Introduction. Writing a True Story of a Life

> Concerning the life story, there are no precise instructions. The beginning can start at any point in time, just as a first glance can alight on any point within a painting; what matters is that, gradually, the whole picture emerges.
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> – *Michel Houellebecq,* The Possibility of an Island

This story is about Madeline Szerafinski White. Teacher, activist, Catholic nun. My cousin. It is a story about her extraordinary life during extraordinary times. It is a story about the extraordinary impact Madeline had on so many other lives. And it is a story about my effort to write a true story about her life: how writing this book began as a project of documenting and celebrating an extraordinary life and evolved into a more complicated and fraught act of truth-seeking that has been both joyful and painful—and ultimately transformative. In that regard, this is a story about writing as a way to truth.

In writing this story, I am inquiring into the role of writing itself in helping us face the many challenges of living our lives. *That* story includes a kind of chronicle of how my own view and uses of writing have evolved over my lifetime. I am a scholar, a teacher, a researcher, and a professional writer, and writing has always played a central role in my life. But that role has changed significantly over time as I have come to understand—and engage in—writing as a tool for living.

For most of my professional life, I did not see writing in this way, nor did I use writing to help me navigate the complexities of life. At least not knowingly. It may well be that, without realizing it, I have always written as a way to understand my life, to solve the inevitable problems that all people encounter in living their lives, to pursue professional and personal goals, to be happy—to name the world, as education theorist Paulo Freire puts it (*Oppressed*), in pursuing "the ontological and historical vocation of becoming more fully human" (66). But for most of my writing life, I did not see writing as a tool for living. I did not understand the role of the experience of writing, or the potentially transformative power of that experience, in navigating the stormy waters of human life. Rather, I believed that the power of writing lay in the text—that is, in the potential impact of a text, as a container of meaning, on others. I understood writing as a transaction, "a form of mediated, learned activity that carries out social activity at a distance," as Charles Bazerman puts it (9). The writer, Bazerman asserts, "offers temporally and spatially organized representations, transformations, and acts in an attempt to influence the cognitive state, disposition, and mental organization of the readers" (9). Like Bazerman, I saw writing as literate action: the texts I produced would act on readers in some way. However, I did not

appreciate the impact *on the writer* of the act of producing those texts. I did not recognize the power of the experience of writing-in-the-moment to shape my sense of self, and to give rise to the truths I was seeking. I cared only about the texts I was producing and how they might be received, what they might *do* in the world. Now I have come to realize that if writing has shaped my life, it was as much—or more—the *experience* of writing, rather than the texts I produced, that did so.

This book is, in part, the story of that transformation, an account of how I came to appreciate the transformative power of the experience of writing and its potential as a tool for living. Ryan Dippre has advocated a "lived reality perspective on literate action development" to illuminate "the entirety—conscious and unconscious, typified and untypified—of literate action as it is happening *in the experience of the person performing that literate action*" (5). In writing this story, I offer an account of *this* experience of performing *this* literate action as it is happening, and in doing so I am exploring more broadly the transformative potential of the experience of writing-in-the-moment. This account is an effort to explain what I now see as a profound shift in how I conceptualize writing and how I engage in the writing I do at this stage of my life, when truth-seeking through writing is more important to me than literate action that is intended to have some impact on a reader. At the same time, I am trying to write a true story about my cousin Madeline to explore this transformative potential of the experience of writing and to embrace the experience itself as a way to get at the truth of her life. In doing so, I hope to illuminate the possibilities of the experience of writing-in-the-moment as a process of truth-seeking.

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I began writing this story in earnest in late 2021, five years after Madeline's death and in the midst of a pandemic that disrupted and ended so many lives—and prompted many of us to consider what those lives, our lives, might mean. It is a very old question, this matter of what meaning a life might have, and it seems especially pressing at a time of such extraordinary suffering and death, not only because of what happened during the COVID-19 pandemic but also because of longstanding racial divisions that intensified in recent years in the wake of the killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Tyre Nichols, and too many other people of color in the U.S. as well as the deep and increasingly violent political polarization that led to the insurrection at the U.S. Capitol on January 6, 2021—an event that has become a flashpoint in an expanding and disturbing struggle over the very nature of truth. At the same time, the horrifying war in Ukraine, which began with Russia's invasion only a few months after I started writing this book, a war whose tactics recall the horrors of World War II, felt—to me, at my rather advanced age—like a terrible step backwards for humanity, even if history shows us that unspeakable violence toward one another is an unfortunate characteristic of human life.
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During these unsettling times, I began thinking a lot about Madeline, whose life was shaped by the equally unsettling times of the 1960s and 1970s and 1980s, who devoted herself to the struggle for racial equality during decades that were, in large measure, defined by that struggle, whose devotion to social justice prompted her to leave the life of devotion she had led for two decades as a Catholic nun, and whose sense of purpose—driven by her faith, her enormous capacity for love, and her dedication to principles of human dignity and equality—never wavered, despite the risks to which her beliefs exposed her. I am writing this story to try to understand what Madeline's life meant—what it means—to me, to others. I am also writing to try to understand what my own life means—to me and to others—as I approach the end of a long career defined by writing. I wish to examine the extent to which writing itself has any meaning, whether it can help us make sense of our lives in the midst of pain and struggle and the sometimes terrifying uncertainties of human life. I wish to examine the extent to which writing can be a means to truth. I am writing *toward* truth: of a life, of a story, of writing itself.

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When I began writing this story, I thought I knew most of what I needed to know about Madeline. She was revered in my extended family and loved by hundreds, even thousands, of people whose lives she had touched through her work as a Catholic nun, a lifelong educator, and an activist for racial equality. I believed I understood why she had such a significant impact on so many people throughout her life and why she had been such an important figure in my own life. It seemed obvious. The big facts of her life as I knew them are striking.

Sometime in 1946, at the young age of thirteen—only days shy of her fourteenth birthday—Madeline was sent to a residential Catholic high school for girls in Reading, Pennsylvania, to become a nun in the Bernardine Order, the first step in a life of service and faith that few people ever live. As Sister Mary Marlene, she was trained as a teacher and earned degrees in education. In the mid-1960s, she served in a Catholic mission school in west Africa for two years and taught at numerous Catholic elementary schools in the northeastern U.S., including one in Washington, D.C., where she advocated for racial equality during the height of the American Civil Rights Movement. Working with a few like-minded colleagues, she tried to incorporate Black history into the curriculum at that small parish school, while also volunteering her own time to tutor children of color from low-income homes without access to many of the resources they needed to succeed in school. She pressed her school and her convent to better serve people of color and, as a result, clashed with her superiors, who did their best to censor her efforts. She advocated for people who were marginalized by poverty and racism, and she fought for equality and justice at a time when the U.S. was experiencing intense racial conflict and social unrest. Her activism in the midst of that unrest prompted her superiors to order her to curtail her activities, threatening to reassign her to a
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retirement home for nuns in rural Connecticut, where, presumably, she would be out of the way and no threat to the established order. But she refused to be silenced. Instead, she left the convent after twenty years of service to the Church, retaking her given name of Madeline and causing something of a scandal in her conservative Catholic family—my family—who had idolized her for her life of devotion and faith. Subsequently, she returned to Washington, D.C. as a layperson and began teaching in a public school where she was the only White teacher on the school's staff. There she met and fell in love with a divorced Black man, Earle, whom she married in 1979, another act of devotion that deepened the rift with some of her family members and resulted in her estrangement from her mother, my Great Aunt Sophie, who disapproved of Madeline's marriage and made it clear that no family members should attend the wedding. Only four did: I was one of them, along with three of my cousins, all of us in our twenties at the time. We were among the few White people at her wedding, which was held at the home of one of Earle's relatives in Washington, D.C. Madeline and her new husband were effectively banished from her family home in Scranton, Pennsylvania, where she was born and where most of her extended family still lived. When her father died a few years before the wedding, she was told that Earle would not be welcome at the funeral. Some years later, Madeline's mother died, and over time her extended family accepted Earle, who became a fixture at holiday celebrations and family events and who was dearly loved by so many of us. During those years, roughly from the mid-1970s through the 1990s, Madeline continued to teach in schools in Washington, D. C., devoting her work to students who fell into the established categories for risk of academic failure: primarily students of color from families of limited means. She also sponsored many young students from Liberia, where she had served in the Catholic mission school years earlier, so that they could attend college in the U.S. Eventually, she helped establish an association to support these students. When she retired in the early 2000s after 53 years of teaching, hundreds of people attended her retirement celebration to honor her. Some years later, her funeral, only a few months after her beloved Earle's death, was a stunning memorial to her life, attended by many people whose lives she touched, including dozens of her former students whom she helped bring to the U.S. from Liberia.

This is the basic story of Madeline's life that I knew. It is a story of a special person who devoted herself to serving others, who never wavered from her principled path despite the suffering she endured, who always seemed to live according to her beliefs in equality and justice and God's love. It is a story of a woman who was a product of her turbulent times—1960s, 1970s, and 1980s—yet who seemed ahead of her times in significant ways. She entered into an interracial marriage before such marriages became relatively common in the United States. She was part of the American Civil Rights Movement and a lifelong advocate for people who have historically been marginalized and persecuted in American society, and she pursued that work at a time when the Vietnam War was raging and American cities were shaken by riots sparked by racism and police violence,

a time when the assassinations of President John Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and Martin Luther King, Jr. shocked many Americans, including her own family, many of whose members rejected the principles of racial equality and social justice that Madeline embraced. Through all of it, she continued to fight against hatred and to promote tolerance and love.

Madeline was the most remarkable person I have ever known, and for many years I have wanted to write this story. Many years before she died, I began making notes for a book about her. I even told her about it shortly after she retired from teaching, though she dismissed the idea. I did not see then that my desire to tell her story was driven not only by my admiration for her but also by an idea that was a function of my own experiences as a student and a professional writer to that point in my life: a conception of writing as primarily a matter of textual production, which is consistent with prevailing cultural views of what it means to write. I did not see then that I could not write this story then, because I could not yet appreciate the complexity of the truth of her life and I did not yet understand that I needed to write my way to that truth, that writing itself could be a way to truth. But not writing as I conceived of it then. Writing Madeline's story—*this* story—I eventually came to understand, was not a matter of producing a text; it was, rather, a process of truth-seeking, a way to get at truth by writing a true story about her life.

That life, I have always believed, emerged from and illuminated significant moments in the social, cultural, and political history of the U.S. and of the Catholic Church in the latter half of the 20th century. The story of Madeline's life, therefore, is inseparable from momentous historical developments that reshaped American society. At the same time, she pursued a distinctive path in the midst of that history. She lived a life that mattered to so many others. And strikingly, after devoting two decades to the Catholic Church as a Bernardine nun, she left the convent so that she could continue to serve others in ways that she believed were consistent with her Catholic faith and with the message of love preached by Jesus Christ. That, I have always believed, was a remarkable, if puzzling, act of commitment to her most fundamental moral beliefs. She was an extraordinary person whose life of devout service arguably made the world a better place—a more loving, equitable, and tolerant place.

That, at least, is the story of Madeline's life as I have told it for most of my adult life. The truth of this story seemed almost self-evident, and I wanted to share that truth with others, who, I believed, would benefit from knowing something about Madeline's work and life. Writing a true story about her life and the impact she had, I thought, would be a relatively straightforward matter. And writing her story would extend the good work she did by making it visible to others who never knew her. It took two decades of trying to write that story before I came to realize that I couldn't write it. Because I believed I already knew the truth of it.

As I finally did set about writing this story in earnest in 2021, however, it became clear that I knew less about Madeline's life than I had always believed. I came to realize that the truth of her life was elusive at best and its meaning contested among

those who knew her. My memories of the few times I spent with her over the years were vivid and precious, and the big facts of her life as I thought I knew them seemed to point to an obvious narrative of a special woman who lived a remarkable life. But my memories were incomplete, and I began to see big gaps in the story I thought I knew about her life. Initially, I made notes based on my memories and on my own experiences with her over the years: a family Christmas gathering she attended when I was very young; her wedding a decade later; a visit in the 1980s to her home outside Washington, D.C., where I was doing research for a magazine article; celebrating with her at a family wedding a few years before her death; her funeral in 2016. I soon realized that these memories, as compelling as they might be to me, raised more questions about her life than they answered. These were powerful memories connected to some of the most important moments of *my* life—moments I relived and shared with others many times over the years—but ultimately they offered limited insight into Madeline and the life she led. They were my memories and, I came to realize, they were really about me. And the more I revisited them, the more I came to understand how much more there was to know about her.

Talking to my relatives who knew Madeline exposed more gaps in her story and raised further questions about her life. Everyone seemed to have precious memories of her, but few knew concrete details of her life beyond the big facts I have shared here. And many of those facts were called into question by conflicting memories among her relatives. Five years after her death at age 83, her closest relatives seemed unable to answer some of the most basic questions about her life. My online searches did little to fill in these gaps, yielding fewer than a dozen sources with little concrete information about her: a brief obituary, a notice about the conferring of her bachelor's degree from Villanova University in 1962, a reference to an alumni organization she helped establish years later for the African school where she had taught as a nun. These sources were noteworthy only because they made the gaps in what I knew about her life seem even bigger. And Madeline herself left no writing of her own about these events—at least none that I could find—aside from some letters and greeting cards to beloved relatives. It was striking—and dismaying—that there seemed to be so little information available about a woman who—as I knew her, and as others knew her—had had such a powerful impact on so many people, a woman who was so obviously loved and admired, a woman who left a mark on the world, a woman whose life was characterized by devotion to principles of equality and justice and who seemed to embody the message of God's love that her own Catholic Church promoted and to which many others aspired. How was it that so little was known about such a life? Why couldn't those who loved and admired her answer some of my most basic questions about her life? What did that say about the way we all remembered her? What did it say about the stories we tell each other—and ourselves—about who we are, what we do, and why?

The stories about Madeline that are told by those of us who knew her, stories based on these big facts of her life but stories with big gaps, are, perhaps, the only stories we need. If I were to write nothing more about her life than what I have written

here, it might be enough. It might, at least, convey some sense of the significance of her life, celebrate her principled service to others, and document in a general, if superficial, way the important, loving work she did. This writing, this brief text, might be all we need. This eclipsed, incomplete version of her story is a hero's tale—a saint's tale, really—and it serves the purpose of highlighting the impact she had. It also acknowledges the special challenge of the life of service she led. It bears witness to the fact that she helped make the lives of others better, that she worked for equality and peace in ways that, we might justifiably believe, made the world a better place. Maybe that's enough. Why seek to tell a more detailed story, a different story?

Part of the answer is that Madeline's life seems to have embodied truths that matter beyond her life, and in that sense, hers is a story that others should know. Madeline made a genuine difference in the world in significant, discernible ways that most of us can never hope to do, even if we aspire to. I would like to tell that story, that true story, the details of which are striking and sometimes painful but hopeful, too. It seems an important and even necessary story at a time when the very notion of truth is under sustained attack; when the competing stories we tell about ourselves are weaponized for political gain and profit; when unarmed American citizens are murdered by masked federal agents violently enforcing increasingly authoritarian and anti-democratic policies; when fundamental questions about the purpose and meaning of human life have been brought to the fore by yet another vicious and destructive European war, an equally vicious and murderous war in the Middle East, and by smaller but no-less-vicious and destructive wars in Sudan and Yemen and Myanmar and elsewhere; when racism, ever resilient, takes new and virulent and dangerous forms; when thousands of innocent people are slaughtered in renewed conflicts fueled by age-old religious hatreds. Madeline's story, a function of the turbulent times in which she lived, seems to have something important to say to us during our own turbulent times.

Another part of the answer is that writing our stories—trying to write our *true* stories—might be a way to some kind of truth itself, and writing *this* story might help us understand how writing matters, how we might use it as a tool for living in a dangerous world. Writing this story about trying to write a true story about Madeline might inform how we understand—and use—writing itself.

As I embark on this project, approaching the end of my four-decade career as an academic writer and writing researcher and theorist, the various fields interested in writing seem to be struggling to adjust their conceptions of writing and adapt writing practices, both in and out of formal schooling, to disruptive historical and intellectual developments, including the dawn of this so-called post-truth era, driven in part by the prominence of social media and new and powerful digital technologies that are being complicated in disconcerting ways by the rapid emergence of artificial intelligence.[1] These developments call into question longstanding views about

1. This mention of artificial intelligence is one of the few I will make in this entire book, which warrants some explanation, given the fact that, as this manuscript is being

writing and rhetorical practice and prompt scholars to wonder about the future of writing itself, a question which, according to the editors of a leading journal in the field, "merges with the question of human-ness, and thereby humanity" (Davis and Taczak; see also Hill Duin and Pedersen). In the midst of these disruptions (and perhaps driven by them), posthumanist theory has influenced how we understand knowledge-making and language. As a result, it has reshaped contemporary writing theory after the disruptions of earlier theoretical movements, especially post-structuralism, which helped give rise to the so-called "social turn" in writing studies in the 1980s and which became a tool for a sustained critique of the humanism out of which much of the theory that informed writing studies emerged in the 20th century. As composition scholar Laura Micciche has noted, "In current theoretical discourse, complexity reigns, as do nonoppositional stances wearied by critique's taste for subtraction, which has failed to slow the commodification of identity and culture, capitalism as an engine of social life in the United States, or abuses of dominant ideology. Primary tools of the social turn—textual and linguistic analysis as well as ideology critique—have proven important but limited" (488). For Micciche, "What's at stake in reconfigurations of social theory is nothing less than the big wide world that both includes and exceeds subjects, altering understandings of agency, identity, subjectivity, and power along the way" (489). In this milieu, our conceptions of writing are evolving in sometimes unexpected ways, and traditional ways of understanding acts of writing are giving way to an emerging conception of writing as "radically distributed across time and space, and as always entwined with a whole range of others" (489). Such a conception of writing might challenge long-standing ways of understanding the purposes and uses of writing and the development of writing ability over time, but these theoretical and social developments also open up the possibility that the experience of writing-in-the-moment, as distinct

prepared for publication in early 2026, AI has become ubiquitous, increasingly powerful, and inevitable as a tool for writing. Recent studies indicate that the use of AI technologies by college students is almost universal at this point (see Freeman; Study.com). As Brett Shanley puts it in a provocative and illuminating 2026 article, AI represents "a paradigm-shifting innovation for the field of college writing and much else" (7). He goes on to state that "when looked at honestly, it is almost impossible to overstate the impact this technology has on the field of college writing, or, perhaps even, it is growing increasingly impossible to imagine how the field will survive" (8). I agree. I also agree with Shanley's call for "a radical re-imagining of college writing studies" (17) that shifts the focus from textual production and skills development to "our students themselves, both in terms of their knowledge-building of the world and their personal development as complex beings operating within it" (18). The conception of writing that I advance in this book (and in my previous work—see especially *Writing as a Way of Being*) is consistent with this kind of re-imagined pedagogical project, which would value writing as an ethical practice of living rather than simply as a communicative skill. That practice, as I describe it in this book, emphasizes the writer's experience of writing-in-the-moment, rather than the production of text, as potentially transformative. In that sense, AI is neither a tool nor a threat and is largely irrelevant to the project of truthseeking that I demonstrate in these pages.

from the process of writing as textual production or communicative action, can be a locus of truth and a site of transformation in ways that we have perhaps previously failed to appreciate. Writing this story about Madeline is an effort to write *that* story, too, which is part of *my* story as a writer.

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If the big facts of Madeline's life point to a conclusion that she was special, that she made the world a better place as a result of her lifelong pursuit of justice and equality, they also invite us to learn more about that special person and the impactful life she seems to have led, to understand *how* such a life is lived, to find truth in such a life—a truth or truths by which we might define our own lives. The facts of Madeline's life as I know them, compelling yet incomplete, also raise compelling—and sometimes unsettling—questions that seem to demand answers:

Why did Madeline's mother—my Great Aunt Sophie—decide to send Madeline to the convent? What does it take for a mother to give her pubescent daughter to the Church, to send her away to a convent when most other children her age are attending their local schools, playing with their neighborhood friends, and growing up at home with their families? Was giving her daughter to the Church an act of devotion, of faith, of selflessness—an extreme sacrifice for her God? Or was it selfish, an attempt to win divine favor? What did Aunt Sophie want or hope for her daughter—and for herself?

And what did Madeline herself want at that young age? Did she assent to being sent away to a convent to become a Catholic nun? Was she given that choice? Did she have a voice in that decision? Can a girl so young even give her assent to such a decision? And what was it like for her to be sent away from home to a strange place as such a young girl? She must have been painfully lonely. Was she? How did she endure the separation from her family? Did she believe it was God's will? And what if she did? What is the nature of belief in a divine being—of faith—in someone so young? Could she understand the ramifications of such faith, of the sacrifice she was making?

And what was Madeline's life as a nun like? What were the joys and sorrows of coming of age in a convent, away from family and friends, in a place that was not her home, in the context of a regimented, cloistered life so foreign to most of us? Did she embrace that life with a sincere faith? Did she believe she was truly doing God's work—in those early years of training, of study, and then, later, during her service as a teacher in Africa and, eventually, in Washington? And if so, what resolve must she have had to muster the will to leave the convent after so many years? How did she arrive at such a momentous decision? Did she act rashly? Or did she agonize? Did she have doubts? Did she believe she was violating her sacred vows as a nun? Or did her convictions about racial equality and social justice supersede her oath to the convent? Did she think of that act of leaving the convent as sinful, as a breach of her faith? Or as an act of courage, of moral righteousness, a true expression of God's will?
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And what about her powerful commitment to racial justice and equality, which, it seems, informed her decision to leave the convent? Did that commitment develop over time, perhaps as a result of her experiences in Africa and Washington? Did she enter the convent with the same racial prejudices that her family held, with the bigotry of the region where and the era when she grew up? Or did she begin to reject those views at a young age, without her family even knowing her true beliefs? What was it like to devote herself, as a young White woman, to the cause of racial justice and the education of people of color in view of the racism she witnessed in the family she loved and the nation she was part of? And what was it like to live estranged from some in her family, especially from the mother who gave her away to the Church? How did that affect her marriage, her relationship with Earle's family? Did she feel vindicated when that estrangement ended? To me, she always seemed to be in the right, but did she herself feel that way?

What, in the end, did Madeline think of her own remarkable life?

Sister Mary Marlene and Family. Madeline (Sister Mary Marlene) with her family at her home in Pennsylvania, ca. 1955. Her father (Stanley) is behind her; her mother (Sophie) is in the dark dress on the far left of the photo. Robert Yagelski photograph.

As I began writing this book, it seemed to me that these questions went beyond the details of Madeline's life and pointed to larger truths about all our lives. These questions are about the challenges and complexities of living, about identity and faith, about responsibility and commitment, about love and loss, about the moral and ethical uncertainties of human life. They are about how we believe we *should* live and why we so often don't live as we believe we should. They are about finding meaning and purpose in our lives—in human life. And they are about truth itself, in all its complicated, contested glory. That seems reason enough to tell a fuller story of Madeline's life for others to know. A true story of her life.

For most of my professional life, it would not have occurred to me that writing itself might be the way to answer such questions, that it could be a vehicle for truth-seeking. Instead, I would have seen writing as a way to share with others, in the form of a text—a book or essay or article—whatever answers I might have discovered as I researched Madeline's life. But as I am writing in this moment, I am focused on the questions rather than answers that would constitute a text: maybe the very act of posing these questions is the point, no matter what answers I might find or whether answers are even possible. Maybe the point is the act of writing about these questions rather than producing a text that conveys answers to them. After all these years of writing—of producing texts to be read—I am seeing value in the experience of writing as a way to inhabit these important questions, something I did not appreciate as a younger writer and scholar. Indeed, trying to write this true story about Madeline has deepened my sense of the value of this experience of writing-in-the-moment.

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On the few occasions when, in her later years, Madeline visited our hometown for a family wedding or funeral or graduation, I would talk with her about politics and race relations and—more rarely—about her own past, but my memories of those conversations are few and sparse and leave me unable to answer the questions I have posed here. My memories leave the big facts of her life intact until the story I know about that life becomes almost a myth, a fable, even a cliché. The big-facts version of her story seems to reduce her remarkable life to a trope, whereby she becomes a kind of admirable but one-dimensional hero that most of us know we can never be—that Madeline herself could never be. In that regard, my memories do little to help me find a way to any kind of fundamental truth of her life. My memories seem insufficient for helping me make sense of her remarkable—and complicated—life in a way that does justice to it. But these memories are what I have. They are real, and though they might be partial and uncertain, they seem significant and essential. I need them, no matter how little they might reveal of the truth—of *a* truth—of Madeline's life. Or my own.

This story I am writing about Madeline's life, then, is *my* story of her life and of my efforts to write about her life. It is about what I am discovering about her
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life and about what her life means to me, which is not necessarily what her life means to others. And in writing about what Madeline's life might mean, I am making sense of my own life—in *this* moment, *as* I am writing.

In that regard, this story is ultimately a story about telling this story. It is my attempt to explain how writing this book began as an effort to document the life of a special person who devoted herself to making life better for others, and became a complicated process of truth-seeking, in which the very act of trying to write a true story becomes the locus of truth itself. In other words, this is a story about writing and how it can change lives. It is about how writing changed my life as well as the lives of others I have known: students I have taught over the years, friends and family members, people I have known only through their own writing. It is about how writing might help us find a way to truths that we need: about who we are and what we have experienced and how we have lived. And what it might mean.

Writing can change the world. I believe that. And this story—*writing* this story—is about that potentially transformative power of writing. I am not referring here to the Great Writing of the popular imagination—that is, writing by famous novelists, poets, playwrights, and essayists whose works we valorize, study, quote, and analyze for wisdom and Truth-with-a-capital-T. Rather, the kind of writing I am referring to here is writing that we might do in the conduct of our lives: writing as an act of genuine inquiry into our own experiences and the experiences of those around us; writing as a way to make sense of our lives, to find truth, *a* truth, a truth we need; writing as a way to *be* in the moment. Writing as a tool for living. This is a crucial distinction—between Great Writing that we tend to think of as art that conveys knowledge and Truth on the one hand and, on the other, the acts of writing in which we might engage in the living of our lives, whose truths we are trying to identify and understand. The writing I am trying to describe here, the writing I am writing about in this book, is not about producing a text but about the experience of writing in the moment as we seek the truths we need.

In his memoir *A Moveable Feast,* the Great Writer Ernest Hemingway describes his strategy for being able to continue writing when he faced the proverbial writer's block: "All you have to do is write one true sentence. Write the truest sentence that you know … and then go on from there" (22). That's what I aim to do in telling this story. And in doing that—in trying to write one true sentence after another—I hope to find my way to some kind of larger truth. About Madeline's life and my own. About telling stories about our lives. About writing and living. Maybe even about truth itself—or at least, the project of seeking the truths we need in our lives.

And there, as another Great Writer once wrote, is the rub. Because how do you define a "true sentence," exactly? Hemingway doesn't really say. Over the course of his career, Hemingway made many pronouncements, as Great Writers will, about writing as a way to get at what is true. "Good writing is true writing," he said (Phillips 10). But he skirted the question of what is *true*. How do we *know* what is true? He doesn't say.

These are old questions, of course, which have preoccupied philosophers and theologians and Great Writers for millennia—questions that have taken on a new urgency in this age of alternative facts and competing versions of reality. I won't presume to try to address such questions. What I am interested in here—what has simultaneously confounded and thrilled me as I am trying to write a true story about my cousin Madeline—is the question of how one might seek truth in writing. Not Great Writing such as Hemingway's, but writing such as I am trying to engage in right now: writing that is an act of inquiry into what we know (or believe we know) in *this* moment; writing as a way of *being* in this moment; writing-in-the-moment in an effort to understand ourselves and the moment itself. If there is truth to be found—or made—in writing, I suspect it lies in the act of writing, in this experience of writing-in-the-moment, rather than in the product of the writing, the text or the story itself. And I'm guessing Hemingway knew that. Maybe he didn't define a true sentence because the truth lay not in the sentence but in the experience of trying to write that sentence.

If truth does reside in the experience of writing—in the act of telling a story by writing it—rather than in the text, it must be in part because language, written or otherwise, cannot capture the totality of our experience. It can only represent a part of that experience, inevitably transforming or rendering that experience in the quest to make meaning of it. Our experience and the meaning we make of our experience through language are not the same thing. Writing, as a visual representation of language, a physical manifestation of the spoken word, can never be the thing written about. A text is always a construction, a representation of a thing or phenomenon or idea and thus always something other than the thing or phenomenon or idea itself. That is not to say that writing to produce a text is without value or truth. Quite the contrary. Writing as a matter of textual production is a powerful tool and a necessary means of figuring out and, crucially, sharing what we know, what we believe, what we accept as true. It is, as Bazerman shows, a way to act in the world. The texts we create through writing convey wisdom and insights and truths that are shared across time and space.

But the texts produced by an act of writing can never truly contain the things they are about. That is a stunning insight into language that postmodern philosophy and poststructuralist theory have helped us understand, even as they have confounded our never-ending efforts to make sense of our lives and to identify truths we need to live those lives. It is an insight that shook up the foundational conception of writing as textual production that informed my own writing for the bulk of my career. It is an insight that I tried to confront in my scholarly work, especially my first scholarly book, *Literacy Matters*, which I wrote in the late 1990s just before earning tenure as a younger scholar. In that book, I explored the fundamental contingency and uncertainty of agency and meaning that poststructuralism illuminated, and I tried to work out what meant for the teaching of writing. My own writing—that is, my writing process, as it were—didn't seem to be affected by these scholarly ruminations, but I now think that was because

I wasn't really paying attention to what was happening as I continued to try to produce scholarly texts that were meant to share my insights. Eventually, I came to realize that if a text is not the same as the thing it is about, neither is a text the same as the experience of writing it. The text cannot contain the *experience* of writing that text. This story you are reading right now will never quite convey to you this experience I am having as I am writing these words right now. Moreover, what this text might mean and the meaning of this experience I am having as I write this text are not the same. In this sense, the text can only be a fragment of a truth, a potentially powerful but ultimately only partial representation of what might be true; the text—the story—cannot contain all of what we know or believe to be true in the moment. We must seek that truth, I have come to believe, in the experience of writing itself. In the end, that's what this story is really about.

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So this story I am writing about Madeline's life is about how we might find truth, if we can find it at all, in the experience of writing the story itself. In that sense, this story I am writing is also about *story*—why stories matter and how they come to matter. And that can be a fraught exercise. For a story, whether true or not, is still a story, a rendering, which entails its own complexities and uncertainties. Philosopher Crispin Sartwell has challenged what he believes is Western culture's collective obsession with narrative, which he argues arises from "a mania for the teleological ordering of time and of the lives that take place in time" (8). He rejects the use of narrative "in the personal existential project of constructing a coherent life out of the chaos of experience" (9). The kind of storytelling that Sartwell rejects fulfills a basic human need to find meaning in existence, and we all do it all the time—from the stories we tell about our past experiences that reflect our beliefs or values or hopes or fears to the stories we tell about the trajectory of our lives, as if each of us is living the plot of a novel or play that gives our experiences coherence and contains the truth of our existence. Sartwell sees more harm than good in this way of using narrative to find meaning, to *make* meaning, in part because "narratives themselves fail of coherence" (16): "Every characterization of actions allegedly ordered into the structures of plot will always turn out to be radically in excess of any possible narrative. Every narrative is just as plainly slapped together from bits of a possible randomness." In other words, when held up to scrutiny, the stories we tell to order our lives, to give coherence to our experiences, to show meaning in those experiences, fail to do so. They are constructions that impose order and meaning where none exist. Just as poststructuralist theorists claim that a text is not the same as the thing it is about, Sartwell argues that the story of a life is not the life itself. It is a representation of that life, inherently incomplete and insufficient. And, ultimately, a false one at that.

More fundamentally, Sartwell questions "whether human experience and human life are meaningful" at all (10). Narrative, he believes, is a tool we use to create
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meaning that isn't there. Most people I know would reject Sartwell's rejection of meaning. They would dismiss the idea—an idea that is frightening for many—that human life has no meaning. For most of my life, I also would have rejected Sartwell's position on this most important question. Raised in a conservative Catholic home, I accepted as a forgone conclusion that the meaning of human life ultimately rested with God. When that belief weakened in early adulthood, I sought meaning elsewhere: in the teachings of Christian contemplatives like Thomas Merton, in philosophy and literature, in work, in family, in mountaineering, in the practice of Zen Buddhism. In love. Sartwell would probably point out that each of these frameworks of belief or spiritual practice or experience is itself driven by the very same specious use of narrative that he challenges. In other words, in leaving Catholicism for Zen, in seeking meaning in work or mountaineering or love, I was simply replacing one narrative with another, getting me no closer to the meaning I was seeking, which is, according to Sartwell, illusory.

I think Sartwell is right. I find persuasive his argument that we tell stories to construct meaning where it might not exist, to try to impose a bearable order on the sometimes unbearable chaos of living. I am reminded of this need each time I hear a friend or family member say, in the midst of pain or suffering or after a setback at work or a medical emergency, "Everything happens for a reason." That very common expression—common, at least, among the people I grew up with—reflects a pressing need to see meaning in events or traumas or good fortune that seem random and meaningless and without explanation. It reflects, too, a fear of the unknown, of the capriciousness of suffering, of the abyss. And it may well be that Sartwell is right about the potential danger of the stories we tell ourselves and each other to make sense of the inevitable chaos and suffering that is life. But it might also be that there is genuine value in the *effort* to make meaning, even if that meaning is a construction, a fabrication, an illusion. It might be that the *act* of storytelling, rather than the stories we tell, is meaningful, even if it does not lead to meaning.

Sartwell himself suggests as much. In rejecting narrative and "the delusion of distance imposed by the structure of language and representation" (125), Sartwell proposes that we embrace our being in the world, to "stop struggling to reduce everything to means which we can annihilate into ends" (124). In this embrace of the absence of purpose and meaning, Sartwell finds hope: "What's hopeful about our entrapment in the human, conceived as being a matter of linguistic representation and of practical rationality and of historical time, is precisely that it is a delusion" (132). If only we could accept that language is not what makes humans special but is merely—and brilliantly—"a craft by which we sense our connection to the earth," if we could let go of the need to impose order on an inherently chaotic world, "we could learn to let the world be." That, Sartwell believes, "would be a lesson of love" (133).

Writing—the act of writing-in-the-moment, the experience of writing at the moment of writing—can, I have come to believe, be a way to let the world be and

to simply *be* in that world, to embrace our wildness as creatures of the earth, to express love, to find hope in our existence together, even as we pursue possibly illusory truths about our lives. In other words, I want to realize Sartwell's vision of radical acceptance of the here and now; like him, I want to reject the use of narrative as a way to impose order on a universe that resists it and to create meaning that isn't there. But I also want to retain what seems most necessary and hopeful about our human need to tell stories to help us make sense of our lives. In a famous essay, literary scholar Barbara Hardy wrote that "storytelling plays a major role in our sleeping and waking lives": "For we dream in narrative, daydream in narrative, remember, anticipate, hope, despair, believe, doubt, plan, revise, criticize, construct, gossip, learn, hate, and love by narrative. In order to live, we make up stories about ourselves and others, about the personal as well as the social past and future" (5). Or as the influential educational psychologist Jerome Bruner famously wrote, "we organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative—stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing, and so on" (4). In short, telling stories helps us live. In that sense, storytelling seems necessary. It seems to fulfill an unavoidable human need to understand and make meaning in the face of inevitable suffering and uncertainty, no matter how uncertain or illusory that meaning might be. And in telling stories to make meaning, we try to find truth. Storytelling, then, is integral to our efforts to seek truth.

I see no contradiction in rejecting narrative and embracing storytelling, for in the moment of storytelling, of writing our story, we exist—just as, in Sartwell's view, we exist in the wordless moment of ecstasy or the perception of beauty or the sensation of pain or the feeling of wonder. Even if language cannot capture experience, as Sartwell argues, using language is itself experience. It is part of being human, and it is part of the human effort to find truth in human life. In the moment of storytelling, then, in the moment of writing our story, we might find a momentary truth, which might be all we need, even if the truth is that, ultimately, there is no truth we can grasp and hold.

And so I am writing about this powerful, seemingly inscrutable, almost magical thing called writing to which I have devoted my professional life. I am writing about what I have come to know about the importance of the experience of writing-in-the-moment, and how that understanding has evolved over so many years of writing, of trying to write, of trying to make sense of writing, of trying to understand the role of writing in our efforts to find truth.

And I am writing to tell a true story about my cousin Madeline.

In the process, I will have to figure out what "true" means. And I will do that by writing.