The Story behind the Deathbed Story

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This article is a companion article to "What Do You Say on Their First Day?" This second article has two aims: to help make the contents of that first article more intriguing; and to help inspire others to use the contents of that article to conduct their own, similar interventions. If you have not done so already, please consider reading the introductory paragraphs of that first article now, up to footnote 1. Because the contents of that footnote are so important, I will repeat them here as the next two paragraphs. (If you have already read that footnote, feel free to skip the next two paragraphs.)

In this second article (that you are reading now), I answer a series of questions about the material that appears after footnote 1 in the first article. Where did that material originally come from? What was that like? What caused me to begin sharing it with others? What convinced me that I absolutely must begin sharing it with all of my students? What effects did that have? What was it like to share it with my young children (in the form of a bedtime story), and what effects did it have on them? Once I began presenting it to all of our new university students at our New Student Conferences, how did it change and why? Why publish that article in exactly that way? What is my exact hope for that article, and what is my most urgent message? One by one, I answer all of these questions (plus two that I cannot list in advance).

If you hate seeing the trailer before the movie, then read the rest of "What Do You Say on Their First Day?" first and save this Q&A article for last. If you love seeing the trailer before the movie, then I recommend that you read at least some of this Q&A now, before you read the rest of that first article, because it will certainly pique your curiosity, and because this will probably give you an even better experience. (The answers in this Q&A are ordered from least spoiling to most spoiling. If you reach a point where the answers have begun to seem too spoiling, stop, read the rest of that first article, and finish this Q&A later.) If your favorite way to watch a movie is to first watch "The Making Of" that movie, then feel free to read this entire Q&A before resuming that first article, because that is exactly what it is.

Story 1 and Story 2

As you have seen, or will see, "What Do You Say on Their First Day?" contains two stories, a "story about me," and a "story about you." In this second article (that you are reading now), these will be referred to as Story 1 and Story 2. Many of my students affectionately refer to Story 2 as

"The Deathbed Story." For 20 straight years, I have told many of my students Story 1. I have told *all* of them Story 2.

For most of my life, I was positive that Story 2 would always be the story, out of all the stories I would ever tell, that I'd treasure the most. I was wrong. The story that I treasure the most is told, for almost the very first time, in the article you are reading right now.

Eight Questions and Answers

1. Where did this material originally come from? What was that like? What caused me to begin sharing it with others?

I have been contemplating Story 2 since I was 14 years old, in 1987. I never invented Story 2. I *dreamed* it. I awoke from that dream deeply traumatized and unsure (even to this day) what to make of it. After that dream, nothing was ever the same again. Soon, a beautiful girl I had never seen before asked me to dance at a school dance. Until that moment, I had spent my entire life panicking and fleeing in every such situation. This time, thanks to that dream, I suddenly saw things the way that I *would* see them, and so, to my surprise, I did the opposite of what I would always do. I danced with her, I dated her, and, years later, I married her. None of that would have happened had it not been for that dream.

Suddenly, my life became littered with examples just like this. Whatever life path I had been on before, I was now on a very different one, and the new one was so much better. I went on to have the richest and most deeply satisfying high school experience of anyone I had ever met.

I thought I would stay on that new path forever, but I was wrong. Gradually, I stopped thinking about that strange dream. By the time I went to university, I never thought about it. What a difference! Especially compared to my absolutely wonderful experience in high school, my experience in university was an absolute nightmare.

In Story 1, I talk about this nightmare in some detail, and I mention how something rescued me from it. That something was the experience of deciding to think all over again about the contents of my long-ago dream, this time not as a dream, but as a thought experiment. To my shock, it completely transformed my life for the better, even more than the original dream did. That year, as I climbed back out of that hole, I made the universe a promise: to help as many students as possible experience the benefits of this truly remarkable thought experiment. I have spent the rest of my life keeping that promise.

2. What convinced me that I absolutely must begin sharing Story 2 with all of my students? What effects did that have?

In 2005, a year after I became a full-time philosophy instructor, I discovered an article by Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Husted Medvec entitled, "The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why."[1] To my shock, it

seemed to explain exactly why Story 2 had the powerful, clarifying, and life-changing psychological effects that it did. Because this paragraph (that you are reading now) appears so early in this Q&A, let me describe the findings of that article later on. Here, instead of sharing what I learned, let me tell you how that information affected me. Suddenly, I felt an intense and pervasive sense of guilt and urgency. For years, I had been telling Story 2 only to some of my students. I suddenly realized that I should have been telling it to all of them. That semester, that is exactly what I began to do. I began telling it to every student in every class as the last stage of one of my lectures. In 2006, I began telling it much more effectively as the last stage of the *first* lecture for each of my classes. I have done this ever since.

The effects that this story has had on my students have been absolutely amazing. It changed everything. Before 2006, over a period of nine years, I had a grand total of three office-hour visits. I have not had an unattended office hour since. Before, I received occasional emails from past students. Since, I have received hundreds per year. Before, not a single past student ever returned to visit me in person. Since, past students have returned in droves. Before, no student's parent or grandparent ever came with their child or grandchild just to meet me in person. Since, this has happened dozens of times per year. I wish I could take at least some of the credit for any of this, but I cannot. It all belongs to Story 2. The bonds that it has created between me and my students have been immediate, intense, immutable, and incredible.

3. What was it like to tell Story 2 to my young children as a bedtime story, and what effects did it have on them?

In 2011, after many years of telling Story 2 to all my university students, I decided to tell Story 2 as a bedtime story to my (then) six-year-old son and nine-year-old daughter. I made it as kid-friendly as I could, while keeping it as close as possible to what I had been telling my students. My children had long been fond of me making up bedtime stories for them, and they assumed that this was what I was doing again this time. It was not. When I finished the story, my children reacted as if they had just been electrocuted. They jolted, they jumped out of their beds, and they ran, screaming, to tell their mom (my wife) that I had just traumatized them, and how *dare* I. My wife brought our two children back to me, each with a hand in hers, and she said, with a warm voice and a big smile, "Kids, I know this story. I *love* this story." She laid down with them and asked me to tell Story 2 all over again, so that our two children could listen to it for a second time, this time with her listening to it with them. So I told it again. As my wife listened, she cried and cried, just like she always has while she has listened to me tell this story. I cried too, just like I always have whenever I have ever told it.

When I decided to tell my children that story, that night, I assumed that they were probably too young to benefit from it or even remember it. I could not have been more wrong. Three months later, in early 2012, I

watched my daughter participate in her school's spelling bee. Until that day, my daughter had been one of the most fearful students in that entire school. As a third grader, she had barely enough courage to even go to school. She was still so afraid to walk through the hallways to her classroom every morning that she could only do so if a teacher held her hand the entire time. Because of this, she was well known to many of the teachers in that school and to many of the parents. That day, all of us watched in amazement as she participated in the school's spelling bee as one of its youngest participants. Suddenly, the most frightened child in the school seemed like the least frightened. Many teachers and parents looked at me quizzically, wondering what on earth had happened to my daughter. I had no idea. After the school day ended, during our walk home, I finally found out. After walking for a while in deeply satisfied silence, my daughter suddenly asked me, in the voice of a child but with the eyes of an old woman, if I remembered telling her and her brother a few months before "that creepy bedtime story." I told her yes, I did. She then told me, just so I would know, that if I had not told that story, she would never even have considered entering the spelling bee.[2]

That experience stunned me. It also helped me realize that I may have been vastly underestimating the value of Story 2. For the first time, ever, I decided to write it up (until 2012, I had always told it only from memory). I emailed it to one of our highest-ranking administrators, asking if she thought I should consider presenting this story as a faculty speaker at some of our New Student Conferences. (These are carefully organized, multi-day events that many of our new students attend in person during the summer before their arrival that fall as university freshmen.) That administrator replied by telling me that not only was I going to present this story, but that I would present it at all of our New Student Conferences. Between 2012 and 2019 (before the pandemic ended faculty presentations at our New Student Conferences), I presented this story at over 40 New Student Conferences to thousands of students.

4. Once I began presenting it to all of our students at our New Student Conferences, how did the story change and why?

Since the start of my career, I had been telling many of my students Story 1, but it was not until I began presenting Story 2 at these New Student Conferences that I realized how well Story 1 complemented Story 2. When I began telling Story 1 before Story 2, Story 2 became much more powerful and effective. Telling Story 2 has always made me cry. Whenever I told Story 1 before Story 2, Story 2 made me *sob*. Whoever you are, before you tell anyone Story 2, or anything like Story 2, please make sure to share your own personal experiences of deep and painful regret, the way I do in Story 1. Doing this might be difficult, and it might even be mortifying, but please do it anyway, because it is important. Until you allow others to feel the agony of your worst past decisions, they will not be able to appreciate the importance of their own future decisions.

5. So, what exactly were the findings of that 1995 article, and what did they reveal about Story 2?

The article described the discovery of two fascinating patterns and a fascinating contrast. In the short term, even when they result in equally bad outcomes, we regret our actions more than our inactions. As time passes, however, this pattern reverses. As we look back on our life, we begin to feel the most regret about the things that we did *not* do, instead of the things that we *did* do.

Suddenly, I understood. Story 2 affects us the way it does and gives us better, lifelong clarity about what we will and will not ultimately regret by breaking the connection between our subjective self and our subjective location on our own timeline. We get a glimpse of how very different our lives will seem to us later on, and this glimpse gives us very different information than our subjective existence has been providing us.

In some sense, Story 2 is like a magic mirror. A real mirror helps us see what others see when they look at us, and clearly this is beneficial. When you walk around with food on your face, it is not because you do not care. It is because you do not know. It's the same with this magic mirror. When you make decisions that you will soon spend the rest of your life regretting, it's not because you think it is worth it or because you do not care. It is only because you do not know. You think you are seeing clearly, but you are living in a fog. This magic mirror sweeps away that fog, and the fog never returns.

Suddenly, I felt an enormous sense of urgency. No student of mine would ever again take my class without experiencing a fascinating visit at their deathbed.

6. What important advice did that information seem to imply?

That 1995 article helped me realize something that had always been important, but that had never occurred to me. For Story 2 to have its strongest possible effects, it is crucial for listeners to experience it with their fullest possible powers of imagination.

As it happens, human beings tend to imagine things more effectively and more vividly when their eyes are closed.[3] Because I knew this, and because I now had a better understanding of why Story 2 has the effects it does, I suddenly understood that my students would benefit even more from Story 2 if they would listen to it with their eyes closed, so that they could use their fullest possible powers of imagination while listening. I have been recommending this, and sharing my reason for recommending it, ever since. (To help more of the students close their eyes, I often share the regrets of past students who insisted on not closing them.)

7. Why publish that article in this way?

"What Do You Say on Their First Day?" is published in written form (which professors find appealing) specifically here in *Zeal: A Journal for the Liberal Arts* (where like-minded professors will be likely to find it), instead of in audio or video form (which many students would find more appealing) on YouTube or TikTok (where new students would be more likely to find it), because I believe—and because all of my experiences seem to confirm—that its contents offer their strongest effects when delivered under optimal circumstances. Those circumstances are created when this material is presented:

1. Verbally and in person (oh good, I am here, and so are you);
2. With a clear sense of purpose (this was planned);
3. With a clear sense of urgent timing (oh good—we are right on schedule);
4. With a sense of momentousness and excitement (this will not be an ordinary day);
5. With a feeling of anticipation (I am excited because I know what is about to happen);
6. With self-assurance (I am not wondering if it will happen; I am only wondering just how intense it will be); and
7. With sincere goodwill (I hope this experience will be as vivid and unforgettable as possible, and I hope you spend the rest of your life benefiting from it).

Presenting this material in exactly these ways offers listeners a powerful impact. When you also begin that presentation by imploring your listeners to close their eyes—because this will heighten their powers of imagination as they listen—you greatly amplify that impact due to three crucial effects. First, it makes your listeners much more likely to actually close their eyes (because you can see them). Second, it helps people trust that something important really is about to happen, because otherwise you would not care this much about whether your listeners actually closed their eyes while listening. That enhanced trust also stirs their curiosity, and each of these things further enhances your listeners' powers of imagination. Third, and most importantly, it causes your listeners to feel much more willing and eager to fully participate in whatever is about to happen. People tend to be highly altruistic. When they sense that you sincerely, urgently hope that they will do their best to use their full powers of imagination, they cannot help but feel powerfully motivated to do this, because they cannot help but want to help you realize your goal.

The effect of all of these things together is incredible. When you present Story 2 in this way, and under these exact conditions, you do so much more than tell a story. You conduct an *intervention,* one that is intense, personal, and deeply unforgettable. An intervention cannot be self-guided, and it certainly cannot be automated. It can, however, be made possible, and it can also be inspired and encouraged to happen. This is why these two articles have been published here, and exactly in this way.

8. What is my hope for that article? And what is my most urgent message?

If you decide to share "What Do You Say on Their First Day?" as a reading or a handout, this is obviously not a crime—but it is still a tragedy, because it is such a missed opportunity. When people encounter Story 2 as a reading, it sometimes has little impact. When people experience it as a vivid and highly evocative intervention, it tends to have a stronger and more lasting impact.[4]

I have witnessed so many examples of that in-person impact. Let me share the one that I contemplate the most. During one of my New Student Conference presentations, one of my favorite university staff members stood by as I told Story 2 to our new students. He was politely waiting to take them to their next event on the schedule. He was also politely pretending that I was scheduled to give this presentation, even though we both knew that I wasn't. That particular New Student Conference had not scheduled any faculty presentations. I saw that as deeply unjust, so I showed up and did my presentation anyway, as though I was supposed to. I believe this staff member's decision to pretend this along with me made him much more able to vividly imagine something else because of me. Imagination is like wildfire: it spreads. Because this staff member had never heard Story 2, he had no idea what was coming—and neither did I. Its dramatic moment hit him like a cannonball. He emitted a loud, long groan, and he folded at the waist like a suitcase. He never said why, and I never asked. Soon, he was gone. He quit his job, moved to the other side of the country, and began living the life he realized he should have been living, instead of the one he had been. (I learned all the details when he emailed me a year later.)

I mention this poignant example to add clarity to my urgency. Story 2 is not simply for amusement. Story 2 is not an amusement. It is powerful, and it is a catalyst. Story 2 gives people the ability to realize how they would actually like to live their lives—and the courage to act on this realization. Please help me help others by creating the conditions where the effects of this catalyst can be most fully unleashed—and by unleashing them.

Death comes for us all, and we cannot change this. We can, however, force it to make two trips; and we can greet it, that second time, with a full heart and no regrets.[5]

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[1] Thomas Gilovich and Victoria Husted Medvec, "The Experience of Regret: What, When, and Why," *Psychological Review* 102, no. 2 (1995): 379–95.

[2] This was the first of many such experiences with each of my two children. Neither of them was ever the same again.

[3] For a more recent affirmation of this, see Yi-Xuan Feng, Ren-Yuan Li, Wei Wei, Zi-Jian Feng, Yun-Kai Sun, Hai-Yang Sun, Yi-Yuan Tang, Yu-Feng Zang, and Ke Yao, "The Acts of Opening and Closing the Eyes Are of Importance for Congeni-

tal Blindness: Evidence from Resting-State fMRI," *NeuroImage* 233 (2021): 117966. https://doi: 10.1016/j.neuroimage.2021.117966.

[4] I wrote the introductory paragraphs of "What Do You Say on Their First Day?" with the hope of making that article as effective as possible as a reading or handout. For in person interventions, feel free to drop those introductory paragraphs entirely. Feel free to also drop "Either in person, or in a way that works even better than in person" from late in Story 2. Those words were included to help Story 2 make more sense in a reading or handout, and they do not belong in any in person intervention.

[5] The content of this article would never have come to exist were it not for three wonderful sources of inspiration. First, I would like to thank the attendees of the two conferences where I presented early versions of the companion article to this article: CogTeacho: A Special Two-Day Cogtweeto Event, in August 2023; and the American Association for Philosophy Teachers International Workshop-Conference on Teaching Philosophy in July 2024. Much of the content of this article was made possible by the extensive feedback and fascinating discussions from those conferences. Second, I would like to thank the editor and two anonymous referees for this journal for their remarkable, provocative, and priceless feedback. Most of all, I would like to thank each and every one of my students. Without you, neither of these two articles would ever have existed. Please never forget what I told you, because it is still true, and will never stop being true. You are my student; you will always be my student; and I care what happens to you. I care a *lot*!