

A lifetime yearning for shalom

Narrative connections between life course and salvation

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In the previous chapters, the two foci of this volume have been at the forefront of our attention. Frits de Lange has discussed the modern biography that takes a critical reflective stance toward the standardized life course of earlier generations. Whether or not this biography is predominantly a matter of choice proved to be an important debate. Evert Jonker explored the semantic fields of weal and woe¹, self-confidently crossing the boundaries between religious and non-religious attributions. The overarching concept of 'shalom' was shown to encompass meanings of redemption and salvation, as well as meanings of well-being and fullness of life.

My aim in the present chapter is to bring these two central topics together and uncover their inherent interconnections. My central thesis is that we tell the stories of our lives to articulate our yearning for shalom. I will elaborate this thesis, using a narrative framework in which life course and life story are closely linked. From there I will move to the existential, possibly religious nucleus of the life story and locate that nucleus in salvation/fullness. Finally, I will underscore the dynamic and dialectic nature of the connection of life story and shalom through the concept of yearning or desire.

PRELUDE: ON NARRATIVE

We are storytelling creatures. We live our lives from day to day, but we narrate our lives from chapter to chapter. In many ways, the capacity to construct a story is essential to human nature. In the family of mammals, what singles us out is the ability to envision another life-world and to act upon that vision. It is precisely this capacity that makes Weltoffenheit (Pannenberg) possible and that gives us a

¹ 'Heil' and 'Onheil', in Dutch and German theology central terms that are broader than salvation or redemption (and their opposites), and closer to the semantic field of the Hebrew Shalom or the Latin Salus.

future. The same capacity to narrate makes it possible to construe the chain of events into a meaningful whole, giving us an identity and personal meaning.

In these all too brief statements, I have outlined the narrative framework that will be central to this chapter. Before we move on, however, it may be useful to provide some background to this choice for a narrative perspective. In such a perspective, we need to distinguish between two levels of narrative approaches. The first is the level of phenomena, the second that of theory. On the level of phenomena, we can observe that people tell stories. They share fragments, life stories, or even epic tales. They do so in ordinary lives, but even more in religion and in boundary situations like crisis experiences. At the extremes of life, where the ordinary is transcended and mystery arises, we need stories to find our way. The structure by which humans try to make sense of their lives is a narrative one, involving plot, actions, characters, and so on. A narrative framework therefore can be seen as a naturalistic theory, following the appearance of the phenomena. On the level of theory, however, a narrative perspective has a wider range. It can be used to interpret both narrative and non-narrative phenomena. At this level it is one particular approach in the realm of hermeneutic and/or social-constructionist perspectives. Together with other approaches it shares fundamental notions about the importance of subjectivity and authorship, the inextricable relation between narrator and audience, and the relational basis of the meaning of every text. These fundamental notions are implied when we advocate a narrative perspective on the theoretical level.

The narrative framework I have developed is built on the definition of narrative as the story-like structure in which the author (from his or her own perspective) experiences and understands life, assigns the parts and roles, and through which (s)he positions him- / herself relationally, and accounts for him- / herself before the audience. This definition helps us determine six dimensions to be explored: structure, perspective, experience, role assignment, relational positioning, audience. Elsewhere I have expanded this theory and made reference to essential literature (Ganzevoort 1998 Ed.). My present purpose only allows for a brief indication of relevant factors within these dimensions. I will focus on the narrated life course, that is: the life story. For reasons of simplicity and clarity, I will not distinguish continually between the overarching life story and the many stories and fragments about one's life. There is a dialectical relation between the two, and often the overarching life story is not completely articulated. Suffice it to say that between the many stories of life there are many overlaps and contradictions, and that the overarching life story is primarily a postulate. Most of what follows is applicable to both the overarching life story and the many stories of life, but my main focus is the overarching life story.

Structure describes the selection of and the sequential connection between the elements included in the story or stories. The narrator uses a time sequence to present the story-elements in a specific order, which may or may not be

chronological. In doing so, the story creates its own time. Retrospection of the past and anticipation of the future are used for interpreting the present. The structure can be highly coherent or consist of loose fragments. It can be construed by means of logico-argumentative and/or associative, metaphorical devices. The sequential ordering of events and characters is further determined by meanings attributed by the author. Through causal, temporal or thematic connections, story lines emerge. This process can be called *emplotment*. For the life story to be a meaningful whole, structure is an essential dimension. Usually we try to construe a life story that has structural indicators of continuity and stability, because that strengthens the sense of identity. Change, likewise, is structurally anchored and evokes an interpretation of development and growth, especially when the later episodes can be labeled as more positive than the earlier episodes.

Perspective describes the stance from which the author chooses or is forced to construe his or her story. The perspective taken constitutes the selection and interpretation of events. Social and religious interaction is therefore determined by the position of the narrators (including gender, age, ethnicity), their respective interests and needs, and the division of the power to enforce a particular perspective upon the interaction. If within the story another story is nested, perspective is to be established on two levels. An important question with regard to perspective is to what degree the narrator can claim authorship. All of us have internalized voices and perspectives of others. That is, in fact, an essential part of socialization and growing up. When the discrepancy between these internalized perspectives and the personal experience is too large, the narrator may not feel free to tell the story in the way he or she would want to. This is not only a matter of narrator versus audience (a dimension to be treated shortly). The narrator may not be aware fully of the power of internalized perspective and indeed accept authorship for those parts of the story that are not his or her own. A painful example is found in traumatized persons who may need a long way to re-develop their own perspective.

Experience describes the dialectic interaction between sensation and interpretation. Emotions and the body are seen as interpreted phenomena, and 'pure experience' does not exist. I do not deny that the sensations and bodily events have a semi-autonomous character, demanding interpretation by the author, but I stress the converse process in which the emotional and physical processes are structured narratively in what is called *enactment*, a lived and acted story. We shape our bodies and our emotions according to our life story. This dialectic relationship between emotion or body and interpretation provides the model for the relationship between events and interpretation, or between life course and life story. The next paragraph is dedicated to this relationship.

Role assignment describes the way the author attributes specific roles to him- / herself, and to other characters in the story. Through this assignment, (s)he construes a constellation of roles deemed useful for the maintenance or enhancement of the narrative structure and identity of the author. The correlation between the roles in the story (their conflict and complementarity) is an important

feature of the narrative process. If we want to know a person from his or her own story, we should not limit ourselves to what (s)he tells about him or herself. What is told about other persons is at least as informative. The narrator's identity can be construed from the role patterns, not only from the individual remarks about the self.

Relational positioning describes the processes through which the narrator uses his or her story to establish, maintain, shape and conclude relationships. A narrative approach to social and religious interaction sees actions and stories as performative, rather than representative. The interaction of the various authors with their respective narrative results in a social drama of negotiation. To be clear: whereas role assignment addresses the use of relations within the stories, relational positioning concerns the use of stories within the relations. This dimension, together with the following, addresses the storytelling process, whereas the other four dimensions belong to the story as told. The life story then is not only something in the mind of the narrator. It is employed in social interactions and serves relational goals.

Audience describes the way the author is addressed by significant others, and accounts for his or her life in front of these significant others. This account or justification is judged by criteria for legitimacy and plausibility the audience holds and expresses in its canonical stories. The constellation of the audience determines the number and consistency of stories needed for justification. Given the fact that for many of us the audience has become fragmented synchronically and diachronically, our life stories have to comply with a number of sometimes conflicting demands from its multiple audiences.

These six dimensions are not atomizable aspects, but mutually dependent and inclusive. Each particular structure, perspective or audience implies specific configurations in each other dimension. The dimensions are useful to offer a number of ways in which the narrative process can be observed and analyzed. These six dimensions can serve the purpose of generating questions for research and practice. The exploration of their theological consequences and empirical validity needs to be furthered (Ganzevoort 2001).

FROM LIFE COURSE TO LIFE STORY

The narrative framework provides the dimensions to investigate if we want to understand the meaning of a story. It also highlights the central interconnections between the life course and the life story. The first four dimensions (structure, perspective, experience, and role assignment) belong to the realm of the configuration (Ricoeur) of the story as told, whereas the latter two (relational positioning and audience) refer to the process of storytelling including its refigurative potential. This duality implies that there are two types of connections between the life course and the life story. The story as told (dimension 1-4) has a referential connection to the life course, the telling of the story has a performative

connection to the life course. In other words: the life course presents the material for the life story, as well as the arena where the life story is enacted.

The life story is the construed life course. The life course itself is a mixture of events, some purposefully chosen in light of our life story, some beyond our control. This combination of active and 'pathic' (to avoid the term passive) elements of the life course is connected to the dialectic relation between life course and life story. The events of the life course beg for interpretation and require to be accounted for in the life story. They are the material and the driving force of the life story, propelling it into new directions every time the events do not fit into the life story developed until then. The life story itself is the guiding principle for the narrator living his or her life. This story itself brings about new events in the life course that are intended to solidify the story but sometimes undermine it.

Each of the six dimensions of the narrative framework can be explored to further our understanding of the relation between life course and life story. It may suffice to offer a few examples. As for structure, some initial research has shown a connection between the structure of one's life story and life view on the one hand and the structure of one's social network on the other (Ganzevoort 1994). A fragmented social network was reflected in fragmented life stories, and a monolithic social network resulted in a more massive and undifferentiated life story. This was the case both for the social network in the present and for the social network of the narrator's youth. The perspective and the amount of authorship a person can claim is heavily influenced by the power relations this person has experienced in his or her life. And the roles assigned to the self and to others are directly related to the roles others have assigned to this person. In each case this is not a deterministic connection as if the facts of the life course dictate a specific outcome in the life story. The life story constantly seeks to break away from the constraints of the life course. The story even intends to change the life course in a direction that seems more desirable or at least affirm the desired direction. It is not capable, however, of full control over the life course. Therefore the life course has a semi-autonomous influence on the life story. We can never control our own life completely.

The dialectical relation between life course and life story is all the more at stake in the gaps between the two. If it is true that the life course keeps its autonomy and steers the life story, while at the same time the life story seeks to control and change the life course, then the space between the two is filled with tension and the quest for meaning. In several disciplines and theories we can find clues for exploring this space. The classical psychological theory of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) deals with the discomfort felt at a discrepancy between the knowledge, beliefs, or stories one lives with and new (or reemerging) information. Festinger's original research regarded a religious cult believing in the crack of doom. When the anticipated flood did not show, marginal believers admitted that they had been wrong, but core members tended to solve the cognitive dissonance by claiming that their faith had saved the earth. The gap between the (in this case

collective) story and the course of events can make the story attractive, but it is also a major threat.

Related insights stem from hermeneutic trauma theory. Janoff-Bulman (1992) claims that we all live with three fundamental assumptions: that the world is benevolent, that the world is meaningful, and that the self is worthy. These assumptions provide the infrastructure for life stories. They serve our adaptive capacity, even if they are not completely adequate interpretations of the events of our life course. In that sense, for our life story to be fruitful it should not be completely 'true'. In traumatic experiences these fundamental assumptions are shattered: the gap between the story and the life course is revealed painfully. One of the first, salutary, coping reactions is denial. Though fruitless in the long run, holding on to the old story is a valuable first step. In psychotherapy, new stories are construed that intend to close that gap. For psychoanalyst Spence (1986) the process of psychoanalysis entails the narrativization of an experience which otherwise lingers as a traumatic lapse of meaning. This process is termed 'narrative smoothing'. Elsewhere² this has been referred to as 'truth in the service of self-coherence'. Again, life course and life story are connected dialectically, and the one cannot be subjected to the other. The traumatic material may be connected to the category of the 'abject'.³ There are elements in our life course that fill us with horror because they jeopardize our entire narrative existence and consistence. This is the life course material that is omitted from the life story, not because it is forgotten or deemed irrelevant, but because it is so powerful and threatening. Such material may surface again in mystified form, in prejudices, in delusions, and in religious distortions. In a way, the story is construed not only to account for the life course, but also to avoid these parts of the life course.

Finally, practical theologian Henning Luther (1992) has furthered the theological understanding of the gaps by highlighting their transcending potential. Because our identity stories do not succeed in becoming all consistent, in covering all our life course, and in solving the gap between the narrator and the audience, there remains a kind of *Welt-Abstand* (distantiation from the world), that is fundamentally religious. Religion is sometimes used to close the gap, but is more adequately understood as its transcending articulation. The distance between the life course and the life story about this life course provides the potential for religion and for yearning. I will return to this later on.

In the last two dimensions of the narrative model, relational positioning and audience, the connection between life story and life course comes to the fore in a

² I was unable to find the proper source for this term. There are references to a publication by Spence in 1982, but also to a 1976 publication by Wolfgang Loch.

³ The concept was articulated by Kristeva (1982). She refers to the reaction (horror) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. In her feminist Lacanian psychoanalytic theory the abject is a very early category necessary for the development of boundaries. For our purposes here, this preverbal interpretation of the abject can only be the background.

different light. Here it is not the elements of the story that are connected to elements of the life course, but the way the life story is employed in the interactions with others. The relation between the author and her/his audience defines the ways in which the life story is framed. Beyond that, the story itself is used to make, shape, maintain, or break off these relations. It is at least partly true that the life story tells us more about the desired relations of the narrator than it tells us about the actual events in the narrator's life course.

The distinction between in-story dimensions and storytelling dimensions has to do with the two types of identity that the life story seeks to enhance. In-story dimensions are orchestrated in such a way that personal identity is found and corroborated; storytelling dimensions serve the narrator's social identity. Personal identity depends on adequate structure and content of the life story. Obviously, many normative criteria can be given to determine whether a life story counts as adequate. Most of these criteria are governed by the discourse they originate from. The group culture in which one participates for example determines how much coherence or fragmentation is accepted. On a more general level, we can find criteria in disciplines like psychology. According to Hermans & Hermans-Jansen (1995), criteria for a psychologically healthy personal narrative are differentiation, integration, and flexibility. Social identity, the storytelling dimensions, depends on how the narrative interactions with the social context evolve. Parallel to personal identity, criteria here may be found in authenticity, plausibility, and again flexibility. The two times three criteria form a subtle yet important balancing mechanism. Loss of balance may easily result in social dysfunction and psychopathology: varying from rigidity to disintegration or loss of contact with reality. It also results in existential loss of meaning and connection.

NARRATIVE IN CONTEXT

Before we move on to the particular questions about life story and Shalom, we need to locate the personal narrative in its narrative context. The narrator of the story is embedded in a social context, and the story itself is part of a larger 'community' of stories, full of intertextual connections and allusions. The life story is never a completely detached and original creation. It is a creative rearrangement of material that is available from this narrative context. The narrator is therefore in continuous tension with his or her surroundings. The story has to comply with the standards of this context (see the dimensions of Relational positioning and Audience), but this can easily compromise his or her authorship (see the dimension of Perspective).

The narrative context can be understood as a canonical framework, providing the musters for understanding life. This framework not only offers interpretive structures, but also normative criteria. How we construe our story depends on the formats available to us. These formats mediate between the narrator, the narrated material, and the audience.

The canonical framework can be both salutary and problematic. Sundén (1966) has developed a theory of the religious roles that are available to an individual. Ideally, there is a variety of roles one can adopt, dependent on the life situation one is in. Each of these roles implies complementary roles for God. According to Sundén, if we can interpret our life situation in terms of the role of for example Abraham, we can anticipate God to act comparable to how He acted toward Abraham. The canonical story provides the musters that are activated in a particular situation. It is only because of these musters that religious interpretation and experience can occur. Elsewhere (Ganzevoort 2001) I have argued that Sundén's theory is one-sided because it does not account for the idiosyncratic constructions people make, but here his insight is crucial: if canonical frameworks are not available, we cannot construe our stories.

The dark side of these canonical stories has for example been explored by Heyen (2003). In his investigation of the belief in hell, he notes that in religion it isn't always a matter of choice. Religious stories are not necessarily free personal constructions of meaning. Sometimes the canonical frameworks are restrictive dogma's that don't foster individual interpretation but restrict it. Heyen (2003,417) speaks of 'erlittene Lehre' (suffered teachings), to describe this primacy of the canonical story and to stress that some narrators are not free to tell their story. He seems to ask whether they have the space to truly be narrators.

Given my own research on sexual abuse and religion (Ganzevoort 2001), I agree with Heyen that the narrator isn't always free. In the dimension of Perspective described above, this is one of the crucial questions. Conceptually, however, I would locate this restriction in the dimensions of Perspective and Audience. There is still a narrator, even if (s)he is forced to tell a story that is not his or her own. The criteria for adequate stories outlined earlier can be applied to assess narrative competence and functioning. If authenticity fails (due to external force or internal incapacity), the story is less than adequate. Adequate stories rework canonical material in such a way that personal and social identity are enhanced.

LIFE STORY AND SHALOM

If indeed personal and social identity-enhancement is the primary aim of the life story, then the central themes in life story development can be identified as connected to this aim. We can use a variety of models to categorize these themes. Erik H. Erikson's (1968) stages of psychosexual development, Irvin D. Yalom's (1980) four fundamental life issues, Paul W. Pruyser's (1976) eight elements of religious diagnosis, or even the different pleas in the Lord's Prayer (Hartmann 1993), each can be transposed into a model of existential themes. All these existential themes circle around the preservation or enhancement of personal and social identity.

The thesis I am developing here now begins to emerge. The life story serves the enhancement of personal and social identity. The central issues in identity formation and preservation are located in the existential domain. All the events of

the life course demand narrative interpretation and strengthen or threaten the narratively construed identity. The delicate balances mentioned earlier are constantly at risk in the vicissitudes of life and the narrator/actor struggles to find a viable story.

Perhaps more than the other models, Erikson's has articulated the critical dimension of these themes. For each stage (or theme in my modification), both the positive and the negative outcome are described: One develops basic trust or basic mistrust, identity or confusion, and so on. The narrator, crafting the personal life story that is the bearer of these identity themes, seeks to construe a plausible story in which the positive sides triumph over the negative. That is: the narrator seeks to construe a story of Shalom.

Obviously, only a few stories are explicitly about Shalom. Many life stories are not articulated in religious language and some are overtly anti-religious. That does not contradict my thesis that life stories are Shalom-directed. My first argument to support the thesis starts with the existential domain, my second argument with the concept of Shalom.

First: whether or not the existential realm is understood as religious is above all a matter of definition. In the first order language of actual life stories, some narrators may choose to use religious vocabulary to organize the material of their story, while others may choose non-religious language. Both choices are equally valid and equally interesting from a theological point of view. Based on personal preferences, experiences with religious discourse, and the availability of religious vocabularies, narrators choose the register they perceive to be most meaningful (cf Sundén 1966). In the second order language of academic theology, the question arises whether the existential and the religious domain should be delineated. In my view, only a limited demarcation is useful. Traditional shapes of religion have withered and contemporary shapes are less clearly distinguishable. Moreover, religion typically operates in the realm of ultimate meaning and limit experiences, that is, in the realm of the existential. The differentiation (or better: specification) may be found in the degree to which existential meaning is construed with reference to transcendence. Religion then can be defined as a transcending pattern of construction emerging from and contributing to the relationship with what is contextually understood as sacred, in such a way that it shapes and transforms convictions, experiences and/or behavior. This definition does not postulate some transcendent 'reality', nor does it exclude world-immanent religions. Transcendence is taken here as a dynamic category of crossing the boundaries of one's existence (Ganzevoort, in press). For that reason, I use the term transcending pattern. It is not someone or something transcendent that defines religion, it is the pattern (or story) itself that transcends our mere existence. Every story as such already transcends the life course, as I discussed earlier, but when it is structured with a pattern that transcends the limits of the person *and* is directed to the relationship with the sacred, it is duly called religious. In this approach, the transition between the existential and the religious is seen as gradual, and not as a fixed objective frontier. It depends on the discourse one is in

whether the central issues that transcend one's limited existence qualify as religious issues.

My second argument rests on the concept of 'Shalom'. Like the Latin 'Salus' and the Dutch and German 'Heil', its meanings are not restricted to the religious realm, as the previous chapter has explored. Although I deliberately use a religious word, the semantic field addressed is much broader than that. Following the range of meanings of the Hebrew root שלם, both religious and non-religious meanings are included. The root meaning is 'to be whole, sound, safe' and from this, shalom is interpreted to include central issues of redemption, well-being, fulfillment. In the narrower traditional interpretation, salvation denotes the act through which a person (or group) moves from a state of peril (or guilt) to a state of liberation. In the broader sense ('weal') it also describes the situation of fullness and flourishing. The existential themes that can be interpreted as threats to the personal identity construed in the life story easily fall into the categories of Shalom. The positive intention of the narrator to overcome the perils of life and to develop and sustain identity therefore can be interpreted as shalom-directed.

At this point we might further explore the religious and non-religious shapes and the connection of Shalom to the Sacred. In several languages these two are linguistically connected (In Dutch and German 'Heil' and 'Heilige', in English 'Hale', 'Whole' and 'Holy'). A phenomenological discussion of the Sacred in its positive *and* negative shapes would include the demonic and the holy, as well as the cosmic narratives of the eternal battle between good and evil, weal and woe. Beyond its religious examples we would have to investigate its present-day functional parallels in the realm of medicine, psychology, and culture. In this chapter I have to limit myself to the notion that the Sacred is the purported center of ultimate meaning and the object of ultimate desire. The dark side of this has to do with the demonic or evil. This is not to be seen as something external to the Sacred, but rather as its flip side. The debate on religion and violence gives evidence of the intricate relationship between the sacred and the destructive.⁴ These dimensions of the Sacred can be observed in the experiences of the overwhelming forces, but also in the encounters with the fragile. Both the wound and the tender caress have the capacity of becoming an encounter with the Sacred. These manifestations of the Sacred (good and evil, overwhelming and fragile) are attractive and horrifying at the same time. The *mysterium tremendum ac fascinans* (Otto) is found in invocation of the divine, in watching horror movies, in the car accident we happen to walk by and in the little kitten we fondle.⁵ Each of these can attract and scare us, and it is the function of all types of taboos to regulate both the border and the transgression. In all these manifestations of the Sacred, specific images of weal and woe come to the fore

⁴ See for example Girard (1972). Recently the discussion has gained momentum because of an uprise in religiously inspired violence. See Selengut (2003) and Appleby (2000).

⁵ Contrary to Otto and Josuttis (1996), I do not interpret the Sacred in essentialistic but in social constructionistic terms. I do not see the Sacred as an ontological but as interpretive category. See Ganzevoort (in press).

and implicit notions of Shalom can be observed. Threats to our existence go hand in hand with metaphors for Shalom.

The intended Shalom or well-being thus takes many shapes, because the threats to identity are manifold. The type of threat provides the background against which the life story seeks to construct a meaningful response. Life story strategies of escape, action, and reinterpretation should be seen as coping responses to these threats. Some life stories take the form of delivery from evil, closely resembling the narrower sense of salvation. Other life stories describe a fulfilled life and are closer to the broader sense of Shalom. In still other life stories this Shalom is only a vision or dream far from the present situation. In fact, in each life story we encounter areas of delivery, fulfillment, and misery. The configuration of these three supplies the material for our yearning.

THE MOVEMENTS OF YEARNING

Shalom, both in its narrow and in its broader sense, presupposes some kind of need or threat. It derives its specific meaning from the connection of the intended Shalom and the experienced presence or absence of Shalom / well-being. The construction of the life story is driven by this connection. The powerful intent to construct a meaningful life story can be described as yearning for shalom – well-being, fulfillment, redemption, and flourishing.

According to Webster's, yearning is a strong emotion of desire. For our understanding of shalom and the life story, we do well not to restrict yearning to the emotional domain, but to include the volitional. The concept of desire or the phenomena understood as such usually involve descriptions in volitional terms like want, wish, inspiration, and intention. Complementary to that are affectional descriptions like passion, eroticism, and lust. The volitional points to the direction that is inherent to yearning. As a dynamic force, yearning is always yearning for something or someone. It implies movement in a certain direction. The affectional points to the strength of the involvement of the person or group to this movement.

Because shalom always implies the threat or the need, it creates a dialectic tension of fulfillment and lack, a tension that is the motor of the life story. The presence of shalom in the life story therefore could be located in the movement of yearning rather than in the substance of a specific type of well-being. It is the direction of our story, driven by the volitional intent of our yearning.

Yearning, however, has still another function beyond articulating the distance between the perceived and the intended, engendering movement in our story. It also represents the object of our yearning. In orienting our mind to the desired object, it brings this object into presence. What we hope for in the future becomes part of our present self, directing us in a certain way and coloring our experience and our identity. When we yearn for another person, that person becomes present in our experiences. The yearned for shalom then not only steers the life story, it also makes shalom part of the story in the present of the

storyteller. Telling the story in light of this shalom thus closes the gap between the intended shalom and what is perceived to be lacking. This is evidently a sacramental understanding of story-telling. The story as expression and carrier of our yearning realizes that which is desired.

YEARNING BEYOND BEGINNING AND END

Although threat, shalom, and yearning can take many forms, it would be useful to discuss the major categories, like the models of existential themes alluded to have done. Again, I will take narrative clues to identify the categories. I will restrict myself to the dimension of structure, more specifically to time structures in the story. Important other categories could be found in yearning for the o/Other, in passion (pain, suffering, and zeal), in the material objects of our desire, and so on. For the purpose of highlighting the connection between life course, life story, yearning, and shalom, it will suffice to elaborate this one element.

Every story begins at some point in time and place and finishes somewhere. Combining time and place structuring with meaningful connections, the time span of the story is established. The choice where to begin or end the story, however, is arbitrary, dependent upon the purposes of the author and the expectations of the audience. It is always possible to extend the story into the past and into the future. In that sense the choice for a particular beginning necessarily postulates prologues and pre-histories and the choice for a particular ending postulates epilogues and eschatologies. These prologues and epilogues are as essential as they are commonly unspoken.

For the individual life story, the customary beginning is a person's birth. The question of identity is answered in a story of origins. We usually refer to the time and place of our birth, our home ground. We may also refer to our family and social context. Such references serve to identify our roots, not so much in terms of historical exposition, but in terms of symbolic meaning, founding the story in a specific origin. The mythical dimension of these stories of birth is apparent in movie- or songtitles like *Born on the Fourth of July* (Oliver Stone 1989) and *Born in the USA* (Bruce Springsteen 1984). These critical dramatizations of the Vietnam war and its consequences make metaphorical use of the high symbolic value of a particular time and place of birth.

These references point beyond the story itself to embed it in a larger narrative structure. The question of origin is a transcending question and our answers attempt to connect our stories, our biographies to extended stories. The reason for this may well be that the beginning of our story – or even our birth as the beginning of our life – forms a stumbling block in the retrospective construction of the story. We encounter the limit of what can be told and this limit provides the first infringement on the structure of the story. The retrospective void beyond the beginning raises some kind of 'horror vacui' and invokes our efforts to ground the story in antecedent stories. If indeed we would accept that there is no foundation for the beginning of our story, we would also agree to the criticism

that our life story and the meaning of our life is without ground. 'Once upon a time...' is a nice way to begin a story, but it is also a vulnerable way to establish a life.

Because of the weight of this demand and the transcending nature of our efforts, the larger stories called upon are often of a religious nature. Most religious and some non-religious worldviews offer stories of the origins beyond the beginning of an individual life. These may be universal stories of creation or evolution, they may also be smaller-scale stories of patriotism, linking the individual story to the identity-shaping stories of a nation. The function of these stories is always to offer a coherent foundation for the individual's or group's existence and identity. The biblical story of creation of humankind in the image of God offers such a foundation with the clearest intention of a transcending ground for being human.

As true as it is that religions provide the stories to answer our questions of origins, these stories themselves are stopped at the limits of what can be told. One could, like the Gospel of Matthew, trace or construe the origins of a person – Jesus – as far back as Abraham, thereby focusing on the connection between Jesus and God's people. The stories of Jesus' birth and youth match this framework, as is evident from the parallels between Israel's and Jesus' journeys to and from Egypt. Beyond Abraham, however, Matthew remains silent. This silence is reflected in the one missing name in the list of three times fourteen begetters, posing the question to Jesus' origin once again. The question is articulated in Matt 8:27: 'What kind of man is this?' Compared to Matthew, the gospel of Luke (3:23-38) attempts one further story in tracing the genealogy of Jesus to 'the son of Seth, the son of Adam, the son of God.' It should be noted that the breach in the narrative foundation is hidden, but not resolved. Verse 23 mentions that Jesus 'was the son, so it was thought, of Joseph' – leaving the entire lineage only loosely connected to Jesus. Luke's account indeed transcends the limit of human knowledge by calling Adam the son of God, but this attempt does not fill in the void. Even in the original belief in creation, a six-year-old child will pose the inevitable question as the origins of God. To me that is not a symptom of unbelief. It is the insolubility of the question that reminds us of the retracting horizon of our origin every time we endeavor to penetrate it. This is the question that returns no matter what story we tell. 'Once upon a time...' is a beautiful opening line for a story if it leaves the transcending religious question radically open.

The narrative appeal to antecedent and founding stories makes way for a religious interpretation. The point made here is not only that even these stories are limited by nature. More importantly, the religious stories have a double function in providing the foundational framework for our stories and simultaneously withdrawing from a final answer. In doing so, they serve the double purpose of religion as interruption of everyday life and religion as maintenance of everyday life'. (Luther 1992, 244). Our ordinary life – and the stories thereof – is maintained and supported by the larger narrative framework. The unresolved question of the beginning serves to criticize every attempt for a closed system: the

stories are interrupted by the uneasy awareness that things don't add up completely.

This double function creates a dialectic tension of revelation and concealment, bringing about a dynamic relationship between the own story and the larger narrative framework. The impediment to arrive at a foundational systematization prevents us from objectifying our stories. According to H. Luther (1992, 170), the rejection of fragmentary identity is only possible when we abstain from mourning and hope, denying the ruins of the past and the ruins of the future. On the other hand, to live without a larger narrative framework means a lapse into relativism and finally despair, capitulating to the essential void beneath our stories.

The end-point of the story is likewise connected to the larger framework, open to future stories and to the future reconstruction of the present stories. Whether or not construction will be pursued on the 'ruins of the future' remains an open question. The end-point of the story therefore presents a fixation in time that cannot escape the deconstructionist potential of the open future. As with stories of before the beginning, there is a void beyond the end-point that can only be filled partially and temporarily. The eschaton as narrated in religious traditions is as much a limit story as creation, dialectically connecting the supporting framework for our fragmentary existence and the critique of every effort to ground our stories in an absolute certainty.

Just like the beginning, the end-point determines the story. We write our biography from the future as well as from the past. The question of identity cannot be answered by descent only, but is pervaded by the yet to come. Who I am is defined by who I want to become. For that purpose we deploy our short-term stories about career prospects, family planning, choosing a partner, and so on. Behind these short stories there is an implicit long-term story covering our entire life and possibly more. We choose a partner because we dream of a particular life together. We expect a child and dream about the kind of person he or she will become. We choose an education because we dream of how our active life will be meaningful, how we wish to learn and what we will accomplish.

Given the existential openness and contingency of the future, the gap between our dreams and the reality to unfold is unavoidable. Our dreams, projecting our stories into the future, do not coincide with the events coming to us from this uncertain future. The child we get is never the child we expected or wanted (and this may be a disappointment or a godsend), and the realization of our active life does not coincide with what we dreamt. It is this gap, functioning as a limit category or threshold, that prohibits immobilization of the story and leaves space for transcendence. The difference between the beginning and the end-point is that the former is experienced as being fixated, whereas the latter is experienced as being open. This openness stirs our yearning and propels our lives towards a future that is anticipated as the fulfillment of this yearning.

It is a temptation to turn this anticipation into a religious warrant, but that seems to be an illusory escape from the irresolvable dialectics of life. Shalom as an anticipated future is a utopian category. It describes that which has no place ('ou topos', Marquardt) in this world. We can turn to psychological theories about fundamentalism, rigidity, and regression to understand why people withdraw from the utopian to the illusory. To say the least, it is connected to a more mythic-literal style of thinking and believing (Fowler 1981). In theological terms then, we should be careful to acknowledge the events in our life course that reflect Shalom as realized eschatology, but we should also be careful not to equate these incidents with the eschaton. There is always more to yearn for.

If we focus on the yearning for Shalom inherent to our life stories, we should not only identify these moments of experienced shalom but also the moments of Shalom that await realization. At this point I recall the two different connections between the life course and the life story. The referential connection takes events from the life course as material for the life story. We try to construe our lives in light of Shalom, and events that fit into that framework are the essential references. The performative connection takes the life story as the starting point that initiates new actions and events in the life course. In this connection, Shalom can also take on performative meanings. If we want to construe a life story of fullness, that will change our being in the world and bring about experiences of Shalom. In that sense, the story not only makes Shalom present on the level of narrative, but also on the level of the life course.

CONCLUSION

My presentation in this chapter has sought to clarify some of the inherent relations between the life course and weal and woe (or Shalom and its opposites). The examples have hopefully contributed to this, but their obvious limitation is that they are also selections. By focusing on the beginning and the end of the story, they may wrongfully have suggested that it is only at the limits of life that these connections are found. Instead of these examples, others could have been chosen, like the relational dimensions of desire, lust, and fear for the other, or the perspective dimensions of authorship, power and authenticity. Each example would have contributed specific elements to the overall understanding.

The main point for me is that the dialectical connection of Shalom and our life story pushes the story into the future and safeguards the religious potential. We are driven by our yearnings for the many shapes Shalom may come in. We dwell on the moments we experience Shalom in our life course. And we hope, dream, pray for Shalom to come. This is in the end a religious theme, but not as if religion is added to the life story as an extra, but as an integral and often implicit dimension of our life course.

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