Authentic Leadership Development in the Classroom: A Narrative Approach

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Abstract

This paper examines how a classroom designed process of constructing narratives about oneself, a group, and others helps students develop an authentic leadership voice. We begin by describing the theoretical framework behind our paper, which includes an overview of the notion of authenticity and the linkage between narrative and authentic leadership. Next, we provide an account of a transformative class called Leadership and Storytelling. Following this is a response to the question that inspired our paper: What was it about the course that made it such a meaningful leadership experience for students? The authors offer three key ingredients to the nature of this powerful classroom experience: space, authorship, and taking students to the edge of knowing. We conclude with an exploration of how others can incorporate narrative into their own work to become better leadership educators.

Introduction

Linking leadership to storytelling is an appealing combination, but a difficult challenge on which to base a course. Teaching storytelling from a communication perspective brings to mind basic lessons in presentation skills. Shamir and Eilam (2005) present an approach to authentic leadership development based on increasing a leader's self-awareness through personal narrative construction. They offer suggested characteristics or attributes of authentic leaders and then add, "We suggest that leaders acquire these characteristics by constructing, developing and revising their life stories. Life-stories can provide leaders with a 'meaning

system' from which they can act authentically, that is interpret reality and act in a way that gives their interpretations and actions a personal meaning" (p. 396).

This paper includes a description of a course, Leadership and Storytelling, offered for the first time in fall 2006 to a group of undergraduate leadership students. While the content of the course was unique, it was the reaction of the students that provided the momentum for this paper. Students used words like "transformative," "inspiring," and "life-changing" to describe the impact of this class. This unusually potent response, a goal for any undergraduate instructor, resulted in a desire to learn more about the cause of this reaction.

The basic goals of the course for the instructor were to provide students with an introduction to authentic leadership, a deeper understanding of the role stories play in everyday life, and to help them develop skills for using stories in various leadership roles. However, the actual path of the course took both the students and the professor to a place of unexpected complexity, hidden psychologies, and deep introspection.

At the end of the semester, a student in the course (the co-author of this paper) asked, "How did we get here? What is it about the course that is so refreshing, challenging, and meaningful?" This paper is our attempt at answering these questions.

Theoretical Framework

Authenticity

Roberts (2008) highlights the critical role of developing reflection in college students studying leadership. She points out the ease with which many students can regurgitate memorized data for tests, but may fail to learn skills that require them to reflect on their actions. In their discussion of developing the moral component of authentic leadership, May, Hodges, Chan, and Avolio (2003), stress the importance of "the leader knowing him- or herself, and being transparent in linking inner desires, expectations, and values to the way the leader behaves every day, in every interaction" (p. 248). Regardless of the particular leadership model or framework students are taught, it is essential to provide students with an opportunity to examine what is most true for themselves – their core beliefs and values (Stech, 2008). Without an awareness of these foundational elements, and the experiences that have shaped them, leadership students may lack what George (2007) describes as an authentic core or internal compass.

Harter (2005) describes the sources and threads of literature on the concept of authenticity as many "islands of insight" (p. 382). From a sampling of

philosophical (Guignon, 2004), sociological (Seeman, 1966), and cultural (Trilling, 1971) perspectives to contributions in the field of psychology (Harter, 2005; Goldman & Kernis, 2002) including the development of an authenticity scale (Wood, Linely, Baliousis & Joseph, 2008), there has been a rise in interest in Polonius' advice to Laertes in *Hamlet*, "to thine own self be true."

For the sake of clarification of terms a working definition of authenticity is provided by Wood, et al. (2008). They suggest that "authentic living involves behaving and expressing emotions in such a way that is consistent with the conscious awareness of physiological states, emotions, beliefs, and cognitions. In other words, authentic living involves being true to oneself in most situations and living in accordance with one's values and beliefs" (p. 386).

Kernis (2003) describes authenticity as "the unobstructed operation of one's true, or core, self in one's daily enterprise" (p. 13). Leadership theorists have begun to explore various methods of integrating notions of authenticity into a model of leadership. What follows is a brief overview of the field.

Authentic Leadership

While an increasing number of authors (George 2007; Bennis, 2003; Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Terry, 1993) are describing authentic leadership (AL), Shamir and Eilam (2005) provide a synthesis of the literature at the present time. Common to all approaches to AL are (a) high degrees of self-awareness that reflect a set of values and convictions based on personal experience, (b) a strong sense of identity that is aligned with the leadership role so leadership is a self-expressive act, not an act for the sake of status or personal rewards, and (c) a consistency and congruency to the leaders' behaviors that always reflects their beliefs and convictions. Illes, Morgeson, and Nahrgang (2005) and Avolio and Gardner (2005) utilize a model developed by Kernis as a basis for their AL models. From their perspective authentic leaders exhibit:

- *Self-awareness*: an ongoing process of clarifying emotions, intentions, cognitions, beliefs, values and talents. One's leadership is based on convictions and beliefs that emerge from within and are shaped by his/her experience.
- *Unbiased processing*: Avolio and Gardner (2005) suggest that rather than striving to be unbiased in the processing of ongoing experience, authentic leaders work at balanced interpretation of events, considering all sides of a given issue.
- *Relational authenticity*: authentic leaders manifest an ability to maintain open and truthful relationships. Their approach encourages the authentic expression of others with whom they come in contact.

- *Authentic behavior/action*: a common method for describing individuals who are considered authentic is to say, "They walk their talk." What they express as core beliefs is congruent in their words and behaviors.

Using this description of an authentic leader, which suggests a strong focus on developing the identity or voice of the leader, we would like to provide some theoretical background for using narrative in leadership education.

Stories, Narrative and Authentic Leadership

The link between leadership and storytelling has become popular as evidenced by a growing body of literature on the subject. This linkage tends to focus on storytelling as a necessary communication tool for leaders. Denning (2004), Clark (2004), and Silverman (2006) offer methods for developing improved storytelling skills for leaders. In addition, leadership fables (Johnson, 1998; Lencioni, 2006) that offer wisdom in the form of stories continue to be bestsellers. One of the most frequently used quotations in the genre comes from Gardner (1995) who notes, "Stories are the single most powerful weapon in a leader's literary arsenal" (p. 43). Actually Gardner's entire quotation states, "Stories of identity – narratives that help individuals think about who they are, where they come from, and where they are headed – constitute the single most powerful weapon in the leader's arsenal" (p. 43). The full quotation suggests that in addition to the communication benefits derived from stories, the creation of a leadership story also offers benefits related to increased self-awareness. In addition, Tichy (1997) suggests, "The most effective leaders are those who are in touch with their leadership stories…The story shapes our attitudes, actions and reactions. When we know our stories we know ourselves" (p. 77).

While the terms *story* and *narrative* are often used interchangeably, there is an important distinction between the two. "Story is an account of incidents or events, but narrative comes after and adds 'plot' and 'coherence' to the story line" (Boje, 2001, p. 10). This distinction offers leadership educators an opportunity. While teaching storytelling can be a rewarding experience for emergent leaders who are interested in improving their communication skills, inviting students to explore their own narratives suggests a deeper experience. Teaching storytelling allows for a focus on presentation, while a learning experience that concentrates on narrative dimensions of leadership engages both student and teacher on a more personal, reflective journey, or what Kegan (1982) terms a "meaning-making process" (p. 5).

Shamir and Eilam's (2005) suggestion to explore an innovative approach to authentic leadership development based on personal narrative became the central theme in our Leadership and Storytelling class.

Leadership and Storytelling: A Classroom Experience

"There is no agony like bearing an untold story inside of you."
Maya Angelou

Educators have persuasively argued that human beings, especially adults, learn best from their own experiences (Daloz-Parks, 2005). A focus of the Leadership and Storytelling class was to make optimal use of the students' own past and immediate experiences. Transforming personal memories into stories helped students distill their experiences into images and metaphors with remarkable staying power. From the perspective of Spence (1982), students came to understand through the process of recalling and reconstructing personal experiences (h*istorical truth*) that these previous experiences had profound impact on their current reality (n*arrative truth*). For the students in the class, recalling and telling their life stories invoked deeply significant questions of purpose, direction, and meaning. This became an effective means of equipping students with tools to enhance their own reflective practice, or what Harley, Hardy, and Alvesson (2004) call "reflexivity…how one thinks about thinking" (p. B1).

The class was an elective course offered to undergraduate students at a mid-sized private university located in the Pacific Northwest. The class size was14 students and all but one were enrolled in a university sponsored leadership certificate program. Student grade levels ranged from sophomore through senior year. The semester system at the university allowed for a fifteen week session. The class met two days a week, 75 minutes per session (see appendix for course materials and a selection of handouts).

The written assignments for the class were based on the Tichy's (1997) tri-part approach to leadership stories and McAdams' (1993) approach to life stories. Tichy describes three types of leadership stories: Who I Am Stories, Who We Are Stories, and Future Stories. Each story assignment evoked a different response from students. The following provides a brief description of each story assignment along with some insight into the class experience of the student co-author.

It should be noted that of the three story types the Who I Am story and the Who I Am as a Leader interview assignment evoked the most student response and warranted greater class time. Consequently, the following descriptions, including a student perspective, are not evenly distributed in terms of space in this paper.

Who I Am as a Leader Stories

> "If you want to know me, then you must know my story,
> for my story defines who I am."
> Dan McAdams

Who I Am stories are stories about the individual. For leaders, these stories serve as foundational to their values and beliefs. They include descriptions of events, relationships, and situations that have been important in shaping the individual and the beliefs he or she holds. These personal narratives identify key values the individual may hold and how these key values were developed. For the course there were actually two assignments involving Who I Am stories (see appendix). The first involved the student interviewing a leader that invited the interviewee to share turning point moments or significant influences in his or her growth as a leader. The second assignment invited the student to compose a story about him or herself that would reveal an experience that led to a certain belief or conviction that is manifest in their leadership approach.

A Student Perspective

When Dr. Albert tasked us with writing a Who I Am story, a palpable trepidation sank into the room and slowly paralyzed each of the students, myself included. What was this professor asking us to do? I could write about James Joyce's use of the bildungsroman, about Kierkegaard's criticism of Hegelian abstraction, or about the history of the United States mediation in the Arab-Israeli Conflict – but a story about who I am? – that was something different. I suddenly became aware how little thought I had given to this question of who I was. The realization was overwhelming, like an ocean had crashed through my body leaving me empty and uncomfortably grit-free. Lyrics by French artist Yael Naim (2007) capture how terrified I felt realizing my own in-authenticity (I've waited for so long outside myself. You see, I was pretending to be someone else. I was longing to see who I wanted to be).

To an extent, everyone in the class shared the same feeling of not really knowing who we were at our authentic core. We were busy students rushing from one activity to the next who had been suddenly made aware of how we were allowing the day-to-day to swallow our identities. I felt I had betrayed myself for staving off this question for so long, for keeping myself too busy to stop and really think about who I was.

As we delved into our life stories, however, it was impossible to ignore this question any longer; as the class progressed, it became apparent that past experiences were inextricably linked to our notions of self. The notion that certain experiences significantly shape self-conception was at the root of the Who I Am

Story assignment. Dr. Albert offered the following metaphor, "Look at your life as though it were a bookshelf filled with stories of your experiences." He told us that what he wanted for the assignment was for us to select a story from our bookshelf that said something about "who we were," to write it down, and then to present it to the class. Though it was scary to recall some of the stories that had shaped me, Dr. Albert created an environment that made me feel safe enough both to delve deeply into my past and to share my stories in class.

Who We Are Stories

Who We Are stories are stories about a group, family, or an organization that involves significant events and experiences that have shaped a person's common identity. The purpose of these stories is to clarify or emphasize certain beliefs, common history, or shared values within the group. Students were invited to share or analyze stories related to family, communities or teams they had been a part of and had influenced their lives. In class examples were shared from film, literature, and popular culture that reflected a narrative presentation of a group that had a clear identity based on a common history. For example, the film *Remember the Titans* (2000) offers a depiction of the challenges facing a Virginia high school football team in the 1970s as they cope with forced integration. The film concludes with the narrator expressing the value of this memory in helping the community overcome challenges years later.

A Student Perspective

Another benefit of recalling and telling who we are stories is that it illustrates the intensely relational quality of human life. To ask, "Who Am I?" is to investigate the self introspectively; to ask "Who are we?" is to acknowledge that identity is not based solely upon personal interests or character traits, but also upon the people in my life to whom I am closest. The Who We Are assignment made me realize that not only am I an American, a woman, a college student, a classmate, or the sum of my personal "selves," but also, I am a self in relation with others. I am a daughter, a granddaughter, a friend, and a sister.

Future Stories

The final type of story is the Future Story. This narrative shares a view of future goals, dreams, and vision often presented by a leader. President Kennedy's future story of landing a man on the moon managed to mobilize the energy and resources of thousands of scientists to that end and energize the nation to a seemingly impossible goal.

Another approach to future story comes from narrative therapy (Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004). In this view the goal of therapy is a process of

surfacing current life narratives and replacing them with more adaptive ones. These narrative revisions expose us to what might be in our future or what Bruner calls, "possible worlds" (2002, p. 94). In class students were taken through a number of exercises that offered the possibility of writing a future story for themselves that they would view as positive or desirable.

A Student Perspective

Future, or vision, stories are complex and sometimes the most difficult to create because they are about moving people into the unknown. The process of moving into uncertainty, growing into the edges, and exploring boundaries is frightening because of the unfamiliarity of the territory. While we were writing future stories in the class, Dr. Albert encouraged us to let go of what we expected, to be open to something other than what we envisioned for ourselves, to go beyond our own boundaries, and to go beyond what we had been told.

While writing my Future Story, I realized that to begin thinking about my future, I had to be honest with how substantially my past – the good parts along with the bad – has shaped who I am. There are demons in my life that I cannot deny or ignore if I want my life to move forward along the path I am beginning to envision for myself. Some are too painful to wrap my mind around, much less write about, but there are others that I am more prepared to tackle. One of the areas in my life that is a constant challenge, and is an area I am prepared to address, is relationships. I love people – meeting people, being with people, talking to people, making people happy – but sometimes my relationships with the most important people in my life suffer because I do not make enough time for them. In order to re-write this part of my story, I have to think about my relationships and about the specific actions I can take that will promote positive change.

Three Key Ingredients to a Narrative Approach in the Classroom

There are three interdependent phenomena that we feel are at the heart of why the class was such a meaningful experience. While a number of factors must be taken into consideration (e.g., class size, student profile, pedagogical theory), we have chosen to focus on three key factors: the creation of a safe space; fostering the notion of authorship; and, taking students to the edge of knowing.

Creation of a Safe Space

"It can be really scary to be vulnerable—namely, sharing a story about myself that I may not be proud of or I'm scared people will judge me for. I think this class, or

> maybe the people in this class, showed me that I can trust others with my story
> more often than I thought."
> Anonymous Student Feedback

Students described the space in the classroom as "peculiarly truthful," "open," and "a place where I could be vulnerable and honest in a way that I hadn't even been able to be with myself." The open or authentic space was created in part due to the instructor's willingness to take the risk of being candid with his own narrative. In addition the space was created out of the recognition of the shared fear and vulnerability of the participants. "There is much more at stake than a grade here," one student remarked, "this is about identity."

Winnicott (1992) describes the stage between an infant's limited exposure and understanding of the world and the stage by which the infant begins to experience the world in a more realistic fashion as a *transitional stage*. Recently Korotov (2007) utilized the notion of transitional space in explaining how executives achieve personal and professional transformation.

Transitional spaces create opportunities for play and experimentation, help the people inside them overcome change related anxieties, offer novelty that gives an extra boost to desire for changing the self, impose certain rules and structures that are counter-normative to what exists in the world beyond the transitional space, set psychological, temporal and spatial boundaries, and offer a menu of giving figures to people inside the space. All these elements together create the potential for identity experimentation and renewal. (p. 129)

While the three stories the students had to compose serve as the focal points of the course, the first course assignment was to interview someone in a leadership role and write a paper on the interview. This assignment allowed the student the experience of being with a leader who shared a Who I Am story. This project served as a transitional vehicle for students as they began to think about crafting their own stories. This task of creation of a safe space is also similar to Winnicott's (1965) notion of a *holding environment* and reminiscent of Kegan's (1982) functions served by a culture of embedded ness. In both cases the individual is provided the safety, support, and challenge needed to explore and develop.

Fostering the Notion of Authorship

> "Who I am today I am able to link back to specific stories in my life. I came away
> from the class with a better sense of self, more confidence in who I am, and a
> better understanding of my own strengths and weaknesses."
> Anonymous Student Feedback

Using the work of McAdams (1993) as a prime source, students were encouraged to become authors of their own stories. McAdams noted that:

> If I want to know myself, to gain insight into the meaning of my own life, then I, too, must come to know my own story. I must come to see in all its particulars the narrative of the self—the personal myth—that I have tacitly, even unconsciously, composed over the course of my years…through our personal myths, each of us discovers what is true and what is meaningful in life. (p. 11)

With the intent of fostering a more authentic leadership identity, students were led through a process of reflecting on their life experiences and emerging themes that manifest in their current values, life choices and beliefs. As Bruner (1986) suggests, narrative offers an effective means by which to organize human experience, one that captures "the vicissitudes of human intention" (p. 16). So while students constructed their life stories and identified key moments or what Bruner (2002) calls turning points, something deeper occurred in the class which suggests the process of constructing life stories fostered an awareness of the power of crafting self-narratives.

In the first class assignment (e.g., interview of a leader) students were encouraged to ask for turning points, key life events, and ultimately themes from the interviewee's life. The hope was to discern a sense of coherence in the leaders' life stories that connected to a current value, belief, or vocation. But in the first self-story, the Who I Am assignment, students revealed that although the striving for coherence was a personal goal, what occurred was a sense of personal agency (McAdams, 1993) or the ability to shape their own understanding of themselves based on their life experiences, or what we have chosen to call, *authorship*.

Taking Students to the Edge of Knowing

"It was an intentional time to take on a different perspective on life. It was like looking at myself from 'the balcony.' I got to confront issues and see patterns and then confront them. It was very enlightening and cathartic."
Anonymous Student Feedback

There is a certain depth and vulnerability about this process that is more difficult for some than others. It takes one to the center of oneself, to the root of one's motivations, and to the unexplored areas of one's life. The willingness to move into the unknown or unexamined dimensions of one's life was facilitated through the use of narrative. Key classroom climate dimensions that contributed to the willingness of students to explore the unknown were trust, confidentiality, willingness to be vulnerable, and expressions of care and support for each other.

Early in the semester fears of embarrassment (I'm afraid people will laugh at my story or maybe I will get emotional) and incompetence (I'm not a good storyteller) were commonly expressed by students. After the sharing of the *Who* I Am story however, a barrier was crossed. The theologian Paul Tillich (1967) described this movement as crossing a boundary, or as French and Simpson (1999) call it, "the edge between knowing and unknowing" (p. 1). As the semester progressed the students began to feel a certain comfort with the unknown.

Conclusion

 "Transformation refers to a movement through time of reformulating reified structures of meaning by reconstructing dominant narratives" (Mezirow, 2000, p. 19). Creating such an environment is a challenge for any leadership educator. However, through the creation of a space that allowed for risk taking, vulnerability, and self-reflection, students in the leadership and storytelling class were encouraged to explore the power of personal authorship and move to the edges of their own knowing. This process had the effect of moving students more deeply into their own authentic selves and allowed them to emerge with a greater clarity and confidence in their leadership voice. This is the answer the co-authors of this paper offer to the question that began this exploration at the end of the semester: "How did we get here?"

This paper offers an experience of using a narrative approach to authentic leadership development. The goal of our paper was to provide some accounting of the experience, but primarily to offer those interested in utilizing narrative approaches to authentic leadership development some tools and strategies to use. We would like to conclude with some recommended bits of distilled wisdom from this experience by the instructor.

The course and its design must reflect the genuine interest and experience of the instructor. Like authentic leadership, the course must be a manifestation of what the instructor knows, believes, and lives.

The responsibility for the space or classroom environment is in the hands of the instructor. There has to be an invitation to join and participate to the students, but the instructor has to model the way and "hold the space."

The assignments and class design must provide, especially at the beginning of the course, transitions from what the students normally experience to the opportunity to examine ones' own identity and leadership in the form of narrative.

Strategies for authentic leadership development are just beginning to emerge. While storytelling has existed in various forms since the beginning of human

existence, the use of narrative as a tool for developing authentic leaders is clearly in its infancy. The authors strongly encourage leadership educators to explore this exciting nexus and take on the challenge of propelling the field of authentic leadership development forward.

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Appendix

Leadership and Storytelling Course Materials

<u>Course Description</u>

This course offers students an opportunity to explore the growing synergy between two research areas: leadership, and narrative or story. The point of departure for the course is a focus on understanding the role of narrative in our lives. Stories permeate virtually every dimension of our existence as noted in the familiar quote: "Civilizations have existed without the wheel, but no society has ever existed without story."

With the groundwork in narrative provided, the class will begin a focus on the kind of leadership that is being demanded by the current world situation: Leaders who lead from their real selves or, Authentic Leaders. After exploring an understanding of authentic leadership, basic characteristics of this type of leaders, and viewing examples of them, the course shift focus to a key tool for leaders: the leadership story.

Noel Tichy (2002) describes three types of stories leaders have access to: Who I Am Stories; Who We Are Stories; and, Future Stories. The remainder of the course will involve exploring each story type in terms of: definition, examples, usage, and developing skills for personal use.

<u>Course Objectives</u>

This course is designed to provide students with the following:
- An understanding of what narratives are and the roles they play in leadership.
- An understanding of the idea of authentic leadership including a definition, examples and characteristics.
- Exposure to Tichy's categorization of leadership story types and how to use them.
- Development of stories in each category for personal use.

<u>"Who I Am" Story-Assignment</u>

Presentation: 5-10 minutes and 4-6 pages

Story Selection
Consider a selection of stories from your past that you consider to be ones that have shaped you in some way or had a significant impact on you.

The purpose of the story should be to communicate something about you such as your character, values or life direction.

The story should involve some sort of turning point in your life. Usually these events are of a surprising nature and possibly unwanted.

Choose a story that you feel "safe" sharing. Please know that there is NO expectation that this story should reveal incidents from your life that you would prefer remain private.

Be sure to have a title for your story and begin both the written and speaking versions with the point of your narrative.

Classroom Presentation
The presentation in class is an opportunity to refine your skills of storytelling in public.

You can choose to read your story—but I would suggest that you use your written notes for outline purposes rather than simply reading it.

Your sharing of the story can last anywhere from 4-10 minutes. Please allow a few minutes for feedback from the class. I'm allowing 15 minutes for each presentation and feedback/discussion. Time yourself or I can be a timekeeper.

Though you have had speech classes in the past I would like you to work on your storytelling skills for this exercise.

Written Version
Writing your story allows you to be more intentional about the details in your story and to develop it—without the nervousness of public speaking as a distraction—in a way that you remember it occurring.

Your story should be coherent. It should fit together and possess a flow. Only include details and contextual factors that fit with your story. In other words, 'What does the reader/listener need to know to understand this story?"

"Who We Are" Story Assignment

Presentation: 2-3 minutes and 4-6 pages

Story Selection
Consider a selection of stories that you would consider to be Who We Are stories or some form of a collective narrative.

The purpose of this selected story is that it in some way captures a belief, characteristic, or cultural dynamic of a group. The term "group" could be applied to an organization, community, institution, group, team, or nation.

Remember that these stories are shared in a variety of ways: a symbol, book, film, expression, monument, or ritual. These stories matter because they create a sense of identity for the members of the group.

Examples might include the following:
A team may regularly recall a particular game or experience that was difficult or joyous but serves to remind the team members that they can achieve great heights or overcome a present obstacle (e.g., "We Are Marshall", "Remember the Titans", "Glory Road.")

A community symbolizes courage or community identity through the sharing of a story about an environmental disaster, or the existence of a community event (e.g., Mt. Helens eruption; Spokane's Firestorm and Icestorm; Bloomsday.)

An organization, community or nation might represent the inclusion of a marginalized group through a story of a pioneer individual or group who persisted in advocating for the rights of some group (e.g., Rosa Parks, César E. Chávez, or Martin Luther King.)

Focus of the Paper
Your paper should involve the description of the story and its purpose.
Your paper can simply provide an illustration of a "Who We Are" story, or,
Your paper could offer an example of how a revised story impacted a group, or,
Your paper could provide an analysis of an accepted "Who We Are" story and how the story could be revised into a more adaptive one.

"Future Story" Assignment

Presentation: 2-3 minutes and 4-6 pages

Assignment Possibilities
With this final assignment you can either (a) choose to craft a future story for your own life; or, (b) analyze a future story crafted by someone else
(a) I would choose an area of your life that you would like to see develop, change or emerge. How would you like it to look in the future? And then ask, "What do I need to do to get there?" Your future story is a bit like the journey from here to there.

(b) There are countless books, films, short stories and speeches that represent an author's vision of the future or at least "a" future. With this option you could describe the future story and then provide an analysis of that story.

Story Selection
Ideas for the (a) option include areas of your life such as career, relationships, money, body, and spirituality. In a sense your future story about yourself is an answer to the question, "What do I want to create for myself in this area of my life?"

A future story provides a clear and compelling description of a desirable future state. Martin Luther King's vision as expressed in his "I Have a Dream" speech is a powerful story of a nation without hate and prejudice. President Kennedy's inauguration speech provided vivid descriptions of among other things, a landing on the moon by the end of the decade—it occurred after his death in 1969. Winston Churchill described a story of the defeat of Hitler and Nazism and what it would take to get there.