

Why We Write Our Story: A WhyzMen Reference

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Why bother?

Writing your story is not a memoir project; it is how a man finds out who he is when the job title is gone. Psychology, spiritual direction and Scripture converge on the same claim: the story you tell about your past shapes the life you can live next.

Kierkegaard put the puzzle plainly in his 1843 journals: life can only be understood backwards, but it must be lived forwards. Retirement is the rare season when a man has time to do the understanding. Think of it as reading the map before setting out on the second half of the trail.

Three voices carry the argument. Dan McAdams shows that we *are* our stories. Dan Allender shows that God is their Author. James Pennebaker shows that putting them on paper measurably helps. A few supporting voices fill in the rest.

Dan McAdams: you are the story you tell

Identity is not a fixed list of traits; it is an internalized, evolving story. Dan McAdams of Northwestern University built the field of *narrative identity* on that claim. His summary line: "We are all storytellers, and we are the stories we tell."

Key ideas for WhyzMen:

- **Nuclear episodes.** McAdams's term for the peak, low-point and turning-point scenes that anchor a life story. His Life Story Interview (2007 revision) asks people to divide their life into chapters, like a book.
- **Redemption and contamination.** In a redemption sequence, suffering turns toward growth or connection. In a contamination sequence, a good scene is spoiled. Adults whose stories lean redemptive show higher well-being and more generativity.
- **Generativity.** Erik Erikson's word for caring about the next generation. McAdams found the most generative adults tell the most redemptive stories. For men in retirement, that is the bridge from *my story* to *my legacy*.
- **Agency and communion.** His two master themes: getting things done, and being connected. Many men's stories are heavy on the first and thin on the second.

The hopeful finding: the same events can be re-read. A story is not a verdict; it is a draft.

Dan Allender: your story is being written

Where McAdams reads the story, Allender asks who is writing it. In *To Be Told* (2005), the Christian counselor and founder of The Allender Center argues that God is the Author of each life, and that we are invited to read our story with Him rather than edit out the hard chapters.

Key ideas for WhyzMen:

- **Wounds and gifts are the same material.** The places a man was hurt are often where his calling lives. The chapter he would rather skip may be the one God most wants to use.
- **Tragedy, comedy, romance.** Allender uses these classic genres as lenses for how a life is plotted. WhyzMen adapts them: which genre has your story been living in, and which is God writing?
- **Flight and desire.** Every story is fleeing something and seeking something. Naming both reveals the plot.
- **Reading with others.** We cannot read our own story alone. We need others who hear what we cannot see; this is why WhyzMen tells stories to witnesses.

The scriptural anchor is Ephesians 2:10: we are God's *poiema*, His handiwork. The Greek word gives us "poem." A man's life is a work still being written, by a better novelist than he is.

James Pennebaker: writing it down helps

McAdams and Allender say *why* the story matters; Pennebaker shows that writing it has measurable effects. His first study, with Sandra Beall in 1986 at Southern Methodist University, had students write about a difficult experience for about 15 minutes on four consecutive days. The writers made fewer visits to the health center in the months that followed. More than 200 studies have since tested the method.

The protocol is simple: 15–20 minutes a day, three to four consecutive days, writing continuously about something significant, for your eyes only.

What his language research found:

- **Venting alone does not help.** Pouring out emotion is not enough.
- **Meaning-making does.** People who improved most used more *causal* words (because, reason, why) and *insight* words (realize, understand, meaning) as the days went on. They were building an explanation.
- **Perspective shifts.** Gains tracked with a move away from heavy use of "I" and "me" toward a wider view. The writer steps back and sees himself as a character in a larger story.
- **Speaking works too.** Talking into a recorder produced comparable benefits in later studies.

One honest note: most study participants were college students of both sexes. The findings apply to people, not specifically to retired men. WhyzMen's four-day life-story prompts are an adaptation of his method, not his own.

Supporting voices

- **Jonathan Adler** (Olin College, a McAdams student). His research found that three qualities of a story track with well-being: *coherence* (it hangs together), *complexity* (it holds mixed feelings), and *positive resolution* (the struggle has come to some peace). The arc a person gives an experience predicts outcomes more than the experience itself. In WhyzMen, resolution can include an honestly open ending, left for God to finish.
- **Bruce Feiler**, *Life Is in the Transitions* (2020). After collecting 225 life stories, Feiler found adults face a disruptor roughly every 12–18 months and three to five major "lifequakes" in a lifetime. Retirement is one. Writing the story is how a man turns a lifequake into a new chapter.
- **Frederick Buechner**. The novelist and minister urged readers to listen to their lives, paying attention to what makes them laugh and what makes them cry. His memoirs, beginning with *The Sacred Journey* (1982), model a man reading his own life for traces of God.
- **Scripture's own habit**. Israel was told to remember and retell: Deuteronomy 6:20–25, Psalm 78:4, and Joshua's twelve memorial stones (Joshua 4). Joseph reads his whole story in Genesis 50:20: what others meant for evil, God meant for good. The same Hebrew verb is used of both intentions.

How the threads weave together

Each voice answers a different question, and together they make the case.

Question	Voice	Answer
What is identity?	McAdams	The story you have constructed about your life
Who is writing it?	Allender	God, with you as co-author and reader
Does writing it help?	Pennebaker	Yes, when you make meaning, not just vent
What makes a story healthy?	Adler	Coherence, complexity, and resolution
Why now?	Feiler	Retirement is a lifequake; stories carry us through

The metaphor for WhyzMen is a restoration carpenter. Before he can rebuild a house, he inspects the old frame: what is sound, what has rot, what was built well and can carry more weight. Writing your story is that inspection. The first half of life becomes the foundation for the second, not a structure to demolish.

It also explains the program's order. Men write the story (Session 5), read it with witnesses for redemption and continuity (Session 6), then build values, strengths, mission and vision on top of it. You cannot author the next chapter well until you have read the last ones.

How to write it well

1. **Write privately first.** Use Pennebaker's frame: 15–20 minutes, several days in a row, no editing, nobody reads it. Candor comes when there is no audience.
2. **Then distill what you share.** From the raw pages, draw out the short version you are willing to read aloud. You share only what you choose.
3. **Think in chapters and scenes.** Name your life's chapters like a book (McAdams). Then pick the peak, the valley, and the turning point.
4. **Ask why, not just what.** Push past the events to their meaning. Use "because," "I now realize," "what it made of me."
5. **Write small.** One name, one room, one conversation. The particular carries the universal.
6. **Look for the thread.** What has stayed true about you across every chapter? That continuity is the answer to retirement's quiet fear: without my role, am I still me?
7. **Read it with others.** Let witnesses hear what you cannot. They may see the redemption you missed.
8. **Leave room for the Author.** Some chapters do not resolve yet. That is honest, not failure.

Sources and further reading

All summaries above are paraphrased; buy links point to Bookshop.org searches, which support independent bookstores.

Author	Work	Year	Find it
Dan P. McAdams	<i>The Stories We Live By</i>	1993	Bookshop
Dan P. McAdams	<i>The Redemptive Self</i> (rev. ed.)	2013	Bookshop
Dan B. Allender	<i>To Be Told</i>	2005	Bookshop
James W. Pennebaker & Joshua M. Smyth	<i>Opening Up by Writing It Down</i> (3rd ed.)	2016	Bookshop
Bruce Feiler	<i>Life Is in the Transitions</i>	2020	Bookshop
Frederick Buechner	<i>The Sacred Journey</i>	1982	Bookshop
Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe & Houle	"The Incremental Validity of Narrative Identity," <i>Personality and Social Psychology Review</i>	2016	Journal article
Pennebaker & Beall	"Confronting a Traumatic Event," <i>Journal of Abnormal Psychology</i>	1986	Journal article