in her analysis of stories told by women in rap groups or the

“metonyms” as described by Bill Ellis in his discussion of legend tellings. Those shorthand-based texts described are used to quickly infer the shared repertoire of an already established group, but since I was not knowledgeable of the processes and stories of my narrators they were required to tell their stories more fully (Kalčík 1975, Ellis 2001).

Aspects of the personal narrative—from context to word choice to audience impact—illuminate its purpose in current culture. Within the context of this thesis, I refer to stories that include narrations from contemporary representations that I have collected. All of these narratives contain a transformative element; in the case of those informants that I interviewed, their transformation manifested itself through a radical career transformation, from pragmatic career to a life passion. Through the telling of this transformation type of narrative, an audience can learn how the narrators view themselves, the emic view. As well an audience might analyze the stories through their own experiences or viewpoints, the etic view.

The issue of career transformation is certainly reflective of the cultural expectations and social role behaviors for both men and women in a capitalist society. These transformations can be interpreted as having the potential for usurping authority from the established order. At the very least the story’s elements affect the stability of the community within which each of these individuals has created space and hierarchy for themselves and others. Arnold Van Gennep concludes that “for groups as well as individuals, life itself means to separate and be reunited, to change form and condition, to die and to be reborn....then to begin acting again, but in a different way”; as we see these career transformation personal narratives are often used to explain this process of

separation from the norm to a wider society as well as to the experiencer (Van Gennep 1960, 189).

These tellings of career transformation are simply single performances that shape and rearrange ideas, facts, and beliefs; tellers splice together a storied recollection of events. Barre Toelken refers to the “twin laws” of conservatism and dynamism that are “prominent characteristics of... any item tentatively classified as folklore.” The conservative items are those that have been reused from earlier versions such as discussion of religious belief, cultural values, and worldviews, while the dynamic items are those that have been changed to suit a different audience, because of forgetfulness or alterations in emphasis over time (Toelken 1996, 39-40). The personal narratives told by those who go through a career change incorporate both conservative and dynamic elements as described by Barre Toelken. The conservative elements being the core structure of the story while the dynamic elements being some of the details and interpretations offered by the narrator.

What makes this subtype of the transformation personal narrative unique? Stories about career transformation are closer to legend or journey stories as described by Vladimir Propp in which the hero transforms after struggle and guidance (Propp 1968). They have some elements described by Claude Lévi-Strauss as the structures that form the "deep grammar" of society that originate in the mind and operate in us unconsciously; this unconscious connection or understanding is especially true for those elements that are elicited by the description about the compulsion to change (Lévi-Strauss 1995). Audiences who listen to conversion or transformation stories gain an understanding of the journey's navigated stages that the narrator is mapping in their tales.

The transformational journey story is prevalent in both folktales and literature. This type of story is about an experience or event that changes a person's life in a significant way. These experiences can be about death, religion, divorce, job loss, and many other events that might cause a shift not only in the physical lives of the participants but also in the emotional and philosophical aspects of their lives. By telling their stories they are providing insight into how changes in circumstance can be handled both successfully and unsuccessfully. In literature people may not mind reading about the tragic outcome of a character's tale, but in real life, audiences are more likely to listen to and even actively search for the successful story. The success story is more likely to be repeated as well. Of course, it may be the positive positioning of the outcome that determines what is meant by success.

Career transformation stories are a type of personal transformation narrative that seems to encompass a quest—for identity, for life purpose, and for career passion—and these stories serve as an outline for the narrators lives disrupted by this journey, but one that has been successfully brought to fruition. The success is manifested through both a radical change in the narrators career as well as in his or her philosophy. These successfully completed journey stories are motivational stories in that the tale elements have the ability to encourage, motivate, and teach an audience valuable life lessons. These personal narratives provide insight and help empower a sense of hope, that if “he or she can do it, so can I.” These stories demonstrate how people have changed despite adversity, whether external or internal; they have pushed through their limits of what is possible and what society thinks is possible. The important thing to remember when

listening to this genre of story is that narrators attempt, intentionally or unintentionally, to demonstrate that life can be successfully changed and that passions can be achieved.

The term I am proposing is “successful unsuccessing,” which means that the narrators of these career transformation stories have successfully redefined themselves based on a non-socially negotiated definition of success. The narrators have dealt with their conflicting identities by resisting one and bringing another, often considered lower on the social ladder, to the fore. The participants have managed to disassociate themselves from their socially-valued professional identity while embracing a new personally-valued professional identity. They have effectively transitioned through their physical and psychological struggles to an acceptance of themselves and their new role and position in society. Not only are the narrators okay with their transition, but they act as positive role models for others. Similar to the self-help books described by Sandra Dolby, these stories of career transformation offer

...the idea of learning to trust the universe....the folk idea asserts that life can be trusted—not necessarily that things will go as one might wish or that there will be no suffering, but rather that there is nothing to fear. In the larger perspective, life will provide what is needed, and what is given can be accepted as right and good. (Dolby 2008, 102)

The narrative is no longer just a personal narrative but becomes a shared or collective illustration of the fight against social pressures that result in career discrimination.

The narrations can be considered optimistic stories that promise a happy ending to a struggle for identity and meaning. They hold an element of “it’s never too late” as well. Listeners appreciate the stories for their realism; as one discussant (Kate) stated to me, she prefers to hear real stories and experiences that she can relate to events that may

happen to anyone. Most tellers of their life experiences that I have met enjoyed sharing these episodes, with the hope that they could provide meaningful assistance to others.

There are many reasons for people to make life changes; stories about the changes that find their way into the folk stream of story proliferation seem to be those stories about successfully finding one's life purpose or passion. Especially engaging are those narrators who are unhappily engaged in professions or activities that are causing them deep dissatisfaction but who persevere, overcoming obstacles, to achieve their passion; this is perhaps true because this story type conforms to our North American exposure to the traditional "happy ending" element associated with this story; as children we are exposed to this traditional story element in our fairytales. We are enculturated and socialized to prefer this story ending rather than looking for and proliferating tales of failure.

Major life-changes may challenge one's identity and involve letting go of deeply held hopes or beliefs. Unlike religious conversion or the events recounted in some family misfortune stories, which may happen spontaneously or instantaneously, career transformation usually takes months or years to completion. This transition or liminal stage enables one to make fundamental changes to one's worldview and to respond practically and creatively to one's new reality, good or bad.

These stories act as models of success for those attempting to enter what might be considered non-traditional fields as far as societal success is defined: some of those fields examined in this thesis include poet, priest, musician, and framer. The narrators' stories help audiences envision themselves taking the storytellers' places. Cultural definitions of success might be encouraged to shift as more stories of this type are told, and thus heard.

Perhaps the greatest outcome of the telling and hearing of these stories is not the practical aspect of how the narrator was able to pursue a non-traditional career; instead, the philosophical debates regarding social conflict and acceptance in culturally defined arenas of success may be equally significant. The stories provide an opportunity to understand the struggle and conflicts of both external and internal pressures to conform.

These tellings are emotional; the narrators' descriptions evoke angst, awe, fear, humor, and other emotional responses. Point after point, the narrator moves his or her story along by using an aggregate of anecdotes to try to connect and arrange events into a meaningful pattern. Validity and value are evoked in order to lead up to a climactic conclusion that demonstrates satisfaction with the outcome of their transformations—their successful disassociation from social expectations of success and failure. The narrators' stories point to the value of the act of professional reinvention instead of just providing an explanation based on simple fact or activity; it is not simply an act of “first I had this job and then I had this other job.” The idea of failure is devastating, so moving from an established, settled, well-defined position in society to a more ambiguously defined one seems to require some validation by the transformed person. There is a “there must be more to it” requirement.

One characteristic that these career changers have in common is that they were willing to take a risk, were willing to try something new to pursue dreams and move their careers and lives in a new direction. There is almost a mythical basis for the recreation of self as they move from inauthentic to authentic self. As the narrators plot their journeys, they navigate through emotions and meaning to try to find the purpose of their existence. These stories are not a linear series of events; instead, the narrators' stories follow a non-

linear pattern. The cause or motivation for the journey is imbedded in both external and internal events. The underlying personality and character of the storyteller is revealed through the word choice and anecdotes that they choose.

My own field work demonstrates that transformation stories act as models to demonstrate for listeners the changes that are required on the mental, physical, and social planes in order to actualize a radical alteration to an existing and ingrained life pattern such as a career. As the case studies will show, both insecurities and social pressures influence our images of ourselves and our choices of careers, so stories that guide and inspire us to alternative possibilities are eagerly consumed. Sooner or later an audience member of these career change narratives will be able to apply the lessons that are being imparted, whether to their own or another's decision making process. The stories that are told in this study end happily-ever-after in a sense and so the same positive outcome might come true for those listening. Positive stories of change that correspond to or echo one's own life have a tendency to steer one's choices and bolster one's courage to implement change or assuage one's choices, whether to change or stay put.

Breaking old patterns, whether internal or external, is often hard to implement, as this frequently involves giving up life-long lessons and friendships. One of the key points that this study's narrative participants discussed is the importance of keeping in mind not what you are giving up, but what you are gaining for the rest of your life. There is an underlying transcendent and philosophical aspect to these participants' discussions. Even though the narrative participants may have had careers that were at the outset fulfilling prior to their transformation, eventually they began to see a difference between what might be considered a working-for-a-pay-check job, compared to pursuing opportunities

to achieve longer-term goals. Not only did these narrators change their careers they also changed their workplaces as well as their work and social relationships.

These types of narratives address questions about the nature of how we construct meanings and our realities. They address the cultural identity not only of the teller but of the societal view of the narrator. They reformulate ideas about social expectations versus personal fulfillment. This is not meant to be a comprehensive study but it does hopefully provide some insight into how human beings interpret moments in their lives that might be considered divergences, turning points, or conversions. Sandra Dolby introduces the idea that “personal philosophies may well change to accept the new and challenging side of the folk idea” of reforging a new identity, a new career and a new life for themselves (Dolby 2008, 101). I have heard a number of stories from various people, and the four stories that are discussed in-depth within this thesis provide a cross-section of the processes proliferating throughout society in terms of providing a sense of the beliefs, desires, intentions, and sentiments of the transformed.

These career transformation narratives deal with the causes and consequences of insiders becoming outsiders, how the narrators cope with that realization, and how they attempt to reintegrate into some level of society through acceptance of themselves and by others. As Sandra Dolby-Stahl points out “personal narrative must make some statement about the topic in terms of traditional attitude” which the narrators of these career transformation stories provide through their reflections on what their culture values as well as by illustrating how their culture is in the process of changing (Dolby-Stahl 1977, 24). This includes the North American view of career success which is predicated on title, prestige, and money, and not necessarily on helping people achieve their passion. If

someone goes from being an architect to picture framing or a lawyer to a guitarist, there is both a personal and cultural need to explain the new worthwhileness of this transition. In our contemporary society which increasingly values the personal experience narrative as a component for understanding ourselves—our motivations, psychology, and life processes—it is important to engage in a discussion of these successful unsuccessing career narratives and their social role.

These narratives are constructed not as absolute fact but as a way to summarize the restructuring of a person's life. Jerome Bruner writes that folk psychology is “a system by which people organize their experience in, knowledge about, and transactions with the social world” in order to create meaning so that they can not only live with themselves but with each other (Bruner 1990, 35). These life transition narratives are crucial to the cultural psychology as they organize and explain experiences that are non-normative in that there are elements of the unknown that constitute the discrimination associated with rejecting normative social roles.

Perhaps these stories can be assessed for reminders that life is about options; these stories may be used to bolster ideas and beliefs about what might be considered a successful existence in modern society. These stories demonstrate the reversal process that is required when people turn their lives upside down compared to the so-called normal pyramid of success. The paralysis and fear that some of the narrators mention are strong emotions that hold back, or in place, much of society. They discuss their profound fears of unsuccessing themselves that place them outside the norms of society and their established connections.

Part of the appeal of these stories is that they highlight incidents that could occur to any person in our modern society; with its seemingly constantly changing economy that pushes new technology and methods of success on society on a daily basis, these life transition stories provide not so much a roadmap as the idea that there is a path that can be followed. The life change narrative is a single incident that is part of the overall individual's journey and for this reason the telling of it contains narrative elements of journey tales that capture an audience's attention and interest.

The teller may be knowledgeable and experienced and may be a recognized expert in certain areas, but he or she may gain respect for being involved in one single but overpowering event that affected or completely transformed his or her life. Many of these tellers keep repeating (and varying) their narrative throughout life, whether to fit a situation or to "make sense" of the event for themselves or others.

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS

Folklorists have long employed structural analysis to traditional narratives for the sake of identifying underlying patterns. Structural analysis of the type of narrative I am discussing—meaning both personal narrative and transformation—using standard folklore techniques has not often been attempted. This thesis is the vehicle through which I demonstrate that these career transformation texts can be treated as folklore, in the absence of access to a variety of performances from each narrator, with a structural analysis. Similar to Arnold Van Gennep's analysis of stories about life transition rites of passage, the career transformation narrators have transitioned, from one stage of cultural acceptance to another, using similar stages.

The narratives often contain an element of personal resistance as the tellers struggle with whether they actually want this change to happen in their lives or if it is the appropriate change for their personal vision of themselves, a vision that may have been constructed from social pressures. According to the personal narratives of those who make the so-called non-traditional career choice, it means making some tough decisions about priorities and values followed by sustained hard work. Career change also often involves taking constructive risks that involve a certain amount of sacrifice, pain, and inconvenience.

The narrators of the life transformation stories in this study profess that they are far happier and more engaged with daily life and that, through the transformation, their new lives provide deeper meaning and greater satisfaction. One of the valuable reasons for narrating life stories is that in the process people confront these life changing experiences and discover how they affect beliefs, actions, and worldview. Sometimes returning to those memories and sharing them can help others. Based on readings from Donald Braid who points out that “narrative [is] a particularly effective vehicle for communicating experience to others,” these stories are often meant to convey the narrator’s individual philosophy and life lessons (Braid 1996, 5). One purpose of this particular narrative analysis of the career transformation stories is to demonstrate how people use stories to understand and disseminate their value systems using the types of narration structures developed and preserved by oral tradition.

My exploration of the structural nature of the transformation narrative as a subtype of personal narrative places focus on the way meaning is created and considered through a storied interpretation of life events. Jaber Gubrium and James Hostein (2009)

observe that the storyteller will often step outside the story to invoke or explain meaning which all of my interviewees did in order to ensure I, and perhaps they, were emphasizing the transformation clearly. Although I do ask to whom the stories have been told and in which contexts, in the discussions with my interviewees I represent the audience who may want to understand how these life changes occurred: what provoked these narrators to change, what followed the change, and how these life changes affected their identities. These types of questions assist with what William Labov labels the “evaluative function” portion of the narrative as they not only reveal the attitude of the narrator to the narrative but also emphasize the narrator’s relationship to the experience (Labov and Waletzky 1967, 13).

Gayleene Becker discusses disrupted lives, in terms of identity, that are affected by a variety of health issues, so much so that the person is forced to reevaluate their relationship to their identities in society. Similar to such life-crisis stories the transitions experienced by those who change careers force a reexamination of the narrator’s identity in terms of his or her cultural fit (Becker 1997). This is an important function of the narrative.

The interviews I conducted were varied in terms of the elements that each narrator incorporated to highlight his or her experience. In fact, there were considerable differences in each narrator’s storytelling of the life events that led to his or her transformation. Narrative expression is a verbal art which each of these narrators demonstrate albeit through differences in style, expressive use of language, engagement in providing a storied telling using images, similies and metaphors and the details and complexity of self and situational analysis. Even so, the underlying structure was similar.

These stories demonstrate how the tellers have successfully negotiated their disengagement from societally defined career success to negotiating new definitions of success for their path to non-traditional professions. They have “successfully unsuccessful” themselves. Narrators experience a transformation in both profession and philosophy on this journey. These “successful unsuccessful” stories may be considered subjectively factual and true, but whether actually so or not, the story’s social relevance as a class of stories is significant in these times. As Linda Dégh explains,

a new interest in the social function of narrating discovered the storytelling event as a complex forum of exchange between tellers and listeners” and that there is a “recognition of the ethnographic value of personal accounts containing information on the life, work, and worldview of individuals. (Dégh 1995, 72)

These life experience stories of transition, from socially condoned life journeys to the “road less travelled” as it were, are filled with “people’s own reflections on experienced reality, and reaction to encountering, creating, and being affected by events that became inexhaustible sources of folklore in the modern world” (Dégh 1995, 72). Unlike the fairytale in which the hero or heroine moves up the social ladder, from peasant to prince or princess, the career transformation narrators move down rather than up the social stratosphere. The narrator’s life embodies the triumph of humane values over monetary values.

These stories have not previously been examined by folklorists in terms of what Arnold Van Gennep (1960) terms “rites of passage.” I attempt to demonstrate that people who are involved in these career transformation journeys experience changes in multiple contexts. They may make changes that affect their social interactions, their positions within their familial or cultural groups and their economic stability; yet, they make the

change in spite of these constraints. They experience a liminal space that can last for years; although it may not manifest on the exterior there is often an internal sense of being “betwixt and between” until the narrator completes the steps that lead to the final transformation (Deegan and Hill 1991; Schneider 2002). This liminal state is similarly expressed in many of the “successful unsuccessing” life transformation narratives.

Gillian Bennett (1986) investigates how storytellers adapt to specific styles and structures when their discourse is intended to explain complex points of view. She discusses narrative patterning as a method for understanding and analyzing experience. Bennett utilizes the “Labovian Model,” which treats personal narrative as story text that is analyzed for specific patterns in the structure of the telling such as an ordering of events. As can be seen by the structure inherent in the career change stories there are underlying patterns, although sometimes not easily observed by the non-sequential ordering of story events.

Gillian Bennett analyzes her narrators’ performances and narratives to assess what methods those narrators use to guard themselves against criticism or disbelief; she also analyzes how those narrators “protect their version of the truth” by “steering their audience to share their interpretations and their philosophies” (Bennett 1986, 432). Some of the conclusions that Bennett provides about her narrators are that these stories may be ways for people to remember, analyze, and give “social shape to private experience” and “metaphysical concepts” (Bennett 1986, 433). I found that this is similar to narrators of the career change narratives in my own research.

These successful unsuccessing narratives describe not only the narrators’ second chance at experiencing a career that is more in line with their desires but the narratives

also highlight the phenomena of the associated personal changes experienced by the narrators. Narrators use an interpretative framework that structures their actions and experience so that the experiences become purposeful. These are a type of transformation in which the person distinguishes his or her authentic self from an inauthentic self. Essentially these narrators are starting over in terms of their careers, but this spills over into their associations with their families and society. Their position in these communities changes so much that there is a need to narrate the experience in order to create meaning for themselves and others.

The narrator's transformation appears in the narrative as the creation of a new view of both the self and one's role in his or her community; the normal social and professional role is challenged by changes in the narrator's beliefs about his or her self and his or her long-term career. These stories highlight the reinvention process and re-interpretation of the self. In some sense these narrators are recalled to an authentic purpose that provides them with a more internally and socially fulfilled life.

Identity, meaning, and fulfillment statements are intertwined to provide an account of the narrator's personal quest to make sense of his or her career change and its impact. Perhaps especially true for the narrator of career change is the fact that his or her story takes him or her from the traditional upwardly mobile career success path to a more non-traditional notion of success, thus requiring the narrator to provide an interpretive framework for that journey.

Although the journey of one of my informants seems to begin with an involuntary displacement, Fiona S who went from landscape architect to framer, in the end she chooses to follow a more authentic path; as she expands her connections within the

community she is able to fulfill both her creative and spiritual aspirations. During her struggle with choice, she wrote a letter to God which she shared with me. In the letter she wrote,

I must live honestly. To the greatest extent possible I must live according to my most honest understanding of myself.

I must sort out those things fundamental to my soul, and those beliefs I've acquired through the process of being civilized. Gradually I am shedding, or at least recognizing, the acquired beliefs. (Fiona S letter February 18 2001)

These narratives are personal reflections on an individual's own process but with an attempt to connect their experience by invoking culturally embedded knowledge such as belief that resonates on a deeper level for these narrators' societal cohorts.

Similar to Jeff Todd Titon (1980) and Elaine Lawless (1983), Regina Holloman (1974) discusses individual transformation as a phenomenon that results in major shifts in a person's worldview. Regina Holloman demonstrates, through an ethnographic study of a secular rather than a religious group, that elements of rites of passage are invoked in the Esalen Institute's encounter/Gestalt workshop whereby its "three stages: separation (detachment of the individual from a social position or state), liminality (status marginality or inbetweenness), and aggregation (reincorporation into the social body in a new status or state)...induce psychological and behavioral change and growth in individuals" (Holloman 1974, 266). Through research, review, and analysis of career transformation narratives I noted that this traditional structure other folklorists have interpreted also emerges in the narrative pattern of the people I have interviewed. There is a correlation between these other folklorists' studies and the analysis of my particular subjects' transformation narratives that establishes the relationship of career

transformation narratives with the theory of Arnold Van Gennep (1960) as my narrators allude to rites of passage that can occur in a secular career environment. The career transformation narrators are describing their journey to recapture their passion; there is a period of struggle in which the person, like a butterfly, attempts to emerge from the cocoon of their past, the chrysalis period.

IDENTIFYING PATTERN IN CAREER TRANSFORMATION NARRATIVES

As illustrated by William Labov and Gillian Bennett structural analysis of narrative will highlight the thematic structure of similar types of narrative events. Although the content of the four detailed narratives that have been examined is individual, we can see a pattern emerging. Vladimir Propp (1968) identifies both the stages and the journey elements through his morphological analysis of folktales which facilitated my identification of the initial situation of the career conversion narratives. Vladimir Propp discusses how although the names of the “dramatis personae” are different and that there are “constants and variables” within a story we can look at its morphology to perceive patterns (Propp 1968, 20).

Similar to the hero in a folktale, career conversion narrators encounter a crossroads as part of their experience which sends them on a life journey through which they come out the other side transformed and ready to reintegrate into society in a different way. The narrators of career conversion stories perceive themselves differently and through their narration are able to redefine for society their new role and acceptance parameters. As Sandra Dolby-Stahl points out; “Propp argues that the actions of all dramatis personae are to be defined and evaluated ‘from the viewpoint of their meaning

for the hero and for the course of the action” and the career transformation narrators conform to that idea (Dolby-Stahl 1989, 96).

Patterns of rites of passage occur not only to facilitate the transitions from one biological life stage to the next (i.e.: childhood to adulthood) but from one social position to the next (i.e.: single to married). The key element here is the commonality of the stages and transitions through which people pass. There is an element of sacredness infused in the events that take the narrator from a compulsion to change to a final transition; as illustrated in the narratives I collected there is a reflection on past events and symbolic meaning is created from seemingly insignificant events. As in Arnold Van Gennep’s (1960) theory, there are three stages of passage that occur in the career conversion stories: preliminal/separation, liminal/transition and postliminal/re-incorporation.

Using Vladimir Propp and Arnold Van Gennep as models I have identified the commonalities of structure within each of the successful unsuccessing narratives as follows:

- Initial Situation:
 - Narrator’s initial career choice was dismissed or ignored early in his or her life, either by the self or through an outside influence.
- Separation:
 - Narrator seeks or takes advice.
 - Narrator struggles with choice.
 - Narrator makes a judgment/choice.
 - Narrator assigns new call to a higher power (God, Universe, Fate, Serendipity).

- Narrator somewhat embraces new path.
- Transformation:
 - Individual enters a liminal state in which there is a necessity to retrain for a new path and create a new identity.
 - Narrators are no longer part of their old community nor have they yet found a new community.
 - Fear, anger, and passion alternate while they get acquainted and negotiate their identities.
- Reintegration:
 - Individual reintroduces self into community and accepts the personal, financial, and spiritual changes that have occurred.
 - The narrators of these stories have survived.

Arnold Van Gennep explains that the length of a transition varies among different people (Van Gennep 1960, 178). Some experience a liminal space that can last for years. Although it may not manifest on the exterior, there is often an internal sense of being “betwixt and between,” until the narrator completes the steps that lead to the final transformation; this is similar to what happens in many personal transformation stories (Deegan and Hill 1991; Schneider 2002). The following chapter provides an introduction to the transformation stories and demonstrates how they fit into the pattern identified.

CHAPTER 3

NARRATORS AND THEIR STORIES

I collected these stories over a period of time in 2010 and 2011. The participants are from both the United States and Canada. The four interviewees consist of three men and one woman. Steve M, the poet, began his career as a lawyer but through a series of events he was able to realize his dream of becoming a published poet. To help fund that dream career, he also became a university English professor who teaches others creative writing including fiction and poetry. Steve M describes his transition from lawyer to poet and university English professor as finding his original purpose. Father Joseph, the priest, spent the majority of his youth in business and sales before he gained enough self-realization to attempt to fulfill his desire to become a priest. Gary B, the musician, spent 30 years as a successful lawyer having given up his dream of becoming a musician early on until he was forced to reexamine his life in the shadow of disease. Fiona S, the framer, was for many years a landscape architect and university professor before external circumstances forced her to reexamine her personal and social role.

These narrators confided details of their life to me, a complete stranger; some of the stories are lengthy while others are more abbreviated in comparison. All of the stories have the common pattern identified. Most narrators were reluctant at first but seemed to enjoy sharing this particular episode in their lives as a means to communicate their worldview, their rationale, and their beliefs, and to provide some small bit of inspiration to others who may be experiencing this type of life occurrence. As Gillian Bennett points out, "they [the narrators and their tales] are capable of showing the ways that private

experience is shaped into public form, through the means of traditional attitudes and expectations" (Bennett 1985, 96).

Life stories are of interest both for their own sake and because they can serve as a model for others. Part of the goal of the performance of these stories is to inspire others or at least provide insight into a phenomenon that might occur as part of some other person's life journey. As Fiona S observes,

We relate to each other in so many different ways and what I am to somebody might be very different to somebody else. I used to see myself as just kind of a conduit. I enjoy life immensely. I love life. And just to be able to flow through it and if I can be of help along the way to anybody that's great. It's not something I set out to do but I certainly try to be open enough that I'm sensitive to other people's needs when they arise in my world. (FS interview, 14)

I received these tales from average or occasional storytellers with a personal involvement with the story being told, which was not only of their career journey but of an internal philosophical shift, so they were sharing some of their most personal struggles. I tried to take a non-directive approach while interviewing the tellers, but I did provide questions along the way to elicit more details and insights (see the appendix). I knew that some of the details were personal and some people were more reluctant than others to share.

Although these stories can be considered part of a person's personal history, these tellers did not stick strictly to hard facts; they revealed emotions, and they attempted an analysis of what happened. Narrators construct a new view of self and their ideas of successful life navigation, which creates a sense of lucidity as noted previously, so that their divergent experiences are connected and give meaning to their radical career transformation.

These accounts provide a real-life context and validity to tales of life journeys that fall outside the social norms of societal expectations. They demonstrate how people try to make sense of what happened to them, their own need to understand and be validated in some way. There is a compelling sincerity in hearing real-life experiences. For the most part, these people are educated and obviously strong enough to make a change in their life. They all believe that they received some form of guidance or push that they felt compelled to follow. Why are these stories told? What purpose do they serve the teller?

These stories are about the lives of the narrator yet they are also about the world and its events and how they impact society. They provide a view of the narrator through their storied life event, particularly about the social, spiritual and psychological influences on the storyteller. These stories, although there are endless variations, provide a particular snapshot of the circumstances and communities of a society and time.

The events discussed not only have an impact on the listeners but the narrator as well becomes thoughtful about his or her own text; each telling would be an unfolding of a new insight into his or her own events so not only are there endless variations among storytellers but also endless variations about the same storyteller. Even as I was unhooking my equipment from my interview with Fiona S, her thoughtful response was about the items that she would include if she were to retell her story. My recorded account of her story is simply one version of her telling. As Jaber Gubrium and James Holstein state, “how one conceptualizes things actually affects what comes into view,” so as each storyteller discusses their event with different audiences they receive a variety of feedback and as time goes by they are exposed to events that reshape their views (Gubrium and Holstein 2009, xvi). These transformation stories are extended accounts

that include explanations and descriptions that help the narrator make their point. They are providing an account of their experience using their own perspectives and presentation styles. For instance, Fiona S provides a “tale within a tale,” whereas Gary B provides anecdotes from his military career and Steve M includes a number of details about his relationship with spiritual influences. Each provides these details in an attempt to demonstrate how their particular events or worldview was shaped in order for them to frame their stories as they have done.

During my interviews I discussed with the interviewee how I had chosen each participant and how I had heard about this particular event occurring in their life. With Steve M it was from colleagues, students and sangha members; with Father Joseph it was from members of his parish; with Fiona S it was from her circle of friends, with Gary B it was from his family members and friends. Since there was such a variety amongst the tellers for potential audience members, one of the points that I wanted to understand from each participant’s viewpoint was how his or her story comes to be part of his or her community. Inherently this story type is of a personal nature, owned and processed by the narrator; so I wanted to understand how do people in the community find out about the narrator’s story? Part of my introduction to each narrator in this chapter will discuss how and why his or her story occurs in a public arena.

For all four of the participants time has passed, and they have all had the opportunity to discuss their stories with various audiences and to renegotiate various elements to better represent themselves, better define themselves or even to acquire deeper understanding of themselves and their sometimes conflicting views of their own narratives. As Peter Raggatt notes, narrators reveal their “dialogical positions (e.g.,

idealist, fearful, creative, vulnerable)” through their word choice and revelatory representations of what constitutes their narrative identity (Raggatt 2006, 20). As with the Framers and the Poet interviews there have often been conflicting narratives—such as the optimist versus the pessimist in terms of each narrator’s individual interpretation at various timeframes in their tellings. For instance, at the beginning of the journey or when still experiencing the rawness of the emotions and the struggles the narrators might have expressed more pessimism about the conflicts that they chose to discuss. By sharing both the good and the bad they enable their current audience to identify with not only the story but the development process in the formation of meaning and philosophy that provides the context for the narrator’s personal journey and transformation.

Similar to the identity crisis stories collected from gay and lesbian Orthodox Jews by Tova Hartman Halbertal and Irit Koren, these career change narrative storytellers make an attempt at not only self-acceptance but social acceptance; their stories affirm “a sense of self that accepts the valid coexistence of both identities” (Halbertal and Koren 2006, 57). In the case of Orthodox Jews it is the integration of their religious with their gay identities and in the case of career change narrators it is also the acceptance of a multiplicity of identities—social and personal. The career changers can be both successful and pursue a personally meaningful yet lesser “social/professional” role in society. Neither of these narrator types is stepping away from their social obligations, but both types of narrators attempt to synthesize their identities so that they become accepted participants in their wider cultural landscapes. It is important to note the stories I discuss are not the only crisis story told in society, but most everyone works and people can

relate to these stories on some level as everyone has the potential to experience these career transformations and their associated challenges.

THE POET

Steve M is the classic example of the narrative pattern identified for this story type as discussed at the end of this section. As a young student Steve M had always loved poetry, but due to a complex relationship with two of the women in his life he discarded that as an option. Even though as he claims “I fell in love with poetry and literature when I was in high school and college;” he manages to dismiss this early recognition of his initial career choice (SM interview, 3). Because of his Catholic upbringing and the pressure he felt to become a priest, he manifested teenage rebellion by taking up Eastern religion in an attempt to become a yogic monk—a Sanyassi. This became his rationale for abandoning his poetic aspirations; “I had to kind of surrender, give up my love of poetry and literature to do that because this was a very severe order of monks....you severed all worldly ties” (SM interview, 3). He spent training in an ashram where he became “disillusioned” when the spiritual philosophy that he had studied in books did not equate to what he experienced on a practical level because of the jealousy, competition, backbiting and meanness that occurred within this spiritual organization. As well, his youthful spiritual influences were the non-violent teachings of Martin Luther King and Mahatma Gandhi; but as he observes “I got to the ashram and....I found out that the actual translation of the [yogic philosophy] phrase was not that ‘life is struggle’ but it was ‘life is violence’ which was scary. It went against my childhood and high school and college in Alabama” (SM interview, 4). He thus abandoned the yogic path.

Having abandoned and lost his attachment to his initial love of poetry and literature, it was at this time that he went through “this terrible personal struggle;” the only options seemingly available were to become a monk (no longer viable) or marry. In a spur of the moment decision, he asked his girlfriend at the time to marry him since “either way you took life-time vows,” but after the Justice of the Peace marriage service he “immediately felt like it was a mistake” (SM interview, 5). At the time he thought “well, I need to do something practical now that I’m married so I thought I’m gonna go ahead and go to law school and I had already given up poetry to be a monk. So that was kinda behind me in a way” (SM interview, 6).

His practical professional choice was influenced by his close relationship and admiration of a maternal aunt who mentored him as a young man. She was both a lawyer and was “inspired by Gandhi and other progressive thinkers of the time. She made a lot of money as a lawyer; she never owned a car, never owned a house, lived in a small apartment and just gave all of her money away....It’s just amazing. She’s like the family saint. So she was a real mentor of mine; she was kinda the one who introduced me to Eastern philosophy” (SM interview, 4). These explanations of his relationship with his aunt and mother provide the context for how Steve M came to set aside his real passion, at first through teenage rebellion and then through the practicalities of choosing a vocation. The aunt and mother acted as the external influences for helping to negate his initial career choice. Steve M experienced both internal and external influences that negated and moved him further and further from the realization of his initial career passion.

Steve M found that law school was all consuming and it was during this time that he developed a “severe depression” because, as he explains, “deep inside” he knew this was the wrong path for him. He also gave up all talk of becoming a monk or a poet during this time; he “just buried them.” He and his wife struggled with their marriage and finally his wife insisted that they both go for therapy, individually and as a couple—she was studying to be a psychologist. Although Steve M gives a slight laugh when he says, “therapy totally changed my life;” it was during one of his sessions that he blurted out in tears, “and all I ever really wanted to do was be a poet.” His therapist responded humorously, “well, it’s a good thing you’re talking about it in the past tense now that you’re 90 years old and everything.” By blurting out such a statement Steve M seems to be indirectly seeking advice from an external source or a higher power. This ties in with the later statements of how for him therapy and spirituality are all part of the same practice. The therapist’s response startled him into the realization that “wow, maybe I still could do this.” Even as he explains that “some years had gone by since I’d first gone to law school,” this was a revelatory experience (SM interview, 7-8).

Over the ten years that he was a lawyer he became progressively unhappy and sick within this life style. By the time he was in his late thirties and had gone through his years in therapy, he finally gave into the messages being presented during his therapy. He surmises that in the course of those sessions he “not only realized that I wanted to be a poet, I also realized that I didn’t have to be a monk” (SM interview, 9). He ascribes his unhappy years and his therapy as the external forces that moved him into a different direction for his life. “I’m a real believer in therapy and that how therapy and walking the spiritual path and practicing meditation and doing therapeutic work all go hand-in-

hand. They're the same practice, I feel like" (SM interview, 11). It was through these two non-agentive external forces that he was able to make a judgment to make a radical career change. As we shall see, Fiona S has a similar dual sacred and profane non-agentive external advice experience; her support comes through her acceptance of prayers she sent to God and the support of her husband.

Steve M describes giving up poetry at such a young age as "a heart-wrenching decision, just gut-wrenching" but his path to becoming a monk in rebellion against his Catholic upbringing would not allow him to do both; as he says "it was like it was maybe too worldly and my ego was wrapped up in it too much" but his ideas have changed so that "I don't feel that now, I feel like my poetry is one of the ways I serve and one of the ways I share what I love with the world" (SM interview, 11-12). As with all respondents discussed in this thesis, there is a sense that they are fulfilling their destiny even if it is to the detriment of their pocket-books in some cases. Steve M declares "now I'm poorer but happier" and this is something that he tells his students when he relays his story to them. This is part of his regularly performed autobiography at the beginning of each academic semester.

As Steve M begins to embrace his new path, he enters into a liminal phase where he is betwixt and between worlds. He is no longer fully embracing his old life as a lawyer although he still practices; yet, he must complete a training phase in order to transition to poet and professor.

In order to begin his transition he reconnected with old college professors who encouraged him to "come back to poetry." He started taking some courses at Georgia

State University while still working for the federal courts in Atlanta. As he describes this liminal state,

it was really clear to me that I would go to my law office and feel pretty alienated and then I would go to the university and I would feel like I was home....I totally fell in love with academia. Just the whole endeavor of study and learning and discovering knowledge and sharing that with other people....When I first got to law school, I'd been in this spiritual organization ready to become a monk and then I was around all these like crass, opportunistic, money grubbing, young people. And it's like, Blah....It's like these are the people I'm going to spend my life with? It was just terrible. (SM interview, 8-9)

Steve M spent 10 years in a transition period; his re-education took four years in the MFA and six years for his doctorate. Even though he worked while obtaining his MFA, to obtain his doctorate he had to attend full-time, which was not an easy decision. As he says, "I asked myself do I want to leave a lucrative job....but on the positive side, you know, as soon as I made the decision to start taking poetry writing courses in Atlanta, I felt like my life was already changing" (SM interview, 15). He initiates the transformation process to reconnect to his original career ideal.

Steve M describes the "double life" that is an observable liminal trait during the transformation. For many years he straddled the life of a lawyer with his work to transition to a poet. Although each of the narrators has worked through some of the complexities and conflicts that emerge in a life disrupted then transformed in this manner, Steve M articulates his through the struggle he had with both his wife and re-education. When he tells his story to his students he tells them in a joking manner that "poetry is very dangerous. It can ruin a perfectly good career" and although he laughs when he tells

me this, he follows it up with the statement “but I let them know that poetry is real power, and literature is real power, and it’s more important than money” (SM interview, 15).

He shared a great deal with me about his journey to reach this new path, and he continues to tell various versions of his story depending on the make-up of his audience.

Steve M points out:

Frequently this story is elicited from me and I’m always happy to share it, you know. So I do share it often, pretty often. I don’t go out looking for occasions to share it or using it to effect some kind of agenda or something, you know. I mean that’s kind of a pejorative term which I don’t mean but...I mean I see myself as wanting to serve others on a spiritual level, wanting to serve others and help others on their spiritual path. And so, in doing that, if my story seems hopeful then I will share it. But it’s funny because as I’ve moved along the spiritual path more and more I think of my story as just like one more case study. You know what I mean; that I’m not really attached to it. (SM interview 19)

There are certain aspects of Steve M’s story that he tailors for each audience. One that he shared with me is the fact that while he was straddling the lawyer-to-poet transition he “had this kind of cosmic conscious experience, this awakening experience, kind of an enlightenment experience” during one of his daily meditation practices. He said it allowed him to fully accept some of the so-called impracticalities of the life changes that were occurring in his professional and financial life. During this incident he came away with a new insight, “I just had this deep, deep, deep knowing that everything is being taken care of, that everything is being held, you know. And that we didn’t have to worry about anything.” Even though he says the incident lasted only 20 minutes, “in terms of the decision or the change, life change, I think it probably gave me an

understanding that it wasn't going to hurt anything to make the change...I think it took some of the worry out of things, decisions and everything" (SM interview, 16-18)

As part of telling his story and being a writer, Steve M is currently working on a spiritual memoir as he wants to share his spiritual journey with the world; this life transition is part of that growth story. As he declares,

I do feel like that certain careers fit certain personalities better than others.

If you're in a career that doesn't fit your personality, [then] that can present its own spiritual kind of growth—the challenges and the discipline and all that. You can grow with that too but it's a more difficult path [laughs]. So if you find something that feels natural to you, then I think it does make sense to follow that. (SM interview, 18)

Steve M's story includes the themes of empathy, generativity, wisdom, and insights into the meaning and purpose in life. He experiences what he considers to be patterns of growth through the so-called "failure" experience. As Steve M asserts "the only way to find happiness is to be true to yourself and to try and follow your deepest callings, your deepest yearnings, follow your bliss as Joseph Campbell said." Following a meaningful but economically challenged career can be a difficult journey as "we are so bombarded with messages that are pointing us in the wrong direction" (SM interview, 20-21). Steve M's narrative is an opportunity for an audience to hear a different message, to demonstrate a different journey from what most western audiences face. As he stresses,

People are taught and bombarded with the message that what capitalism teaches, [which is] you have to sell your product.

And so, we're constantly bombarded with these ideas that as we are now we're not really good enough and we need this or that product or whatever to feel better. And then, just the fundamental human element which is worrying that if you don't have what your friends have you're not going to be able to be friends with your

friends anymore. You'll be less than. And so, we have this fundamental human desire to not be excluded, I think. (SM interview, 21)

During our conversation, Steve M mentions many books that to him reflect back to him elements of his own story (*Eat, Pray, Love* by Elizabeth Gilbert; Thomas Merton's autobiography *The Seven Storey Mountain*; St. Augustine's *Confessions*; Paramhansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi*; and Evelyn Underhill's *Mysticism*). He explains that he was attracted to these types of stories before he even had a chance to develop his own story. As he declares "there was something deep inside me that was attracted to these books....deep in my sub-conscious I probably see them as models for how to live" (SM interview, 23). Although these books were a big influence on him in general, he surmises that his story came out of his life circumstances referred to as "these crises" and that "it's like you read these books and there's some part of you that just resonates and knows that this is really the truth," that "it's like hearing a voice from home, across from another shore" (SM interview, 23-24).

Asked what other changes might have occurred during his transition, particularly in terms of the communities that he interacted with Steve M responded that "I had to change community....When I went to law school I left those friends [ashram colleagues] behind and made law school friends and left them behind and went to Atlanta and then I made my literary friends which I still am in touch with" (SM interview, 25).

Although Steve M spends his days teaching, he spends an equal amount of time on poetry and his spiritual growth. In terms of his reintegration into a community through which he can demonstrate his harmony with his life choices, Steve M that he would like to leave his audiences with the following sentiments,

I'm very active in a local Buddhist community and so I feel like I get to have the role of a kind of spiritual teacher while at the same time to be a poet. And so, I feel like I have both of those things now. Rather than having to choose one of them, somehow they've all come together....I feel like my true love is poetry and the spiritual.

You have to dedicate your life to spirituality and that it's the most beautiful thing in the world. And that poetry is one way I try to—poetry is one way to talk about the inexpressible. And so, I hope that in my poetry I'm able to point to that inexpressible spiritual reality. And that fundamentally, that's the only place...as Kabir said, he said 'Friend. Listen. There is one thing in the world that satisfies and that is a meeting with the guest.' So in the Islamic Sufi tradition that's like God, but whatever you want to call that, absolute reality. That's what it's all about [soft laughter]. (SM interview, 13, 26)

Steve M has completed his transformation in terms of successfully unsuccessing from a career and life in which he felt trapped. He has renegotiated his identity not only for himself as a published poet, university English professor and Buddhist but also the identity which he presents to his community has been transformed. He is far more participatory in community affairs as well as being perhaps more emotionally attached through the sharing of his narrative, his poetry and his spirituality.

THE PRIEST

Father Joseph is a Roman Catholic priest who for most of his adult life worked in sales. He moved from job to job gaining a lot of experience but not finding his true path. As he reached his late forties (he is now 63), he felt that he needed a change and he always wanted to work with people. He does not recollect discussing his career dreams and goals with any family or friend who might have influenced him or steered him in a different direction; he assigns the hesitancy to fulfill his role to his own lack. Father Joseph's initial career choice was dismissed in his early years through his own lack of

confidence in his ability to be engage in priestly behavior. So he ignored his own inner calling using an inner judge. Father Joseph provided this explanation for his decision:

And I believe, sincerely, that I've always had a religious calling to priesthood. But I sort of – not only delayed it – I was too afraid of it, and I was putting roadblocks, and obstacles in my way, and using them as an excuse as why I would not pursue priesthood. I said, 'Well, I'm not good enough, I'm not holy enough; I'm not intelligent enough. I'm not this, or that.' And that kept me away. And because of my own humanness: I felt so weak, and sinful, and guilty – and I said I could never measure up to being a priest. So with all that, it took me over 50 years to finally make a life-changing choice to become a Catholic priest. (FJ interview, 2)

All the years of working at various positions outside the priesthood gave him exposure to dealing with all kinds of people. Being from a small Catholic community in Newfoundland he explains that

the people and events that most impacted me while I was growing up (in terms of career choices), were priests, and religious brothers, religious sisters. I began to feel a strong attraction to the priesthood in my teenage years. And having the brothers and sisters, and getting to know some priests, really encouraged me – or I felt a stronger attraction or desire – to become a priest. And I feel very comfortable with my choice – through change, obviously, and through all these years – to become a Catholic priest. (FJ interview, 2)

Perhaps because of this religious influence his choice of the priesthood in later life came only as a slight surprise to him as this was something that in his youth he wanted but lacked the confidence to pursue.

Each narrator's story is varied, yet there are similarities in how they approached change and their efforts to reconstruct their identities; for instance, as we saw in the previous narrative one element that appears for narrators is their time in liminal space in which they attempt to retrain themselves as they reorder their careers. Father Joseph

enters his in order to acquaint himself with the religious and social aspects of his new identity.

Although he is a Canadian who studied and worked most of his professional life in Canada, in order to become a priest Father Joseph studied theology in the United States at a seminary in Connecticut. This break from an established community on three fronts—family, community and nationality—would help the transition from his established career in sales and his life in the profane world to this new calling to the priesthood and life in a more sacred environment. In this liminal state of re-education Father Joseph is able to obtain the required credentials and create a new persona that would allow him to reintegrate in a new way into the world. The reeducation phase is a similar state through which all the narrators passed as part of their transformation. However, the new path does not come without struggle and anxiety. Father Joseph describes his difficulty of entering into this liminal state as follows,

So all of the changes that I've had to make were difficult: to give up jobs, you know, I had to move to another country for seminary training, I had to go back into university—being an older student. And you know, being in class with younger students – it was pretty daunting, pretty scary at times. But I felt, "I'm going to persevere, it's not going to kill me," [laughs]. "If this is what I have to do, well this is what it takes." (FJ interview, 3)

Father Joseph's university experience is similar to the re-entry to university described by Gary B (the Musician); both were older students dealing with the feeling of otherness in comparison to the younger students who pervade the normal university class. Both men question their decision yet persevere, a character trait that permeates each narrator's story.

As Father Joseph separates from his previous identity and the colleagues and attachments that he formed in the profane world of business, he is forming new relationships and attachments through association with his various parishes. As he explains,

In a sense, I do have a different community and environment than previous. Right now, as a Catholic priest, I'm living on the island of Fogo Island, and I've been here for the past four and one-half years. And next week I'll be leaving this parish, of St. Patrick, to go to a new Parish, and new appointment. (FJ interview, 3)

Even though Father Joseph has divested himself of his previous career, he believes that the so-called real-world experience makes him a stronger, more relatable priest. As he points out,

I have told my story about my life-changing career to people in the parish, to the whole congregation, and I tell the story because I feel it's important that they get to know me, that they know some of my experiences, and about the road I traveled in order to come to priesthood. And people react very well: they encourage me, they appreciate me, and they value the experience that I've had in life leading up to priesthood. And they feel that because of my previous experiences, they will be able to identify with me, or I identify with them; and even from my experience, I might be able to help them because of my experiences. (FJ interview, 3)

I heard of Father Joseph's story from members of his parish, so it appears that the story he creates resonances with the pre-existing worldviews and beliefs of his audience. As Sandra Dolby Stahl explains, "the details of a personal narrative are both known and unknown...the listener will already be familiar with some of the information stated or alluded to in the narrative, while some of the information (for example, the event itself) will be new. It is the interplay of this shared culture and the unique event that allows

intimacy to grow” (Dolby Stahl 1989, 38). It is in this intimacy that an audience and a teller share knowledge and acceptance of deviance from cultural normalcy. Father Joseph describes the reactions that he receives from his various audiences, particularly those who knew him in his early years:

The reactions I receive from all acquaintances who have learned that I have since become a priest, over the years – they are very supportive, very loving towards me. They saw things in me when I was growing up with them, that indicated to them that, “Bill is probably going to be a priest; there is something special about Bill.” And they have encouraged me, and you know, supported me in believing that Bill has found his rightful niche in life. (FJ interview, 4)

Each of the informants testified that they had the support or belief of an external source. For Father Joseph it was people in his community and the religious order of his education system.

[The decision to] be a priest – there’s something special about you. So I’m delighted that their support has been wonderful, and I am somewhat sometimes surprised that they’ve seen, you know, the call to priesthood in me; I’m surprised at that (pleasantly surprised). And I guess I seen it, but I – they acknowledged it, whereas I wouldn’t acknowledge it myself. (FJ interview, 4)

Father Joseph reveals his past imagined life that he abandoned while also revealing the traits that a person might need in order to make this kind of career transformation. He stresses the interior, non-intellectual nature of his realization. These encouraging statements appeal to the core psychological desires of the audience.

As I see it, probably the biggest problem that people who want to make a life-changing career, but find difficulties, or problems in order to make this change – is probably the biggest problem might be, is confidence. It takes a lot of confidence – extreme amount of confidence, and courage, and strength, and faith – to make a life-

changing career. And it certainly was in my case. So, confidence is the key word.

If you can build up enough confidence to trust, to hope, to believe that you know, things will fall in place – if you are able to make the decision to pursue some career – with confidence. Yes, there's a little bit of trepidation involved, you know – letting go of the fear, and the trepidation, and hoping and believing that after all the time you've thought about this, it's time to make a move – with confidence. (FJ interview, 3)

The result of the story on the narrator and the audience is emotional. Audiences relate to the emotional and mental suffering that the narrator endures. These traits establish a basic path or method by which the narrator navigates his or her successful transformation. These types of personal stories provide insight into the belief system that is interwoven in the everyday struggles of everyday people. They illustrate the influence of the human need for meaning.

One thing that I want people to remember about me, is that I've had a lot of experience in life: I've lived in different places, so many different jobs – I've got a lot of experience, and it has all been very challenging, and I have met the challenges, and continue to meet the challenges. So I hope people will see me as a courageous, strong faithful person; a nice person, a good person – a person who tried his best, even in the face of difficulties. (FJ interview, 4)

This period of life seems to lend itself to a reflective narrative process that includes a wish for acceptance by society.

One thing that I would want people to remember about me is that I am a person who has a lot of experience in life, and that I did my best, and tried my best to live up to the challenges of it all. And I hope people get some inspiration, or encouragement from that, that they too – no matter what, if they desire it, if they feel that they want to do something different – I hope that they might take me as an example, “Well, Bill did it, and he did it his way, and he lived to tell about it.”

And people might say to themselves, “Well, I can do it too, if I want to make a career change.”

And I want people to remember, “Bill cared, Bill was a lovely person; Bill was simple and humble.” (FJ interview, 4)

Even though the content of Father Joseph’s story might be different from the previous narrative, his underlying message demonstrates emerging themes in relation to Steve M. Both Father Joseph and Steve M highlight traits that serve as guide posts or touchstones for audiences who may inherently believe that courage, perseverance, and a belief element (internal and external) assist with any major life-crisis or transformation. By choosing to highlight specific events and traits narrators are choosing to “showcase” their own actions as well as cultural “collectivity” as described by Sandra Dolby-Stahl previously. As Sandra Dolby-Stahl argues “the individual’s perception of his experience will be variously affected by collective structures or concepts” which ensures these experiences are of topical interest to an audience (Dolby-Stahl 1977, 17). This showcasing, collectivity, and emerging themes will also be revealed in a similar fashion in the details of the ensuing two narrators’ stories.

THE MUSICIAN

Gary B is not one to go looking for people with whom to share his story. In fact, he observes that “I never think of it as a story.” He still shares it mostly with family and close friends and in fact, it is from his wife and their friend Lynne that I heard of his narrative. Unlike the other stories in this collection, Gary B’s story may not yet be fully complete as he has seemingly not fully actualized his transition. However, his telling of the transition stages through which he has passed on his journey has similar motifs to other tellers’ tales enough so that those who hear of my study recognize his fit as a

subject for my scholarship. The patterns I have identified are often buried in the structure of the teller's journey tale. Some, like Gary B may state in a joking manner, "you're on your own if you're looking for inspiration," but by telling their stories the narrators are providing listeners with positive role models for the successful transition from social expectations to self-realization of a life of passion. It may be that the initial career is needed to bolster personal confidence in their own abilities and to overcome doubts about lack of social acceptance. Like Father Joseph, Gary B doubted his ability to succeed and like Steve M, Gary B found himself at the practical versus aspiration crossroads.

Much of Gary B's experiences are introduced through anecdotal tellings that help his audience to better understand the emotion and trauma of the transition because they "invite reflection on human nature and the human condition [as] it is precisely the comparison of past and present in order to evaluate the status quo that gives rise to historical discourse, of which anecdote- and legend-telling are primary forms" (Cashman 2008, 117).

Gary B completed his undergraduate degree in the late 60s; he claims that while in college he was exposed to the predominate genres of the time, folk and country music. As he says "it was pre-Beatles" with groups like The Kingston Trio and Peter-Paul-and-Mary, and The Highwaymen. Gary B explains "there's a couple of guys in my fraternity, older than me, that had like this duet, you know, duo guys. And they would sing and play guitars and they would do it sometimes in the fraternity house during dinner. And I thought that was like the coolest thing I had ever seen, you know. I wanted to be one of those guys." When the Beatles came on the scene Gary B became interested in playing

the electric guitar but did not have the opportunity until he joined the army (GB interview, 6-7).

While participating in basic infantry training at Fort Riley, Kansas, in preparation to be sent to Vietnam, Gary B heard of a military band opening for a clarinet player. The clarinet was an instrument he had played since the second grade. This skill enabled him to join the military band, thus avoiding going over-seas to fight. Gary B explains his reaction to this selection was “I felt like I had just hit the lottery” (GB interview, 9). His participation in the military band provided Gary B with access to electric guitars as they were part of the military band’s arsenal. As a clarinetist, Gary B played in the marches and parades, but as a guitarist he performed in smaller combos for other military functions. It was during this time that he was building skills and dreams and had the idea that as he claims

I’d thought about going to Berklee College of Music.

And then—I’m not getting this in exact order but I had wound up playing in a—there’s a country and western band around Junction City, Kansas where Fort Riley is just south side of Junction City. I think it was Tom Johnson and the Knight Riders. I was a Knight Rider. And I wound up playing bass, and that is a country and western band. And this guy, Tom Johnson, was a refuse collector during the day and he was missing a tooth, kind of a fat guy, real friendly, nice guy. And he had the best baritone country voice you’ve ever heard. I mean he was just fabulous. This big fat guy with, you know, missing a tooth up there singing and people around Junction City loved him. I mean Junction City’s kind of like Smithfield [Utah]. It’s not a very big town and the only reason that it’s alive is because Fort Riley is right there.

So we played a lot around Junction City and—I never—at least my impression was, I never had so much cash, spending cash, walking around money as I did back then because we would play...we’d get like 15 or 20 dollars a night each. Which wasn’t a lot

of money, and all the beer you could drink but remember I'm in the Army so you don't have anything to buy. There's...they give you everything you possibly need. (GB interview, 10)

When Gary B finished his undergraduate degree he tried to enroll in an MBA program to receive an exemption from the draft, but the army did not accept his rationale so Gary B was drafted and spent four years doing his duty. While still in the army he played in a band in his spare time; the money he made was spent on new guitars. Playing guitar in a band was a dream of Gary B's since his first exposure to the Beatles. He described his initial defining moment, the crossroads at which he negated his guitar playing skills and his dream of playing professionally in a band, as occurring just a few weeks away from being released from his time in the army as follows:

So I didn't have anything to spend it on. So you know, 4 or 5 nights a week I'd get another 20 bucks and put it in my pocket and, you know, I just had all this money so I bought a...I think I got another guitar and you know you just accumulate all this stuff. Well, anyway I'm fantasizing about going back to, you know, going to this music school and I'm going to be a guitar player.

And another guy in the band was..."Do you mind if my little brother sits in?"

And his little brother is 14 or something like that so his little brother sits in and plays guitar and he was like...Fabulous. I mean he was like the best guitar player I'd heard in a very, very long time and I'm sitting there, you know, in a very sober mood. Realizing I'm like 22 or 23 and this little 14 year old is kicking my ass up and down.

I...you know...I'm not going to be a guitar player.

And I was getting close to getting out and that's when my friend and I had a conversation. And hey, I thought, I'll go to law school. Yeah, that's probably a smarter thing to do.

So there was this little intersection right there and I took that road rather than, you know, going to guitar school. (GB interview, 10)

Gary B did not touch a guitar again for 30 years, even though as he describes it he would practice the chords in his head.

I didn't touch the guitar once I started going to law school cause law is pretty demanding.... And then as time went by and I don't know what...25...and I was thinking about it and I mean I was always very conscious of music. I'd hear things on the radio and I could hear the chord structure and I could hear what they're doing and in my mind sort of play guitar to the song but I haven't, literally 30 years I hadn't touched the instrument.

And where we lived in St Louis, the house next to us sold and some people moved in, Byron and Adrian, and they had a lot of parties and we liked them. We socialized with them a lot and all their friends, a lot of their friends played music and they would come over and they'd sing and play. And I'd hang and drink and whatever else. And it kind of pushed me over the edge. It was like "Wait, I'm better....I was better than that guy. You know, 30 years ago or whatever." And you know, "I'm going to go upstairs and if I can find it, pull out my guitar." So I did and of course, I was really bad. I mean it was like starting over. But, I kind of kept at it and was interested. And then I decided, this was stupid; I'm going to start taking lessons.

And then I started taking lessons and then it got worse, this disease.

And I wanted to play in a band. It was what I always wanted to do anyway. (GB interview, 11)

Demonstrating the strengths that he had learned from setting up his own law practice and transferring those skills to his renewed passion for guitar by planning the assemblage of his own band, Gary B explains why he chose that route. He tried for a while to answer ads in the local paper for guitarists but found that "they were all kids. I mean some of them were really young kids and I'd go over there and it's like, their Dad just walked in. [Laughter].... I realized that that wasn't going to work. I wasn't going to find a place, one of these pre-existing situations and so....like I'd always done, I'll just do it myself" (GB interview, 11).

This short anecdote demonstrates for the listening audience the independence, self-reliance and fortitude required to make a career transition as diametrically different as the one Gary B was attempting. Similar styles of anecdotes are told by other narrators who experience such transitional journeys; the fact that these narrators are out of their comfort zones in terms of competing with younger cohorts is a familiar theme. It is as though the career change narrators must “go back in time” yet remain their current age. This task of restarting can be an uncomfortable and intimidating idea for an audience, and so they are interested in how the teller negotiates this aspect of the transition. Gary B was able to put a successful band together which satisfied him for about three and a half years, but as he says “it was still—it was all part-time” with Gary B still working in his law firm.

At this stage Gary B begins to describe the dissociative feeling he felt about his involvement with his old life as a lawyer. The struggle begins between the old and the new. He lost his drive to participate fully in his old way of life as he began building a bridge to the new life he envisioned. This struggle is a balancing act, a kind of limbo; he is betwixt and between as his actions and new aspirations initiate alterations to his identity and social sphere. At this particular crossroad he describes his frustration at being unable to achieve full participation in new life plans that he has set in motion. As he explains,

But I didn't care, you know, I moved on. Mentally, I was like out of that job. And so I was spending quite a bit of time working on the band, and getting things together, and practicing. And I'm taking lessons, and all that, and I'm really trying to get where, you know, make up for 30 years. And you know, I realized, “I really like doing this. And I think I'm kind of good at it.” And I just liked everything

about it. And I was becoming frustrated a little bit – actually, a lot – with the band, because I couldn’t take it to the next level, you know, because everybody is working.

So, I don’t know; one thing led to another [this includes his two daughters going off to university and his wife being diagnosed with breast cancer]....And we [Gary B and his wife] just realized that, you know, we’re here – I mean, what are we going to do? Is this, you know, where we’re going to be the rest of our lives? And I wanted to really pursue the guitar. (GB interview, 15)

The person with whom he was taking lessons in St Louis knew of his conundrum and introduced him to the possibility of obtaining a degree in music from Utah State University, a prestigious program according to Gary B. This intervention allowed Gary B to validate his inner choice by accepting outside advice. Gary B flew to Utah to audition for the program where the music director offered further impetus for the career change transition. Gary B described this validation of his passion as follows,

Honestly, I thought Mike was probably going to tell me, you know, “Well Bill, it was really fun, I had a good time, but seriously – I mean, you’ve got a nice situation in St. Louis. I’d say just keep taking lessons, and you know, the idea of coming here to study guitar – I don’t think you’re really ready.” But that’s not what he said. He was like, “No, I think you’re fine. I think – yeah, we could work with you. So yeah, I think you’d be good enough to be in the program.” So I don’t know, not as bad as I thought. (GB interview, 16)

As Gary B and his wife began to look for a house, they encountered disappointment and roadblocks up until the last day of their reconnaissance of Logan. Through a friend they viewed and purchased a house in one day. Gary B explains his philosophy as “the best plan in life is to be lucky; that’s kind of been my method of operation” (GB interview, 17). He is introducing the idea of fate or serendipity; others in similar circumstances might assign this intervention to a religious deity, but Gary B

seems more firmly anchored in the profane rather than the sacred. He uses the house purchase anecdote to demonstrate that the move from St. Louis to Logan was meant to be through the non-agentive intervention of a universal serendipitous event. He also uses the conversion terminology of forks-in-the-road to discuss life-changing decisions points to negotiate faith. Further along in his narrative I ask Gary B if he thinks that there was some reason that he might have been meant to be lawyer in order to achieve the successful transition to being a musician and his reply was,

I think everyone in the world has forks in the road, and they choose whatever they choose. And you know, there's books and movies, and all kinds of things about those kinds of incidences – you know, it happens almost every day.

Certainly life decisions, you know: when you're going to get married, or if you're going to take this job, or if you're going to go to this school, or if you're going to select this major. And you know, those kinds of decisions – those are life-changing decisions. You may not think of it quite that way, but you look back you go, "Oh yeah, that was when I decided to do that; oh yeah," and then realize all these other things.

And so you know, I think there's a lot of happenstance and serendipity in life, and part of your success is your ability to change, or modify, or you know, go with that, or adjust, or whatever you got to do to like, you know, "How is this going to work for me? How is this going to work for my family?" Or you know, "How can I get out of this gracefully?" Or, "How can I maximize this good thing that happened? What else can I do with this?" (GB interview, 31-32)

His wife's illness and his own family health history were used as a couple of motivational triggers to solidify his change. Disease of the body is equated to a time in his life where he also felt uneasiness of the spirit (a dis ease) that initiated his career change. These are significant markers that support the concept of a compulsion. As Gary B observes,

It certainly brings forth the, you know, the volatility of life, or the you know, unpredictability; or you know, you don't know what you're doing tomorrow, you may not be around tomorrow – kind of a thing. You know, I have a family history – I'm healthy, but I have a family history of heart disease; my dad was 64 when he died – and he had been sick for the ten years leading to that death. And my mom also had heart disease, and so I've got the beginnings of that. And you know, so far now I'm 65, so I've outlived my dad (my dad died very shortly after his 64th birthday)... And I have high cholesterol, and so you know, I could see you know, my family heritage coming at me real hard (GB interview, 43).

Because of the cautious nature of his wife it still took them a year to make the move as they sold their house, his share of the law partnership and other business. Gary B used humor to describe his integration into the new university environment,

And I'll never forget the first day, you know, I'm back in college, you know. And the music school at USU is kind of a little, self-contained campus, or building; it's like a little high school. I don't know how many people are in it: 300, 400 students maybe, and of course the faculty. And you get to know everyone – at least by their face, if not their name – fairly quickly, especially me because I'm 60, or something, and you know, not the typical kid walking down the hall.

And the first day of class – I think it was Music Theory 1 – you know, I walk in the classroom, and everybody looks up, and, “Oh, here's the teacher,” you know, “Professor!” [Laughing]

And so they kind of put their books away, and start sitting up, and looking like they're paying attention. And then I sit down behind some girl, and the girl is looking at me like, “What's he doing? How come – this is weird.” [Laughing]

And then the real professor walks in, and he looks – you know, he's carrying his books, and he sets them up on the piano, and starts writing his name on the board, and I was like, “Oh.” And then they look at me again, like, “Who's this guy?” [Laughing] And then the class starts. And in music school, they don't have that many classrooms, and so a lot of the classes you have – they're all in the same room, you know. It's like room 218, room 220, room 222 – it's in one of those. And so everyone leaves, and then ten minutes later

the whole class comes back, because instead of Music Theory 1, it's whatever the next freshman course is. And it's all the same people. And so, "There's that guy again, he's still in there." They're looking at me like – [Laughing]

You know, and I'm looking at them. And I don't know what they're thinking, but I'm kind of thinking, "What am I doing here?"

Because these kids are 18 years old. But we kind of got to know each other after a while, and I loved it. I mean, for four years it was as much fun as I've had. I loved, you know, going back to school the second time around, and all those things you think, "Boy, if I had college to do over again, I would do such and such." And you know, I had a chance to do that. (GB interview, 18,19)

Gary B made use of humor as a narrative element to demonstrate not only his anxiety and questioning of his career transformation decisions but it also highlights the personal strength and endurance gained through these seemingly out-of-my-element situations.

Gary B's purpose for returning to academia was not so much that he wanted to become a teacher; instead, as he asserts,

what I wanted to do (because I don't sing), is I wanted to actually learn the instrument as a musical instrument. And it's no different than violin, or piano, or anything else; I mean, it's a lifetime pursuit. And to really learn it: read music, and actually not just strum away, but know, you know, know the notes, and know what you're playing, and you know, have a concept of how to actually play the instrument. And so I've been doing that, and I was not very good at it when I started. (GB interview, 23)

He also managed to create and hone his performance persona by practicing at various venues including volunteering to play in local retirement homes. He describes this time of initiation into his new persona as such:

They would all come in to hear me. And they were fun, delightful people.

And that helped me a lot, just kind of getting used to performing on solo guitar, you know, not somebody singing, where I'm backing

up and they're really listening to the singer, but just me. And you know, you learn how to kind of cover up your own mistakes. You know, like I do something wrong, and it used to be, "Oh, let me try that again, I can get that." Well, you can't do that when you're performing, you know, you're performing. So you know, you either quit, and die and go away, or you get better. (GB interview, 24)

Gary B speaks of the various kinds of stress from both careers which demonstrates the difference between work and passion,

Practicing law is extremely stressful. I was a trial lawyer: I tried lawsuits, and you win, or you lose. And winning – you own the world, I was like, "I'm going to do it, I'm really good at this! I love it!" And when you lose, it's like somebody shot your dog, or something.... But playing guitar, and putting stuff together, and all that is stressful, but it's just different. I don't know how to describe it.

But he does go into a detailed description of a stressful situation as a guitarist whereas he glosses over the legal stress. During the description he demonstrates how he believes this stress is necessary as "the prime motivator between whatever it is that you are, and what you want to be" (GB interview, 29,30).

When asked if he believes that his prior career as a lawyer gave him any strengths or skills that helped in this second career Gary B responded,

I think it helps being older, and I hate to say mature because I'm not sure that applies to me. But you know, I'm certainly more focused, I think, on what I want to do.

The one thing in my lifetime that I have wanted to do, was be a guitar player – although I didn't do anything about it for 30 years.

I like[d] practicing law, but I mean – I don't want to die at my desk here, and I never tried this other thing. I just want to try it, and who knows where it's going to lead, and what I'm going to do; but that's just what I want to do.

And I've been, like I said, lucky. And you know, I was very lucky when I was practicing law, that we could do this – we could afford to do this, because you know, I'm not making money. You

know, whatever I've said on this tape, it looks like, "Boy, this guy has been," you know. None of this is an income producing, you know, type of activity. You know, like playing at Borders, and playing at Starbucks – maybe it gets a little bit in tips, or whatever. But if you're planning on that and the mortgage – you've got a real problem. So I'm able to do this now, you know, and enjoy this, sort of, leisurely lifestyle and all that, because of the practicing law for 30 years. (GB interview, 30, 33, 42)

Gary B's story offers listeners insight into a journey of persistence, although the persistence comes after what appears as an initial stage of abandonment of a passion. He never really gave up on his dream, but he did sublimate it to practical concerns. His sparking of an old desire has relit his creative fires. Persistence on his second chance is paying off; and his story offers hope for leading a better life through personal fulfillment rather than monetary gain. He has changed his identity to such a degree that when asked what he wants people to remember about him, his response was as follows,

'We liked him. He was fun to be around, and he was a really good guitarist.' Yeah, that's what I want people to say. 'I liked playing with him. Bill was fun to play with.' I would be happy with that. (GB interview, 47).

There is not a single mention about being remembered through his legal career in Gary B's reflection on his epitaph.

He has excised his old identity and replaced it with the new identity, although he has not completed his reintegration into his new community. He has actualized his vision of his creative self which he sees as life-giving, compared to the previous career which caused his "dis-ease." Like the Framer whose story follows, Gary B's call to action came via external circumstances. While he was dabbling in relearning the guitar and creating a part-time band, his life circumstances, through health and relationship disruptions, caused

him to take the final leap into his new realm. He re-examined his career, his desires, his philosophy and his perfectionist nature. In his 20s as he compared himself to the younger 14-year-old guitarist, Gary B found himself wanting and so crushed his own musical ambitions. Now in his 60s, when he compares himself to his younger instructor and the university students with whom he studies, he is aware the he has limitations in comparison but is accepting of this status. Perhaps this is because he has already experienced success in one realm and the “win some, lose some” nature of the legal profession. He had done his social duty, but in the end he found it was not enough to maintain a healthy outlook on his future.

THE FRAMER

For most of us, including this narrator, it is not easy to walk away from a stable paycheck and job security. Sometimes it takes a push, like a layoff, to move a person in a new direction. It can, though, give a person an opportunity at a new career and new life. Further along in life as they tell their story the reflective process kicks in to enable the narrators to make sense of the options handed to them. In many cases, this liminal experience acts as an internship that can help transition the person to not only a new career opportunity but also to a new philosophical outlook.

Fiona S began her career as a landscape architect. Her story was initially forced upon her by external actors or so her initial narration goes. Part of her story was not captured on tape because it was too painful, and she didn't want to include this painful situation as part of her story even though she is aware that it did have something to do with her decisions. During what Fiona S described as a political conflict in her husband's

department who also worked at her university campus, his department was trying to get rid of her husband and they used his wife's job loss as a maneuver to do so. Fiona S hired two lawyers who told her that she could get her job back, but she "decided to go with the flow—to move on—to let go of the past" and "even though a painful moment, the result was not" (off-tape).

By using stories within a personal narrative, tellers are able to demonstrate that their new found outlooks are "full of a distilled wisdom that is as old as time itself" (Dailey 1994, 7). Fiona S uses a "Who's To Say It's Bad Luck?" tale to distill her philosophy of the change in her circumstance and "that each circumstance has a good and a bad aspect, depending on how you perceive it (Dailey 1994, 7). The tale as Fiona S narrates it flows as follows:

Interviewer: Now when you say...what I'm hearing is that there's this strength of belief in yourself but also belief coming from your parents. But you also mention the spiritual kind of God, Universe...what are you doing to me...questioning at the time. Or do you remember?

Fiona S: No. Although it's had a lot of trust that whatever happens is ok ultimately. I love that Chinese proverb about the man and the horse. Do you know that one?

Interviewer: I don't think so.

Fiona S: Well, there's a Chinese man and he's given a horse and everybody in the village says "Oh, you are so lucky, so lucky." And the man says, "Oh maybe so, maybe no." And the man's son rides the horse and falls off and breaks his leg and everybody in the village says, "Oh, this is so sad, so unfortunate." And the old man says, "Maybe so, maybe no." And then the army comes in conscripting young men and they don't take his son. And everybody in the village says, "Oh you're so lucky." You know, because they don't take the son cause he's got a broken leg. "You're so lucky." And he says, "Maybe so, maybe no." Anyway it goes on like that and...and it's just the idea I don't think we can ever know how it's all unfolding but

I have a lot of trust and always look for the most positive aspects of whatever I do (FS interview, 13)

Sheila Dailey notes that stories like this are

a variation on the good/bad story type and its main focus is not to entertain but to provoke thought. This story has the feel of the Buddhist teaching tales, wherein some aspect of human nature is neatly and briefly presented for contemplation. In this instance the story demonstrates that it is our perception of human events which controls how we will feel about them (Dailey 1994, 115).

Life's trajectories are complex, with many spaces for serendipitous moments that, as Fiona S's narration exemplifies, must be recognized even if after the fact. Each of this particular study's narrators felt at some point they were the agentive force in their own life, but at certain moments they shift agency to a higher or external power. In Fiona S's case this can be seen through her introduction of this Chinese parable whereby Fiona S introduces the concept of fate as the external agency acting on her life's journey.

The advice incident that Fiona S experiences is similar to that of Steve M as previously mentioned. Fiona S receives her advice and support from her husband and her willingness to accept "God's will" as she expresses through a letter that she writes to God. This dualism of the sacred and profane is mirrored in both the advice requests and in the career transformation from practical (profane) to passion (sacred). For both of these radical career changers there is a spiritual element to their rationalization of the transformative juncture of their career path.

As a licensed landscape architect, Fiona S had started her own company and was very successful. She had been asked to teach at her university, but as she stresses "I never intended to be a teacher....I had more of a professional orientation" (FS interview, 3-4).

During the time that Fiona S was a professor, she was also working closely with her husband and his art; he was working to becoming a successful artist and Fiona S started picking up mats and frames to assist with the display and presentation of his pictures. Even while she was helping her husband and struggling with her potential excise from her professorship, she describes that she had “tried to get hired on part-time at another frame shop in town and they just laughed at me. And said, ‘Oh yeah, right’. You know, somebody who teaches at *XYZ University* wants to be a picture framer on the side. And I said, ‘yeah, I really do’” (FS interview, 4). But they never hired her, and so with encouragement from her husband she opened up her own frame shop and art gallery that not only allowed her to showcase her husband’s work but also allowed her to expand out to offer her framing services for paying customers. Fiona S explains the effort to expand outside her private circle as an element of her own self-discovery,

this business just boomed immediately. And it was actually far more rewarding financially than teaching at the university or even private practice. And, and I loved it. [emphatically stated] I just loved doing it. It was very immediate, you know.

I was involved in environmental planning, in landscape architecture; it was a creative process but it was a long term creative process. Whereas this you get an idea, you work with a piece of art which I’d always loved art and been involved in the arts.

And it just was an immediately gratifying profession, so at some point the consultation in landscape architecture just sort of waned and I just became a full-time picture framer...I have a seventh grade year book that my father showed me not long ago and in it, you know, you put a little blurb about yourself. And it said I want to spend my life riding horses and doing art. And that’s what I do. (FS interview, 4-5)

When asked whether she receives adverse reaction or questioning looks when she tells people about her past career compared to her new career she discloses

I've been doing this for so long and, you know, I think people who know me respect what I do. I think there was initially...when I told people that I was going to change. I think there was some surprise that I would leave something that other people looked at as a very respectable, professional career to become a picture framer [laughs] yeah, I think there was a little surprise there.

It was a little surprise to me too [laughs]. (FS interview, 6)

During her transition stage Fiona S explains

I actually had quite a lot of angst about making this transition. It was very, very difficult. It was one of the most painful periods of my life. Because...I had spent eight years in universities getting the degrees that allowed me to do what I was doing [working as a landscape architect and university professor] . I went to picture framing school for one week. And, you know, when I went to picture framing school, they said, 'Well, you can expect, you know, like five dollars an hour or something like that being a picture framer.' And I, at that point I was probably getting sixty, seventy dollars an hour to be a landscape architect.

And I thought I was nuts. It was really quite disturbing to me. But...that one week was just, of course, the very tip of the iceberg. I have been learning in this profession my whole life.

And, I also quickly realized that...that by owning the business rather than just being a picture framer in somebody else's shop that I had the potential to make much better income.

And, I had...I hired employees and it actually turned out to be far more successful financially than had I stayed a landscape architect. I didn't know that at the time.

So there was a lot of angst about making that change. And I also had a lot of angst over giving up on environmental planning and landscape because I saw that as doing something for the world and I felt like this was quite selfish.

This was something I loved but I didn't see it as being of any significance in any greater realm. (FS interview, 6-7)

But she does provide an elaborate story that plays on the pathos of her audience and that anchors the story in the spaces and activities of her listeners world.

oddly it was one day I was walking down the street in town and I was looking in, it was at dusk, and I was looking in people's windows [laughs] you know how they don't have their [laughs] their curtains drawn at dusk.

And it just kind of hit me, that everybody has something on their walls. And I thought about how barren our lives would be if we didn't have art in our lives. If we didn't have something that we took into our home environments that enriched them.

And, and that was really a turning point in realizing that there is value in what I do as a picture framer.

And in helping people make the very best of things that obviously mean something to them or they wouldn't bring them into me. And also in supplying art. I now do large facilities, you know, like I've supplied over four-hundred pieces to the Women's Center and I do the framing for IHC. So, I just completed a big project for Sunshine Terrace.

So I'm doing, I'm doing facilities where a lot of people see it and that's very gratifying. (FS interview, 7-8)

Because there was “so much pain in leaving” her initial profession, Fiona S found herself not only in a career transition but in a spiritual transition—wondering why me? As she discloses

I'm going to get a little teary. [SF becomes a little emotional for this part] It has great spiritual significance. I think that I grew into a much better person as a result of this transition. And the process sort of stripped away everything that wasn't real.

I mean when I looked at what I was losing by giving up my former profession which I dearly loved, I realized that everything that's really important to me about myself was still intact.

And that all the values that I had were still intact. And it didn't matter whether I was a street sweeper or a railroad conductor, I mean it didn't matter what I did. That had no relevance at all to the values that I hold dear to myself. And so yes, I think I grew enormously” (FS interview, 9).

She learned to “wear the world like a loose cloak” having had the opportunity of detaching from one profession for another and “that detachment then you see as being

very healthy” (FS interview, 9). In fact as part of the detachment of not only personally being identified in a certain way, Fiona S also experienced great change with whom and how she associated with her environment and working relationships. As she recounts

My environment expanded enormously when I changed professions. I had been at the university and I had been in a field that—it’s relatively narrow. I mean it’s broad in terms of what it, how it impacts the world potentially, but you know, I was in a relatively small department. And then my professional contacts were in places outside of Utah.

When I came down to this street corner, I was sort of like a guy who moved to a different city. I mean this whole new world opened up to me.

And ironically I now probably have much greater contact with the people at the university than I did before, you know. Because now I know everybody from, you know, the president and his wife to the janitors and the—I mean it’s just every department I have had contact with.

Framing is an intimate process, you know. It’s something most—most often people are bringing things that they cherish and they want somebody they can trust. And so I get to know people and then often I end up with a social relationship with them as well. So, it’s just—yeah, it’s been great. [laughs]

I feel highly connected to this community. It’s...it’s been a, just a facet of changing, of changing my profession that’s been a great gift that I could never have anticipated. (FS interview, 10-11)

As mentioned previously, Fiona S had a great deal of emotional support and physical support from her husband during the initial stages of her crisis, but she also credits having “deeply loving and supportive parents” who instilled a lot of confidence in her. She divulges that “they always gave us, my sister and I, tremendous spiritual freedom. And tremendous freedom of self-determination, so I would have to credit my parents with my ability to redesign my life” (FS interview, 12).

As the narrators become more removed from the trauma of the initial stages of their transition and the crisis event and more comfortable in their new role, their stories become more reflective, and they provide hindsight insights as it were to the events that occurred. Fiona S surmises that

I imagine that you heard about it from somebody who is either a close friend or that knew me years ago. But it's really nothing more than a story now. This is my life. I'm a picture framer. I love my job. One of the interesting things that happened in this change is the realization that I am not my job. (FS interview, 8)

Fiona S sees herself as "just a kind of a conduit" and believes that "if I can be of help along the way to anybody that's great. It's not something I set out to do but I certainly try to be open enough that I'm sensitive to other people's needs when they arise in my world" (FS interview, 14).

Two concepts that Fiona S narrates in her story that are used as direct advice to assist others who may wish to travel a similar path are: (1) to have "an openness and trust" which seems to refer not only to one's self and one's skills in a similar fashion to Father Joseph's advice but also refers to opportunities or serendipity similar to Gary B; (2) to accept one's ability to change which is imparted by reiterating her own parent's advice "my mother always said that there's nothing that you can't change in your life" (FS interview, 15).

ANNOTATIONS

It is easy to see the pattern emerge from each individual narrator's story. Each narrator's initial career choice is quashed in some fashion either through lack of confidence, a youthful rebellion, or by making a more socially congruent choice of career. As Steve M explains it,

[as a society we are] bombarded with the message of what capitalism teaches. [We as a society and as individuals are] constantly bombarded with these ideas that we're not really good enough and we need this or that product or whatever to feel better. And then, just the fundamental human element which is worrying that if you don't have what your friends have you're not going to be able to be friends with your friends anymore. You'll be less than. And so, we have this fundamental human desire to not be excluded. (SM interview, 21)

While the narrator experiences his or her struggle with his or her decision to make a radical career and life change, this is experienced through a pre-liminal state that has the individual experiencing a variety of tests that can cause suffering and anxiety. This is the stage in which the career changer struggles with creating a new worldview; and with creating a coherent and meaningful expression of the struggle and choice that has affected all aspects of their own lives. This is the time of disruption of the normal harmony of previous life choices and paths. Within the narrative they provide interpretations, observations, and commentaries about their choice.

Richard Bauman maintains that the narrations demonstrate how the narrator "may take an active hand in directing how his or her discourse may be recontextualized" (Bauman 2004, 160). This idea of active recontextualization may be true, but I am not sure if it is done at a conscious level for these particular personal narrative tellers. There are certain elements of character, context and emotion that the tellers wish to convey, and

to some extent they are manipulating the pathos of the telling as they imbue their tales with emotional language. As they choose which anecdotes, parables and metaphors best convey their story the tellers construct and reconstruct using both factual and emotive elements; there is a sense of the “reperformance of text performed before, they are representations of prior dialogues as well” yet none of the stories can really be taken as historical fact (Bauman 2004, 161). That is to say that although the stories are not fictional they are also not truly factual; rather the stories can only be told from one point of view or one interpretational ideation. The elements and social interactions that these narrators choose as part of their story are “endowed in [his or her] mind with sufficient significance to mobilize his [or her] expressive energies” (Bauman 2004, 88).

There are emotional revelations that can be heard (and seen in written format) by the language used to describe the emotional states of the narrators as they relate various events, trials and struggles that they endure to obtain a satisfying outcome to their particular evolution. These revelations seem to be an important element of the story through which narrators can express the intensity of their initial and ongoing struggles. Using this style of narration, the narrators ensure that their listeners are aware of the truly heroic psychological journey the narrator has endured, Steve M describes his depression; Fiona S discusses the angst of her choice through dream and her personal letter that she wrote to God; Father Joseph reflects on the daunting aspects of change and that it is “pretty scary at times;” Gary B expresses his frustration with his attempts at realizing the full-potential of his band and his worries about his health and early death.

In essence, the events of these narratives are based on the North American concept of capitalistic success and the struggle of those individuals who believe they do

not meet mainstream criteria for the attainment of socially set goals. They do not value income over personal fulfillment; for example, they may not strive to have the big screen television, the grand house, two cars, and all the new technology toys. They are neither homeless nor living in poverty but they are seen by some as failing to meet societal expectation. Some of the important ideas that operate within these stories are the expectation that the individual's purpose is to strive for monetary success and prestige. Implicit also is the fear that if unsuccessful in this realm they will be seen as failures by society and the communities in which they live and work. This causes great personal concern and hence the struggle in the pre-liminal state to accept the new path. Jim Carrey, an internationally known comedienne/actor and multi-millionaire, is quoted saying "I wish everyone could experience being rich and famous, so they'd see it wasn't the answer to anything." A similar philosophy is a thread woven through these career transformation narratives.

An interesting element of these career change narrations is the physical relocation that is intertwined in the story. All of the narrators have moved from their original employment locale. Steve M, Father Joseph and Gary B all moved out of their towns, and even Fiona S moved from up-on-the-hill to down-in-the-valley. This shift of place reinforces the concept of the departure of the hero on his or her journey from his or her old realm to a new one or as Neil Smelser claims "participants leave this world in some way and enter another" (Smelser 2009, 15). This reinforces the social and psychological shifts that take place in conjunction with these radical career changes. The act of geographical relocation is a way of redefining the narrator's relationship with his or her vocation.

Although offered a variety of places to impart their story, each participant chose their place of work for their interviews. Even Gary B, the musician, invited me to watch his band perform at one of their venues; this choice of place has a similar flavor to the personal anecdotes about the deceased at a wake as noted by Ray Cashman in his book *Storytelling on the Northern Irish Border: Characters and Community*. There seems to be a place or context that needs to be established for the setting of the stories. Steve M, the poet/professor, chose his office in the university where he teaches and where he is surrounded by bookcases filled with poetry and literature. Fiona S chose her framing/art studio where all the accoutrements of her trade were visibly displayed including framing matts, knives and hung and unhung pictures. Father Joseph chose to tape his in the sanctity of his church office where he counsels his parishioners. This choice of venue that demonstrates they have successfully completed their transition was perhaps also a secondary reinforcement of their stories as if to say, “here I feel most comfortable and happy.”

Although each of the narrators of these successful-unsuccessful stories is different and the career changes they experience are diverse, there are common themes that resonate throughout their stories that demonstrate that we all face the same struggles. Hearing these narrators’ stories of struggles and triumphs, we may learn from those narrators who have already grappled with finding his or her life’s passion or purpose. Some of the elements each of the narrators shared included: how his or her choice of initial career was reincorporated; how he or she created a new identity as a person, as a professional and as a community member; how he or she learned to live life fully within a different financial and social sphere; how he or she learned to release barriers to change

and feel more empowered after the transition; and how he or she developed skills for the new career as well as the coping mechanisms that helped make sense of emotions such as fear, anger and stress. Individuals may not know at the moment of their actions how the full impact of their choices will unfold within their lives. It is only upon reflection and articulation of their stories and by their choice of the specific moments to describe that the narrators and their audiences are able to perceive the emergence of implications.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

I have attempted to demonstrate by example how these career transformation stories are constructed along a traditional narrative structure while introducing some of the ideas about why they are considered folklore, for they are both individually and culturally constructed. Sandra Dolby contends that in order for a narrative to be considered folklore there needs to be a presence of a pattern, like the urban legend—that consists of a risky situation, a worst-case scenario and an ironic twist at the end (Dolby, 2008). These new career transformation texts have an identifiable pattern that when studied provides the context for how traditional story elements are used to reorient concepts of culturally normative ideas of success. They challenge the collective practices of established social practices about production and success. Richard Bauman determines that people telling stories to each other is “a means of giving cognitive and emotional coherence to experience” and “constructing and negotiating social identity” which we can see born out through the lens of the structural analysis of the career transformation stories (Bauman 1986, 113). These narrators are both in the story and telling about it.

Perhaps part of the appeal of these stories is that similar to the legend tellers described by Linda Dégh, these narrators “do not make the story; the story makes them, and this is why they are appreciated by their community” (Dégh 1995, 82). The narrator carefully shares facts of the event with as much supporting information as the narrator can supply to satisfy their audience’s curiosity; in the samples I discuss the audience is myself. The narrator is partially depending on the support of the audience who is

somewhat familiar with their situation and is ready to assist with additional information or questions to draw out details.

FUNCTIONS: INDIVIDUAL AND SOCIETAL

Thinking about these narratives as vehicles for transformation (just as folktales, legends, urban legends, myths) allows folklorists to understand how narrators make meaning through the traditional construction of stories as well as the performance elements. The functions of these stories are two-fold: in the first instance, there is an individual narrator function that defines and redefines a perceived culturally deviant identity for the narrator through a storied telling of events; in the second instance, there is a societal function that demonstrates that life is made up of journeys through which we must overcome obstacles in order to achieve our “bliss” as described by Joseph Campbell (Campbell 2004).

This thesis has looked at narratives regarding pivotal moments of transition individuals face within their careers which lead to a successful-unsuccessing outcome. As different as each of these narrators’ careers may be they share a common underlying pattern through which motifs and functions can be discerned. Claude Lévi-Strauss illustrates his structuralist approach for identifying the underlying form in text by using a personal anecdote from his childhood,

when I looked at the signboards on shops - for instance, *boulangier* (baker) or *boucher* (butcher) - I was able to read something because what was obviously similar, from a graphic point of view, in the writing could not mean anything other than ‘bou,’ the same first syllable of *boucher* and *boulangier*. Probably there is nothing more than that in the structuralist approach; it is the quest for the invariant,

or for the invariant elements among superficial differences. (Lévi-Strauss 1995, 8)

Arguing inner conflicts with themselves, these are not people who just one day woke up and decided to step outside the bounds of social and cultural norms. These narrators went through often lengthy transitions and a great deal of “angst,” according to Fiona S. The narrators of these stories often had to let go of existing support structures—from the financial support of well-established, well-paying professions to some of their established, long-term relationships including marriages, friends, and colleagues.

MOTIFS

By looking at the pattern of the narratives folklorically through a structural analysis some of the emergent motifs of the stories can be more easily identified. These features highlight some of the deep-seated attitudes and archetypes prevalent in folk communication.

Even though the career transformation narratives are unique, there are invariant (or, as Barre Toelken would say “conservative”) elements within the structure of the stories. Some of the motifs and themes that unfold in the telling of career transformation narratives are: a bumping up against an existential crossroads whereby the narrator struggles to create a purposeful life; determining how to create a new personal and social identity whereby the new purpose is incorporated in that identity; and having faith in order to travel the sometimes difficult life journey on the quest for authenticity.

Crossroads Motif

These career transformation stories utilize the crossroads motif. A crossroads is the juncture where two roads lead in two different directions; the choice of career paths is a metaphorical choice of roads. The “Choice of Roads Motif” is N122.0.1 in the Motif Index and signifies a crossroads or a choice to be taken. The motif of the choice of roads appears under the broader motif heading of “Ways of Luck and Fate,” N100-N299. Each career transformation narrator encounters two crossroads in life. The first crossroads demonstrates the repudiation the narrator undergoes to cause the repudiation of his or her initial career desire. The second crossroads represents the recovery of his or her true identity. The narrator attempts to describe how one becomes an authentic self with an authentic life that is self-fulfilling rather than living inauthentically through the expectations of others.

Destiny and Authentic Self Motif

As narrators deal with their perceived destiny the classification of crossroads stories dealing with fate, which are traditional folk elements, becomes significant here. Narrators do seem to think their destinies are determined. The crossroads theme is a model through which narrators can structure their stories rather than simply referring to their change in career and social status as occurring as a result of dumb luck. Through the trials experienced, each narrator seemed to discover who he or she was in relation to a God, the universe, or another belief concept, and how that fit into the new life they were being pushed or guided towards. There was some nurturing of that belief side in order to manifest the personal strength to continue on the path towards a unique purposeful life. A

transformation as life changing as these narrators underwent seems to require some form of faith, whether in a non-agentive self or in the order of the universe, that provides the narrator with the belief to make the professional leap to a seemingly less secure social and financial position.

Some of the stories may resemble conversion or misfortune narratives as these career change narratives move a person from a perceived inauthentic path to an authentic purpose. These stories are somewhat crafted in terms of word choice and worldviews expressed; even those who profess not to believe in any religion do express belief in some higher or stronger compulsion than could come from a self.

Leap of Faith Motif

One of the underlying themes in these narrations is the consideration of fearful leaps of faith as the leaper never knows where he or she might end up. As Fiona S says “I feel highly connected to this community. It’s been just a facet of changing my profession that’s been a great gift that I could never have anticipated” (FS interview, 11). The idea of faith woven in these narrations is affective for both narrators and audience. There is the idea that it takes both a “higher power” and the “personal power” of the individual to overcome societal pressures.

These stories highlight the fact that if a person is brave enough to consider giving up their pragmatic occupation to start a new career or new business, there are ways they can make it work. Unlike the practical information supplied by career counselors, these stories provide audiences with an insight into the entanglement of the working life with all other aspects of a person’s life journey. Tellers take the time to mull over whether

what they are doing is what they want to be doing and if it is meaningful and fulfilling.

There might be temporal skipping within the events and anecdotes of their narration, but the narrator sees each event they describe as having a significant impact on all other events described, whether close in time or in disparate time frames.

As narrators discuss their transition, particularly their liminal states of separation and transformation in which they are neither lawyer nor poet, businessman nor priest, lawyer nor musician, professor nor farmer, they reveal their feeling of otherness. In the sense that their identities have become amorphous, they are not yet sure of declaring statements of who they are or are not.

FUTURE STUDIES

I hope I have demonstrated a perspective on the oral transmission of personal narrative that illuminates how a pattern that can appear in the variety of stylistic presentations of storytellers who experience thematically similar life crisis events can be analyzed folklorically. As Sandra Dolby-Stahl has discussed, personal narrative, when treated as folkloric text, can highlight the general concerns of not only an individual but a culture (Dolby-Stahl 1989, 20).

This is not a comprehensive study. My work can lead to many future studies such as providing a more in-depth examination of the emerging motifs. As well, one of the issues along the way has been the idea that narratives are performed; I was not in a position to compare/contrast but in the absence of a variety of performance based narratives for each narrator I am suggesting that this would be an element that requires further study in a future research project to demonstrate how narratives are performed

differently in varied audience situations. There needs to be further discussion about how the audience affects the information being shared and an examination of the variety of performances. Clearly there are many avenues one can develop for future research in career transformation narratives.

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APPENDIX

Sample Interview Questions

Sample Interview Questions

These questions were used to elicit further information in instances where the interviewee stalled in their telling.

1. What is your full name?
2. When and where were you born?
3. What is your religious affiliation?
4. What is your current profession?
5. Has this always been your life's work?
6. What is your professional training or educational background?
7. As a child or a teenager, do you remember discussing your career dreams with someone (family or friend) who might have discouraged you or steered you in a different direction?
8. What world events had the most impact on you while you were growing up? Did any of them personally affect your family?
9. Do you feel comfortable with your choice to follow through on your change?
10. Do you believe that you were compelled in some way to refocus your life path?
11. As you see it, what are the biggest problems that people who want to make the kinds of changes you have made face? how do you think they could be solved?
12. Who do you tell this type of story to? Describe the situations.
13. When and why do you tell this story (or not tell it)?
14. How do people react?
15. Describe any associated changes that you had to make. Do you have a different community and environment than previous. What reaction do you receive from old acquaintances
16. What is the one thing you most want people to remember about you?

NOTE 1: Anyone wishing to review the full transcripts of the interviews please contact the author through the university.

NOTE 2: Pseudonyms have been used to replace the interviewees' names.