

PARTICIPANT REFERENCE

Dan Allender

To Be Told: Know Your Story, Shape Your Future

“Your story is not background. It is the curriculum.

— Dan Allender

WHO IS DAN ALLENDER

Dan Allender is a psychologist, theologian, and storyteller whose work sits at the intersection of Christian faith, trauma, and narrative identity. He is the founder of The Seattle School of Theology and Psychology, and has spent four decades helping people read their own lives as stories — not as problems to solve, but as texts to be interpreted.

His core conviction is this: God is the author of your life, and your story is the primary means by which He both reveals who He has made you to be and calls you into your next chapter. To ignore your story — to treat it as merely backstory for your achievements — is to miss the central plot.

In *To Be Told* (2005), Allender provides a framework for reading your own narrative that is simultaneously psychological, literary, and theological. It is the book that most directly underlies the story-writing work in this program.

THE CENTRAL CLAIM

Most men treat their life story in one of two ways: as a career summary (what they accomplished) or as a list of events (what happened). Allender argues for a third way — reading your story as a text written by a purposeful Author, with recurring themes, embedded gifts, and unresolved arcs that are still in motion.

“The story you have lived is not merely what happened to you. It is the plot God has been developing — and you are both the protagonist and, increasingly, the co-author.” — Dan Allender

The stakes are high for men in transition. When a man retires and the primary narrative he has been living — the career story, the achievement story, the competence story — reaches its final chapter, he faces a question that can feel either like an abyss or an invitation: what is my story actually about, and what does it want to become?

Allender says this is not a crisis to manage. It is a plot turn to embrace.

THREE LENSES FOR READING YOUR STORY

Allender offers three analytical lenses for reading your own narrative. Each asks a different question, and together they produce a reading of your life that is both honest and forward-facing.

LENS 1	LENS 2	LENS 3
Wounds & Gifts	Genre	Flight & Desire

THE THEOLOGICAL FRAME · GOD AS AUTHOR

Allender's most distinctive contribution is what he calls the Author frame. Most narrative psychology is anthropocentric — you are the author of your story, and the work is to take ownership of the narrative you've been constructing. Allender agrees with the importance of ownership, but adds a layer that changes everything:

“You are not the sole author of your life. You are the co-author. God has been writing this story all along — not overriding your agency, but weaving your choices, your wounds, and your desires into a plot that serves purposes larger than you can see from inside any single chapter.” — Dan Allender

This is not passive fatalism. Allender is not saying that everything that happened to you was God's will or that suffering was a gift. He is saying that God is a sufficiently skilled author to work with everything — including the chapters that were written against your will — toward a coherent and meaningful whole.

The practical implication for retirement: the transition you are in is not an epilogue. It is the plot turn that makes sense of everything before it. As Allender puts it, in a great story, the final act illuminates what the first two acts were actually about. Readers reach the ending and think: of course. That's what this was always going to be.

Ephesians 2:10 is the scriptural anchor: “We are His workmanship [ποίημα, poiema], created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.” The word poiema is the root of ‘poem’ and ‘masterwork.’ You are not a problem to be solved. You are a work being authored.

WOUNDS AND GIFTS ARE THE SAME MATERIAL

This is perhaps Allender's most counterintuitive and most powerful claim. Men are trained to compartmentalize their wounds — to keep them away from their professional identity, their leadership, their sense of capability. Allender argues that this compartmentalization is precisely what keeps men from their deepest gifts.

THE ALLENDER INVERSION

A man who grew up in chaos and learned to create order carries both the wound (anxiety, hypervigilance) and the gift (the ability to bring clarity to confusion that others cannot). A man who was overlooked learned to notice what others miss. A man who was held to impossible standards learned to pursue excellence with a rigor that others find inexplicable.

The wound and the gift are not opposites. They are the obverse and reverse of the same coin.

The question Allender asks is not “how do I heal my wound?” but “what has my wound made possible in me that nothing else could have?” This is not a bypass of grief — Allender is insistent that wounds must be named and mourned before they can be read as gifts. But mourning is not the destination. The destination is the gift that was being forged inside the wound all along.

For retiring men, this often surfaces in unexpected ways. The man who was most defined by his professional competence often carries a wound around being valued only for performance — and a gift of exceptional discernment about what is genuinely excellent versus merely impressive. The wound and the gift are the same material.

THE THREE STORY ARCS

Allender adapted the classical genres of literary theory to describe three narrative arcs that 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.

TRAGEDY

“My best days are behind me.” The tragedy arc reads diminishment as the dominant theme. It masquerades as realism but is actually a theological claim: that God’s story for this man peaked in his career, and what follows is postscript. This arc produces men who are difficult to engage, who deflect hope, and who make their families anxious.

***The invitation:** grief that is acknowledged is the door to the next arc, not a permanent address.*

COMEDY

“Everything will be fine.” The comedy arc is the avoidance arc. Not malicious, but protective. Men living the comedy arc deflect depth with humor, stay busy, and avoid the interior work that transition requires. The comedy arc produces pleasant men who are not growing.

***The invitation:** joy is not the avoidance of sorrow. It is what sorrow gives birth to when it is faced.*

ROMANCE

The quest narrative. In the classical (not sentimental) sense, romance is the genre of the hero's journey — a man who was made for something, has been shaped by everything, and now stands at the threshold of the chapter he has been being prepared for all along. This is not triumphalism. It includes wounds, losses, failures. But it reads them as formative, not terminal.

The invitation: this is the arc WhyzMen is trying to cultivate — not by denying what was hard, but by reading it as the Author intended.

FLIGHT & DESIRE · THE STORY BENEATH THE STORY

Every story has a surface narrative and a deeper one. The surface narrative is what you report: the career, the family, the accomplishments, the setbacks. The deeper narrative is what you pursued and what you avoided — often without knowing it.

Allender's two questions cut to this deeper level:

WHAT HAS YOUR STORY
BEEN FLEEING?

The wound you have organized your life around avoiding. The fear that has structured your choices without being named. The vulnerability that your competence was designed to prevent anyone from seeing.

WHAT HAS YOUR STORY
BEEN SEEKING?

The beauty that keeps returning — in the moments you most came alive, in the work that felt least like work, in the relationships that required nothing of you to be fully yourself. The longing that has been whispering beneath the ambition.

Naming both the flight and the desire reveals the story beneath the story. Most men can articulate what they desired. Far fewer have named what they were fleeing. Allender argues that the flight is often the more important clue — because the energy spent in avoidance reveals the wound that, read correctly, points to the gift.

HOW THIS CONNECTS TO YOUR HARVEST CHARTER

Allender's framework is not background reading for the program. It is a direct tool for building Charter Part One: Foundation.

Charter 1.0 · My Threshold	Allender's grief work — naming what you are releasing, what you are carrying, and what deserves mourning — fills this section. The Threshold is not just logistical. It is a literary moment: the end of one chapter, the pause before the next.
Charter 1.1 · My Story	The three nuclear episodes (peak, nadir, turning point), your chapter titles, your genre arc, and your wound/gift reflection all belong here. This section is where Allender's framework does its primary work.
Charter 1.2 · My Purpose Statement	Once a man has read his story through Allender's lens — naming what he was fleeing and what he was seeking, identifying his primary wound and the gift it forged — his purpose statement stops being aspirational and becomes confessional. He is not inventing a new self; he is recognizing the self that was always there.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS · FOR PERSONAL WORK

These questions are drawn from Allender's framework and are designed for unhurried personal reflection — in a journal, on a walk, or in a quiet hour. They feed directly into Charter 1.1.

ON YOUR WOUNDS & GIFTS

- What is the wound you have most carefully kept away from your professional identity?
- What capacity in you — a sensitivity, a vigilance, a way of seeing — seems to have been forged by that wound?
- If your wound and your gift are the same raw material, what does that suggest about what you were made to do?

ON YOUR STORY'S GENRE

- Which arc have you been living — Tragedy, Comedy, or Romance? Not which arc you aspire to, but which one you recognize?

- What would it mean to read your story as Romance — not triumphantly, but as a quest narrative in which everything, including the hard chapters, was preparation?

ON FLIGHT & DESIRE

- What has your story been fleeing? Name the fear or the vulnerability, not the circumstance.
- What has your story been seeking? Name the beauty, the longing, the recurring draw — not the goal, but the desire beneath the goal.
- Where do the flight and the desire point to the same place?

ON GOD AS AUTHOR

- If God has been writing your story all along, what theme keeps appearing across chapters?
- Where in your nadir moments — the losses, the failures, the unwanted chapters — do you see the hand of an Author working with material you didn't choose toward purposes you couldn't see?
- What does the arc of your life so far suggest you were being prepared for in this next season?

“We are not the sole authors of our lives. We are co-authors with God — and He is a better novelist than we are. The question is whether we are willing to read what He has written.

— Dan Allender, To Be Told

Wise Men Still Seek · Knowing Their Why's