Human Change & Growth: Our Stories and what they tell us

Arts & Humanities Capstone Project | Boris Taratutin | Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering

"When I accept myself as I am, then I can change" – Carl Rogers

Prologue

This book is a collection of people's life stories and core life philosophies: who they are and how they came to be that way – and what we can learn from them.

The individuals represented here are not unequivocally diverse or mathematically representative in any way shape or form. I have not selected people based on economic status, geographic location, age, gender, sexual orientation or lifestyle. Instead, I have picked individuals whom I have found to be truly extraordinary to interact with: where every conversation offers a key new insight, critical new idea, or moment of inspiration. They are world-changers; they are good people; and they are my friends.

These are people who live their lives with a sort of excitement, determination, and peace that is hard to find in everyday life, and seem to have an approach to life that shines well beyond their words or ideologies – their personalities not only are seen, but are *felt*. I think there is a lot to be learned from them.

I invited each of my interviewees, Hanmin Lee and Rhyne O. White (pseudonyms they each chose), to express their core life philosophies and tell the story of how they came to develop them. Though it is impossible to ever fully escape one's own lens, I tried to represent each character's story in the most organic and honest way I could, through the journalistic life narrative. At the end of the book I then attempt to apply ideas from the fields of anthropology, personality psychology, and narrative identity to try to better understand the significance and meaning of the stories they tell. I also attempt to take a step back and examine my own role as the listener and storyteller[1] and reflect on the lessons learned from these narratives. Apart from their names, I have not changed a single detail about the individuals presented in this book.

As you read, by asking the same questions I did when creating this book, *What stands out to me about this individual? Why is that? How are they similar/different from the other people in my life? Etc.*, I hope you, the reader, might learn a little bit more about yourself and about what is interesting and important to you in your own life.

After all, other people sometimes form the mirror through which we see ourselves most clearly[2].

[1] Known as "reflexivity," it is a critical skill of good Anthropologists and one of the concepts I discuss at the end of this book.
[2] A concept known as "the looking glass self," first described by sociologist Charles Cooley in the early 1900s, and another idea I discuss in the end.

To the people I have known and learned from

I hope you enjoy – and think.

-Boris Taratutin

December 12, 2012

Hanmin Lee

Age/Demographic: 20s, Taiwanese-American
Career: Marketing, self-described 'professional hustler'
Core life philosophy: "A man must constantly exceed his level" (-Bruce Lee)
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"I've always walked the line between two worlds," Hanmin starts, giggling, as we begin our interview. Lying on the grass and propped up on her elbows, she playfully kicks her feet up and down and continues,

> "Even though I'm a girl, I am also a boy at the same time. On the outside, I look like a girl but in my head, I think like a guy. So, as a result, I can understand girls very well. When they come to me with their problems, I can understand where they're coming from. But by the same token, I can also hang out with guys. We can talk sports, or hang out, and we have this natural camaraderie that most girls don't have with guys because they see themselves as a very different gender from the other one."

Intrigued, I ask Hanmin to elaborate on this concept of "a line between two worlds." She goes on to talk about how she's an "ABC" (another giggle), "American Born Chinese," and how she can "walk the line" between American culture (having grown up here) but also rock out to 'K-pop' and 'J-pop.' She maintains that "Gangnam style" was her song *before* it became an international viral hit.

"Why would you want to walk the line between two worlds?" I inquire. Hanmin starts to explain how she wants to be a jack of all trades, able to function in any situation. "Walk any line." She elaborates,

> "Say, if I was a dancer. What if I suddenly lost the ability to dance? – What the hell am I going to do then? – If I were doing dance, I would also do something else. Like write poetry or something, so that if dancing fails, I can fall into something else."

She ends by answering my question with one of her own, "What would happen if *you* lost a group of friends? What would you do then?" I pause, realizing it's not something I have ever thought about – and now feeling like I should. I tell her I don't have an answer right now, and we continue.

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Hanmin grew up in Colorado, in what she describes as a genuinely "magical" childhood. She would bake bread out of cattails with her parents, hunt for crayfish in the pond behind her house and spend days playing Huck Finn with her brother and sister, letting their imaginations and young spirits roam free. She attended a non-traditional elementary school. It was the kind of school where you have to take an IQ test to get in, but once you're in, there are no report cards or grades, and the teachers encourage students' freedom in doing what they want. For Hanmin, it was pure heaven. She told me of schoolyard 'revolutions' she started, to expand the territory of their play yard, and her incessant pursuit to learn and explore in whatever way she wanted. She loved the freedom.

I ask for a story, and Hanmin replies with a tale when her teacher asked the students to work with counting blocks; but instead of counting them, Hanmin wanted to use the blocks to build a tower. In a traditional school, Hanmin would have been kindly but firmly told "no" and redirected back to the activity. But here, instead of telling her to stop, the teacher encouraged Hanmin, "keep going!" and turned this would-be act of delinquency into a learning opportunity for the whole class. The entire classroom got involved in the building of the tower and the all the kids had a chance to learn from something that may have been considered a classroom disturbance in a different school environment.

Experiences like this, where she was able to express herself fully without external constraints or requirements led Hanmin to develop a core life philosophy: "do what I want – and not care about what other people think." To me, this comes off as being somewhat harsh, pretentious, and insensitive – qualities that go against the Hanmin I know, who is a fairly caring and loving person. I ask her to elaborate, wondering if I am misinterpreting her words. She replies,

> "It's not about actively not caring what other people think. Rather, it's more that you're so wrapped up in doing what makes you happy and what you think is right for yourself, that you don't really notice it. You don't really notice other people. You become kind of consumed in your own little world – which isn't a bad thing, you know."

Later, Hanmin tells me that so many other people in the world try to first look outwards and find their happiness; by pleasing others, getting external validation, seeking worldly success. But here, Hanmin found that if she first followed her own desire for happiness, she would naturally attract the kind of environments and people that enjoyed being around her, and everyone would be better off.

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This changed drastically when Hanmin moved to New Jersey.

"I moved when I was 10, and that's when everything did a complete 180," Hanmin says. "It's like that little cartoon where there's a monkey, an elephant, and a fish. And there's a teacher that's like 'alright, it's time for a test – go climb a tree.'" The new school system – and culture – did not work for Hanmin. She was forced to behave in ways that were fundamentally contrary to her inner self, and this had negative repercussions.

Hanmin describes starting to struggle with her Asian identity and with the expectations of a 'normal' school. "It wasn't like I just didn't like Asians, I just wasn't *aware* that I was Asian – until we moved to New Jersey, where the neighborhood was 50% Asian. That's when I started to realize, 'oh shit, I'm yellow! – and I'm way behind.'" Hanmin goes on to describe the stereotypical Asian: tutoring since they were two, diligently attending piano lessons, learning violin, and pursuing a dozen extracurriculars – "on the Americanized-Chinese path to success," as Hanmin calls it. She talks about the pressure to get all A's and 2400s on her SATs and trying to fit in with the Asian clique at her school.

> "And me – I had come from a school where we didn't even have grades, where the teacher would just let me run around outside and catch ladybugs, and where I was super hyperactive. All of that changed when I moved to Jersey. All of a sudden, I was sitting at a desk. I got grades. I got my first report card when I was in the 5th grade, and I was like 'what the fuck is happening?'"

Trying to fit in, Hanmin admits, "was like losing [her] superpowers." "I'd be a fuck-up," she says. "I wouldn't do well in school. I'd feel insecure, unhappy with something; always trying to reach other people's expectations for what I should be, instead of really realizing what I am and what I could be." The structured environment of classes, struggling to fit in at school, and internal family scuffles caused Hanmin to turn into "a smaller, shittier version" of herself.

It all came to a head on graduation day of her senior year of high school. Dropping her voice, Hanmin leans in to share what is obviously a very personal and important story.

> "I never learned what it meant to be a true friend until graduation day. I had been friends with this kid, Shane. He was my best friend, we did everything together. But the thing is, I was very selfish. I would always have these crises, and always be dramatic and stuff, because I was always frustrated with everything. And one day, he just stopped being my friend, because he couldn't take it anymore.

> And that just sent me spiraling down, 'oh my god what's wrong with me, what's wrong with me?' I thought.
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> Fast forward to graduation day. He was salutatorian, he gave a speech. We had four speakers that day, because, you know, it's an Asian school. Everyone has essentially the same GPA. The theme was Disney movies. So one person was like 'Oh after college, is like a whole new world' and parodied Disney movies and stuff. And when Shane went, … his talk was deeper, more real. But instead of actually listening to what he said, I was like 'This is fucking boring,' and I went up to him afterwards and I was like 'Dude, your speech was so boring man, what the hell? Lesley's speech was so much better.' That's when he looked me dead in the eye and said,
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> 'This is the problem with people nowadays. We are only preoccupied with entertainment value. We don't ever go beyond the surface to see what's really there. That was one of the most honest things I've ever written in my entire life, and out of all the other friends and teachers, only Serena,' this other girl, 'came up to me and told me what she *actually* thought of it. And it may not have been all been good, but she actually *thought* about what I wrote, and it was one of the most honest things I've written in my life.'"

Now, looking *me* in the eye, Hanmin continued, "And that's when I realized, that being a true friend is about not being selfish in a friendship. You have to take the good with the bad, before the good runs out, and the bad flows over. Friendship is like a two-way street: you both have to mutually be there, and dependent on each other. You can't always be the one that's talking, you have to listen to the other person too. You have to be intuitive and understand when your friend is stressed out."

As I hear this, I think how far Hanmin seems to have come from her young days of "not caring what anyone else thought" and from her selfish crises and attention-grabbing behaviors in high school. I marvel at the sincerity and forcefulness of her graduating friend's words and the impact they had on her. Nowadays, Hanmin routinely blows off work to help her friends with *their* crises and struggles; providing counsel and lending a listening ear. She really has come "180." And it is this ability, to step back, acknowledge her errors, and identify how she can move forward to constantly push herself – is one of the core aspects of Hanmin, and one of the reasons I respect her greatly.

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The interview officially over, I ask Hanmin if she has any finishing thoughts. Hanmin shares with me that her dream, her ultimate goal, is to be a person who has "exhausted all her resources, understood wholly who she could be," and "has fucking gone for it." She doesn't want to have any wasted opportunities in her life or to have missed achieving her maximum potential. They key to this, she thinks, is knowing yourself – and then going for it; like the way she lived during her elementary school days.

Hanmin acknowledges that none of us can ever reach the state of knowing ourselves *fully*, but nonetheless think people can get pretty far. I ask her how much she think she knows herself. "87%" she replies. "And others?" I ask, imagining something like "30%" or "50%." Hanmin replies, "10 percent." "Maybe 15." My eyebrows furl – it's a very low estimate. Perhaps reading my expression, Hanmin explains,

> "It's true! So many people are so indecisive or confused about things, and feel so frustrated – because they don't know themselves. Because if you are insecure, that means you haven't really

> looked deep enough inside yourself to see what your true flaws are, or how you could fix them. Or not even fix them – but accept them."

I mull over the idea: does our unhappiness and frustrations come from not knowing ourselves – or even from being *afraid* to know ourselves? "If knowing yourself is the key to happiness, and ridding ourselves of insecurities.." I start, "then how can people come to know themselves better?" I ask. Hanmin replies,

> "I guess it's a lot of self-reflection. A lot of people don't take the time to do it because they're scared. It's a scary thing to maybe see why you're so frustrated at somebody else, when you realize it's because you're scared you might see that the flaw they have is the same flaw that you're afraid *you* have."

I take a second to let these words sink in. It's true, I think, as I recall some of my own experiences. "Sometimes the things that frustrate us most about others are the things that frustrate us most about ourselves," I say to her. Hanmin nods, and leaves me with one last thought:

> "Insecurities are just like those types of things that happen because of misunderstandings between you and your inner self."

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The interview ends, we say goodbye, and Hanmin skips off to the next event in her life. I sit on the grass, my mind twirling, trying to assimilate everything I just learned – but it takes me a couple days to understand Hanmin and her story. I try to pick out the important turning points and wonder how she could appear so childish and ditsy on the outside (she almost made her pseudonym "boobs"), and yet so incredibly insightful and introspective at the same time. I wonder how she is so darn happy all the time.

A couple days pass, and my thoughts begin to settle. I realize that behind the Bruce Lee quotes and boy-girl dichotomies, the core idea by which Hanmin lives her life is in knowing what she wants. She has struggled and figured out how to be a good friend – something very important in her life – and in general, finds happiness – true and lasting happiness – by knowing *who* she is, and then "fucking going for it."

How we met:

Hanmin and I are from neighboring schools and we met through a mutual friend. Though we have only been friends for the lesser part of a year, we have grown close through our shared love for adventure, sarcasm, and thinking about life. I've learned a lot from her and even been one of the people that called her in the middle of the night to vent to and get "girl advice" from. Conversely, I like to think that I've added a bit of spice and silliness to her life, and pushed her to start grappling with her own weaknesses and struggles.

Rhyne O. White

Age/Demographic: 60s, American
Career: Executive Recruiter
Core life philosophies: "God has given me things to accomplish and the skills to do so"
"Find people with potential, and encourage them by removing barriers to their success"
"Pay it forward"

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"I consider myself a modern Renaissance Man," Mr. Rhyne O. White starts, reclining comfortably in a co-working space in the heart of Cambridge. Sixty-five, white-grey hair, and sporting a large and good-natured demeanor, Rhyne O. White (a play on words of his already-existing pseudonym, "The White Rhino") exudes contentment and wisdom as he continues, "if you were to ask me how I identify myself."

I ask him to elaborate:

> "I was given a model for the Renaissance Man configuration when I was in prep school… I started out behind the eight-ball, a 'second-class citizen,' feeling like I didn't belong economically, socially, or culturally… [but] over the course of those years, ended up doing a lot of things and excelling in a variety of fields. At the end of my junior year, as I was sitting at the commencement for the senior class a year ahead of me – I was there just to be supportive – ...The headmaster stood up and said, 'well now it is time to give' – it was either the Harvard book prize or something similar to that – 'to one of our lead juniors, one of the few Renaissance men that we've had come through this academy.' And then he began to go through this list, and I realized he was talking about me: 'For the first time in the 200-year history of the academy, simultaneously serves as Captain of the Wrestling team, president of the glee club, violinist in the new England prep school orchestra, soloist in the New England prep school chorus, organist and piano player for our chapel, and assistant organist for his home church in his home town. Etc., etc. 'Come and receive your prize.'"

This was the first time someone had looked at Rhyne O. White's numerous accomplishments and seen it as something more than a lack of focus. Similarly to how Hanmin's friend had given her incredible insight into her weaknesses, here the headmaster showed, for the first time, Rhyne O. White the framework of being a "Renaissance Man" and helped him organize his disparate pursuits under this unified identity. White describes this as one of the true turning-point moments in his life:

> "He laid out this vision for me; that I realized there was a category to explain what had been somewhat confusing to me: all my areas of interest. I had way more areas of interest than anybody else that I knew, and, it was the first time that someone acknowledged that that was a positive thing rather than a potentially negative thing. So that gave me something to hang on to and something to aspire to."

This sort of "looking-glass-self" theme (a concept I discuss at the end of this book), where other people offer insights about us turns up as a recurring theme in Rhyne O. White's life. The headmaster identifying White's strengths is one example. Another one is when Rhyne O. White was on a mission trip to Haiti with a group of missionaries, NGO workers, church pastors, locals, and government affiliates, yet he himself was not part of any organization. Expressing these concerns – of whether he was really adding anything to the team – to one of the Haitian pastors, the pastor sat White down and told him,

> "I'll tell you want your role is: I've never been in a situation where I've had the kinds of insights available to me that you have been able to offer through this entire trip. We would sit in a meeting and you would observe and you would make appropriate comments. But at the end of the meeting, as we would debrief, you would say 'did you notice that that person over there was the natural leader because x, y, and z happened. And he's really somebody that we should be investing in to develop that natural leadership. On the other side, this guy over here said some things that on the surface sounded good, but I think he's got some ulterior motives that we need to examine.' You have an amazing insight into people, and picked up on things that I never would have, and you picked them up across language barriers."

This is another stunning example of someone else directly pointing out Rhyne O. White's strengths. And, White admits, "I wouldn't be here without them" – referring to the individuals that have helped him find his talents. These experiences have had a strong influence on Rhyne O. White's life: they helped him find his current career path and instilled a strong sense of gratitude for what he's been given in his life.

White describes this idea as "paying it forward," recognizing that his talents and skills have largely come from others, and that he should, to the greatest extent possible, pass on the benefits of abilities to others, saying "I feel like [they are] not mine and [have] been lent to me," "…that I need to pass it on, that I can't hoard it."

I ask him to elaborate on what "it" is, and he replies:

> "[I] look for people that are in stages of development, especially when I sense that there's the possibility that someone may have the same kinds of seeds in them that I learned that I had in myself – of a potential Renaissance Man or Renaissance Woman…To identify those people and then do two things: Encourage them to move in that direction – because so much of the world discourages that – and to remove barriers that make it difficult for people to move in that direction."

As the pastor in Haiti pointed out, White's strength is the ability to see the potential in others and encourage it in such a way that it creates a lasting positive influence in their lives. This passion spills over into Rhyne O. White's professional life, where he works as a recruiter for "non-traditional Renaissance men and women executives," though he admits that his efforts to empower and enable people permeates various aspects of his life, saying, "I do [that] both professionally and personally. There's no compartmentalization."

I am astonished at the confidence and depth with which Rhyne O. White understands and explains his career path and passions; it is so different than the others I have been interviewing. "I see that others have had a big influence in shaping your path," I start, wondering how others (including me) might also be able to find our own passions with such confidence. "Is there anything else – that's had an effect?" I ask.

Jovially, White answers, "of course." He explains how part of it is "innate," though he admits, "it doesn't come directly from my parents, who are wired completely differently." Because of this, he attributes part of his talent to a gift from God, saying "I attribute that to this: God had a plan and needed me to be wired that way."

He gives an example of each aspect of his development: the innate gift from God, and the nurtured talent.

The first story he recounts is an example of how even when he was two, he displayed a natural ability to connect with people and make friendships:

> "They would see me, beginning as early as two years old, going out into the world and building relationships – and say 'yeah we don't know where you came from.' The story is told that, that when I was two years old my mom would walk me in a carriage when she could pay the bills – back in the days when you actually paid bills face-to-face. She'd park the carriage by the sidewalk, and I'd climb out and start walking up and down the sidewalk, introducing myself to people. When I was two."

He elaborates on this idea, stating that even during his teenage years, he could sense that something was different.

> "I began to notice that people – even when I was a teenager – would come to me and unburden themselves with deep problems or secrets that they said they couldn't share with anybody else. And I sensed that that was unusual, not just for somebody my age, but for anybody."

By monitoring and observing his natural propensities through the years, Rhyne O. White was able to at least identify that he *had* some talent or some skills, even if he could not articulate what they were at the time.

The second part to his development, White continues, was closely tied to people. The headmaster, the Haitian pastor, even his wrestling coach in high school, were all people who helped him develop the language and nuance for expressing his talents. But, perhaps most telling is the strong, somber tone with which Rhyne O. White tells of two woman figures who had a very profound effect on his life:

> "My great Aunt, that everybody called 'Deda,' was my mother's aunt, and she had a really tough life. A really tough life. [She was] confined to a mental institution because of a nervous breakdown after her husband abused her and left her. But one of the most giving people I have ever met. And she had a reputation in our town of knowing everybody. She would often take me and my sister and brother on Saturdays with her, ostensibly to help her with chores around her house, but I think it was really to take us out of the house and give us a broader exposure to the world. So I got to see her interact with all kinds of people…. And I think that reinforced what was already there as a seed in me."

Mr. White continues,

> "My mother's brother's wife – my aunt Isabel – was wired very differently. She was very gregarious, and in any situation would instantly learn everybody's life story. I observed that over the course of many years. Because she was part of the extended family, we did a lot of things together a lot of parties. We camped together. We went on trips together. So I got to see her in the real world, got to see what that was like, and took delight in watching her do that. So I think that reinforced it."

With these stories, White circles back to "it" – his desire to meet people and learn their stories. He acknowledges that these two aunt figures acted as both role models and inspiration during his youth, and is very perceptively grateful to them. He attributes much of where he is now to these two, for having exposed him to opportunities to meet people and develop his talent.

I make sure I am getting the point clearly: "So, you feel like part of it is innate – a gift from God – and part of it has been nurtured over the years?" I ask.

White confirms: "Yes. Gift from God, nurtured over the years. Exactly"

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The interview wraps to an end, and I ask White if he has any advice or lessons he has learned that have helped him in getting to where he is now. In waiting for his response, I hope for a nugget of wisdom or some perspective that will markedly differentiate him from the other, younger, individuals I have interviewed. In his usual roundabout, story-philic way of talking, Mr. White first starts with a story,

> "One of the things that I would share is... When I first went to Haiti and fell in love with the people of the country, I thought that I would be there forever. But when I bumped up against the racism of the missionaries that I was working for, I knew I couldn't stay as part of that environment. So, that was one situation in which things didn't go the way I'd expected that they were going to go. But I think that the ability to bounce back from failure – whether it's a failure that was generated by my own decisions or imposed upon me by other people's decisions – the ability to examine that and summon the courage to get back on the horse again is a constant theme that I've seen in myself and in other people."

I ask him how he thinks other people can come to find their own passion or happiness in life.

> "I'll use myself as a case study. I think that part of it is innate, and part of it is putting yourself in a situation where you are, where that seed that is there can be watered and fertilized and nurtured and weeded out. So I think making deliberate choices to put yourself in situations where you can be mentored, where you can be encouraged, where you can be held accountable, where you can be challenged where you can be stretched, where you can be exposed to a variety of prismatic ways of looking at one situation, those are all part of it."

"Any last words of advice?" I inquire, "for things we should look out for while trying to pursue our own passions?" "Of Course" White answers in good humor, and leaves me with this thought:

> "Take ownership of creating opportunities for yourself, and take risks. And when those risks sometimes result in negative experiences, not to determine never to take another risk again, but to ask yourself, 'What do I need to do in order to get back up on the horse and ride again?' Not to be dissuaded from living an adventuresome life just because the path that ends up being followed is not the first one. To have a GPS in your head that says 'recalculating route.'"

Pausing, he adds one last word for emphasis: "Resilience."

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Initially, as I poured over Rhyne O. White's narrative, I was confused and overwhelmed; his stories and ideas seemed so clear and coherent when he spoke, but, attempting to sort through them on paper was a nightmare. His narrative left me questioning the coherence of his thoughts, and if his stories were maybe actually disorganized and unrelated. However, as the major themes of his story started to emerge – nurture vs. innate ability, the gratefulness to God, the belief in our own power to shape our destinies, "resilience" – so did a better understanding of what White's narrative was about. Eventually, I was able to step back and see that it was actually *me* who was short-sighted and disorganized in my interpretation, and that the web of White's life narrative was, in fact, highly structured and coherent – it just took me a while to see it.

How we met:

Rhyne O. White and I met a year ago at a roundtable "Socratic discussion" held on Sundays at "5 Napkin Burger," a restaurant in the heart of Boston. Intrigued by his depth of wisdom and gregarious spirit – and he by my youthful enthusiasm and energy, we soon became close friends. Now we regularly meet in Boston and spend afternoons in tea shops and cafes discussing politics, history, language, culture, life, and philosophy – the bread and butter of two aspiring Renaissance Men.

Epilogue

Personal Reflection

I will admit, in beginning this work, I was not sure about what I wanted to get out of it or what the project was really about. I started off with the question, "can we learn anything from the people we find *interesting* in life?" ("interesting" being an entirely subjective descriptor). One of the major things I learned was what "interesting" meant to me; as I selected and began interviewing individuals, I began to be able to articulate the commonalities they share that initially drew me to them as "interesting." Hanmin Lee, Rhyne O. White, Will Brown (not included) are all people I look up to and respect for their ability to self-reflect and change their behaviors; their capacity to think critically and have insight onto a range of topics, ideas, and problems; and their possession of a strong sense of identity, passion, and curiosity.

I eventually learned that the field of psychology has a term that encompasses many of these qualities, known as **ego development**. Defined as "the striving to master, integrate, and make sense of experience," individuals with high levels of ego development are more concerned with "interdependence, questions of identity, self-fulfillment, etc." than their appearances or other's opinions (Loevinger 1976). And, at the highest stage, are characterized as being at a point where "learning is understood as unavoidable… the unattainable is renounced," and "the ego shows wisdom, broad empathy towards oneself and other, and a capacity to not just be aware of inner conflicts… but reconcile and make peace with those issues" – many of the themes and characteristics that I saw in my interviewees (Loevinger 1976).

As I dug farther into the idea of ego development, I came to learn that ego development has been – surprisingly – shown to *not* be associated with positive mental health and psychological well-being (Gold 1980). Apparently, happiness and nuance in experiencing life are completely unrelated; and yet the individuals I was drawn to – who had extremely high ego development – were also some of the happiest, most content people I knew. So I came to wonder, "do these individuals have any set of core philosophies or beliefs that might explain their happiness?" Eventually this turned into one of the main underlying motivating questions of my work.

As I began to unravel the idea of ego development and began grappling with the question of what makes people happy, I uncovered the real purpose of the book: looking at people's stories of growth and change, and analyzing what we can learn from them.

Now, this project focuses on exploring four key questions:

1. What can we learn by *what* others tell us? (the content of their stories)
2. What can we learn by *how* others tell us their stories? (the structure of their stories)
3. How does the writer's/narrator's role affect stories?
4. What can others' stories tell us about ourselves?

The following sections explore how the narratives of Rhyne O. White and Hanmin Lee can be explained by the fields of personality psychology, anthropology, and writing – and how they might help us gain insight into these questions.

Content of Stories

People's narratives can be explored through one of two epistemological paradigms: *hermeneutic* or *paradigmatic*. The hermeneutic approach deals with the specific, personal, and highly-contextualized elements of individual's stories; their ideas and narratives (Bruner 1986). The paradigmatic approach, on the other hand, attempts to classify narratives into groups and categories and build cause-and-effect relationships that can become generalized scientific findings (Bruner 1986). Both approaches are useful for their respective purposes, but for analyzing the *content* of people's stories, I think it is most appropriate to take the hermeneutic approach.

By using the hermeneutic lens, we can look as each individual and their ideas and suggestions as an entire data set. And, I argue, if the individual has sufficient breadth of experience, depth of thinking, rigor in their analysis, and clarity and coherence in their arguments (and if we believe the honesty of the narrator), then we can learn directly from their words (critical thinking – Ennis 1987). The following sub-sections point out some of the themes that I saw emerge from White's and Hanmin's narratives.

In her interview, Hanmin extensively talked about "being able to reflect" as important to her happiness, as was "knowing what [she] want[ed] – and fucking going for it." Rhyne O. White talked about the importance of "resilience," and continually re-evaluating his decisions; as well as the importance of building up a positive environment around himself and recognizing that talent comes from "part innate, part nurtured" – and a whole lot of effort. These are their best understanding – their individual ideas – as to where their happiness and contentment comes from.

Across these ideas, I did see a common theme that started to emerge across the interviews[3]: knowing oneself and living in a way that expresses that fully leads to happiness.

Knowing yourself, and living by that

Both Hanmin and White show very clearly that they are confident in what their values and passions are, and that they live, to the greatest extent possible, by these values. Hanmin talks about "knowing herself" and the utmost importance of reflection and introspection in identifying the source of her – and other's – fears and passions. She talks about how her happiest moments in childhood and teen years came when she was "wholly herself," and acted in a way *she* believed to be good, following her beliefs. Rhyne O. similarly spends a significant portion of his interview discussing *how* he came to find his passions and how now being able to do the work he does – what he feels like he is meant to do – brings him incredible joy in life. They both acknowledge the tremendous satisfaction they get from doing what they love.

Though somewhat cliché, the phrase "be yourself, and do what you love" captures this sentiment pretty well. However, the cliché is not necessarily trivial; upon closer inspection, Hanmin and White's stories show us that there is a tremendous amount of nuance, depth, and effort behind this simple idea – and that learning to truly come to live by it is no simple matter, but if you are able to, might just lead to your own great happiness.

The Looking-Glass Self

[3] I formally interviewed 3 individuals for this project, and did approximately six informal interviews and a survey with ~40 responses. Yes, officially two individuals – White and Hanmin – are too small of a data set, but at least this thematic finding is consistent across their interviews, and the informal ones.

Another common theme I saw between the Hanmin and White interviews is best described by the sociology concept known as "the looking-glass self." Introduced by American sociologist Charles Cooley in 1902, the looking-glass self suggests that a person's perception of self grows out of society's and others' perceptions of them (Cooley 1902). In his work, Cooley gives an analogy of an individual looking at themselves in a mirror, and from that developing a conception of who they are. An example of this might be if others tend to view us as "wise," we will start seeing ourselves as being wise. Or if others label us as "hippies" or "computer geeks," eventually we might come to see ourselves in that way as well – as in a mirror that always shows you slightly fatter than you really are, will ultimately have an influence in how you think of yourself.

In my interviews, both Hanmin and Rhyne O. White talk about experiences where a friend/colleague "called them out" and gave them insight about themselves. For Hanmin, it was her friend graduation pointing out her selfishness, and White's stories of his wrestling coach and headmaster identifying his strengths for the first time. Though these were singular events that had a big impact on Hanmin's and White's lives, they also suggest a presence of a recurring looking-glass motif in Hanmin and White's lives, that has helped them shape their own identities over the years.

Structure of Stories

Turning to the *structure* of people's stories, the field of Narrative Identity can help us gain insight into the meaning behind people's narratives. The theory of narrative identity stipulates that individuals form their identity by integrating their disparate "roles, talents, and social involvements" into an "internalized, evolving story of the self" that then provides the individual with a greater sense of unity and purpose in life (McAdams 2001). It suggests that individuals form their identity based off of the story they tell about their life, and the way in which they tell the story. It follows that, by understanding more about the process of *how* people tell stories, we can better understand their identities. Thus, by looking at the structure, coherence, thematic content, and the reasons people tell stories and even considering the role of the listener in a story, we can better understand what the non-explicit part of Hanmin and Rhyne O. White's stories are telling us (McLean 2007, Bluck 2003).

Stories and Audience

Bluck (2003) proposes that people tell stories for social, self, and directive (future-planning) reasons. Relaying one's story to another individual might help one feel more cathartic (self reasons), generate a closer bond between the listener and the narrator (social reasons), or even to portray oneself in a certain way to others (Bluck 2003, Goffman 1959).

In my interviews, it is important to know that the individuals telling the stories *knew* that their narratives would be shared with others (and that they weren't telling them, for example, to a social, emotional connection with me). Hanmin and White told their stories to help me with my project, and, by Goffman's (1959) reasoning, to most accurately convey the personality that they want to project to the world. Goffman's seminal work, "the presentation of self in everyday life," describes how when an individual comes in contact with other people, they might attempt to "control or guide" the impression others might take of him by altering their "setting, appearance, and/or manner" (Goffman 1959). As much as I tried to select for open individuals who share their stories & beliefs in a public setting as much as they do in a private setting,

according to Goffman, there is no doubt my interviewees considered the public nature of my work when crafting their responses, and thus, inescapably altered how they portrayed themselves in their stories.

Post-Facto Storytelling

Narrative identity also offers us an insight about the significance that these narratives are being recounted *post-facto*. In one of the seminal works of the field, McAdams (2001) asserts that, when telling their life story, individuals are attempting to make sense of their "disparate roles, talents, and social involvements" and "integrate them into one whole personality." This means that the "life stories" people tell are often a reflection of who they are and how they came to be that way, rather than an in-the-moment processing of the facts. Inevitably then, individuals talking about their past are less likely to provide more raw, visceral descriptions of those moments, and will tend to give more filtered, logical, reflections of the past.

Narrative Coherence

One of the main ways people's life stories are often analyzed is by the strength and type of *coherence* in them. Narrative researchers often look for *temporal* (chronological), *causal* (cause-and-effect), *thematic* (is the narrator creating themes?), and *cultural* (does it follow the 'norm' of storytelling in the society) coherence in a narrative (Habermas & Bluck 2000). Amongst other outcomes, the presence of coherence in narratives has been linked to psychological well-being (Baerger & McAdams 1999) as well as the nuance and complexity of meaning-making processes (e.g. ego development) (Adler et. al 2007).

Both of the individuals I interviewed showed high amounts of coherence in their stories, as well as high levels of happiness (high psychological well-being), and nuance in their approach to life (high ego development). Both Hanmin and White were able to convey their life stories with tremendous cause-and-effect detail (e.g. Hanmin's conversation at graduation, that led to her being less selfish now), particularly when it came to the question of "how did you develop your current life philosophies." This suggests that there might be some sort of relationship between the process of developing "core life philosophies," the narrative coherence that may offer, and the resulting psychological well-being and ego development (though more research would be needed to prove anything). In my opinion, This might also suggest that the *process* of grappling with one's past life events and generating a set of core life philosophies (that lead to coherence and happiness in life) is potentially more important than *what* the actual philosophies are.

Presenting Stories

In all of this interpretation, I argue it is also important to understand *how* the stories are being presented. Is the author using the individual's words and quoting them? Are the narratives entirely paraphrased? How much of their own meaning/interpretation is the author including? Is this biasing you, the reader?

The world of writing is big, complex, and messy – just like people's stories – and there are always opportunities for misinterpretation. Even the act of putting words on paper and crafting sentences can create opportunities for ambiguity. Likewise, the structure through which the writer chooses to each character's story can have a profound effect on the reader's interpretation of that character.

For example, if I chose to include more of my analysis for Rhyne O. White in the beginning of his narrative or attempted to standardize the structure of his profile with Hanmin's, I might have missed (or misconveyed) some of the nuance of his personality. Instead, I let each story speak for itself as much as possible and let the natural structure of their spoken narrative flow through to the final written profile. In the end, the way I wrote Hanmin's story very differently than I wrote White's.

For example, White had a much more developed set of beliefs and was much more willing to dive into them right away than Hanmin. I tried to parallel this in crafting the structure of his profile; presenting his ideas in his own words in the beginning and letting his stories and ideas shape the structure of the narrative. With Hanmin, however, it took a while to build up to the real "meat" of her beliefs during the interview. This is completely reasonable; she hadn't had the 40+ years (like White did) to sit and think about how to organize her life story into a coherent whole, and needed a bit more prodding and pointed questions to get to her core philosophies. In the narrative I wrote for her, I mirrored this by including much more of my own voice in the story, as I had played a much bigger role as the interviewer. A few among many, these are just a couple of ways in which the structural elements of writing can impact how a story is read and understood.

Stories and Ourselves

The last question I would like to explore is what other people's stories can tell us about ourselves.

In analyzing and listening to the stories of the individuals I interviewed, I found that certain things naturally stood out more to me than others. Across both interviews, I found I was significantly more engaged and interested any time Hanmin or White talked about a topic that *I* was interested in, and had a harder time understanding the weight of any topic that I didn't already think to be important.

I first realized I was doing this during the White interview, where I caught my attention drifting when his storytelling shifted toward religion, something I personally am not very keen on. However, I was able to catch this reaction and recognize that my identity – my beliefs and values – were potentially creating a bias in my interpretation. Acknowledging this, I reasoned that, if White is sharing this (religion) with me now, it *must* be important to his identity, and I ought to give it equal consideration. By seeing and understanding my own lens, I was inadvertently employing the idea of **reflexivity** Anthropologists use in their everyday work.

The ability to be self-reflexive is perhaps one of the most important attributes of a successful Anthropologist and is generally defined as "consciousness about being conscious" (Myerhoff and Ruby 1982). Reflexivity is the ability to understand your own lens – your identity, beliefs, and set of values – and the influence they have in how you see the world (Myerhoff 1982). All external human interactions, beliefs, ideas, and thoughts are ultimately filtered through your lens, and distorted because of it. Our lenses are also continually changing entities; even as we try to listen to an individual's story, observe them, and gain insight into their lives, our lenses will adapt and shift, and we have to be aware of these changes, and their potential impact on our interpretation.

In my case, attempting to be self-reflexive not only helped me push myself to understand, without bias, the most important parts of each individual's personality, but helped me learn more about myself as well. By understanding what my "lens" was, I came to better know my biases and interests and values, and learned how I could better account for this in the future.

Furthermore, I believe, in sharing people's narratives, it is important not only to acknowledge our lens and attempt to correct for it, but to be very honest and open about *what* that lens is. That's why in previous sections, I have attempted to be as transparent as possible with what my interests and motivations for this work are. The motivating questions ("what makes people happy?") and my preoccupation with philosophy and ideas have inevitably had an impact on – though hopefully not biased – my work.

Anthropologists argue that we can never *escape* our lens, and that it is distinctly separate from a "bias," which is when we fail to account for our perspective and it affects how we interpret a situation. A commonly used phrase that captures this sentiment is "we do not see things the way they are; we see them the way *we* are" (Bones 1987).

Ending Remarks

In a continuing spirit of questioning and exploring, I invite you to challenge yourself and consider a couple questions to explore your reaction to this work. And, perhaps through this, embark on a similar (though perhaps shorter scale) journey of self-discovery, as I did in the making of this book.

A few questions to consider:

1. What stood out to you most about this book – and why?
2. Did you enjoy these interviews? Which parts did you find most interesting/compelling, and why do you think that is?
3. What are you going to take away from this book?

Happy Explorations!

-Boris Taratutin

Author Bio

Full Name:	Boris Taratutin
Nationality:	Ukrainian, Russian
Career:	Blank-Space Designer | Engineer

I am a senior at the Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering in Needham, Mass. An Engineer by training, I have always been fascinated by human growth, development, and how we come to be who we are. To this extent, I have spent countless hours talking, debating, and philosophizing with people of all ages, genders, and walks of life, to try to better understand what the essence of being human is, and how people find happiness and purpose in life. This book, I hope, is a crack in the door to that understanding, and might shed some light on some of these questions ;). Most of these motivations can be explained by the fact that I was born in Ukraine but had the chance to grow up in the Silicon Valley (after my family emigrated) and attend University in Boston, two of the most opportunity-filled and intellectually thriving communities in the world. In my life, I have gone from growing up with essentially no opportunities to now having nearly infinitely many, and feel like I have been given the opportunity to learn and grow so much more than I ever thought possible. In my life, I want to understand how people grow to their fullest potential so I can help others do the same.

I am always curious to discuss new ideas and to hear thoughts, comments, and feedback on my work. Feel free to comment, say “hi,” or drop me a line at borist@ideasandtea.com.

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