

**EPISODE 61**

[INTRODUCTION]

**[00:00:06] ANNOUNCER:** You are listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders, leadership conversations that explore adapting and thriving in a complex world with Rick Torseth and guests.

[INTERVIEW]

**[00:00:19] RT:** Hi, everybody. This is Rick Torseth. And this is 10,000 Swamp Leaders. We are the podcast where we have conversations with guests to talk about things leadership related to the difficult challenges that leaders face, the difficult work they take on, the potency of making choices to use yourself to lead. And then how you go about that by developing craft?

Today is a sweet conversation. And, actually, I'm going to say the next two conversations are in this vein. My guest is Geoff Mead. Geoff is the Founding Director of Narrative Leadership Associates in the UK. He is focused on using storytelling as a sustainable leadership activity and a craft. I think this is an incredibly important element that leaders may take for granted or may wing too often. And Geoff has some unique capacities to help people build that craft.

You've brought your work to leadership development programs, including the national police Acceleration Promotion Scheme, top management programs. We were talking a little earlier today about a program you're running with a consultancy. Geoff is also a prolific writer. He's got several books out, which we'll list in the show notes.

Without further ado, Geoff Mead, welcome to the swamp. It's great to have you here.

**[00:01:32] GM:** Thank you, Rick. The swamp is a more homely place than I imagined the title suggested.

**[00:01:38] RT:** Well. Before we get into a lot of interesting things, I think that for people who are choosing to lead will probably benefit from, let's help them get some orientation here. What do you want them to know about Geoff Mead before we get started?

**[00:01:52] GM:** Okay. I guess the relevant things are my background brings some several things together. I had a 30-year career in the UK Police Service as an operational detective, as an area commander. And laterally, as someone involved in the development of high-flying, young police officers. I had my initiation into the whole world of leadership development, gosh, 1980s, late 1980s. I've been around that field a long time.

And I've also studied narrative and the effect of narrative on identity and leadership. I'm an associate professor at a business school where I work with doctoral students. And I work in corporations helping boards and people at all levels really think about their leadership through the lens of narrative. What I hope I bring together is some experience of leading a studied understanding of narrative. And also, a sort of practical fascination with story.

When I left the police service in 2002, I went to the International School of Storytelling and trained as a performing storyteller. Because I was already fascinated by the power of story and I wanted to understand it from the inside. Not just as an academic study. I wanted to learn what it is to tell a story, and be with an audience, and feel it in my body. I guess those are the areas of kind of study and understanding and practice. Above all, practice that I bring to the conversation.

**[00:03:15] RT:** Okay.

**[00:03:15] GM:** Is that enough to start with? I guess that'll do.

**[00:03:18] RT:** That'll get us going. And for listeners, let's also give them a landscape of what we've thought about here, that we are going to have two conversations. And this conversation we're going to do today is on narrative identity, which you'll explain here shortly. And then the second one we'll do next week will be on narrative leadership.

We're traveling a journey that starts with self and then moves on to how person uses themselves to lead using narrative. We'll begin with ourselves here. When you and I were exchanging information about how we might approach this conversation, you sent me a document at the very beginning. It was a quote by Salman Rushdie. Which, when I read, really jumped at me in the context of what we wanted to talk about. I thought that's a good place for us to start. Would you mind reading what Rushdie had to say?

**[00:04:02] GM:** Sure. This comes from 1991. It actually comes from an essay called *One Thousand in a Balloon*. And Salman Rushdie wrote it while he was in hiding from the fatwa that was a threat against his life, which I think makes it all more poignant.

Those who do not have power over the story that dominates their lives, the power to retell it, rethink it, deconstruct it, joke about it, and change it as times change are truly powerless. Because they cannot think new thoughts.

**[00:04:32] RT:** There's so much here to unpack. Let's take it a little bit at a time. But using his sort of compass point for us. Let's start with you. What got you into this exploration of narrative? Because I think you wouldn't say this. But I would say at least in the business sector leadership narrative, you're one of the leading thinkers and probably have done as much research on it and the potency of it. What drew you to this exploration for yourself personally?

**[00:05:00] GM:** It was a coup de foudre. A falling in love. I in – gosh, it must have been the early '90s, was at a conference, a three-day conference on complexity theory and organizational change. It was new. It was fashionable. There were 30 or 40 of us at this conference. It was a three-day event. And the evening of the middle day, the organizers had arranged for two professional storytellers to come and tell stories in the evening. And I was not interested. I mean, I was more than not interested. I was cynical. I thought, "I'm pretty grown up. What on Earth do I want to go and listen to stories for?" There's a kid's program in UK called Jackanory about storytelling. Storytelling is Jackanory. Storytelling is for kids.

I went to the bar. I was the only person in the bar. I have cleared bars before and I've cleared them since. But I went there and I said to the guy behind the bar, "Where is everyone?" And he

pulled a large glass of red wine and gave it to me and he said, "They're next door waiting for the storytelling." I thought, "Oh, my God. Really? Really?"

I had nowhere else to go. It's a residential event. I went in there reluctantly. And it was in the lounge room there. Usually, during the day, people sat around and had coffee. But they adjusted the seats. It was full. There were no seats left. Not only did I not want to be there. I had to sit on the floor. People had unbuttoned their top buttons. Has the world gone mad?

And I sat there kind of expecting a sort of conspiracy of skepticism. But actually, what I saw was a room full of adult people who were kind of almost leaning forward thirsty, hungry for something, wide open. And I thought, "This is extraordinary. What's wrong with them all?"

But I, being polite, I kept quiet and I thought, "Well, I'll listen." And two guys stood up at the end of the room. I've now know them both very well. But one, Ashley Ramsden, runs a school of storytelling. I didn't know that at the time. And his colleague, Bernard. And Bernard began to tell a traditional story. And it was actually the story from the Jataka Tales of the Buddha. It was about when the Buddha was reincarnated as a deer.

And amongst men, a new king came to the throne who'd love nothing more than hunting. And within two minutes, I could see these scenes in my mind. I could hear them happening, the hunt. I could almost smell the blood. And I thought, "This is astonishing." I loved the story. I was completely in it. I look around, everybody had their sort of wide-eyed and mouths, soft jaws, slack-jawed in wonder. And I thought, "This is extraordinary."

So I relaxed enough to really enjoy the evening listening to the stories. But at the end of it I thought, "I have to learn how to do this." I was already working in leadership development. Working with people around their leadership practice. And, immediately, I saw this is fundamental to what we do when we're leading. We're trying to create experiences for people. We're trying to help people understand. Give significance and meaning to things. And these guys can do it. This process does it. This is story. Story is doing something extraordinary. And I want to learn how to do it.

It was really a chance meeting if you like. But it was instantaneous. From skepticism to, "My, God. This is astonishing." But I was very lucky because the people I met were very wonderful practitioners of the art. And I rushed up to them afterwards, Ashley, who runs a school, I said, "I've got to learn how to do this. I could hardly bring myself to wait for the applause to die down." And he said, "Well, lucky for you, I run a school for storytelling. You better start coming."

I started on weekends and then week-long courses. And then when I left my work in the police service in 2002, I took a sabbatical. I went to the International School of Storytelling. There really is one. It's in East Grinstead or near East Grinstead in Sussex. And I trained full-time for – I think it was 13, 14 weeks, residential, in the traditional art of storytelling. And then I went out and practice. I told stories, traditional stories mostly, all over the place. From church halls, to schools, to International festivals. Because I wanted to get it in my bones. And then I began to develop this practice I'd imagined was possible connecting leading and storytelling, leading and narrative. And I practiced that I suppose the last 25 years now.

**[00:09:08] RT:** Okay. Let's segue then a little bit here gently though. You've developed your craft of storytelling. And then you've begun to make a linkage between that and leading. And it strikes me and I know it strikes you that we human beings come versed in story. Some by design, and some inherited, and some unconscious.

As you began to do this work to help people use story to lead, what challenges did you run into and what experiences were you seeing people having to wrestle with to get to grip with being able to do this well?

**[00:09:47] GM:** I began naively, I think. And I began with a straight practice of helping people learn how to tell a story. But after a while, I realized that that wasn't enough because they were struggling to know what story should I tell. What stories are mine to tell? And that began to fascinate me. And that fed really into what I've been working with in my leadership practice.

And I think, over the years, I'd come to intuit some really important existential questions that leaders need to answer. Like, "Who am I? What do I really care about? Where do I belong? What's my tribe? Who are my people? What do we do?" And thirdly, "What do I serve? What's

the world calling for to which I can contribute?" And, gradually, I began to understand that narrative and story contribute to understanding all those three dimensions, those domains.

And so, I quickly shifted from I will teach you how to tell a story to I can help you learn about who you are, the stories that shape you and the stories that you want to shape. And so, I sort of moved from leader of a storyteller to something I thought was more significant and more deeper, more profound, which is about narrative leadership.

**[00:10:56] RT:** And in this conversation we're having today, I think what you're leading us to is this idea of narrative identity.

**[00:11:02] GM:** Yeah.

**[00:11:04] RT:** For listeners who may have never heard of this phrase before, amplify it a little bit. What is narrative identity? And why does it matter? Why should we care about it?

**[00:11:13] GM:** We carry with us, all of us, some kind of sense of self who we are. And that includes I'm the kind of person who does this. I'm not the kind of person who does that. Some of those you might call them injects or injunctions. Conscious. We know about them. We've chosen them. But many unconscious and unchosen. We've taken them on board somehow over the years. And so, they really, really do influence, shape how we show up in the world. How we show up in our lives and how we show up as leaders.

I began to be really interested about the role of story in this and narrative in this because it seemed to me instinctively that a sense of self has a story attached to it. If you ask me how am I, I can tell you very simply. If you ask me who am I, I'm going to tell you a story. I'm going to tell some potted version of my life. And we all carry with us some sense of biography, autobiography, as the story of who we are and how we become who we are.

And I began to explore that through various psychological roots leading me eventually to narrative psychology and a deeper understanding of how we construct a sense of self over time through narratives that we take in, narratives that we construct, narratives that are imposed upon us. And how some of those narratives are really helpful if we can tap into them. They give

us strength, and courage, and nourishment. And others are really quite dysfunctional and pass their sell-by-date and are very limiting.

This instinctive sense of I'm the kind of person who or I'm the kind of person not, if we unpick it, we can often go back to an event, a moment, a story that will illuminate how that belief has come about. Then we can perhaps begin to have some agency over our own story. Unfolding life story. And that's been my fascination for the last, I guess, five years. To study and research that and to work with that.

**[00:13:08] RT:** Safe to say too that you stand on shoulders and lean on people in different disciplines to support the exploration. Not only what you're trying to assemble. But also, how you go about helping people use their own. And I'm going to say add to, or adjust, or adapt their identity that they use through their narrative for something more useful for themselves. Who matters in this conversation from different bodies of work that you pull from that you think help support the work you're doing?

**[00:13:38] GM:** Well, if you go right back to its origins, the first person probably, to use the term narrative identity, was Paul Ricoeur. A French philosopher who wrote enormous, very difficult to read, three-volume work called *Time and Narrative*. But he used that term I think for the first time. That he came to the conclusion that narrative story is what enables both to have a sense of continuity and of change. And that thought has been taken up over the last few decades in three different complimentary, I suppose. But qualitatively different schools of thought about narrative psychology.

From a North American base, the preeminent scholar there is Dan McAdams. And he works from a kind of, you might say, humanist position. Quite Rogerian. That we have an authentic self, which gets a bit clouded. And that the work of expiration is the pairing away of things that are inauthentic to find what is authentic. I think that's interesting but it's ontologically and epistemologically problematic.

Where does the authentic self come from? Are we born with it? Is it God-given? Is it actually immutable? Are we just stuck with an unauthentic self?

**[00:14:50] RT:** God, help me.

**[00:14:51] GM:** Whatever it is. I think there are interesting thoughts around it. And we do have some sense – I think we carry sort of a – again, an intuitive sense of, "Well, that's me. And that isn't quite me." It benefits from exploration. But you can't abandon altogether, I think, the idea that something feels more real than others. Some stories feel more closer to our core sense of who we are.

Then you've got another school, if you like, at the opposite end of that ontological spectrum, which says the self is a social construction. That we come into the world as it were, as a *tabula rasa*. And that our sense of self is made up by the stories we interject and the stories that are imposed upon us. Particularly, as Foucault would talk about, an idea of regimes of truth and power. The way certain kinds of hegemonic stories become imposed on people.

I was talking, for example, yesterday to a group of leaders and talking – men and women in the group. And in the course of that conversation, noticing and identifying in particular the women who felt this was very helpful for them. Because the stories have been imposed on them historically as to how they should be, what it is to be a woman, have come in very complex ways. But strongly a sense of it being imposed.

And so, that work has come from Epston and White who practiced in New Zealand and Australia as therapists. And they have some wonderful work. They published an extraordinary book called *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. And they show how opening up the stories that have been imposed on us is the first move.

And what I learned from them was about the criticality of moving from a position of stories that have us to stories we have. Externalize it. You are not the problem. You have a problem. Let us name this problem. Let us have a relationship with this problem. And they really work in a beautifully and exquisite way often through writing as well as verbal, spoken therapeutic sessions with this idea of forming a different kind of relationship with this part of one's narrative identity over which we want to get some agency. I learned a lot from them.



And then the third area which I've come to more recently is the idea of a dialogic self. The self is not so much a unitary-centered single thing but that it is in a way an ongoing conversation between parts of ourselves or different aspects of the self. And that opens up another way of gaining agency, which is to explore what these dialogues might be and to create fresh dialogues between parts of the self. And perhaps also parts of the self that might live outside the individual psyche.

Maybe the self isn't purely within the city walls. Maybe the self is more diffused. It spreads out somewhat into the relationships. Whether they were with real people, or fictional people, or mythological figures, or archetypes, this idea of the self as an ongoing dialogue.

**[00:17:58] RT:** Okay. You're a storyteller too. And I know that – why don't we take a moment here and step into you as storyteller? You passed on a story that you thought might be relevant to the conversation here. Let's use what you're talking about as an example of what you're talking about, if you don't mind my order language of it.

**[00:18:19] GM:** Okay. Yes. I'll give it a little preamble, if I may.

**[00:18:22] RT:** Please.

**[00:18:23] GM:** Because I'm interested in story from many perspectives. And one is the relationship between the canon of traditional stories and the way we view our lives. The sort of almost archetypal templates of what it is to live a life that those traditional stories – some of them with real wisdom offer to us. And there's an American writer called Allan Chinen, who's helped us move beyond the kind of Joe Campbell's monomyth of the hero's journey, which is in my opinion given far too much prominence.

There are many forms of story, and they're not all the hero's journey, and is not a monomyth. And if we look at the canon of fairy stories, Bruno Bettelheim's work on the uses of enchantment for example, we can see how fairy stories offer patterns and ways of getting through childhood's difficulties. They're for kids. They're about the struggle that children have.

Then you can move, as you go through life, to a hero's journey. There is a time for life coming up into adulthood where the young prince and princess have struggled to become king and queen, if you like. The struggle to find happily ever after. The moving out into the world. And the hero's journey fits that beautifully. But then there's another canon which Chinen calls post-heroic stories. And my first book was called *Coming Home to Story: Storytelling Beyond Happily Ever After*. Because, by that stage, I was in my 50s. I tried happily ever after and it didn't last. And I've never met anyone in beyond midlife who says, "Yep. Got there. Happily ever after. It's still great. Never a problem."

I thought I really wanted to explore those. And they're fascinating stories too. And they begin not with a call to adventure but a fall from grace. They've done the work. They're no longer prince and princess. They're king and queen and something happens. And that union is lost. And then there's a long journey of recovery.

Then, beyond that, there are elder tales. and I'm an older person. I'm now in my 70s. And so, elder tales really fascinate me. What happens at this stage of life that these traditional stories can help us about? And then beyond that, there are stories for old age and death. There are stories about why death is necessary. Death in a nut and those kind of stories. Where death is somehow imprisoned. It's taken out of the world and the world just falls apart. And all cultures have those stories about why death is important. Okay. That's the preamble.

The story I want to tell you, it's very short, is an elder tale. And it kind of touches on the return of magic. Because in the post-heroic quests, the magic has gone. The protagonist has to survive by different means. And it feels means like the ability to really stay with something endurance, fortitude, that different kind of courage. It's not so much slaying monsters or luck. It's a different kind of energy that's required to get through. But something these elder tales suggest the possibility of what happens when you let go of a quest? When you're not striving anymore? Okay.

This is a story – it begins with an old woodcutter and his wife. It's a Northern European story. And they live in a little hovel, old hut in the woods. And every day of his adult life, the woodcutter has gone from the hut and he's gone deep into the forest. And he has cut wood, which he's

loaded onto his faithful horse, which he takes with him from the house. He loads up and he goes back to the house. And the wood is sold in the nearby town every day.

And they once had children. Two strapping sons. And while they were around, they could cut more wood and get more money. But they needed more food. They never were anything other than poor. And when we meet them, they don't really have two pennies to rub together. The sons are married and gone and they're on their own.

And one day the woodcutter comes back from the woods and he says to his wife, "That's it. I'm not doing this anymore. I've had enough." And he hangs the axe up on the wall and he says, "I'm going to bed." He goes into a little side room and he goes to bed. And his wife can't get him out. Well, they've been mad a long time. A little difficulty isn't going to make them part. But she can't get him out a bit.

After a little while this is going on and trying to make sense of it all, a stranger comes past, knocks on the door and says, "Excuse me. I see you've got a pony out the back. And I very much like to hire the pony. Could I pay you some money and use the pony?" The wife sticks her head around the curtain and talks to the husband he says, "Well, you're dealing with things now." He says, "You sort it out." She agreed a price and this stranger takes the pony.

Now it so happens that this stranger is in fact a wizard. A wizard who has certain magic but certain secret knowledge. And he happens to know that deep in that forest buried many, many years ago is a treasure. Gold, silver, jewels, plate. And he takes his horse, takes the horse to where the treasure is and he digs it up. And he puts it in great sacks and he puts the sacks on the horse's back. And just to that moment, a troop of soldiers sweeps through the forest looking for this wizard. And he hightails it. He runs off because he doesn't want to be killed by the soldiers leaving the horse standing there with bags of treasure on its back.

Now what does the horse do? The horse only knows one thing to do. At the end of the day, he goes home. The horse goes home and appears outside the cottage. And the husband's still in bed and the wife says, "Oh, pony's home." And the husband says, "Well, you better take the saddle off then. You better see to it." And she grumbles and complains and goes outside. And she takes the bags off, "These are heavy." And she looks inside, she sees the treasure. And she

goes back to the husband and she said, "I think you should come and see what we found." And he says, "No. No. No." She said, "I really think you should come and see this." And her voice is so convincing that he gets out of bed and he goes outside. And lo and behold, there is the treasure. So, they're not poor anymore. They give a third of it away to their sons, a third of it they give to the needy, and the other third was more than enough to keep them in comfort for the rest of their days. That is an elder tale. It's one of my favorites. And we can unpick it a little if you like.

**[00:24:50] RT:** Yeah. Let's do unpick it. Because, A, not everybody's in the elder tale stage of life.

**[00:24:55] GM:** That's true. That's true. That's true.

**[00:24:57] GM:** And not everybody is as well versed in interpreting story as you are. Let's do unpack it. You go first. I have a couple of questions.

**[00:25:04] GM:** Right. Great. I mean, what I would say is there is no single meaning to a story. And so, if I talk about what it means, it's what it means to me. It's not what it should mean to someone else. I think that's really critical. And something I learned in my training as a storyteller that we must not impose the meaning of a story on another. Whether it's a story about our life, or a story like this, or a traditional story, it's a real kind of act of oppression to do that. But this is what it says to me. There's a gift in the everydayness of what we do.

Later in life perhaps, that small gift will be repaid. Will come back in a different way. And for the woodcutter, it's the daily grind. It's the going and the coming. The going and the coming and doing his work in the world that results in the pony bringing the treasure back. There's a kind of magic to it. And it's not through striving. There's a kind of readiness to receive the gift. I mean, they don't call the king and give it back to – give it to the king. They keep it. The treasure is valued and recognized and used well. I think that's really essential. And the story is very clear about that. They don't keep it all. They don't live in a castle. They give to those who need. They give to their family. They give to those in greater need of themselves. And they keep enough to be comfortable. But above all for me, there's a sense in which midlife is so full of strife that it's very hard for any kind of magic. But I don't mean waving a wand magic. I mean, the kind of

synchronistic magic that occurs in life to be recognized even, it passes us by. But perhaps it's possible in a later stage of life to have the space, to create the space, to notice and to be willing.

For me, the gift that came back to me was writing. All my professional life, I wrote. I wrote reports. I wrote papers. I wrote articles. I did this. And I did this. And I did this. And I did this. And, eventually, they came a point I stopped doing that. I said, "I'm not going to do that anymore." And that's when the stories, and the poetry, and the novels I've written started to become possible. That gift came back to me.

**[00:27:17] RT:** To what extent you might be suggesting that for many people, especially as they move through these stages of life and get older, have been accumulating a kind of – I don't know, karmic goodwill that they're unbeknownst to them that is there through their activity and their toil or things that they took for granted? Or maybe they didn't pay that much credit to themselves for enduring and staying with it that somehow comes back to them. Is that too mechanical and too mathematical? Is life random?

**[00:27:51] GM:** No. I think it's both – I think it's random as well. I mean, bad things happen out of the blue. But the story opens up a possible way of construing a position in life, which is still generative in late life. It's taking the gifts that you've somehow earned and using them well and differently.

And I think that if we regard in that way, then I think it becomes something that's possible. Whether it's universally possible. I don't know. There are many stories. There's not only one single story. And, of course, it's just that I have a dual fascination with the kind of the lived stories. If you like, the autobiographical stories and also the traditional story. That realm. And I think there's an interesting mirror, mirroring. I call it the world of the mundane and the world of the mythic.

And so, there's a kind of mythic resonance sometimes with a particular story individually. We can say, "Oh, that story feels like it has something to say to me." And that can be really quite nourishing in the imaginal realm. And that can be important. I'm not saying at all that everyone

who wants to explore narrative identity needs to go into the realm of traditional story. But it can be interesting. Because at the heart of all this is the power of our imagination.

To go back to narrative identity a bit, James Hillman, who's a – well, he's an archetypal psychologist. He created a field called Archetypal Psychology. He was actually a student of Jung. He was director of the Jung Center in Switzerland for many years. And then he kind of broke away a bit and delved even deeper into the archetypal realm than Jung did.

But he says we can only live the stories we can imagine. And I think it's really interesting. That doesn't mean to say things happen to us that we haven't thought of or that if we imagine it will happen. It means the lives that we consciously wish to live we can't live unless we are capable of imagining what they might be. And I think that's such an important thing in this realm. And it can be informed by all sorts of things in the imagination.

For me, my imagination is certainly informed by that archetypal realm. But it doesn't have to be. We can do this this work around the self without going in that place. But we can't do it without finding our own way to imagine and reimagine our stories whatever they might be.

**[00:30:09] RT:** I'm now connecting, and you can clean me up if this is a misconnect, you're opening with Salman Rushdie's quote and I hear him saying, based on what you're saying now, the inability to reimagine yourself means you don't get a different world than the one you're inhabiting right now. What is the work for people who may be listening to you for the first time and hearing this proposition of narrative identity and starting to think a little bit about the identity and the narration that they give it that maybe that's repetitive, and old, and a little out of date? What's a move? What do people do with that insight so that they can maybe produce something different?

**[00:30:50] GM:** Yeah. Yeah. Let's go back to my work yesterday with this group of leaders where I invited them to – I was talking about narrative identity. And I was talking about limiting assumptions. The first thing I said was, "Who in this room was told as a child you can't sing?" And about a dozen hands went up. "How's that going? How's that singing going? Are you singing yet?" And they say, "No." I say, "Well, you've got a larynx, you've got a voice box, you

got lungs. You can sing. You may never be chosen to be an opera singer. But you can. But you're not doing."

Now I share that particular constraint on myself. Although I've done several things occasionally to try and breach it. But what's powerful is to go back and say, "Where did that come from?" And almost that exception, people can go back in their minds and say, "There's a moment when I took that on."

For me, that moment was being shamed by my music teacher at the age of eight. Brought out in front of the other boys and listen to me screeching away here and turned to you, "You'll never sing as long as you've got –" like I said, I'm rude, but you're never going to be able to sing. Come to the front where I can see you and you're going to play the triangle. And I want to be in the back playing the cymbals and the drums. But only the singers were all in the back. I had to go in the front and go ting for about three years.

But, actually, finding that moment, sharing that story enables me to begin to do something, to have some choice about it. Because what we have after we've moved – we live in a constant flow of experience. Some of those things become experiences. For various reasons, they're traumatic, or they're important, or they're interesting. Those are the ones we kind of create little stories around consciously and unconsciously.

There's the story of Miss Higginbottom bottom telling me I couldn't sing. That's a story I have now. The story that had me was you can't sing. By laying aside the you can't sing story for a bit, I can go back to a story that says I was shamed as a child and haven't sung since.

Okay. I'm a lot older now. What do I want to do about that? Am I content with that? Might be. Might be fine. Do I want to challenge it? Okay. I can do something in the world to challenge that. I can try community choir where my voice isn't really heard. I can, as I once did on a visit to China, sing the Little Green Frog song to a hall full of Chinese communist party officials. That's another story.

**[00:33:22] RT:** I bet it is.

**[00:33:26] GM:** I have sung in public but only or twice in my life. That's a very obvious example. And then I invited people in the room to this thing I said earlier about I'm the kind of person who I'm not the kind of person who just to jot a few of those down. And then have a conversation with someone sitting next to them, "Where did that come from?" If it wasn't, I'm not a kind of person – but you're not the kind of person who. Who'd be saying that? Well, whose voice is that? Where it did come from? And almost that exception they are able to pinpoint in the moment. Then it becomes a story.

And once you have a story, you have choices about it. It's not a simple matter. Big issues can be very traumatic. They can take a lot of shifting. And some perhaps we never shift. But we can begin to get some agency over who we think we are and the stories that shape us. Some agency. But the first point of contact with that is to identify the story. To storify if we can the moment, the event and have some choice about it. Did that answer your question?

**[00:34:33] RT:** Yeah. Let's keep going with it. Because you spend a lot of time like you did yesterday, for example, with rooms full of people who work in business. And they all have stories. All have narratives. And I'm pretty sure that when they're in your presence, you're provoking them a little bit just like you are here with this distinction. What have you seen people actually do when they take your advice and start to probe and challenge these narratives? Anything that jumps out for you about what human beings are capable of when they start to take that work on?

**[00:35:04] GM:** It's a good question.

**[00:35:06] RT:** You've raised the heat on them a little bit by making this distinction.

**[00:35:09] GM:** Yes. Yes. Yes. I mean, in truth, often I don't get to see what happens because it's a moment in a conversation together. I have seen people step up to inhabit a larger sense of self. To say I'm going to go for that job. I didn't think I could do it. But, actually, there's nothing stopping me. Or I'm going to confront this person about what's happening because I don't think it's right. And I know I've got the courage to do it. I found it. If I dig back, I know in the past I've stood up for something I believed in, I can do it again.



I think it's in those little moments that you see something. If I was working with someone in a therapeutic way over the longer term, and I'm not a therapist, then I might be able to track the development of something over time more readily. But I do sometimes get people come back and tell me that they've – of a shift they've made in response to that moment of thought and to fold it up. I mean, this is not a kind of fairy dust. It doesn't instantly work.

Very interesting that I said the Epston and White work. They open a gap. And in the beginning, the agency might be – they say how much influence does this problem have over you? How much do you have over it? And what really impresses me, they often work with kids who are unsophisticated. They can't game it. They're truthful.

And maybe, "Oh, okay. So maybe – is it true to say –" this problem has 95% power. And you've got 5%. 98%. You got two? Okay. All they're interested in is 1%. Because that is qualitatively different from nothing. If you got nothing, you can be stuck. If you got 1%, you can shift.

When's an example of when you've delayed this behavior? This problematic behavior? By a minute or two. Oh, there was a time when –" oh, that's interesting. Okay. Sometimes you can just delay a little bit. Well, I've done that. Those little moments. You won't see this. But my fingers are kind of coming together as if I were making some tiny little object or if I'm manipulating some tiny little molecular-level activity. That tiny shift is a starting point. And then people have choices as they go do I want to try and do something about this? Do I confront the source of this injunction? You can't do this if it's another person. Or do I sidestep it? My example, do I join a choir? Do I go going and try and do something different or not?

I've worked over the years with both men and women. I've certainly seen women step into roles that they thought they told themselves or they have learned that they couldn't do because that wasn't what – that's not what a woman does. Yeah. I think that's my response to your question.

**[00:37:46] RT:** I'm not even sure that this is part of the information that you and I discussed. And I'm not sure I've got it located in the right part of our conversation. but let's figure it out. I'm interested in this information. You exposed me to Arthur Frank in his idea of narrative wreckage.

**[00:38:02] GM:** Yeah.

**[00:38:03] RT:** What's he speaking to? Narrative wreckage. Very provocative phrase.

**[00:38:07] GM:** Isn't it?

**[00:38:08] RT:** Where's he going with that? And who is Arthur Frank?

**[00:38:11] GM:** Okay. Arthur Frank is Canadian. I think he described himself as a medical sociologist. He's an academic. But he's also in remission from cancer. He has experience – first-hand experience of how people get medicalized. Okay? How, when one is wrapped up in complex, difficult, life-threatening medical procedures, our stories get lost? We get dehumanized. We become the condition. We become the CABG, which stands for coronary artery bypass graft, known as CABGs, the CABG in bed tree as opposed to, "How's William getting on?" He writes about that. And he's researched it as well about how critical it is for people to be able to have some way of regaining agency over their story.

The idea of narrative wreckage feeds into narrative identity. Sometimes we choose to work on our narrative identity just because we're interested. But we're more likely to be confronted by the fact that our story doesn't work. Our sense of self no longer seems to make sense. And all sorts of life events can provoke that. They can be joyous. They can be getting married. They can be falling in love. They could be having a child. They can be getting ill. They can be a bereavement. They can be losing a job. They can be getting a job. But some significant shift in circumstance, which means that our sense of self doesn't fit. If you like, the stories that we tell ourselves that give us continuity hit the rocks. And he calls that narrative wreckage. The idea that our stories don't make sense.

And he says there's an inevitable period of chaos where we're just living in this fragmented existence of confusion. If I give you my own example of that, it would be my second wife died 10 years ago this year. And she was an extraordinary, brilliant, amazing young woman. And she died of a brain tumor.

And I noticed many things but later when I was trying to work through my grief and my loss. When people said, "How are you?" I always had an answer. But the question they didn't ask that

I didn't have an answer to is who are you now? I didn't know. That was narrative break. I'd lost the sense of who I am. Not completely. I still function in the world. But at some fundamental level, I had no idea who I was anymore. I wasn't the husband. I wasn't the person who was going to live the life that we had planned. I was adrift. There's a period of inevitable – period of chaos.

And then says Arthur Frank, really, there are two other roots. Some people do stay stuck in chaos. They'd never escape it. And we've met those kind of folk who are lost, frankly. They're lost souls. Sometimes you can create a restitution narrative. Something bad happens but it can be fixed. And we can get back to how things were before. That's perfectly legitimate. Some things are like that. But other things don't heal unless you find some kind of transformative narrative. Things will never be the same. But they can be different and they can be all right. They might in some ways even be better in some. But by different standards, I suppose.

I saw all of this when I was visiting Chris in the hospital when she was having treatment for her cancer with the various patients in the ward. There was one patient, a lady who was still running her business from the hospital bed. She was on the third and final round of chemotherapy. If it didn't work, she wouldn't live. And yet, she was utterly determined that none of her clients would know that she was ill. That her business would run in exactly the same way. She was in a way living out in a kind of restitution narrative. But everything's fine.

There was another person in the ward who was clearly in the midst of chaos. Who would cry out, who would scream, who'd have hallucinations or terrible dreams? She'd lost a sense of self. And God bless her. My wife, Chris, worked very hard to create some kind of narrative for herself, which was still learning, still growing, still generative in this process. I have this. It doesn't have me. And I'm alive. And I'm going to live until I die. But things are different. That's a very perhaps quite an extreme example.

But I think most of us, looking back, if we're not in the first flush of youth would say, "Yeah, there have been times in life where we've been really knocked off course." And part of that knocking off course, it can be helpful to think about in terms of our sense of identity. The who are you question? And how can we explore that? How can we work with the stories that are falling apart, come to understand them and restore our lives in some way?

**[00:42:52] RT:** What I'm thinking about, a slightly less intense condition, is the challenge that so many people have with stopping their job because their job is who they are in the world. Their narrative is I am – I do this. And it's oftentimes an unconscious narrative of I do this.

**[00:43:09] GM:** Yeah.

**[00:43:10] RT:** I know you've been exposed to a lot of people in that kind of transition. And what do you say about that? What counsel, what advice that you haven't already given that relates to that?

**[00:43:21] GM:** sometimes I just tell them the story of the woodcutter and they say, "Oh, yeah. Okay. Okay. Yeah. Mm-hmm." I mean, it does take time. And there's no forcing it. But it's the old joke about therapists and light bulbs, isn't it? How many therapists do it take to change a light bulb? And the answer is one. But the light bulb is going to want to be changed.

There's something about someone's readiness, and rightness, and willingness. This is not something you do to people or even for people. You can support people if they get a sense of wanting to do something around this work. And I think any kind of creative activity is really helpful. It opens up a part of ourselves that is open to possibility. Whatever that creative activity might be. I don't mean being a great writer or a great painter. Anything that has any kind of creativity involved. Making a scrapbook. Playing with Lego bricks, which I also quite like as it happens. But that's, again, another story.

But is there anything that has the possibility to take us into that place of wonder again? You see? Gardening. I don't know what it is. But there's something about – and I often think these – when we get a clue about what might be possible, that clue is often very faint.

Hillman talks about the soul. The soul's code. The voice of the soul. And not in a religious sense but in a sense that if there were a part of us that knew who we were and what we're here for, let's call that the soul, he says, basically. And if we behave as if that were the case, the soul has often a quiet voice. Tries to tell us something through an image, or a symbol, or a picture, or almost a whisper in the ear. And we have to learn to listen because it's a voice that's easily

suppressed. Because the old I'm not that kind of person story can come up very quickly. It's a choice. And as Jung used to say, come back when things have got worse.

**[00:45:16] RT:** Damn, Jung.

**[00:45:17] GM:** I know. But it's true. I think human change is not easy. If I can just drop someone, another name, which has really influenced me.

**[00:45:25] RT:** Please.

**[00:45:26] GM:** There's an existential therapist and writer called Allen Wheelis. Many years ago, literally half a lifetime ago, I spent 3 months at the FBI Academy in Quantico. I won't go into the reasons for it. But I was there. And I met there a wonderful man called Hillary Robinette. Ex-Naval officer. Special agent. And he ran a course about human relations.

And the first session, there's only about – I don't know. Six or eight of us who did it. He gave us each a copy of a book by Allen Wheelis and the book was called *How People Change?* Now this is half a lifetime ago. I didn't even know that people did change, you know? I got to the point in life I kind of hoped it was possible. But I had absolutely no idea of how the psyche worked of how we might change.

But he said, and I've looked back on this many times, that there is a kind of predictable pattern to deep change. And it begins with suffering. If it's not hurting, we don't go there. Rarely, rarely do we really invest the enormous psychic effort to bring about change unless something is really causing us difficulty. But you can get stuck there. Just suffering.

The second stage he says is insight. We get some sense of what the problem is and what might be causing it. And what it might be to be different? This is a lot about narrative identity here. Then he says it's will. We have to gather our will together in order to do different things if we're going to change.

A thief is not a thief because he is dishonest, says Wheelis. A thief is a thief because he steals. You don't steal, you're not a thief. You change the behavior and life changes. I think some word

of wisdom in that. We kind of fake it until you make it. Act as if in order to bring about the change. After will comes actually doing it. Action. And then if action is persistent, change is possible.

**[00:47:17] RT:** It happens. Yeah.

**[00:47:19] GM:** But it's true to say that if we're bumbling along happy enough, I mean why would we change? What's the point? There's no reason to. It's when things don't work. We can change in response to positive or negative events. But it seems to be our response to negative events that shapes our character.

**[00:47:37] RT:** I think you're accurate. We're coming to the end of this conversation. But this is just part one. We're going to take up next week narrative leadership. And you and I discussed a little bit about was there something we might put forward for people to think about or maybe even perhaps do that might serve as a bridge between this conversation and the one we'll have next week? What thoughts do you have about that that might be a bit of a homework? Maybe that's too heavy a word. But just something to stay engaged but have it be personal and be active.

**[00:48:11] GM:** A little inquiry.

**[00:48:12] RT:** Yes.

**[00:48:12] GM:** A tiny preamble. Just let me backstitch. Why again are we talking about narrative identity in relation to leadership? And my proposition is because who we are is how we lead. And who we are depends a lot on how we see ourselves. What possibilities we allow? What we believe to be valuable, important in the world? The qualities we have learned to manifest and the values we seek to uphold? And they are often – they associated with our sense of self and our narrative identity, I would say.

The first precept of any leader I think is know thyself. The thing above the Delphic oracle. Know thyself. Or in Socrates language, the unexamined life isn't worth living. There's something about anyone who's I think claiming the ability, the responsibility, the legitimacy to lead and take

decisions that will affect other people I think needs to understand themselves somewhat. And this is one way of doing that. One way into that that people can do with others, with themselves. It's therapeutic but it doesn't have to be therapy. It can be helpful. That's the backstitch I wanted to make.

**[00:49:26] RT:** Okay.

**[00:49:27] GM:** With that in mind, an invitation would be for our listeners, particularly those who'd like to go forward and explore where this goes into narrative leadership, to think about leadership in some way. And a really fascinating thing to do is to have a conversation with someone, a friend, a colleague, and recall – it's nice if you both do this actually and share it together. It's lovely to do as a kind of mutual activity. Reflect on when you might first have identified yourself as leading something. When did you first exercise leadership? It could well have been in the home. Might have been at school. Almost certainly before the age of 16.

This is the really interesting territory. Because at that age, we're unformed and we do things instinctively and naturally. We don't know any leadership theories. We're not trying to be anything. We just show up as the half-formed forming creature we are and we try and do something.

Think back. Try and recall a specific example or event and simply in a few minutes just tell the story of that to the other person. And the other person's job is simply to listen. If the person gets stuck, as a listener, you can say, "Oh, that's great. What happened next?" If it feels a bit thin, you can say, "Could you tell me a bit more about this bit?" You can help the person tell the story. But the object is not to tell a fluent, wonderful story. The object is to get back to the particular moment.

Then have a conversation. As the listener, what qualities did you see that the teller of the story manifest in that moment? And what values, if any, were they seeking to uphold? And how do they play out now? Have you outgrown them? Have you let them go? Have you suppressed them? Are they qualities and values that you have that you would like to draw more? Does it encourage you to say, "Actually, there has been a time in my life when I've done this and that."

Perhaps I'll give a tiny example if that would be helpful.

**[00:51:25] RT:** Sure. Absolutely.

**[00:51:27] GM:** When I was – and this speaks a lot to why I think in ways I kind of understand and kind of don't. Anyone will make up their mind about this. But when I was 14, my step-brother and stepdad were big fishermen. They used to go out fishing. And I occasionally got the chance to go with them. But I fancied myself as a potential fisherman. A potential fisherman.

At school, I formed a fishing club. Now I was the only person with a rod. None of the others had ever been fishing at all. And I only ever went about twice a year. It was kind of the invisible fish club really or the imaginal fish club. But we were dedicated. We would meet at lunchtime and talk about fish. Mostly, I guess, I would talk about fish. And then I decided wouldn't it be nice if our club, the fishing club, had a competition? Because I knew my stepdad and step-brother had competitions.

At the bottom of the playing fields at school, there was a muddy, interestingly, swampy piece of water, which was far too polluted for any fish ever to have lived there. But I decided it must be in my mind full of fish. I drew a diagram of this pond and I marked in it where I thought the roach would be, and the chub would be, and the perch be, and the pike would be. And it was a bit like playing battleships. I had a secret plan of where these completely fictitious imaginary fish were.

And then I took my rod, the one rod we had between us, and I put a line on it and I put a weight on it. And then people – the boys lined up to cast their weight where they thought the fish would be and what sort of fish they thought it would be. And I completely unilaterally marked up their scores. And at the end of it, a lovely man whose real name was Graham but was known to everyone, and still is, as Mouse, I decided that Mouse had won the prize. And the prize was an engraved spinner that was awarded to the imaginary winner of the imaginary fishing competition of the imaginary fishing club. I don't know what qualities or values it really shows. But it does I think – what I realized, and I've laughed at it many times since, I think the imagination is our primary organ.



And when I look back, I can see that that was real to me. There weren't fish there. But the competition was real. The event was real. The camaraderie was real. We were fishing in some other world. And that other world has fascinated me ever since. There's a possibility.

**[00:53:57] RT:** Okay. Excellent. We agreed that there's a poem or a reading that we think is a nice coda to this and a bridge to next week. A little tea up and why you like this? And then go ahead.

**[00:54:11] GM:** Yeah. I love this poem it's by William Stafford, who I think is a great poet. And I think it speaks to this sense of the kind of elusive and yet deep thread that runs through our life. It speaks to the continuity as much as the change. And I love that notion that, in order to be ourselves, we need both of those things. A sense of being true to ourselves, whatever that is. And that true – that thing that we're being true to is not a fixed point. It also moves. And yet, it has constancy somehow in our lives. And to remember what that is, and what we really care about, and what our sense is of what we're here to do. And I think that's a deeply empowering thing for us to carry into life. And it's sometimes lost. We can lose sight of it. But we can recover it through the work of imagination. And I quite often invite people to write for a few minutes in response to the poem. Just wherever the poem leads them to write it.

**[00:55:11] RT:** Okay.

**[00:55:11] GM:** Would you like me to read it?

**[00:55:12] RT:** Please.

**[00:55:13] GM:** Okay. It's short. It's called *The Way It Is* by William Stafford, "There's a thread you follow. It goes among things that change. But it doesn't change. People wonder about what you're pursuing. You have to explain about the thread. But it's hard for others to see. While you hold it, you can't get lost. Tragedies happen; people get hurt or die; and you suffer and get old. Nothing you can do can stop time's unfolding. You don't ever let go of the thread."

**[00:55:52] RT:** Okay. We'll hold this thread through the week. Geoff Mead, thank you for taking this through narrative identity. And we will be back next week with an exploration of narrative leadership. Thank you for the first phase, sir.

**[00:56:06] GM:** Thank you, Rick. It's been an absolute pleasure talking with you.

[OUTRO]

**[00:56:09] ANNOUNCER:** Thank you for listening to 10,000 Swamp Leaders with Rick Torseth. Please take this moment and hit subscribe to follow more leadership swamp conversations.

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