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# Life Authorship: A Psychological Challenge for Emerging Adulthood, as Illustrated in Two Notable Case Studies

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Dan P. McAdams<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

A central psychological challenge of emerging adulthood is the construction and internalization of a self-defining life story or narrative identity. In becoming an author for one's own life, the emerging adult develops a personal narrative that selectively reconstructs the past and imagines the future in such a way as to provide life with purpose, meaning, and a sense of temporal coherence. This article sketches the main themes and processes involved in the development of narrative identity in emerging adulthood by briefly reviewing empirical studies and describing two notable case examples—Barack Obama and George W. Bush. Both Obama and Bush sought to discover and/or compose self-defining life narratives during their emerging adulthood years. Despite their many differences, both ended up drawing upon important social relationships and deep cultural sources to develop powerful stories of personal redemption—in Obama's case a story of redemption through liberation and self-discovery, and in Bush's case a story of redemption through recovery, atonement, and the achievement of self-regulation. As illustrated in the case examples, the development of narrative identity should set the psychological stage for meeting the daunting life challenges of the 30s and midlife.

## Keywords

psychological challenge, education, life course, work, emerging adulthood

There is a story, always ahead of you. Barely existing. Only gradually do you attach yourself to it and feed it. You discover the carapace that will contain and test your character. You find in this way the path of your life. (Ondaatje, 2011, p. 181)

Emerging adulthood is that period in the human life course running from the late teens through the 20s wherein young men and women strive to find their way in the world of work, mature love, and adult commitment. Especially salient in modern, postindustrial societies, emerging adulthood is a developmental epoch marked by instability and self-focus, possibilities and transformations, a liminal sense of feeling betwixt and between, and the psychological and social search for an identity (Arnett, 2000). For many young people, emerging adulthood can be fraught with peril and dissatisfaction, should they fail to assume or construct the kinds of instrumental and interpersonal roles that potentially provide adult life with meaning, fulfillment, and stability (Smith, 2011). For others, however, emerging adulthood presents a developmental platform for substantial personal growth. At its psychosocial best, emerging adulthood provides the first-in-a-lifetime opportunity to create an integrative *story* for one's life (McAdams, 1985, 1996). A prime psychological challenge of emerging adulthood, I would submit, is to become the *author of your life* (McAdams, in press). Drawing on two decades of research and theorizing in personality and developmental psychology, in cognitive science, and in life-course sociology, this article

explains how emerging adults become life authors, focusing on recent empirical findings and two notable case examples.

## The Challenge of Narrative Identity

Long before the term emerging adulthood was invoked to demarcate the period from age 18 to 30, Erik Erikson suggested that the search for *identity* marks these critical years in the human life span. Erikson's (1958) seminal case study of identity—*Young Man Luther*—follows the development of the ideological and vocational aspects of Martin Luther's identity search and the implications of this personal transformation for both psychological theory and the history of Western civilization. The identity drama played out between the years 1505 and 1517, which corresponded roughly to Luther's 20s and 30s. During his emerging adulthood period, Luther went from being a pious monk to a church reformer. The transition encompassed dramatic changes in his understanding of himself and the world, including new insights into the meanings of Christian writings and practices.

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The search for identity may begin in adolescence, Erikson suggested, but it typically builds to a crescendo in the emerging adulthood years, as happened for Luther. Therefore, the traditional reading of Erikson's theory of identity, enshrined in textbooks for personality and developmental psychology, is too narrowly focused on adolescence and neglects the fact that Erikson's own case examples of identity development, as well as many early studies inspired by Erikson (e.g., Keniston, 1963), extend the identity search into the 20s and beyond. Creating an identity in emerging adulthood involves exploring various ideological and vocational possibilities in life, as well as possibilities in friendship and love, and eventually committing to principled value positions and an occupational/vocational niche (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). As such, young men and women must decide what they believe to be true and good (ideology) and how they will function in the adult economy (vocation). In addition, identity confers upon the emerging adult's life a sense of what Erikson described as *temporal sameness and continuity*—a unity of selfhood that knits together the reconstructed past, perceived present, and imagined future. Achieving a self-understanding that connects the past and the future, Erikson maintained, is a significant psychological signpost for adulthood:

To be adult means among other things to see one's own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and prospect. By accepting some definition as to who he is, usually on the basis of a function in an economy, a place in the sequence of generations, and a status in the structure of society, the adult is able to selectively reconstruct his past in such a way that, step for step, it seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned it. In this sense, psychologically we *do* choose our parents, our family history, and the history of our kings, heroes, and gods. By making them our own, we maneuver ourselves into the inner position of proprietors, of creators. (Erikson, 1958, pp. 111–112)

How do emerging adults develop the kind of retrospective and prospective understanding of their own lives that Erikson describes in this evocative passage? Drawing on various philosophical (Ricoeur, 1984) and psychological (Murray, 1938) sources, McAdams (1985) first proposed that men and women in their late teens and 20s construct and internalize life stories, or personal myths, to provide their lives with some degree of unity, sameness, and continuity (see also Cohler, 1982). Marked by self-defining autobiographical scenes, central characters, favored plots, and recurrent themes, life stories reconstruct the past and imagine the future so as to explain, to the self and to others, who the emerging adult is, how he or she came to be, and where his or her life may be going in the future. The construction of life stories would appear to be a psychosocial challenge in many different cultural contexts, Western and Eastern. Whether cultural norms encourage construals of self that are independent or interdependent (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), the developmental imperative prevails to articulate continuity in experience—from the standpoints of both the individual and the collective—as experience has evolved from past, present, to future.

Today, researchers use the term *narrative identity* to refer to the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person begins to construct in the emerging adulthood years (Hammack, 2008; McAdams & McLean, in press; Singer, 2004). Narrative identity, then, is the story about who I am, how I came to be, and where I may be going next that a young man or woman constructs and internalizes—a story that he or she continues to work on for much of the rest of the adult life course. Narrative identity does not encompass *all* of the different aspects and functions of identity that Erikson and other scholars typically invoke (see Schwartz, Luyckx, & Vignoles, 2011), but it does capture the essential identity process of consolidating a sense of temporal continuity in life, and thereby affirming life meaning and purpose over time. Moreover, narrative identity assumes a prominent position in the constellation of psychological features that comprise an individual *personality* (McAdams & Pals, 2006). In the full adult personality, life stories layer over personal goals, values, and motivations, which themselves layer over those basic temperament dispositions, like extraversion and neuroticism, encompassed in the Big Five model of personality traits (McAdams & Olson, 2010).

### Becoming the Author

To articulate and commit to a narrative identity is to become an author of one's life. In modern societies, men and women compose the first drafts of narrative identity in their emerging adulthood years. There is a sense, then, in which the author waits in the wings for almost two decades, from infancy through early adolescence, gathering material for the self-defining story that he or she will someday write. Nonetheless, a great deal happens in those early years, some of which will have implications for the kind of author who will eventually emerge and the kind of story which the author will tell. Temperament characteristics, early attachment experiences, and peer relations, for example, may color the aesthetic sensibility that an author brings to the task of composing a narrative identity (McAdams, 2008). A temperament bias toward negative emotionality or the incorporation of insecure attachment models may slant an author's perspective toward stories of unfulfilled expectations and frustrated dreams. After all, the stories that ultimately emerge as narrative identity reflect the life as it is actually lived as well as the author's characteristic proclivities for making meaning out of lived experience.

The developmental psychology of narrative identity begins with the emergence of autobiographical memory in the second and third years of life (Fivush, 2011). By age 3, most children are able to tell little stories about events in their daily lives, as they remember them. By age 4, they have consolidated what developmental psychologists call a *theory of mind*, enabling them to make inferences about desires and beliefs in the minds of others (and in their own minds). Telling a good story depends on knowing that characters in the story act upon their own wishes, intentions, and beliefs (Bruner, 1990); therefore, the establishment of theory of mind marks a major step forward on the road to becoming an author. By age 5 or 6, children understand that a story is set in a particular time and place, incorporates motivated characters who seek to accomplish

goals over time, and typically builds to a climax and then a resolution. If a story does not conform to conventions such as these, children may find it confusing and difficult to remember, or they may recall it later with a more conventional form that it originally had.

Full self-authorship, however, requires more than merely telling coherent stories about individual episodes in one's life. In narrative identity, the author must also articulate what personal memories *mean*. In early adolescence, people begin to employ the skills of *autobiographical reasoning* in order to derive meanings from personal experiences (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). The term autobiographical reasoning refers to a wide set of interpretive operations through which people draw upon autobiographical memories to make inferences about who they are. For example, a person may trace a particular passion in life back to an early event "where it all began," or may designate a specific episode from the past as a "turning point"—"I was never the same after *that* happened." In another form of autobiographical reasoning, a person may tell how a particular episode conferred upon the self a lesson learned or insight gained (McLean & Pratt, 2006). In this regard, research on narrative identity suggests that people are especially eager to derive lessons and insights from negative emotional scenes in life, searching for redemptive meanings in suffering and adversity (Adler, Skalina, & McAdams, 2008; McAdams, 2013).

Autobiographical reasoning also encompasses the ways in which authors string together multiple events into causal sequences, in order to make a point or draw a conclusion about the self (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). On college admissions essays, candidates may arrange important episodes from their past into a narrative that explains how they came to hold a certain value or aspiration in life, or why their admission to the particular college represents the logical, even inevitable, end point in a sequence of personal events defining who they were, are, and hope to become. Although they may not explicitly define their task as such, admissions officers may be judging not only the quality of an applicant's autobiographical experiences but also the reasoning the applicant uses, as an author of self, to make narrative sense of those experiences. In a similar vein, research on psychotherapy patients who experience successful therapeutic outcomes shows that they tend to organize memories of particular therapy sessions to tell a heroic story of individual triumph over an implacable foe (Adler, 2012; Adler et al., 2008). In these instances, autobiographical reasoning serves to arrange the memories of individual sessions into a recovery narrative that illustrates the protagonist's steadily accelerating individual agency.

Developmental research shows that autobiographical reasoning skills begin to emerge in late childhood and early adolescence and continue to grow into the emerging adulthood years. Older adolescents and young adults show more facility than their younger counterparts in (1) deriving organizing themes in their lives, (2) sequencing personal episodes into causal chains in order to explain their development, (3) illustrating personal growth over time, (4) identifying clear beginnings and endings in their life narrative accounts, and (5)

incorporating foreshadowing, retrospective reflection, and other markers of mature self-authorship (Habermas & Bluck, 2000; Habermas & de Silveira, 2008; McAdams et al., 2006; McLean & Breen, 2009; Pasupathi & Wainryb, 2010). From early adolescence to emerging adulthood, furthermore, storytellers develop a more detailed understanding of the typical or expected events and transitions that mark the human life course—when, for example, a person leaves home, how schooling and work are sequenced, the expected progression of marriage and family formation, what people do when they retire, and so on (Thomsen & Bernsten, 2008). In modern societies, moreover, emerging adults often spend many years in advanced schooling, job training, or other regimens for learning through which they obtain very specific knowledge about the kinds of lives and life course expectations—professional and personal—that may prevail in a given line of work or a particular subculture or community. These expectations provide an overall developmental script for the life story, within which the author can construct his or her personalized narrative identity.

Authoring a self-defining life narrative is a process embedded in the social ecology of everyday life. From adolescence through the emerging adulthood years, people construct narrative identity through a process of experiencing events, narrating those experiences to others (such as friends and parents), monitoring the reactions of others to those narrations, editing the narrations in response to the reactions, experiencing new events, narrating those new events in light of past narrations, and on and on. Over developmental time, then, selves create stories, which in turn create new selves, all in the context of significant interpersonal relationships and group affiliations (McLean, Pasupathi, & Pals, 2007). Narrative identity emerges gradually, through daily conversations and social interactions, through introspection, through decisions young people make regarding work and love, and through normative and serendipitous passages in life, as when a student meets with a vocational counselor to discuss "What do I want to do with my life?" or a young couple sit down to write their marriage vows.

Gender, ethnicity, race, and social class strongly shape the authorial process. Women tell different kinds of stories than men tell, based both on different experiences and different cultural expectations regarding the kinds of narratives women and men are supposed to tell. Culture provides a menu of images, metaphors, and plots for the construction of narrative identity (Hammack, 2008; McAdams, 2013). Emerging adults sample from the menu in constructing individual life stories, aiming to find narrative forms that capture their own personal experiences, allow for their own limitations and constraints, and convey their aspirations for the future. They appropriate models for living that prevail in the cultures wherein their lives have their constituent meanings. In this sense, self-authorship is rarely experienced as an act of full authorial freedom, but rather as a matter of cobbling together a life narrative that works within a particular sociohistorical context, given prevailing constraints and opportunities.

Let us now examine how the process of authoring a story for one's life may unfold in the emerging adulthood years by

considering two notable cases. The first is the 44th president of the United States—Barack Obama. The second is his immediate predecessor—George W. Bush. The first two American presidents of the 21st century offer a stark contrast in narrative identity, rooted in the very different ways in which these two men experienced the emerging adulthood years. And yet both eventually constructed narrative identities that expressed a deep sense of temporal coherence and affirmed a strong life purpose. For all their differences, Barack Obama and George W. Bush eventually articulated stories for their lives that set them up well for the challenges and responsibilities of mature adult life and for public service. In both cases, moreover, the authors drew upon a wellspring of social and cultural sources to create quintessentially *American* life stories (McAdams, 2011, 2013). Their respective journeys through emerging adulthood and the resultant life stories they eventually told (and lived) illustrate the intricate interplay between culture and the self in the development of narrative identity.

### A Story of Self-Exploration

By the time Barry Obama arrived as a freshman at Occidental College in the fall of 1979, he had already formulated a set of questions that would guide his search for identity. *Who is my father? What is my calling in life? What does it mean for me to be a Black man in America?* His biological father—Barack Obama, Sr.—left his wife and infant son behind in Hawaii to attend Harvard University for his studies, and then to return for good to his homeland of Kenya. Barry met his biological father only once, when Barack, Sr. flew back to Hawaii for a short visit in 1971. Yet, his mother regaled her firstborn with heroic stories of the father, whom she described as a great scholar and a distinguished African man of the world. Growing up with his maternal grandparents in Hawaii and Indonesia, Barry Obama enjoyed many friendships and happy times, partly as a function of his easy-going temperament and his legendary “cool.” At the exclusive Punahou School in Honolulu, the teenager did well in his studies and played on the varsity basketball team. Punahou enrolled students from many different ethnic and racial groups, including native Hawaiians and students of Asian and European descent. There were, however, relatively few African Americans. As a result, Barry earnestly studied up on African American culture—he learned how to be Black—through watching television, listening to African American music, and reading magazines and books featuring such African American icons as Ralph Ellison, Langston Hughes, and Malcolm X. Born to a White mother and Black father, he struggled to reconcile the racial polarities that he experienced in high school, as described in this passage written nearly two decades later:

I learned to slip back and forth between my black and white worlds, understanding that each possessed its own language and customs and structures of meaning, convinced that with a bit of translation on my part the two worlds would eventually cohere. Still, the feeling that something wasn't quite right stayed with

me, a warning that sounded whenever a white girl mentioned in the middle of a conversation how much she liked Stevie Wonder; or when a woman in the supermarket asked me if I played basketball; or when the school principal told me I was cool. I did like Stevie Wonder, I did love basketball, and I tried my best to be cool at all times. So why did such comments set me on edge? (Obama, 1995, p. 82)

At Occidental, Barry took classes in politics, history, and literature mainly, and he made friends with the more politically active Black students on campus. He wore leather jackets, drank beer, and smoked marijuana. He began to use the name “Barack” to signify a stronger identification with his mythic father and a newfound sense of worldliness and sophistication. After his sophomore year, he transferred to Columbia University, desiring a more urban and diverse social environment. He did not, however, take as much advantage of the social environment as expected. Obama found it difficult to make close friends at Columbia. For the first time in his life, he spent significant chunks of time alone. During his senior year, he received a phone call from Africa telling him that his father had died in an automobile accident. After graduation, he stayed in New York for two more years, working for the Business International Corporation and the New York Public Interest Research Group. In an interview years later, Obama looked back on his time in New York (ages 20–24) as an especially intense period of identity search. In New York, he saw that

a whole bunch of stuff that had been inside me—questions of identity, questions of purpose, questions of, not just race, but also the international nature of my upbringing—all those things [were] converging in some way. And so there's this period of time when I move to New York and go to Columbia where I pull in and wrestle with that stuff, and do a lot of writing and a lot of reading and a lot of thinking and a lot of walking through Central Park. And somehow I emerge on the other side of that ready and eager to take a chance in what is a pretty unlikely venture: moving to Chicago and becoming an organizer. So I would say that's a moment in which I gain a seriousness of purpose that I had lacked before. Now, whether it is just a matter of, you know, me hitting a certain age where people start getting a little more serious—whether it was some combination of factors—my father dying, me realizing I had never known him, me moving from Hawaii to a place like New York that simulates a lot of new ideas—you know, it's hard to say what exactly prompted that. (Remnick, 2011, p. 114)

At age 24, Obama moved to Chicago to take a position as a community organizer under the direction of Jerry Kellman. A White Jewish activist from New York, Kellman headed a coalition of churches and community groups on the far south side of Chicago, an area of abandoned steel mills, dilapidated housing, high crime rates, and bad schools. Because the far south side was predominantly African American, Kellman needed a Black organizer to work in the churches and the streets. By dint of complexion and vocation, Barack Obama fit the part. Obama worked in various capacities with neighborhood groups,

churches, the police, and politicians in Chicago. He organized neighborhood cleanups and crime-watch programs, sponsored career days for area youth, and worked to secure agreements from city aldermen to improve sanitation services.

Community organizing was grueling work, and Obama experienced many failures and made many mistakes. One persistent problem was that others often perceived him to be distant and aloof, even when they admired the work he was doing. Aware of the problem, Obama set out to become a better listener. He came to value small talk and moments of idle conversation, wherein people opened up to tell the stories of their lives. And in the process, Obama began to open up, too. He learned that “beneath the small talk and sketchy biographies and received opinions people carried within them some central explanation of themselves. Stories full of terror and wonder, studded with events that still haunted or inspired them. Sacred stories.” This realization “finally allowed me to share more of myself with the people I was working with, to break out of the larger isolation that I had carried with me to Chicago.” Over time, Obama found that “those stories, taken together, helped me bind my world together.” They gave me “the sense of place and purpose I’d been looking for” (Obama, 1995, p. 190).

Obama spent 3 years in Chicago as a community organizer (ages 24–27). Then, he attended law school at Harvard. Upon completion of his legal studies, he returned to Chicago, where he worked briefly as a lawyer, taught classes at the University of Chicago law school, met and married Michelle Robinson, and eventually launched a political career. Back in Chicago, he also began work on an autobiographical book, entitled *Dreams from My Father* (Obama, 1995). *Dreams* chronicles Obama’s childhood years and provides a vivid depiction of his search for identity as an emerging adult. Indeed, the book itself, structured as a narrative of ascent and redemption, is a detailed externalization of the personal myth he constructed in his 20s to provide his life with meaning, purpose, and temporal continuity (McAdams, 2013). In other words, Obama’s first autobiographical book is quite literally his narrative identity, transcribed into the written word, as he understood his narrative identity to be upon graduation, in his early 30s, from the emerging adulthood period. As Erikson (1958) would have it, *Dreams* tells the story of a man who now “sees his own life in continuous perspective, both in retrospect and prospect,” such that “step for step, [the story] seems to have planned him, or better, he seems to have planned it” (p. 111).

In writing *Dreams*, Obama provides answers to the three key questions of his identity search.

*Who is my father?* The author of *Dreams* tracks the long evolution of his beliefs and feelings about the complex man who abandoned him as an infant. In turn, an accomplished scholar and a charlatan, a generative patriarch and a drunk, an instigator for African democracy and a hopeless authoritarian, resolute and feckless, Barack Obama, Sr. was a bundle of contradictions, and his American son sought to comprehend and internalize them all when he traveled to Kenya to interview distant family members during the summer before he attended Harvard.

*What is my calling in life?* His years as a community organizer on the south side of Chicago convinced Obama that his calling was public service. Despite the frustrations and setbacks, Obama felt irresistibly drawn to community organizing for what he described as its “promise of redemption” (Obama, 1995, p. 135). The gritty and thankless work he performed in the Chicago streets aimed to deliver people from their miseries to an enhanced status or state, the fundamental meaning of redemption (McAdams, 2013). Moreover, Obama came to link community organizing to a broader political vocation that he associated with the grand narrative of African American, and more generally *American*, liberation and progress—the long arc of history that bends toward justice, as Obama described it, running from the Emancipation Proclamation to Martin Luther King, Jr. and encompassing women’s suffrage, civil rights, and the expansion of freedom and equality.

The same redemptive narrative helped to answer the third identity question: *What does it mean for me to be a Black man in America?* It meant continuing the pursuit of the redemptive dream, building on the Black legacy of Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, W. E. B. Du Bois, Ralph Ellison, Martin Luther King Jr., Jesse Jackson, and other African American icons. And it meant living on the south side of Chicago, with other African American men and women, attending a Black church, and identifying wholeheartedly with Chicago’s Black community. And perhaps most of all, it meant marrying a Black woman from Chicago, which he did at age 31.

## A Story of Self-Regulation

If Barack Obama needed to find the father who abandoned him, George W. Bush needed to lose the father he had known all his life.

By the time George W. Bush enrolled in Yale University in 1964, his father—George Herbert Walker Bush—was already a millionaire businessman and a rising star in the Republican Party. A decorated fighter pilot in World War II, a varsity athlete and top student during his own years at Yale, a fabulously successful oil tycoon in Texas, and an all-around nice guy with hundreds of close friends and a matchless family pedigree, the father was an impossible act to follow—and yet the son sought to follow it. Like his father, George W. Bush attended the elite Andover Academy for high school and was inducted into the secret Skull & Bones Society at Yale, but his grades were always mediocre and he excelled at fraternity beer pong rather than varsity baseball. Like his father, he flew fighter jets during wartime (the Vietnam War), but over the sunny skies of Texas as a member of the Texas Air National Guard, rather than in actual battle. Amazingly, like his father, he proposed marriage to a coed from Smith College at the age of 20, which was the age at which George Bush Sr. proposed marriage to Barbara Pierce, who happened to be a student at Smith College in her day. George Sr. and Barbara eventually became president and first lady, 1989–1993; the son’s engagement with Cathy Wolfram broke off during his senior year. And like his father, George W. Bush tried to make his fortune in the oil industry, but in the son’s case every hole his

companies ever drilled, during his 20s and 30s, came up dry. In terms of narrative identity, George W. Bush spent the bulk of his emerging adulthood years fashioning a story for his life that followed, chapter and verse, the heroic narrative of his father. The authorial effort failed, miserably; the first draft of the son's narrative identity never went to press.

There were two obvious reasons that George W. Bush was never able to develop a narrative identity along the lines drawn up by his father. The first is that George W. Bush was no George Bush Sr. The son loved the father dearly and admired his character and his accomplishments, but the two men were temperamentally and intellectually very different and had very different life experiences, especially during their respective years as emerging adults. Inspired by Franklin Roosevelt's call to patriotism in 1941, the father enlisted in the military and became the youngest naval fighter pilot in the war. After Japan surrendered, the father reunited with his sweetheart to start a family, rushed through college in short order, with excellent grades and a decent batting average on the varsity team, and eventually set out for Texas to launch his career. As a leading edge baby boomer, the son attended college during those years (1964–1968) when the Vietnam War went from being a noble national effort, in the minds of most Americans, to a painful stalemate and a lightning rod for national dissent. The son joined the Texas Air Guard to avoid the draft. During his time in the Guard and after, George W. Bush drifted from one failed job and relationship to another. Looking back on his mid-to-late 20s from the vantage point of middle age, Bush described those years as his “nomadic period.” He lacked purpose and direction. He still hoped to become like his father someday, but he could not figure out a way to live the plot that he imagined.

The second reason that George W. Bush failed to live his father's story was *alcohol*. The Delta Kappa Epsilon (DKE) fraternity parties at Yale were like the movie *Animal House*, and George W. Bush regularly played the role of John Belushi. As one fraternity brother recalled those times, “we drank heavily at DKE. It was absolutely off the wall—appalling. I cannot for the life of me figure out how we made it through” (Andersen, 2002, p. 64). Beginning in college and running through age 30, George W. Bush was arrested 3 times for alcohol-related activities. Driving his 17-year-old sister Dorothy home after 3 hr of heavy drinking in 1976, he was pulled over in Kennebunkport, Maine, and given a sobriety test. His blood alcohol level registered 0.12; he subsequently pleaded guilty to the charge of driving under the influence. Throughout his 20s and 30s, George W. Bush drank heavily, so heavily that friends and family members worried that he was becoming an alcoholic. Even as he held down various jobs, started a family, and taught Sunday school at the local Methodist church, Bush continued to abuse alcohol. His social activities were dominated by what he called “the 4 Bs” in life: “beer, bourbon, and B & B” (Andersen, 2002, p. 106). In the evenings, he regularly came home drunk, after enjoying beers and shots with friends. On more than one occasion, his wife threatened to leave him. “It's me or Jim Beam!” she is reported to have told him. Until his 40th birthday, it was not clear what choice he would make.

If, psychologically speaking, emerging adulthood corresponds to that period in the life course wherein the young person struggles mightily to find his or her authorial voice, then it could be argued that George W. Bush did not finish the main work of emerging adulthood until his early 40s. It was in his early 40s when Bush finally abandoned his father's story and began to tell a different narrative for his life—a story of redemption through recovery and atonement (McAdams, 2011). The story chronicled his redemptive journey from the dissolute years of his nomadic period to self-regulation in middle age. As Bush has told the story again and again, in print (Bush, 1999) and in person, three turning points stand out.

First, marrying Laura Welch, at age 31, helped to settle his wanderlust and reinforce his image of himself as a responsible adult who was capable of commitment. Bush (1999) characterized his marriage to Laura as “the best decision I ever made” (p. 79). Second, Bush experienced a profound religious conversion in his late 30s, partly as a result of private consultations with an itinerant preacher named Arthur Blessitt. In the spring of 1984, Blessitt and Bush prayed together in a Holiday Inn coffee shop in Midland, Texas, where Bush followed the evangelical Christian practice of accepting Jesus as his lord and savior. In doing so, he incorporated into his narrative identity a set of culturally mediated metaphors and concepts for the life course—ideas regarding sin and salvation, the story of the prodigal son, the sense of being chosen by God, the role of epiphany in self-development—that have colored the life narratives of American evangelicals for nearly 200 years, going back to the Christian tent revivals of the early 19th century (McAdams, 2013). Third, on the morning after his 40th birthday celebration, still suffering from a killer hangover, Bush went for his customary run, and upon returning pledged to Laura that he would never drink again. If the public record is to be believed (and there is no reason to doubt it), he never did. He gave it all up, cold turkey. In the redemptive story Bush regularly tells, he traces his subsequent success in business (as owner of the Texas Rangers baseball team) and in politics to his swearing off alcohol. And he mainly credits Laura and Jesus for his dramatic self-regulatory accomplishment. Along with the father he so wanted to be, they are the main heroes in George W. Bush's narrative identity, the powerful and virtuous agents who helped to redeem the story's protagonist.

## Conclusion

When development follows a normative course, the life stories constructed in the emerging adulthood years set the author up well for the psychological and social challenges that adults invariably face in their 30s, 40s, and beyond. Arguably, the greatest challenge of them all is what Erikson (1958) described as *generativity*—the task of guiding and promoting the next generation through parenting, teaching, mentoring, leadership, and engaging in a wide range of activities aimed at leaving a positive legacy for the next generation. Ideally, the author's narrative identity should support a generative life in the midlife years. Research has shown that adults who score high on

well-validated measures of generativity tend to construct narrative identities that resemble, in many ways, the personal stories of redemption developed by Barack Obama and George W. Bush (McAdams, 2013; McAdams & Bowman, 2001; McAdams, Diamond, de St. Aubin, & Mansfield, 1997; McAdams, Reynolds, Lewis, Patten, & Bowman, 2001). Despite the clear differences between them, both Obama and Bush ended up articulating life stories that celebrated the power of redemption—the movement from suffering to an enhanced status or state. In both cases, furthermore, the authors drew upon the deep wellspring of redemptive imagery to be found in American history, heritage, and narrative culture—the stories that Americans have loved to tell about themselves for hundreds of years (McAdams, 2013). For Obama, redemption is the upward thrust of liberation and social progress, epitomized in his own personal narrative of ascent through self-discovery and associated with a grand historical arc that bends toward justice, equality, and freedom. For Bush, redemption is the move from sin to salvation, the recovery of a lost innocence and personal agency through self-regulation, epitomized in his personal triumph over alcohol and deriving its inspiration from a powerful American tradition of evangelical Protestantism.

Redemptive life narratives, like those constructed by Obama and Bush, support generativity because they give the author the hope and the confidence needed to carry on with the daunting tasks of parenting, leadership, civic engagement, and other generative challenges in midlife, all of which insist that men and women make personal sacrifices and invest heavily in something beyond the self, be that raising a family or working to make the world a better place (McAdams, 2013). Nonetheless, there are many different kinds of life stories that an adult might construct to support a generative life in midlife—a wide range of different story forms that go well beyond the kind of redemptive narratives formulated by Obama and Bush. Moreover, stories of personal redemption are not without their limitations and dangers. For example, McAdams (2011) argues that Bush's personal narrative of redemption expressly and dramatically shaped decisions he made as president in ways that were detrimental for public policy and international relations. There is no perfect story for life, no sure path that the author can take to assure that all things will work out happily in the end. Nevertheless, emerging adulthood challenges young men and women to become authors for their own lives. Their efforts to construct a meaningful story for life aim to consolidate a sense of identity in the world of work and love while paving the way for the daunting challenges, and exciting opportunities, that lie ahead.

### Author's Note

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### Author Biography

**Dan P. McAdams** is the Henry Wade Rogers Professor of Psychology at Northwestern University, where he also serves as Chair of the Psychology Department. He is the Director of the Foley Center for the Study of Lives. His research examines personality development in adulthood, with an emphasis on generativity and the stories adults construct to make sense of their lives. McAdams is the author most recently of *The Redemptive Self* (revised and expanded edition) and of *George W. Bush and the Redemptive Dream: A Psychological Portrait*.

Emerging Adulthood book. Read 20 reviews from the world's largest community for readers. Recently the lives of people from age 18 to 29 have changed so d...Â Start by marking "Emerging Adulthood: The Winding Road from the Late Teens Through the Twenties" as Want to Read: Want to Read savingâ€¦| Want to Read. The place of emerging adulthood within the adult life course is discussed. The weaknesses of previous terms for this age period are examined, and emerging adulthood is argued to be preferable as a new term for a new phenomenon. With respect to the question of whether emerging adulthood is experienced positively or negatively by most people, it is argued that it is positive for most people but Emerging adulthood is a new developmental stage, taking place between adolescence and young adulthood, proposed by psychologist Jeffrey Jensen Arnett. It is defined as a period of identity exploration that takes place before individuals make long-term adult commitments. Arnett has argued that emerging adulthood should be added to the eight life stages in Erikson's stage theory. Emerging adulthood is characterized by change and exploration of possible life directions, jobs, residences, partners, and worldviews. It is not a universal period of development but exists under certain conditions that have occurred only recently in some cultures. Social Changes Leading To Emerging Adulthood. Over the past half-century, demographic shifts have taken place that have changed the nature of adolescence and early adulthood. People are getting married later than ever before. EMERGING ADULTHOOD 9. types of questions as well. For example, here is a portion of a 25-year-old African American woman's response to a question about what makes a person an adult (Arnett, 2004)Â Nevertheless, emerging adulthood is a distinctly self-focused time of life, which is different than being self-centered.