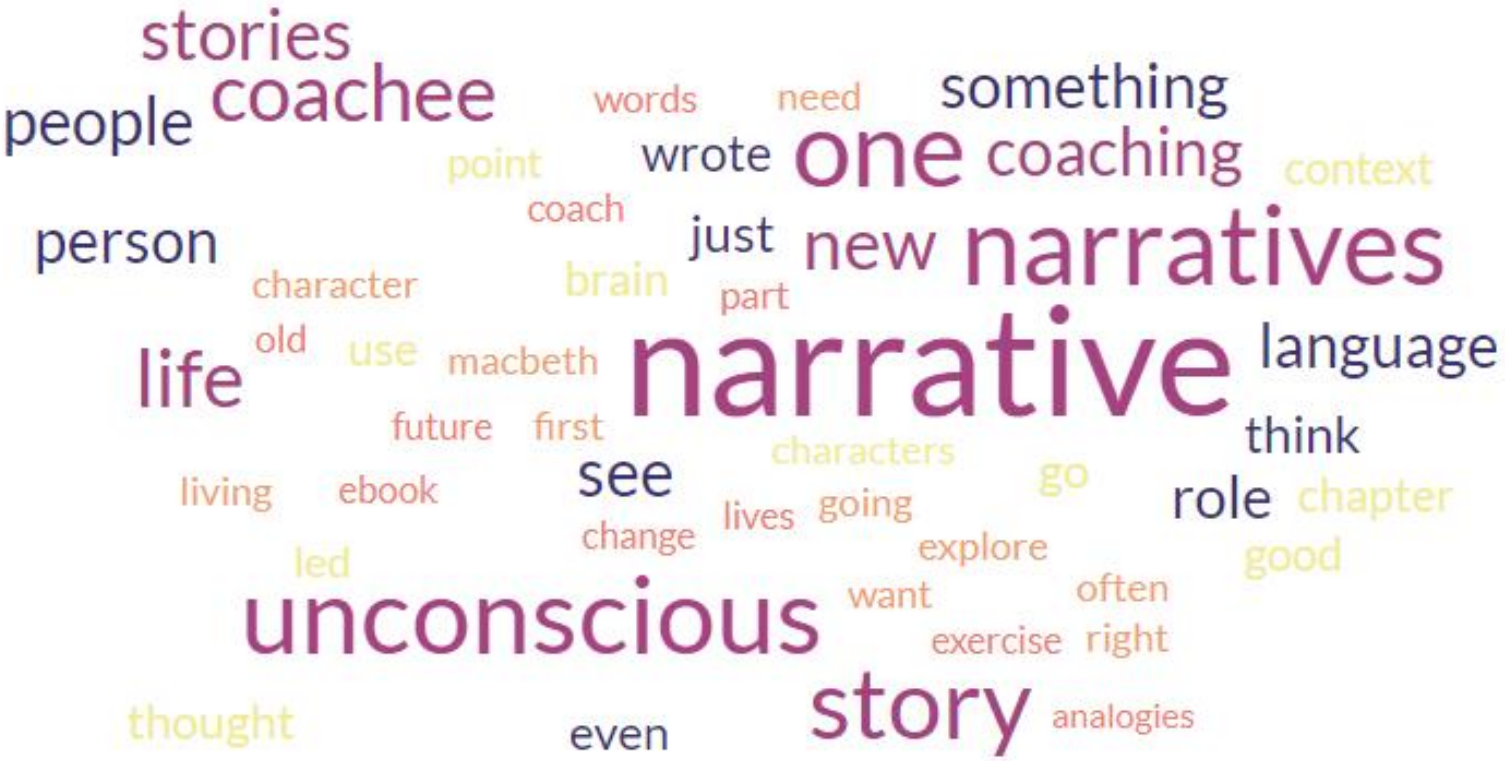
Narrative Linguistic Coaching: A Writer's Workshop for Your Life

Dylan Emerick-Brown



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Introduction

When I was a high school English teacher, one of my favorite texts to teach was *Macbeth* by William Shakespeare. It had ghosts, witches, power struggle, betrayal, murder, and intrigue. What more could anyone want? My students loved it as we dove in and swam through the 17th century lines like "two spent swimmers that do cling together" (Act I, Scene 2, Line 10). Each year we would perform aloud the play, analyze the metaphors, chart the character development, and tie all the neatly snipped loose ends together by the conclusion of Act V.

However, there was always one thing that bothered me year after year. The students always villainized Lady Macbeth, often more so than her husband. Spoiler Alert: it was Macbeth who killed Duncan and his two guards, plotted the assassination of Banquo and his son, had Macduff's entire family slaughtered, and even killed poor Young Siward. While Lady Macbeth also had blood on her hands, as evidenced from her famous line "Out, damned spot, out, I say!" (Act V, Scene 1, Line 37), she was more the catalyst than the killer.

At first, I thought it might be sexism. Then, I thought perhaps the students just didn't understand the play. And then it dawned on me: they weren't paying attention to the grammar. Of course, grammar is probably the least interesting part of the play. But it brings me to my revelation in the English class as well as a key point of this eBook: language matters!

What my students were missing was revealed in the beginning of the play in Act I, Scene 7, Lines 62-67. Macbeth had told his wife about the witches' prophecy that he would become king, even though his cousin, Duncan, was currently king and he had two sons who would inherit the throne. The witches' first prophecy that Macbeth would become Thane of Cawdor

had come true. So, why not this one as well? Lady Macbeth saw only one path forward: kill Duncan and frame his sons. Macbeth originally agreed to the plan, but then was having second thoughts, as anyone might. And then, Lady Macbeth spoke her most important lines – in my opinion – that nearly always go unnoticed:

> I have given suck, and know
>
> how tender 'tis to love the babe that milks me.
>
> I would, while it was smiling in my face,
>
> Have plucked my nipple from his boneless gums
>
> And dashed the brains out, had I so sworn as you
>
> Have done to this.

It isn't the most quotable line of the play and the students usually gasped in horror at the image of Lady Macbeth killing her baby. And this is likely where the misunderstanding begins and the most important piece of information around the infamous Lady Macbeth slips through the cracks.

I won't bog you down in a full grammar lesson, but hear me out. The key here is the difference between "I have given" and "I would". The first line begins with the present perfect tense – "I have given" – and this implies that Lady Macbeth is explaining something that happened in her past, which is that she had a baby whom she breastfed. However, even the least astute student would pick up on the fact that there was no Baby Macbeth crawling around Inverness. The implication is that, as so often happened in 11th century Scotland and elsewhere, the baby died young, likely of natural causes. According to Alixe Bovey of the

British Library, "pregnancy and childbirth were risky in the Middle Ages: complications that would today be considered relatively minor, such as the breech presentation of the baby, could be fatal for mother and child."

But then, Lady Macbeth said to her husband "I would", which is an auxiliary verb indicating that what follows in this context is hypothetical, as made clearer when she ends with, "had I so sworn as you have done to this". So, the dashing of the baby's brains is meant to illustrate the theoretical lengths Lady Macbeth would go to in order to keep her promise to her husband.

Not only is this the seed of confusion for the students – confusing the true past with the imaginary present – but it is also revealing something instrumental in understanding Lady Macbeth's character and motives. In 11th century Scotland, a woman had three potential roles in society: mother, caretaker, or nun. Cleary, Lady Macbeth wasn't running off to join the convent any time soon. As a noblewoman, she had caretakers cleaning and cooking about her castle. And that leaves just one role: mother. She reveals to the audience that she played the role of mother, but fate stripped her of it, which means she is now a woman living in a patriarchal society with no purpose. Bovie continued, "most women, even those in privileged circumstances, had little control over the direction their lives took." Her success or failure is entirely tied to that of her husband. And should he become king, she would become queen. If she cannot be mother to her child, at least she could be maternal to her country.

Lady Macbeth's quest for power is not about status, wealth, or notoriety, as it becomes for her husband. Her motive is to achieve a sense of purpose and value within society and herself. This completely changed the way the students saw her and felt about her. The shift was palpable and impactful.

Years later, I was coaching a successful young man in his late thirties named Dwayne. By all measures, he was doing great. He had a wonderful and loving family. His career was going well and on the rise. He was healthy and fit. But there was something holding him back. It was something he couldn't define, hiding just out of view in the shadows of his unconscious mind. So, we did an exercise I developed – which I'll share later in this eBook – to uncover his unconscious narrative: the story playing out in his mind without him realizing it. And I noticed something interesting in the language he used.

He would use phrases like: "I've already seen," "I'm wondering," "I thought," "I'd like to," "I don't," and "I've always". These were very confident, declarative lines. Each one was a doorway he was cracking open and inviting me in. We could have gone through any one of them. Some indicated from the doorplate that they led to curiosities or aspirations, others to beliefs or past experiences that have shaped current perspectives. When he said, "I'd like to…", I could have asked him what's stopping him; when he said, "I've always…", I could have asked him why. Some doors led down the Hall of the Known and others to the Hall of the I-Know-I-Don't-Know, while a few took turns into the very dark and dusty Hall of the I-Don't-Know-I-Don't-Know. But then at the end of our conversation, he turned a very dusty doorknob that creaked loudly only to those who listened carefully. He said: "I should…"

It was the first and only time he uttered that phrase, and it was quickly buried under a flurry of justifications and deflections before stopping entirely. While his other phrases were the low-hanging fruit most coaches would pick, I was intrigued by this one. After all, on paper he was doing great. But "I should" indicated a belief that he was falling short of an expectation he or others had placed on him. Perhaps it was a justified "I should" like "I should wash my hands after using the restroom" but it was barely touched on, saved for the end, and quickly

deflected. All this indicated something lurking behind that door with claws that dug deep, not wanting to be seen.

Of course, where we go in coaching is determined by the coachee. But it's my role, as I see it, to at least shine a light on what I'm noticing so that my coachee can have full autonomy to make that decision for him or herself. When I pointed out his grammatical poker tell, he became intrigued and wanted to explore that area more. And that ended up being the path that illuminated the struggle he couldn't define, allowing him to explore it, become intentional with it, change his perspective, adjust his behavior, and live with the clarity he was lacking before.

Like I said earlier, language matters. It both *reveals* how we see the world and, thus, how we interact with it; and it *influences* how we see the world and interact with it. Whether it's picking up a tragic past, barely hinted at, which leads to ghastly motives for future action or detecting a subtle expectation unconsciously planted as a seed long ago that's since grown into a vast tree, casting shade over conflicting aspirations and curiosities, language has power.

To use one other quick literary example to highlight the subtle, yet powerful effect of language, consider Graham Greene's short story, "The Destructors," in which a gang of boys was considering their next neighborhood vandalization. One of the newer members said he'd recently been inside the house at the edge of the parking lot they congregated in. When asked why he had gone inside for a tour by the owner, the boy said, almost unconsciously, "it's a beautiful house" (10). The head of the gang, Blackie, became concerned. "It was the word 'beautiful' that worried him – that belonged to a class world that you could still see parodied at the Wormsley Common Empire by a man wearing a top hat and a monocle, with a haw-haw accent" (10).

Certain words, out of context, can stop us in our tracks. When we speak, it's often unconscious. We don't edit ourselves as the words form and leave our lips. We talk off the cuff, so to speak, freely. But even completely appropriate language, out of context, can hint at significant meaning.

I used to do an exercise with my students to exemplify just that. I would write on a chalk board the following: "Upon learning that his V2 rocket had successfully launched from Germany and struck London, killing many innocent people, Nazi aerospace scientist Wernher von Braun said, 'the rocket worked perfectly…'" I asked my students what they thought of von Braun. The answers, as one would expect, were that he was a monster; he was evil; he should have been imprisoned; etc. But then, I pointed out the ellipses at the end of the quote, indicating that I had cut it off. I lifted the overhead projector screen, revealing on the chalk board the remainder of the quote: "…except for landing on the wrong planet."

Wernher von Braun was a rocket scientist who designed rockets to go into space for purposes of peaceful exploration. One could argue his morals and ethics given as a German he was recruited into the Nazi party. But the point made was that language alone doesn't paint the full picture. Context matters because it gives the language its natural environment in which to study it.

But that's enough for one introduction. You didn't pick up this eBook for a lesson in Shakespeare or grammar. You want to explore how our unconscious narratives – and the language attached to them – impact our lives and how to become not merely the unintentional protagonist of your life story, but also the intentional author of it. With that in mind, this eBook is going to feel like a writer's workshop…because it is, in a sense. Much of what we do with narrative linguistic coaching is akin to a writer's workshop in which the coach is the

editor and the coachee is the author. It's one of many coaching approaches and one, given my literary and educational background, I have found to be simple to understand and use, as well as highly effective. And now, we need to shift from an English lesson to a science one.

Food for Thought:

- How have words you've spoken or written impacted others – for better or worse – and how often was that intentional?
- What are the words or phrases you love to hear and how does that impact your behavior?
- What are the words or phrases you hate to hear and how does that impact your behavior?
- How has context shaped what you felt about someone or something?
- What is a situation or person you took for granted or misinterpreted, but later – in retrospect – realized there were linguistic clues dropped like breadcrumbs?

Chapter 1 – Our Minds and Their Restless Pens

When it comes to unconscious narratives, there's more to it than people simply telling themselves a story. There's an evolutionary and psychological purpose to the innate act of the brain in this capacity. In Jonathan Gottschall's book, *The Storytelling Animal*, he explained the connection between story and life. "A life story is a 'personal myth' about who we are deep down – where we come from, how we got this way, and what it all means," Gottschall wrote. "Our life stories are who we are. They are our identity. A life story is not, however, an objective account. A life story is a carefully shaped narrative that is replete with strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings" (161). These narratives are not always intentionally formed, but rather are usually an unconscious action taken by our minds as they filter experience for meaning.

And this meaning-making extends not only to the situations we face, but also to the people in our lives. And the "strategic forgetting and skillfully spun meanings" Gottschall referenced are part of a much grander conspiracy. Will Storr, in his book, *The Science of Storytelling*, wrote, "for the psychologists Professors Carol Tavris and Elliot Aronson, the most important memory distortions 'by far' are the ones that serve to 'justify and explain our own lives'." Storr continued, "we spend years 'telling our story, shaping it into a life narrative that is complete with heroes and villains, an account of how we came to be the way we are.' By this process, memory becomes, 'a major source of self-justification, one the story-teller relies on to excuse mistakes and failings'" (93-94).

Things don't simply happen objectively. There is no *objective* reality. It all comes down to perception. We've heard this many times. William Shakespeare said it in *Hamlet*: "There is

nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so" (Act II, Scene 2). John Milton said it in *Paradise Lost*: "The mind is its own place and, in itself can make a heaven of hell or a hell of heaven." And the list goes on and on. Will Storr described it more concretely and scientifically when he wrote, "if a tree falls in a forest and there's no one around to hear it, it creates changes in air pressure and vibrations in the ground. The crash is an effect that happens in the brain" (25). Once we can agree on the foundational concept that reality is perception, we can explore the way in which we shape it and it shapes us.

To bring science more into the literary fold, there are numerous examples of not only why our brains form unconscious narratives, but also their effects. For example, Gottschall wrote, "according to the psychologist Michele Crossley, depression frequently stems from an 'incoherent story,' an 'inadequate narrative account of oneself,' or 'a life story gone awry'" (175). The more we study the human brain, the more we realize what a profound impact storytelling has on us. Storr gives us an even more fascinating example when he wrote, "the neuroscientist Professor Sarah Gimel watched what happened when people in brain scanners were presented with evidence their strongly held political beliefs were wrong. 'The response in the brain that we see is very similar to what would happen if, say, you were walking through a forest and came across a bear,'" (87). One can easily see the defense mechanism at play in our unconscious storytelling. There are emotional, psychological, and even physiological responses to the way our brains filter and organize what we perceive and experience.

And when we think of the unconscious, which is a strange thing to do admittedly, we typically think of it similarly to how many of us view "the cloud" on our computers. "It's in 'the cloud'," we might say, referring to an amorphous holding space floating somewhere and nowhere simultaneously. However, there actually is a suspected "home" for our unconscious

narratives, a location in our brains that light up when we're tapping into our beliefs, justifications, and perspectives. I say "suspected" because like so much of our brain, it is still far from being fully understood.

But the posterior cingulate cortex is our most likely safe house for those unconscious narratives – the stories we tell ourselves without fully being aware of them. The PCC is located in the upper part of the limbic lobe, in the middle-back of the brain. The limbic lobe is part of the limbic system, which is responsible for our emotions and fight or flight reflex. It's often referred to as our reptilian brain because of its association with our less evolved brethren. Whereas our neocortex is a relatively new feature of the human brain, responsible for logic, reasoning, and language, the limbic system is far older and usually dominant in our unconscious mind.

The PCC is a highly connected and metabolically active part of the brain, roughly 40% more so than the average rest of the brain. The PCC is most often associated with memory and emotion. It lights up like a Christmas tree during self-related thinking and slows down significantly during meditation. But it's that self-related thinking that's the important part. The PCC shows a lot of activity when we think about ourselves.

The PCC is also attributed to something called operant conditioning, which is the process of learning through modified behaviors resulting in the association of reinforced or punished stimuli. I'll try to avoid getting too deep into the weeds but suffice it to say there's a pattern forming: emotional, associated with memory, storing behavior-modified learning – in other words "experiences" – and is highly active during self-related thinking. Sounds as cozy a place as any for unconscious narratives.

But what *exactly* are unconscious narratives? They're the innate judgments we form about people. They're the instinctive yearning we feel toward particular activities. They're our imposter syndrome and arrogance. They're the origins of our "gut feelings".

When we experience the world, our brains are constantly looking for ways to survive and thrive on a deep level. Sometimes that involves striving toward something and sometimes that involves resisting against something. For example, when Mel Brooks's monster in *Young Frankenstein* was watching the blind man enjoying puffing on his cigar, he became intrigued and curious. His "abnormal" brain was starting to make connections and tell a story: fire can be used for good and enjoyment. And then, when the blind man accidentally set the monster's thumb on fire, the narrative he told himself instantly changed for self-preservation: fire is bad and can hurt me. None of it was explicitly or intentionally constructed. Those narratives just naturally formed as an innate result of experience.

While this is an over-simplification – and a humorous one at that – it does illustrate the point. These narratives are what we tell ourselves in order to function and cope with living in the world. It's a part of learning that's essential to our growth. And, unlike conscious narratives which we intentionally tell ourselves – like pep-talking in front of a mirror – unconscious narratives are unknown to us because they happen automatically. If we consciously thought of every narrative in our minds, we'd go insane.

And "there's the rub," quotes the Bard in *Hamlet*. If we weren't blind to our blind spots, they wouldn't be blind spots, would they? That's where a coach can come in handy. But before we move on into that, let's stick with those unconscious narratives for another moment.

I tell people all the time that how we see someone determines how we behave around them, and how we behave around them influences how they behave toward us, and how they behave toward us reinforces our original perception of them. This applies also to situations and, well, everything. This phenomenon is called an ouroboros. Have fun with that word. It's a never-ending loop, portrayed since ancient times as a snake or dragon eating its own tail. And our unconscious narratives can have a similarly cannibalistic nature to them.

Let's stop and call our unconscious narratives, for the moment, our life's story. To be clear, unconscious narratives are also various plots and sub-plots, but for our purposes now let's stick to the big picture. We often see ourselves as the protagonist – or main character – of our life's story. We do, after all, see the world through our own lenses so this makes sense. Everyone else would be supporting characters, antagonists, and so forth, but we're the one all the action happens to and who drives the plot forward. This is how we typically see ourselves. On a side note, I bet your posterior cingulate cortexes are going crazy right about now.

However, we don't often realize that we're not only the protagonists of our life's story, we're also the authors of them. After all, it is your brain doing all the work. Whether intentionally – consciously – or unintentionally – unconsciously – we are writing the stories we tell ourselves, believe, and live by. That makes our narratives empowering, and at the same time, dangerous. Now, we'll never uncover all our unconscious narratives and, honestly, we don't want or need to do that. But we should focus on the ones holding us back, limiting our scopes, and pulling us *away* from potential problems rather than pushing us *toward* potential opportunities.

So, now let's get that posterior cingulate cortex hopping and have you think about yourself from a whole new perspective.

Food for Thought:

- Think of a person you don't have a great relationship with. Trace back events as far as you can to the origin of that relationship. What may have caused your view of them to take hold and how much of that view could be misinterpreted or even self-fulfilling prophecy at this point?
- How have narratives served you in the past?
- How have narratives held you back or limited you in the past?
- What do you think of the story you're living right now and your role in it?

Chapter 2 – From Protagonist to Author

So, let's talk about you. Right now, in your story, you're somewhere reading this eBook. It's not a particularly exciting part of your story, but it's where you are right now. Me – Dylan Emerick-Brown – I'm somewhere else, but that's not important because this is *your* story. I'm just a side character for the time being, "a poor player that struts and frets his hour upon the stage and then is heard no more." And yes, I'm a side character who loves to quote Shakespeare.

But think for a moment as to why you're reading this eBook. There's a motive to every plot point. What's yours? Perhaps you're a coach researching a new technique to use with your coachees. Perhaps you're a leader within your organization looking for a new way to reach and engage with your colleagues. Perhaps you're related to the author of this eBook and encouraging him and his career. Either way, you have a motive that we could trace back as far as we want to go. But plots are for Chapter 5, so let's not get ahead of ourselves.

The point for now is that you made a choice. You're reading the eBook (thank you, by the way). Yes, you had a motive, but you also chose what to do next. This was a conscious narrative, an intentional decision. Life is not simply happening to you as it would a character in a piece of fiction. It's also happening because of you.

The reason we're protagonists *and* authors is because we're on a journey of exploration. As with any journey – whether it be geographical, psychological, or emotional – it is going to include the unexpected and choices we have to make along the way. Even if two people are on the same journey, it's our autonomy that makes the journey uniquely individual to us. Yiannis Gabriel, in his book, *Storytelling in Organizations*, wrote, "poetic license is every

storyteller's prerogative – the acknowledged right to twist the facts for effect" (31). Depending on what it is we're individually seeking, consciously or unconsciously, we're going to tell a slightly different story than someone else on the same journey, experiencing perhaps the same thing.

And it's that unconscious seeking that's the filter of perspective, the imaginary hand holding the pen. David Drake, in his book on narrative coaching, wrote that "protagonists often discover in the end what they first sought was only a proxy for what they truly desired and what they sought outside themselves was within them all along" (139). It may sound cliché as far as stories go, but there's a reason clichés exist. There's a universality and an unspoken truth to them that makes them so pervasive. And what those true desires may be that we're seeking are as unique as the narratives we weave to explain, remember, and justify the journey we go on to discover them.

There's a wonderful and complex book by Flann O'Brien titled *At Swim-Two-Birds* which follows the lives of the characters of an author's books as they savagely planned their revenge for being used in such horrible literature. While the author slept, his characters lived their separate lives and thought of ways to escape the control of their puppeteer-like creator. One day, a character named Orlick was "born" who – with the aid of his "Waterman fountain-pen, the one with the fourteen-carat nib," he wrote his own story, with the help of some of his co-conspirators, which plagued the author as he slept. It's a classic *Frankenstein* revenge plot. And, interestingly, the comparison between the novel and one's life is eerily similar when considering the way O'Brien's characters wrote and how our brains form unconscious narratives: "The novel, in the hands of an unscrupulous writer, could be despotic…It was undemocratic to compel characters to be uniformly good or bad or poor or rich. Each should

be allowed to a private life, self-determination and a decent standard of living" (19). And while the people in our lives aren't likely to rebel in a schizophrenic manner to rewrite their roles in our unconscious narratives, there is a rhyme and reason for each person's role; there's a method to the madness.

O'Brien's story illustrates a theme I consider each and every day and it's the theme of this eBook. That theme is how we are not hapless bystanders in our own lives; we are the empowered authors of them as well, or at least can be. We are the characters who also have the power to write the stories we live! And it's why I have a Waterman fountain pen with a fourteen-karat nib on my desk. It doesn't have any ink in it, but that doesn't matter because I didn't buy it to write on paper. I bought it to remind me to write my own story with action. And it reminds me to help empower my coachees with that same perspective.

Alfred Adler, the acclaimed psychologist, once said, "We determine ourselves by the meanings we give situations." It's a beautiful and profound quote when you think about it. Consider how it begins: we determine ourselves. Of course, there are aspects of life that are beyond our control. But when it comes to who *we* are, nothing could be more within our control. And despite how others may perceive you, remember that how you perceive yourself matters more, and it instructs others as to how we think we should be perceived. We teach people how to treat us.

The second part of Adler's quote – "by the meanings we give situations" – is equally empowering because it is we who give situations meaning. Think of life like a pearl necklace. It's simply a string of pearls, one after the other. Those pearls are like moments in time, one after the other. There are no good moments or bad moments. There are simply moments. Think about when your "check engine" light comes on in your car. What's bad for you is

good for your mechanic. Good, bad, and all the other labels we assign moments are all subjective. But the key distinction here is that we are the ones who assign them. We are the authors who determine if the situation will become an insurmountable foil or a scalable challenge that will result in our growth. As Umberto Eco wrote in *Foucault's Pendulum*, "You're an author, not yet aware of your powers" (69).

And our stories don't have to be one-man-shows. We aren't in this alone. We're surrounded by people who play a part in our lives. Each one is a potential supporting character to your narrative, for you to choose how they fit in or don't. But for this theme, we're going to need a bigger chapter.

Food for Thought:

- Consider your current situation, whatever that may be. How do you currently view it? If you were going to write the ending to this part of your story, how would you write it? And what could you do in your life to live into that ending?
- Take a moment to make a brief list, describing how you see yourself now. Then, make a similar list describing how you would like to be. Notice the crossover. Notice the gaps. What's holding you back in those gaps and how can you overcome them?
- Whether things are going well or not, consider the meaning you're assigning things. How may this perspective serve and/or hurt you? What are some other perspectives that may serve you better?

Chapter 3 – Casting Call for All Supporting Characters

Look around you at the people in your life. This could be family, friends, colleagues, neighbors, etc. They are all supporting characters to your unconscious narrative. Whether you've thought about it much or not, you have an opinion about each and every one of them. My grandfather used to say, "Dylan, opinions are like ***holes, everyone's got one." Poetic as he may have been, he wasn't wrong…on either point. However, how are those roles or opinions serving you? We'll get to antagonists in the next chapter, so don't get swept up with the villains in your life quite yet. But let's look at the people you want to be around or, perhaps, are simply neutral as of now.

Before we explore how we can better incorporate them into your unconscious narrative, it's worth remembering that each one of those people you're thinking of does *not* consider themselves a supporting character in your story. To each person, they are the protagonist of their own narrative, and it is *you* who is the supporting character in theirs. So, tread lightly here and keep in mind that unlike Orlick in O'Brien's novel, you cannot control their every move. But remember, how you see people determines how you behave around them; and how you behave around them influences how they will see, and behave around, you; and how they behave around you will reinforce your perception of them.

There are different kinds of supporting characters: love interests, sidekicks, comic relief, and guides are some of the most popular types. One thing they all have in common is that they help move your story forward. And don't worry about what your story is yet…that's Chapter 5. Consider the role they currently play in your narrative. You've likely never thought about it that much. Up to now, they've just been…well, *them*.

But have you considered *why* someone plays the role they do in your life story? There's a very good reason we unconsciously assign supporting roles to our friends, family, and colleagues. In Yuval Noah Harari's book, *Sapiens: A Brief History of Humankind*, he described the Cognitive Revolution which occurred some 30,000-70,000 years ago. He noted that it wasn't our use of language, as a species, to transmit information regarding everyday things that propelled us up the food chain; it was our ability to communicate about things that didn't exist in the real world. "There are no gods in the universe, no nations, no money, no human rights, no laws, and no justice outside the common imagination of human beings," (28) he wrote. With these imagined concepts spreading throughout humanity, people were able to relate to one another and understand something about each other quickly, without necessarily ever having met. "Since large-scale human cooperation is based on myths," he continued, "the way people cooperate can be altered by changing the myths – by telling different stories" (32).

And there you have it: cooperation. Depending on our needs, we will instinctively place people into categories. If we're on our first day of a new job and we meet a colleague with a smile, we instinctively make them an ally or mentor in our narrative, someone we can rely on and learn from. It has practical as well as social, emotional, and psychological value.

If our need is romantic love, we'll find a romantic character for that role. If our need is knowledge, we'll find a mentor. If our need is companionship, we'll find a friend. If our need is emotional support, we'll find an ally. And we will explore those needs in more detail later. But it's also worth remembering before we move on that each of these people are the protagonists in their own life stories. How we see people is not necessarily how they see

themselves. It's subjective. The question we're answering on a conscious level is: what role for them is serving me right now?

And, depending on where we are in our life stories, what we're experiencing, and what our needs are, we'll write in characters as we see fit. But not all of those characters play such a productive role in our narratives. After all, every good story has a villain.

Food for Thought:

- Think about some of the supporting characters in your life. What traits might they have in common?
- How are various supporting characters at work or in your personal life moving your story forward? And is that a direction you want your story to go in?
- How might you fit into the unconscious narratives of your supporting characters, who see themselves as the protagonists of their own stories?
- What are the benefits, as well as the drawbacks, of perceiving a person within a certain role?

Chapter 4 – Antagonists: A Necessary Evil?

As we all know, every good story has to have a good villain. Right? Well, not so fast. Let's consider *why* stories have foils or villains to balance out their protagonists. First, drama creates motivation for change. It's a catalyst for action. We see this in the natural world with the movement of electromagnets with opposing polarities or the movement of water molecules within osmosis from higher to lower concentrations. When there's antagonism, we often say there's friction in that relationship. And what does friction generate? Heat. It's basic science. If all we have is a protagonist, the story can feel boring. Evolution, change, growth all stagnates. But like how a giant sequoia tree requires fire for its cones to dry out and release their seeds, people often need some sort of obstacle, danger, or challenge in order to upset the status quo and grow.

Another reason stories commonly feature antagonists is because they often reveal a hidden truth about the protagonist. Perhaps he or she isn't as just and noble as first thought. Perhaps he or she has more grit than they initially assumed. Adversity can show us people's true colors and the personification of adversity is an antagonist.

And a third reason antagonists may appear in a story is to cast blame. Things cannot always go right in the world. Well thought out plans can go awry. The best of intentions may count for nothing. Pain and suffering are an inescapable part of life. And our brains, as we've already established, like to categorize and organize our experiences in ways that make sense to us. But they also do the same thing for another reason: self-protection. Sometimes a person truly did something awful. And sometimes we choose to believe a person did something awful because it deflects blame and accountability from us. It doesn't feel good to realize that we

may be a part of the problem or perhaps did or said something that had an undesirable iimpact. It can sting to find out that our impact and intention were completely unaligned. And so, to avoid those unpleasant feelings, we look to external sources of fault: the antagonist.

To be clear, none of this really matters. As we've established, reality is perception. We can sit here all day and argue about someone in our lives validly being an antagonist or not. But what's the point? What matters is how that character's role is serving our narrative. Are they moving our story forward in a direction we want to go in? Or are they not?

We'll go into more specific examples of this when we tackle revisions at the end of this eBook. But for now, let's revisit why antagonists enter our stories in the first place. The first reason was that they're often the catalysts for change and action. But let's challenge that. Do we really need a villain to enter our lives to upset the status quo? The second reason is that villains can reveal something about us we didn't previously know. Does self-realization require a villain? And then lastly, villains can become the scapegoats of blame when we don't want to acknowledge our own failings. How healthy is that?

Antagonists exist in our unconscious narratives. They're unavoidable. Most are pretty benign with little impact on our daily lives. However, there may be some who are playing an oversized role in our stories, steering the narrative in a direction we really don't want to go in. Given that we are not only the protagonists, but also the authors of our unconscious narratives, it's worth considering the impact those people are having on us. We may not be able to eliminate those people from our lives, but are we giving them to much credit? Are they pulling our narrative down a dark path? What would you rather be spending your time doing or thinking about?

And remember, however dishonest, malicious, or evil that person may be to us, they're likely not that role in their own unconscious narrative. They're the protagonists. I once read the memoir of a politician I admired. I found the stories fascinating, the people multi-dimensional, and the experiences thrilling. But, of course, there was a politician – a U.S. senator – on the other side of the aisle who clearly played the villain – or at least foil – in this narrator's memoir. I became curious how this senator saw himself. So, I read *his* memoir. I didn't agree with all of his conclusions or motivations, but I saw him as a more complex figure. I better understood why he did what he did. While I wasn't changing my vote, I found that he didn't get me so riled up when I heard his name in the news. Anger turned into empathy and curiosity. Getting upset when I read up on current affairs wasn't a feeling I wanted to encourage, and it wasn't moving my life in a direction I liked: obsessing on the policies of someone I perceived as evil and corrupt. That senator, as of the writing of this eBook, is still in office and still in the news (which is all out of my control), but they play a significantly smaller role in my life.

Perhaps a colleague or acquaintance or even family member says or does something you find repulsive or unforgivable. Consider that behavior is not an indicator of identity, but rather an indicator of needs. Two-dimensional villains are weak and boring. They lack substance and are usually indicative of a poorly written story. Complexity is human and it's that factor that creates a good character and story. Ask yourself what need isn't being met by this person? What competing commitment or perspective might they have? Whether you're right or wrong in answering these questions isn't as important as the exploration of answering them. The very act of questioning chips away at the wall of certainty we felt a moment ago and opens

the door for curiosity and empathy. Just realizing that they're the protagonists of their own unconscious narratives can be illuminating.

But opening the door is only the first step. Walking through it is the next one. And the world is full of doorways. Despite someone's trustworthiness, trust is always a choice. Without there being a right or wrong answer, will you choose to trust? If this person isn't serving your narrative, how can you rewrite their role to one that is? What will you do to wrestle back the mental pen and give more attention to the narrative you want to live into? None of this is easy. I never said it would be. However, the only question you have to answer to move forward or not is: is it worth it? Ignore judgment or justification. Simply focus on the story of your life. There's nothing wrong with a good antagonist every now and then. But they shouldn't become the main character or the author of the story.

Food for Thought:

- Who are the antagonists in your life and how are they serving it?
- How might those antagonists see themselves in their own narratives?
- How much space do these antagonists take up in your story?
- What are some ways of minimizing the impact of the antagonists in your life?
- How might you actually feel empathy toward those antagonists?

Chapter 5 – What Type of Story Are You Living? Plots & Twists

It's movie night. You change into something loose and comfortable. You make yourself a drink and maybe grab a snack. You get cozy on the couch or in your favorite chair. You turn on the television and pick a streaming service. And then you flip through the thousands of choices to watch….

We all have those go-to categories of movies or television shows we love. For us readers, we have our favorite genres that populate our bookshelves. Sometimes the context matters. I'll be more likely to watch *The Holiday* or *Home Alone* or *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation* in the winter. But for the most part, there's usually a genre that we'd take on a desert island if we had to pick just one.

The same thing applies to our unconscious narratives. Again, context matters. We may not always be in a romantic comedy or drama, but it's valuable to think about where we are in our lives at this moment. According to a paper by Yiannis Gabriel, David Gray, and Harshita Goregaokar, Doublas Ezzy's research in the early twenty-first century into unemployed Australians – something I doubt you ever thought you'd be reading about – revealed primarily three types of narratives people constructed for themselves, in which "the story's narrator and its protagonist co-created each other" (1694), as coping mechanisms for their unemployment: "romantic narratives approach job loss as a positive experience of emancipation from oppressive work, leading to a better future; tragic narratives cast job loss as a negative turning point in people's life plans, leading to depression, anxiety, and self-blame; complex narratives interweave job loss with other adversities such as marital breakdown or serious illness" (1692). These narratives were not found to be rigid, but rather

quite fluid depending on how the individual perceived their situation, themselves, and then coped in real time.

In this way, context very much shaped the narrative the person was living. But unconsciously, it was still a mental construction as opposed to an objective fact. Julie Beck, in *The Atlantic*, further elaborated on the plot device of our life stories through an explanation of narrative psychology. She wrote that "a person's life story is not a Wikipedia biography of the facts and events of a life, but rather the way a person integrates those facts and events internally – picks them apart and weaves them back together to make meaning. The narrative becomes a form of identity, in which the things someone chooses to include in the story, and the way she tells it, can both reflect and shape who she is. A life story," Beck continued, "doesn't just say what happened, it says why it was important, what it means for who the person is, for who they'll become, and for what happens next."

I always say that before one attempts to solve a problem, they first must understand the problem. And so, before we get into any revisions of our unconscious narratives, we need to understand what kind they are. Nobody's life story is going to fit into a single genre. However, wherever you are right now, you're currently living within one of those categories. It may not be a particularly exciting chapter within that genre, but you're in it, nonetheless. Even Herman Melville spent pages describing types of knots one tied aboard a whaling vessel before we ever encountered the viciously vengeful and menacingly dangerous Moby Dick.

The best way to understand what type of story you're currently living in is to get curious. Ask yourself some powerful, open-ended questions about you. By now in the eBook, if you've read the Food for Thought sections at the end of each chapter, you've probably already got a pretty good idea of your current genre. And there's no good or bad genre. Whether you're

living in a thriller or drama, horror or comedy, romance or epic journey, genres don't define whether or not a story is good or bad.

Given that unconscious narratives are, by definition, unconscious, by bringing these thoughts to the surface, it allows you to rewrite the narratives if you choose. Perhaps you would prefer that your comedy was more of a romance or that your thriller was less horror. What needs to happen for that rewrite? You cannot go back in time – unlike the author of a book – and edit the beginning. The closest we come to that is revisionist memory.

A good example of revisionist memory, which is difficult and not particularly worth one's time, was described in Claudia Rankine's book, *Just Us: An American Conversation*. Rankine, discussing race and whiteness in America, talked with documentarian Whitney Dow of Columbia University's Interdisciplinary Center for Innovative Theory and Empirics in which he gathered data on over 850 people – mostly self-identified as white or partly white – and documented their oral histories. When asked what he had learned about conversing specifically with white men, he replied, "they are struggling to construct a just narrative for themselves as new information comes in, and they are having to restructure and refashion their own narratives and coming up short" (29). As new information came to light, such as when Rankine pointed out earlier in her book that a recently emerged audio recording from 1971 captured pre-president Ronald Reagan referring to African delegates to the United Nations as "monkeys" who "are still uncomfortable wearing shoes" (16), white men – in this case also republican – had to conduct some mental gymnastics to justify being pro-Reagan while simultaneously anti-racist.

Simply put, we cannot go back and change past themes of our life stories any more than we can change ourselves from being the protagonists of our unconscious narratives. What we

can do, however, is to change the direction of our stories where we currently are. Just as we consider the value and purpose of the people in our lives and the roles they play in our narratives, we can consider the value and purpose of our current genre. The revision process itself will come at the end of the eBook. But the closest we can come to changing our context is changing our genre. And the best way to do that is a plot twist.

Everyone enjoys a good plot twist, especially one you didn't see coming. The best plot twists evolve out of complexity. They cannot simply be random epiphanies like "and then he woke up and it was all just a dream" or "and then he found her birth certificate revealing she was, in fact, his mother!" Plot twists stem from challenging the beliefs we previously held as solid. Consider the work we've done up to here. What if a supporting character or antagonist could fill a different role in one's narrative? What would that look like and what purpose could it serve? Given a particular character's behavior that led to the formation of a particular belief or character role, what could be a conflicting motive or perspective that could completely challenge that belief or role? What if a choice one made in the past, and has since been living the consequences of, was changed in the present?

If reality is perception and everything is subjective, then by shifting one's perception, he or she can change…well, anything. The bad luck on the dating scene transforms from a depressing drama to a romantic comedy. The thriller of one battling an antagonistic colleague can be transformed into an epic journey in which both characters grow. If you're the author of your own narrative – and you are – don't limit yourself. Sometimes a subtle change can be hugely impactful. One just has to be intentional, which is the challenge with narratives that remain unconscious.

Food for Thought:

- What genre do you see yourself living in right now? Is that the genre you'd like to be in? Why?
- Why do you think you're living in that particular genre?
- What mindset shift could transform the genre of your narrative to the one of your choice?
- How does believing you're living in a particular type of story impact how you feel?
- What actions would you take differently if you were living in your chosen genre?
- If you changed genres to one of your choosing, how would that make you feel?

Chapter 6 – Analogies: Metaphors, Similes, and the Many Ways We Illustrate What We Can't Say

First of all, let's get some basics out of the way. Analogies are just different ways of explaining a concept through comparison, and metaphors and similes fall under that umbrella. A metaphor replaces one word or concept for another, and a simile does the same thing, but with "like" or "as." Phew. Now that we've got that out of the way, let's explore how the usage of analogies in our language can be analyzed to explore further meaning.

Yiannis Gabriel wrote, "omissions, exaggerations, subtle shifts in emphasis, timing, innuendo, metaphors are some of the mechanisms used" when studying narratives. "Far from being an obstacle to further study, such 'distortions' can be approached as attempts to re-create reality *poetically*" (31). The concept of studying the use of analogies and other literary elements on a deeper level wasn't new to Gabriel. Even Aristotle, in his *Poetics*, wrote, "the poet being an imitator, like a painter or any other artist, must of necessity imitate one of three objects: things as they were or are, things as they are said or thought to be, or things as they ought to be. This he does in language – using either current expressions or, it may be, rare words or metaphors" (441). Throughout history there has been an understanding that how we choose to express ourselves, whether consciously or unconsciously, contains more meaning than meets the eye.

For example, when I was a teacher, I repeatedly heard phrases from colleagues like "we're in the trenches" and that something was "going to be a fight." The room in the front office teachers and administrators used to plan in was referred to as "the war room." These are all fairly common metaphors to the point that they're basically colloquialisms, a part of our

normalized language. However, look at those phrases more closely. What does it tell you about the frame of mind of educators at that school? That we're at war. There's an enemy we're in conflict with. Battles are expected. Now, imagine the effect of that culture on an energetic young teacher. Language matters and it both reveals how we feel and further directs our actions ahead.

And the use of analogies isn't always something intentionally constructed. We're preprogrammed on a neurological level to respond to them. Nobel Prize winning economist and Yale professor Robert Shiller wrote in his book, *Narrative Linguistics*, "linguist George Lakoff and philosopher Mark Johnson (2003) have argued that such metaphors are not only colorful ways of writing and speaking; they also mold our thoughts and affect our conclusions. Neuroscientist Oshin Wartanian (2002) notes that analogy and metaphor 'reliably activate' consistent brain regions in fMRI images of the human brain. That is the human brain seems wired to respond to stories that lead to thinking in analogies" (17).

Those nicknames we're given or give others at work; the way we describe going to work on Mondays; the words and phrases we employ to indirectly express how we feel all reveal and guide more than we may be aware of or intend. George Lakoff and Mark Johnson wrote, "metaphorical imagination is a crucial skill in creating rapport and communicating the nature of shared experience" (231). When we talk about onboarding at a new job as a "gauntlet" or "trial by fire" or commiserate with a colleague about getting "beaten up" by the boss, these aren't just loose images thrown around. They're a way of bonding and empathizing with a person, sharing and coping around a situation. Lakoff and Johnson continue with, "metaphors may create realities for us, especially social realities. A metaphor may thus be a guide for future action…In this sense metaphors can be self-fulfilling prophecies" (156).

And that's the point. When our unconscious narratives remain unconscious, unexplored, and unknown, we've become passive characters in our own life stories. While we may be the ones holding the pens, many of us delude ourselves into believing we have any autonomy over the words. How can anyone be in control of something they're unaware of? They can't. Our usage of analogies is important to reflect on and understand. They're insights into how our minds are making sense and meaning out of our experiences. Those words are charged and they reveal where our heads are at as well as predict how we might behave accordingly in the future.

Just as we have to explore whether or not a particular character or plot point or genre is serving our life stories, the same must be said of the language we use which is so colorfully displayed through analogies. So often, I've encountered people who couldn't put into words what they were feeling. But when I asked them to use an analogy, the images and descriptions poured out of them. It's like a mental shortcut. And those images and descriptions are chosen unconsciously, unfiltered. They're wide, open doors to look inside and roam around in for a bit.

But ultimately, it isn't enough to simply become aware. To use the open-door analogy again, we now need to walk through the narrative linguistic door to where the real coaching begins. You might have noticed that I haven't talked much, if at all, about coaching up to now in the eBook. That's because, as I said earlier, before we solve a problem, we must first understand it. And here we delve into the revision process of the writing workshop approach to coaching.

Food for Thought:

- What are some common analogies you use in your routine communication?
- How might the analogies you use in your communication with others differ from analogies you use in internal monologues?
- What do those analogies say about how you see a person or situation? *Note: the interpretation is entirely up to you.*
- What do those analogies suggest you may do, behaviorally, as a result of such a mindset?
- How are those mindsets serving you?

Chapter 7 – Revisions: Narrative Linguistic Coaching

Now that you understand the concept of the unconscious narrative, how it impacts your perception and behavior, the way in which it serves you, and its various elements, we can begin to look at a coaching session through the lens of a writer's workshop. I want to be clear at this point that I wouldn't prescribe narrative linguistic coaching – or NLC as I'll refer to it here on out – as a full-service coaching methodology. There are too many programs out there pedaling their coaching methods as the silver bullet or magic elixir that will change everything. I am simply offering NLC as a tool in your toolbox. A hammer might be the most common tool in my toolbox, but that doesn't mean it's universal and I'll use it for leveling a picture frame or tightening a nut. It is up to you, the coach, to determine when and if NLC may be a useful tool in your coaching. I would even recommend discussing it with your coachee. If your coaching relationship is truly a trusting partnership – as it should be – then make them a co-creator of the path forward. It elicits buy-in and engagement.

David Drake, in his work with narrative coaching, touches on the process of using stories to change behavior to get desired results. He wrote, "the only way to authentically change a person's story is to alter the underlying and contextual narrative processes that support it. Often this comes through helping coachees make new associations, e.g., between two stories, between two characters in a story, between a problem in one area of their life and a solution in another" (41-42). However, we're going to take a deeper dive.

To bring our old friend, science, back into the conversation, the home of your unconscious narratives is the posterior cingulate cortex (PCC) which resides comfortably in the limbic system of your brain. The limbic system is responsible for emotions and the fight or flight

reflex. Language and reasoning, on the other hand, are located in the prefrontal cortex at the front of your brain. We need the prefrontal cortex to be our interpretive guide to the posterior cingulate cortex because while we cannot coach purely with emotive gestures and facial expressions, we can coach with language. It may be an imperfect translator – as all translations are – but it is our window into what's really going on. As Yiannis Gabriel wrote, "if poetic interpretation allows the storyteller to align events with desires and construct meaning in a meaningful way, analytic interpretation asks why such constructions resonate with meaning; whether they possess a deeper layer of significance" (43). That's a perfect illustration of NLC.

When we're coaching our coachee, the topic – which is often chosen by the coachee – will almost always certainly explore the past or future. Even if the topic is about something happening currently, the issue likely stems from past experiences not wanting to be repeated or future experiences not wanting to be had. But this isn't a problem for coaching because on a neurological level, it doesn't matter. Julie Beck wrote that "there's been some brain research supporting this link between the past and future, showing that the same regions of the brain are activated when people are asked to remember something and when they're asked to imagine an event that hasn't happened yet." And this is essential given that in NLC, we will be taking the coachee's old unconscious narratives and having them rewrite them for a hypothetical and desired future.

When we utilize NLC, the coachee is the writer. The coach is simply the editor. A good editor will provide insights, ask questions, and hold the writer accountable to themselves. The same can be said of a good coach. So, it isn't your job as the coach to rewrite the narrative for

your coachee. In fact, that wouldn't be effective because it wouldn't be coming from an authentic place. It's important to stay in your lane for this.

The exercise I created and use with NLC is a trademarked tool called T3XT. It utilizes text, context, and subtext in a manner that explores the language the coachee uses to dig into the unconscious narratives. This exercise can be done verbally or written with equal efficacy. However, if you're starting out with T3XT, I recommend trying it out written so you can see the process as it unfolds.

Below, see Fig. 1, is the first direction to give your coachee: what is it you would like to explore? You will want to give them full reign. They may want to ask clarifying questions as though there's a right and wrong answer but try not to give them examples that may skew their perspective. No edits. No going back and revising. Just freewriting on their topic of exploration.

If the coachee prefers to do this exercise verbally, your job as the coach is to listen carefully as the coachee talks about their topic and to write down any words or phrases that stand out to you. There is no further direction beyond that. You might be asking yourself, "what is the criteria?" or "what do you mean 'stand out to me'?" Relax. Your insights don't matter as much as the coachee's interpretation. This isn't psychoanalysis. Sigmund Freud would interpret the dreams of his patients and prescribe according to his diagnosis. I'm not Freud – and neither are you – and in coaching it isn't about your interpretation, and there are no diagnoses or prescriptions. So again, relax.

Example:

Step 1 – Reveal the Unconscious Narrative

DO THIS: What is it you would like to explore? Write about this in a brief (one page), first-person narrative from the beginning to the present focusing on what it is, perhaps where it stems from, and why it is important to you. This can be about an event or even a person in your life. Use the box below to type.

Coach Notes:

Fig. 1

Step 2 – Pull the Unconscious Narrative Into the Light

Once the coachee has written out their narrative, it's your job to read it and highlight anything that stands out. In written format, it's best to assign this as pre-work to a session to save time. Again, the same direction applies here as it did above with the verbal example. It doesn't matter what your observations are. I suggest you look for patterns such as the usage of similar words; repetition; look for unusual usages for words; look for analogies; look for sudden changes in verb tense or tone; anything that strikes you as interesting and perhaps worth bringing up. There's no right or wrong here.

You can see above that there is a section for "Coach Notes." You can use this space for writing out any of your notes if you don't have the space in the text box. If you did this exercise verbally, you can just use the text box if you prefer. Your job is to simply pull out anything of subjective interest from the coachee's narrative.

Step 3 – Realize the Plasticity of the *Conscious* Narrative

The next step is to share your insights. Explain to the coachee that what you're about to share is not right or wrong and there's no judgment. The purpose – and it should start to make sense right about now – is to get the original writer/speaker to think differently about their previously unconscious narrative. Just as we cannot tickle ourselves because of a cognitive block in the brain, we cannot effectively explore our own unconscious narratives. This is because they're unconscious.

It isn't necessary, or even preferable, to invite feedback at this point. It may be difficult for the coach and/or coachee, but the point here is to simply let a new perspective into the unconscious narrative so the coachee can think about what they wrote/said differently. Share your thoughts and questions (again, they don't need to answer those questions out loud just then).

When you're done, invite the coachee to share their thoughts about what you just shared. This isn't meant to be a conversation. There needs to be a pressure release valve at this point in the exercise given that they're like fish seeing water for the first time and will need to verbalize what they're thinking about. This may take a few seconds or a few minutes, but again, this is not a conversation. 1) Unconscious narrative, 2) then your feedback, 3) then their feedback. Period.

Step 4 – Outline the Old Narrative

The fourth step is where the real exploration goes into overdrive. Ask the coachee, based on the insights you both pulled out of the unconscious narrative, what one to three words/phrases they'd like to explore further. You, as the coach, may be itching to explore a particular word or phrase, but hold back. This has to be the choice of the coachee. And rest assured, even if you think they might be avoiding something by choosing a particular word or phrase, it is likely the deeper theme you think should be tackled will come up. This isn't because of leading questions and guiding them; but rather because their arrival at a meaningful conclusion is somewhat inevitable.

You can use the below chart (see Fig. 2) as a scaffold for the exercise. Once you've done this enough and gotten comfortable with it, it'll become second nature. Take the one to three words/phrases the coachee selected and place each one in its own row under "Text (Old Narrative)" on the left side.

If the person wants to explore a particular person in their life, ask them what role that person plays in their narrative. Would they be a villain, a bumbling fool, a Machiavelli, etc.? Let them choose a role that they think fits and write it in that "Text" box.

Then, ask the coachee about the context surrounding that word/phrase/role. What happened? What's going on? Who is this person? Take some notes in the far-left column under "Context (Old Narrative)." This is going to be fairly straightforward, but it provides the context for the old narrative.

And then, ask the coachee to provide some feelings associated with the word/phrase/role. This is the subtext and is completely subjective. When thinking about the situation or person, how do they feel? It's important to establish this link between the neocortex and the limbic system so this doesn't become a purely intellectual exercise. They need to be engaged and tap into that posterior cingulate cortex.

This, ultimately, establishes the 30,000-foot-view of the coachee's old unconscious narrative. They can see it laid out before them. It's important to let them see it, read it, or hear it so that it goes from unconscious to conscious. Now that the shadow has been lifted, the coachee can now take the mental pen and be intentional with it. Ask them, without judgment, how that old narrative serves them. Go through some of the questions, as you feel appropriate, asked in the "Food for Thought" sections earlier in this eBook.

Context (Old Narrative) *What has happened or is happening?*	**Text** (Old Narrative) *What word is anchoring this narrative? (**For Person:** what role do they play in your narrative?)*	**Subtext** (Old Narrative) *What is the connotation attached to this word? Why is this important?*	**Character Context** (If working on a person) *How do you think they see themselves in their own narrative?*	**Context** (New Narrative) *What do you want to be happening or to happen? What does this look like?*	**Text** (New Narrative) *What word aligns with this new narrative to replace the old word? (**For Person:** what role better fits them in your narrative?)*	**Subtext** (New Narrative) *What is the connotation attached to this word when exploring your old context?*

Fig. 2

Step 4.5 – Loosen the Strongly Held Belief of the Role

If we're dealing with a person whose role we've already defined in the old narrative, then you move on to the middle column titled "Character Context." The question is simple: how do you think they see themselves in their own narrative? This is a powerful question to ask, and the key word is *think*. A common response is, "how would I *know* that?" But you're not asking what they *know*, you're asking what they *think*. Keep it hypothetical. You could ask your coachee, "do you really think they see themselves as _____?" The answer would almost certainly be "no." So, keeping things hypothetical, what do they think? The point of this part is simple, but highly impactful. It gets the coachee to open their minds and be curious, to consider that their strongly held belief may not be the only possibility. Right or wrong is irrelevant; simply acknowledging another perspective is the breakthrough. Just a little crack in that wall can be enough to collapse it. Really get them to explore this possibility and write it out for them. It'll be helpful for them to reference it later on.

Step 5 – Workshop the New Narrative

If we're dealing with a situation/word/phrase – or anything other than a specific person – skip the middle column. By now, the next step will be the "Context" of the new narrative, third column from the right. Ask the coachee, "what do you want to be happening or to happen?" Have them really go into detail as to what that would look like. What is the desired future for the situation or person? The key shift here is that we are not going to strive to prevent the old narrative from happening, but rather strive toward the new narrative. It's far more effective to be moving toward something than away from something; pull, don't push. The

clearer the coachee can get on the context of their new narrative, the more impactful the rest of the exercise will go.

The next step is to have the coachee consider what it would be like if the new context became a reality. What would be the replacement "Text" for the new narrative? If you're working on a specific person, the question becomes what role better fits this person in this new narrative? If it's a situation you're working on, what word or phrase better fits this new narrative? It doesn't matter if the word or phrase or role makes any sense, so long as it makes sense to the coachee. They're the ones who give it meaning. They're the ones who give the whole narrative meaning.

Then, lastly, you have the coachee imagine this new character role in this new context, or this new word/phrase in this new context. Ask them, how does that feel? This is the subtext of the new narrative and goes in the far-right column. We're inviting the posterior cingulate cortex to chime in and anchor the new narrative where it will stick. By now, it's usually pretty easy for the coachee to express how they're feeling in this new narrative. Let them get as flowery with their adjectives as they like.

Importantly, when you're done, go through a recap of the whole process for the coachee. They may be wondering at this point how they wound up where they are given where they started. You can even give them a copy of the exercise to keep if they like. But it's always valuable to recap that the old context was ____ which made you see the person as ____ – or associate the situation with ____ – which made you feel like ____. If the topic is a person, remind the coachee how the other person may potentially see themselves within their own narrative, breaking the hold the old belief had on them. Then, show the coachee how in this

new, very possible context, the person now plays ____ role – or the situation is more like ____ – and how it feels ____.

Ask the coachee how they feel at the end of the exercise. Bring them back to a conversation with you. Let them express themselves openly and freely. And this takes us to the final step.

Step 6 – Make It Happen

You can call it "homework" or whatever you like. But this is the difference between opening the door and walking through it, between writing a narrative and living it. They have the mindset shift, but what are they going to do with it? How will they commit to living into this new, desired future they've created? I ask them, "what actions will allow you to embody this new narrative?" Sometimes people will have a sticky note with a reminder of something. Other coachees in the past have created pieces of art to embody the new narrative. One asked his daughter to make him a bracelet he'd wear each day. Another created a song playlist to embody the new narrative. Everyone is different and it's important that they do something that fits with their lifestyle, that will make sense to them and stick.

I've done this exercise with many coachees many times over the years and I'll share some brief examples of old narratives and new ones that they created and lived into. I invite you to give them a quick read. Some of them may seem like obvious paths, but I can assure you there was nothing obvious about them in the moment, given how the coachee felt. And other evolutions may interest or surprise you. This quick snapshot won't give you the full, powerful, and enriching experience, but it will provide a peek.

"*Buying me* and my position" led to "*Buying in* on all levels."

"Hesitation" led to "Loving curiosity."

"Villain" led to "Superhero In-Training." This one was interesting in how the person the coachee was having conflict with evolved from someone with malicious intent to someone with the potential to grow, who could become an ally.

"What I could be" led to "Being good enough."

"Controlling" led to "Liberation."

"Safety" led to "Peace." Here, the old narrative was avoiding something unpleasant, and the new narrative was moving toward something serene.

"Achieve" led to "Change the Game."

"Trophies on the Shelf" led to "Eiffel Tower." In this one, the coachee emphasized that in her new narrative, the metaphor was something to be constructed, but in a beautiful and elegant way that people would find attractive and engaging, as opposed to something merely collected for oneself. There's a stronger intentionality with the new narrative.

"Validation" led to "Self-Empowerment."

"Desperate" led to "Curious."

"Pressing Forward" led to "Allowing." Sometimes the epiphany is that the coachee shouldn't be asking themselves 'what can I *do*?' but rather, 'what can I let go of?'

"Fail" led to "Reclaim."

"Relationship" led to "Connection."

"Too Old" led to "Growing."

"Allow for an Expression" led to "Stake my Claim." Notice the passivity in the first phrase and the active verb in the second.

"If I Lose Him" led to "I Trust and Enjoy His Presence."

"Phoniness" led to "Insecurity." This was a fascinating one where the coachee's perception of someone's motivation became expanded and opened the possibility of creating empathy.

As you can see from these quick examples, once the old unconscious narratives were brought to the surface and viewed in the light of day, the coachee was able to work with it, mold it, and rewrite it in a way that they felt better served them. They painted the picture of a desired future they wanted to live into. They connected the language and reasoning of the revision with the subtext and emotion of the narrative itself. They were engaged and took ownership – you could even say authorship – of their lives in an intentional way. By the end, they had a tangible path forward they could choose to walk down. And they had the self-created tools to support them in that journey.

Remember, this isn't traditional coaching, per se. Regular coaching sessions should sandwich this exercise so that a trusting relationship is formed ahead of time and that follow-up can occur afterward. Keep in mind that T3XT is a specific exercise, a tool to use when appropriate in coaching to explore and rewrite unconscious narratives by focusing on the language being used. But that doesn't mean you cannot engage in a more traditional coaching session with the mindset of a narrative linguistic coach. Using T3XT or not, you can still listen to the unconscious clues the coachee is providing and engage with them in a way that pulls out the old narrative so they can create a new one. Language both reflects the coachee's perceptions and simultaneously directs their future behavior.

Food for Thought:

- How might you be able to use T3XT in your own coaching practice?
- When would T3XT be appropriate in coaching?
- How might I embody a narrative linguistic coaching mindset, without T3XT, in my coaching sessions?

- FYI, for more information visit www.Emerick-Brown.com where you can learn more and contact Dylan Emerick-Brown.

Chapter 8 – Listening to Others' Stories & Last Thoughts

Even if you're new to coaching you will be familiar with the concept of active listening. It's about being present and putting aside any agenda or follow-up questions. You're not listening to respond; you're listening to truly hear the other person. Of course, there are many signs people give when they're communicating. There are facial expressions, body language, tone of voice, etc. But it's our unfiltered language that we speak when we feel comfortable and fully heard that reveals our unconscious narratives.

As a coach, most of the time you won't be utilizing an exercise like T3XT. However, in your coaching sessions, there are endless opportunities to listen to your coachee and pick up on the language that's revealing hidden desires, competing commitments, deflections of accountability, and all sorts of themes worth exploring. But that language isn't merely revealing perceptions; it's also confining that individual to a prefabricated reality of their own unintentional design. Most of the time, coachees are completely unaware they used a particular word or phrase, or repeated themselves that much, or shifted in their seat when they said that thing. Making them aware of those idiosyncrasies can be very impactful as they relate to the stories they're telling themselves, how those stories are serving them, and how they want those stories to proceed from that point forward.

David Drake said it well when he wrote, "what people are defending against is often the very thing they most need in order to grow" (108). He also wrote that, "even though the past is given the bulk of attention in conceptualizing identity and development, a clear case can be made that who we are and how we act are as much influenced by our expectations of the future as they are by our explanations of/from the past" (85). We live into the future we see

coming toward us. And that future is often the product of unconscious narratives that we're writing blindly and then telling ourselves are absolute truths.

The implications of us exploring our unconscious narratives are far and wide, even beyond one-on-one coaching. For example, economist Rober Shiller wrote that literary theorists "have found that certain basic structures are repeated constantly, though the names and circumstances change from story to story, suggesting that the human brain may have built-in receptors for certain stories" (15-16). He continued with, "when one reflects that the economy is composed of conscious living people who view their actions in light of stories with emotions and ideas attached, one sees the need for many different perspectives" (12). The global economy is a string of concepts communicated through language. Language conveys the fears and anxieties or excitement and foresight that drive the investment and allocation of trillions of dollars worldwide. Likewise, the same could be said of the global economy as it could be of interdepartmental relationships at work or dynamics within a family.

Shiller also points out that narratives spread like diseases in epidemics. He noted that the Ebola epidemic that spread through West Africa was greatly affected by stories. "Medical researchers in the Congo during a 2018 outbreak of Ebola linked the high contagion to narratives reaching the population," he wrote. "Over 80% of the interviewees said they had heard misinformation…These narratives discouraged prevention measures and amplified the disease" (23). Because the global community is so intertwined in the 21st century – economically, politically, militarily, socially, technologically, and even geographically given worldwide transportation – narratives spread at the speed of light across the globe. They influence elections, compel rioters, start wars, inspire movements, panic consumers, and drive

the entire human race. The questions we're not asking are: to where are these narratives leading us, and is that where we want to go?

But to pull us back down to the personal level as I bring this eBook to a close, it's worth considering the power of language in how it both reveals and propels us. I cannot think of anything worth studying more, as a coach and as a human being, than language. Narrative Linguistic Coaching is a particular approach that focuses heavily on the listening to, and exploration of, the words our coachees use in a manner which allows us to workshop unconscious narratives into an intentional future we want to live into. Perception shifts lead to behavioral change which culminates in desired results. It all begins and ends with the intentional and thoughtful engagement with language.

Food for Thought:

- What will you do next?

About the Author

Dylan Emerick-Brown is an executive coach trained through the Co-Active Institute. His experience includes training in Positive Intelligence; a fellowship in the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, a Harvard Medical School affiliate; and membership in the American College of Healthcare Executives. His certifications include "Improving Your Business Through a Culture of Health," "Strategic Leadership in Healthcare," "Cultivating Entrepreneurship & Antifragility to Thrive in a Fast-Paced World," and "Talent Optimization Consultation." He is the creator of Narrative Linguistic Coaching and developer of the copyrighted T3XT coaching tool. Emerick-Brown is also the Director of Organizational Culture at Direct Orthopedic Care, where he coaches individuals, teams, and provides organizational support. Through coaching, he creates and supports cultures with deep self-knowledge, enlightened perspectives, and healthy conflict that align individuals and organizational values and aspirations by empowering all stakeholders. He lives with his loving wife and two beautiful children in Lake Mary, Florida.

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