

SESSION 5 · PARTICIPANT GUIDE

Me, the Co-Author & Protagonist of My Story

The Journey So Far

“We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell.”

— Dan McAdams, *The Stories We Live By*

NAVIGATING TRANSITION · BUILDING BROTHERHOOD ·
IGNITING JUBILEE

Name: _____

Date: _____

THIS MORNING'S ARC

Three Movements, Ninety Minutes

1 · 25 MIN	The Frame Check-in. The claim. Two truths in the title. Why it matters now. Reconnaissance, not therapy.
2 · 55 MIN	Map · Mine · Tell Chapter titles. The Life Map. Your markers, read back. The genre. Why we write. The Witness Pair. What Surfaced.
3 · 10 MIN	The Hand-off This morning becomes Charter §1.1. Two layers of homework. What Session 6 does with it. A benediction.

Before We Begin — Reconnaissance, Not Therapy

We are not here to talk about feelings. We are here to read a text — yours — the way an engineer reads a system or a scout reads terrain. We are prototyping your story, not exposing your soul.

What it is	Mapping the ground you've already covered. Naming chapters. Locating turning points.
What it isn't	Group therapy, confession, or fixing. You share only what you choose to share.
The posture	Curiosity over judgment. A scout's eye. "Huh — look at that" rather than "what's wrong with me?"

Nobody reads what you write this morning but you. What you speak aloud, you choose.

MOVEMENT 1 · THE FRAME

Opening Check-In

Five questions, at your tables. Have your three markers out — nobody collects them, but this morning is when they go to work.

Your three markers. Which of the three was hardest to write — and why?

The Kitchen Table. One thing you heard at the Kitchen Table.

Your marriage practice. Read your one line.

Practice of the Week. One moment with “Her day first.”

And for fun — if your life were a movie, who plays you? (Your answer says more about your genre than you think.)

The Claim

You are not a man who has a story. You are the story you tell.

Four decades of research keep landing on the same finding: identity is not a résumé we carry — it is a narrative we author. Dan McAdams, whose work on narrative identity spans forty years at Northwestern, puts it plainly: we are the stories we tell. Change the story you tell about your life, and you change what you do next.

Two Truths in the Title

PROTAGONIST You are the one living it.	The hero who acts, chooses, achieves, endures. Forty years of agency live here — and it is a strength to honor, not pathologize.
CO-AUTHOR You are not writing it alone.	God has been authoring this story all along — weaving your choices, your wounds, and your desires toward a plot larger than any single chapter. As Dan Allender puts it: He is a better novelist than we are.

“We are God’s handiwork — **poiema**, a work being written.” — Ephesians 2:10. Poiema is the root of “poem.” You are not a problem to be solved. You are a work being authored.

THE GRAMMAR OF BOTH

Active voice — I do the thing. My agency. My choice. My responsibility.
Passive voice — the thing is done to me. God’s agency. I receive. I’m acted upon.
Middle voice — I do the thing for myself, and I am transformed by it. Both at once: the actor and the acted-upon.

Why This Matters Now

When the story a man has lived — the career story, the competence story — reaches its final chapter, he doesn’t just step away from a role. The character he has played for forty years exits the stage. The five losses we named in Session 2 are really one loss: the role you’ve been playing.

This morning is not about replacing the role. It is about reading the story well enough to discover who the character was always becoming.

MOVEMENT 2 · MAP IT · STEP ONE · 8 MINUTES

Give Your Life Chapter Titles

Think like a novelist, not an accountant. Divide your life into four to seven chapters — by feel and theme, not by dates. A good title carries the emotional weather of a season.

INSTEAD OF “Age 30–45” · “Second Job, Pittsburgh” · “The 2008 Layoff”	TRY “The Years I Proved Myself” · “When Everything Cracked Open” · “Learning to Be a Father”
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1	Chapter 1	_____
2	Chapter 2	_____
3	Chapter 3	_____
4	Chapter 4	_____
5	Chapter 5	_____
6	Chapter 6	_____
7	Chapter 7	_____

Four is enough. Seven is plenty. If you have nine, two of them are the same chapter wearing different clothes.

MOVEMENT 2 · MAP IT · STEP TWO · 10 MINUTES

The Life Map

1 Draw it

Your life as a landscape — peaks and valleys, not a straight line. Career and life, not career alone.

2 Label it

Each rise and fall gets one of your chapter titles.

3 Mark the people

Who shows up in more than one chapter? Put their initials on the map. (They matter later — §3.2, My Rule & My Triad.)

4 Quiet

Shoulder to shoulder, on paper. Nobody reads this but you.

BIRTH

TODAY

MOVEMENT 2 · MINE IT · 8 MINUTES

Read Your Three Markers Back

You wrote these the week of Session 3 — Charter §1.1, Step One. Read them again, slowly. Then:

- 1

Circle one

Which marker still has heat in it? Tick the box below. That is the one you will bring to the Witness Pair.
- 2

Circle two

On your map — the moment that most defined you, and the moment that most surprised you. One sentence each on why.

☐ THE PEAK	What I was made FOR. Most alive, most myself, most capable.
☐ THE VALLEY	What I was made OF. A failure, loss, or wound that changed you.
☐ TURNING POINT	WHEN I became who I am. The before, the after, the difference.

The moment that most defined me — and why:

The moment that most surprised me — and why:

MOVEMENT 2 · MINE IT · THE GENRE · 3 MINUTES

Which Genre Have You Been Living?

Dan Allender adapts three classical genres to describe the arcs men unconsciously live out. These are not personality types. They are postures — ways of narrating what is happening to you, which then become self-fulfilling. Write one word: not the arc you aspire to, the one you recognize.

TRAGEDY “My best days are behind me.”	Diminishment read as realism. It masquerades as clear-eyed, but it is a theological claim: that God’s story for this man peaked in his career.	THE INVITATION Grief named is the door to the next arc — not a permanent address.
COMEDY “Everything will be fine.”	Depth deflected with humor. Not malicious — protective. It produces pleasant men who are not growing.	THE INVITATION Joy isn’t the avoidance of sorrow. It’s what sorrow gives birth to when faced.
ROMANCE The quest you were made for.	The classical sense, not the sentimental one: a man made for something, shaped by everything, standing at the threshold of the chapter he was being prepared for.	THE INVITATION Not triumph that denies the wounds — but reads them as preparation.

The arc I recognize — one word, and one sentence on how I know:

Our job this morning is not to force a different ending. It is to read our stories honestly enough to see which arc we have been living — and then to ask whether that is the arc God is writing.

MOVEMENT 2 · WHY WE WRITE IT DOWN

The Writing Is the Active Ingredient

James Pennebaker's research at the University of Texas — more than 200 studies — keeps returning one finding: the people who improved most from writing about significant life experiences weren't the ones who vented. They were the ones whose writing turned toward meaning. The pen does what the mind, looping, cannot.

Putting fragments on the page organizes them. What lives only in your head stays tangled; what is written becomes a stable launching pad from which the next chapters can be designed.

LISTEN FOR THESE WORDS IN YOUR OWN WRITING

Causal: because · why · reason · cause **Insight:** realize · understand · know · meaning

When these appear, a man has stopped reliving and started understanding. You do not force them in. You keep writing until they arrive.

THINKING · WRITING · RECOGNIZING

Thinking loops around and around; the mind returns to the same place. **Writing** externalizes the fragments and makes them stable — you move from reliving to understanding. **Recognizing** sees the whole, and discovers the meaning was already there. Not the thinking, not the talking about it later: the writing itself.

Two more things Pennebaker found

- **Distance helps.** Writers who moved from “I” toward “he” and “we” were stepping back to see the whole picture. That is why third person is allowed this week.
- **Expect a dip.** A heaviness after the first sitting or two is common and lifts by the third. Don't stop halfway.

MOVEMENT 2 · TELL IT · THE WITNESS PAIR · 12 MINUTES

The Witness Pair

THE TELLER · 4 min

One chapter title. The marker with heat in it. The arc you think you've been living.

THE WITNESS · listen only

No advice. No “me too.” One job — reflect it back: “What I heard you say was...”

Switch. Then three minutes together on one question: what did you hear in his story that he didn't hear himself?

What my witness heard that I didn't:

The story changes in the telling. That is where the work happens — not on the page, but in being heard.

What Surfaced · 10 minutes, whole room

Three or four men. One thing each — an insight, a surprise, a moment of recognition. Not your whole story. Four lenses to listen through:

HEARD	In his story	What did you hear in your partner's story that he didn't hear himself?
PATTERN	In your chapters	What kept appearing that you didn't plan for — something that seemed to follow you?
PEOPLE	On your map	Who showed up in more than one chapter — and what does that tell you?
AUTHOR	In a valley moment	Where do you now see the hand of something larger than your own plans?

HEARD INTO BECOMING

- 1 You speak it aloud.** And in the speaking, you hear yourself.
- 2 The witness listens.** Not to fix. Not to agree. Just to receive what you're saying.
- 3 He reflects it back.** "What I heard you say was..."
- 4 You recognize yourself.** And in being heard, you become more fully who you were already becoming.

CALLBACK · WHICH CHAPTERS GO IN THE KNAPSACK?

Your story is both: the foundation you built and the chapters you are about to write.

First half · Your story so far. Proving, struggle, victories, defeats. All of it shaped you. Not all of it comes with you. Some chapters stay at Basecamp.

The choice · Carry the wisdom, not the weight. Which chapters go with you into the second half? You are the protagonist, and the Author is not finished.

Second half · Your next chapters. Redemption, wisdom, witness, presence. New chapters need room in the Knapsack (the pack).

Your Charter isn't your whole story. It is the chapters you chose to carry.

MOVEMENT 3 · THE HAND-OFF

Today Becomes Part One

What you mapped and mined this morning is the raw material for Harvest Charter §1.1 — My Story: The Journey So Far. Step One — your three markers — is already written. You draft the rest this week and read it back next session.

2	Origins & Formation	Step Two, paragraph one. Where you came from — and what it made of you.
2	Building Years	Step Two, paragraph two. What you built, and what you built it with.
3	Where was God?	Step Three. One sentence — including the stretches where He seemed absent.

Nothing you write here is spent once. Your peak feeds §1.3 Strengths; your valley feeds §1.0 Threshold and §1.4 Faith Foundation; your turning point feeds the Caring Shift line in §1.3 — and the whole story feeds §1.2 My Compass, which you begin after Session 6.

This Week’s Work — Two Layers

LAYER ONE · PRIVATE The raw writing. Three sittings this week, 20 minutes each. Two to three pages by the end. Don’t edit as you go. Nobody reads this. Ever. That is what lets it be true.	LAYER TWO · SHARED The Charter draft. From the raw pages, distill §1.1 Step Two (Origins, Building Years) and Step Three (the God sentence). 200–300 words. This is what you read aloud at Session 6 — and you share only what you choose to share.
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PRACTICE OF THE WEEK · ASK FOR A STORY

How: “Tell me about a time when...” Then listen for the turning point.

From the Toolkit: 2 · Ask

Rooted in: David Brooks

Tried it this week ☐ · Bring one moment to the room.

This week you write your own story; the practice turns the same skill outward.

BEFORE SESSION 6 · YOUR MAIN WORK THIS WEEK

The Three Sittings

Adapted from Pennebaker's protocol. Twenty minutes each. Write continuously — no punctuation worries, no going back. If you run dry, repeat the last sentence until the next one comes. Three sittings — about an hour; then the §1.1 draft, about forty minutes.

SITTING	THE PROMPT	WHERE IT LANDS
SITTING 1 The What	Origins and formation — where you came from and what it made of you. Facts and unfiltered feeling. Who was there? What did you lose, gain, or leave behind?	§1.1 Step Two · ¶1
SITTING 2 The Who	Building years — what you built and what you built it with. Alternate “I felt...” with “Looking back, the reality was...” Notice how that younger man adapted.	§1.1 Step Two · ¶2
SITTING 3 The Why	Return to your valley moment. Keep writing until you reach what it made of you. Use “I now realize,” “the reason,” “because.” What did it teach you about your strengths, your blind spots, what you value?	The turn Session 6 reads for
THEN The Author	Read the three sittings back. Title the book. Write the one sentence: where was God — including where He seemed absent. Then distill it all to 200–300 words on the next page.	§1.1 Step Three + the read-aloud draft

Three permissions

- **Third person is allowed.** “He grew up in...” Distance is a tool, not a dodge.
- **Write it as if to your grandchildren.** It sets the tone — and it quietly seeds the story you will write for them in Part Four.
- **If you will not write, talk.** Into your phone's voice recorder, twenty minutes, then listen back. Pennebaker found the benefit travels.

OPTIONAL STARTERS, FROM MCADAMS' LIFE STORY INTERVIEW

Sitting 1: an early memory that stands out as especially good — and one that stands out as hard. · The Author: a moment you felt something like the presence of God, or of something larger than yourself. Describe it. What does it say about your life?

RAW WRITING · PRIVATE · SITTING 1 · THE WHAT

RAW WRITING · PRIVATE · SITTING 2 · THE WHO

RAW WRITING • PRIVATE • SITTING 3 • THE WHY

READ-BACK NOTES • PRIVATE • THEN • THE AUTHOR

LAYER TWO · SHARED · BRING TO SESSION 6

My Story — The Draft I Will Read Aloud

Charter §1.1, Steps Two and Three. Two paragraphs and one sentence: 200–300 words, about two minutes aloud. Rough it here; it lands in your Harvest Charter.

If my story were a book, its title would be:

Step Two, ¶1 · Origins & Formation

Childhood, family, early influences, defining experiences that shaped who you became.

Step Two, ¶2 · Building Years

Career, marriage, major decisions, turning points — what happened, and what it meant.

Step Three · Where was God in this story — including the stretches where He seemed absent?

One sentence.

HOMEWORK BEFORE SESSION 6 · MONDAY DECEMBER 14

Two Things Finished Beats Seven Started

Do · Required

1. **Three sittings. Twenty minutes each, on the raw-writing pages or wherever you write. Private. About 60 minutes.**
2. **§1.1 My Story draft. 200–300 words built from your Three Markers — Origins, Building Years, the God sentence — on the draft page, and into the Charter. Print it with your Life Map and bring it to Session 6; you will read it aloud. Can't print? Send the draft two days ahead. About 40 minutes.**
3. **VIA Character Strengths survey. Free at viacharacter.org. Bring your top 5 to Session 7 (Monday January 4). About 25 minutes.**
4. **Practice of the Week · Ask for a story (From the Toolkit: 2 · Ask). Try it this week; tick the box on the practice page; bring one moment. About 5 minutes.**

Reading for This Week · Recommended · about 10 minutes

1. **Why We Write Our Story — WhyzMen, 3 pages (Session 5 · Recommended Readings). McAdams, Allender and Pennebaker in one short reading.**

About 140 minutes this week — a milestone week, longer on purpose. The three sittings and the §1.1 draft are most of it. Going Deeper, below, is not counted.

Optional / Going Deeper — only if it calls to you, not counted

Narrative Identity — Dan McAdams · you are the story you tell.

Allender Reference — Dan Allender · the genre arcs, and Flight & Desire.

Adler Reference — Jonathan Adler · three marks of a story that carries a man forward.

Healing Benefits of Writing — James Pennebaker · and The Life Story Interview — Dan McAdams. No one is behind for leaving any of these.

CARRY THIS — DON'T WRITE IT

What has your story been fleeing — and what has it been seeking? — Dan Allender. Over coffee, on a walk, in the shower. Let it compost.

Coming at Session 6 · Read My Story

Each man reads his §1.1 draft aloud — two minutes. Two witnesses answer: “what I heard you say was...” — and they name the arc they heard. We will listen together through Adler's three

marks of a story that carries a man forward: coherence, complexity, resolution. Everything you write this week is revised, not graded.

Bring on paper: your Life Map and §1.1 printed (Steps One to Three, two or three sheets — not the whole Charter). The raw pages stay home. Can't print? Send your draft two days ahead.

VIA is the one survey, and it is this week — take it once the writing is done; your top 5 comes to Session 7, after Christmas. Session 6 gives you three weeks for the Compass essays. This week is the story.

Recommended: text the men on your left and right one sentence — how you walked out this morning. Brotherhood is built between sessions, not during them.

PERSONAL NOTES

Use This Space During the Session

“For I know the plans I have for you,” declares the LORD. — Jeremiah 29:11 “We are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” — Ephesians 2:10

Every story reaches the moment the protagonist must accept the quest. Everything that has happened to you has been preparation. The next chapter is the one you were being readied for all along — if you are willing to read it the way the Author wrote it.

Wise Men Still Seek, Knowing Their Why's