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 Arlington Street Church  
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## **Changing the Ending**

“There’s a line in the opening episode of the Sopranos, where — panning over a hollow, grey, suburban life in New Jersey — Tony Soprano says, ‘Lately, I’ve been getting the feeling that I came in at the end. The best is over.’

“It’s a bit harrowing, [really:] a guy ... framing his whole existence inside the collapse of the American dream, and the bleakness of it all.”<sup>1</sup>

This morning, I say to Tony, “It’s up to you.” It’s up to us to change the ending.

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Psychologist Melanie Harth tells her story like this:

“Desperately uncomfortable in my skin as a child, I was equal parts pathologically shy with strangers and fearless with my sisters and brothers, running wild over the boulder-strewn southern California land during summers.

“As a young girl, I was also, more than once, the target for predators.

“[A member of my elementary school staff. A neighbor. A stranger.] My ... grandfather.

“The fairy tale about living in a safe world, where adults care for their young ones as precious flowers, quickly became a horror story filled with monsters and demons. There wasn’t a hero in sight.

“[I concluded that] adults were dangerous, bad things were normal, and secrets were the glue that held everything together.

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<sup>1</sup> Yotam Marom and George Lakey, *Can Now Really Be the Best Time to be Alive?*, 12/26,19. Please see [wagingnonviolence.org/2019/12/can-now-really-be-the-best-time-to-be-alive/](http://wagingnonviolence.org/2019/12/can-now-really-be-the-best-time-to-be-alive/)

“I became masterful at ... [keeping people] at a safe distance.... And truly, my life wasn’t all bad. There were ... friends, lots of laughter, and [that] ... unbreakable solidarity with my sibs — enough to start carefully making my way out into the larger world....

“[I got a job] in the public relations department of the Los Angeles Philharmonic Orchestra — ... a magical portal into a world I’d only dreamed about.... In my little VW bug, I drove Simon Ratter (now Sir Simon, famed music director of the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra); the late, great violinist Isaac Stern; jazz legend Dizzy Gillespie; and many others to interviews and lunches.

“The best *Happy Birthday [To You]* ever...? It was at a private party in a downtown hotel, sung by the entire cast of the opera *Falstaff*.... I found myself in a universe filled with adults who seemed to be effortlessly living happily ever after — everything I wasn’t.

“The problem? ... Still [paralyzingly] shy, I had zero social skills.... [And] it seemed as though everyone drank, except me.... I wanted what I thought [they] had....

“The solution? Start drinking, of course.

“O, the extremely fancy shindigs, with bottles and bottles of wines and cognac and scotch worth hundreds of dollars each! .... I drank on the West coast; ... in New York city; all ... across Europe.... I was really living my story now...! .... I hadn’t thought about [my grandfather] in years....

“Except that I began having trouble managing the hangovers....

“[And then] it finally, [blessedly,] got to the point where I couldn’t stand myself anymore. I undertook the excruciating work of beginning to get real....

“It took a long time. Can I just tell you? There are parts of the [hero’s] journey that are truly, absolutely miserable. But never, not once, was there a time that learning to get and stay real felt worse than needing to finish a bottle of wine by myself every night.”

Dr. Melanie Harth concludes, “Honestly, the traumatic experiences as a child, my journey into addiction and back out into recovery — healing the sacred

wounds — all became the magic carpet ride leading to living the story I wanted to live — reclaiming] that story for myself... [including happy endings].”<sup>2</sup>

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A key to happiness, effectiveness, and power is to look long and hard at the way we’re telling our story — the way we’re telling it to ourselves as well as to others. Is there a more empowering, uplifting telling that honors both ourselves and others as agents rather than pawns; survivors, rather than victims? Have we reached a point in the telling where the next line should be, “I realized I couldn’t do it alone — that none of us, really, is meant to do it alone — so I asked for help?” Will we decide to do something about our regret? Will we change the ending to reflect compassion and forgiveness rather than a conflagration of hatred and revenge?

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The personal is political, and I want to zoom out now for a quick look at how we’re telling our national story. I suspect that people at both poles of our polarized nation are feeling despair at this cold civil war in which our country finds itself. How are you metabolizing the incoming hits delivered by the daily — sometimes hourly — news? Denial? Rage? Resignation?

On December 23rd, *The Rachel Maddow Show* hosted a segment on voting that should have been depressing but was extraordinarily uplifting. In the interests of keeping this sanctuary a place for all people of good heart, I’m going to share just the facts of this story.

Some years ago, Republican legislation generated by the National Ballot Security Task Force instituted poll watching in which armed officers worked to guard against voter fraud. Democrats countered that this was a thinly-veiled scare campaign to intimidate voters and keep them away from the polls.

Related to this initiative, in Georgia, recently more than 300,000 voters were removed from the voting rosters. In Wisconsin, some 200,000 voters were removed.

Wisconsin’s democratic chairman Ben Wickler’s believed that scrubbing the rolls was wrong, and he’s working to change the way the story ends.

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Melanie Harth, *Changing Your Life Story and Finding Your Happy Ending*. Please see [tinybuddha.com/blog/changing-life-story-finding-happy-ending/](http://tinybuddha.com/blog/changing-life-story-finding-happy-ending/)  
Another great reference is Dr. Lewis Mehl-Madrona, *Healing the Mind Through the Power of Story*

I'm paraphrasing Ben. "This is an organizing challenge, not a crisis. It just adds to our to-do list. It's a reason to work, not to freak out.

"There's no question we're in a crisis for democracy," he says. "The question is, What do we do about it? While many are oscillating between abject despair and euphoria, the right place to be is on the hardworking, gritty edge, using the power of our feelings about what's wrong in this country and turning it into energy to make it right.

"We're going to use the open records law to find the names of everyone who's been purged, reach out to them in every way we can, make sure they know exactly what they need to do to reregister, and get them reenrolled.

"Voter suppression only works when voters are intimidated into not even trying to vote," Ben Wicker concludes. "Our message is, 'No matter what, show up, and we'll be there to support you and help you get your vote counted.'"

When asked if his positive message can possibly outweigh the terror of being intimidated by armed guards standing around menacingly at the polls, Ben responds, "Americans have fought and died for generations to protect a democracy in which every person gets a vote and every vote counts. If we're convinced the election is stolen, it's all over. When the right to vote is threatened and attacked, we should be outraged into action.

"In a state like Wisconsin, a handful of voters here could make the difference for generations to come. Any voter has the power to shape human history. Use your power!"

After Ben Winkler's call to action over the purging of the voter rolls, voter registration volunteers knocked on 54,000 doors in one weekend.<sup>3</sup>

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Changing the ending isn't easy, but it makes for a much better story. Born in 1837, Mary Harris Jones was a dressmaker whose husband and all four children died of yellow fever.<sup>4</sup> Four years later, she lost her dress shop in the Great Chicago Fire of 1871. By my lights, she should have been felled by grief. Instead, she was called "the most dangerous woman in America" for her success in organizing mine

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<sup>3</sup> Please see [overcast.fm/+K9YSOFVRs/](https://overcast.fm/+K9YSOFVRs/)

<sup>4</sup> 1867

workers and their families against the mine owners. They called her Mother Jones. Her motto was, *Don't Mourn! Organize!*

We need better endings! Do we even want to imagine a world in which Odysseus decides not to head home after all and Harriet Tubman stays home in the first place?

In 1979, 100,000 women marched into Tahrir Square without burqas. Who knows whom they inspired? Broadway playwright Lorraine Hansbury wrote *A Raisin in the Sun* — the first Black playwright and the youngest American to win a New York Critics' Circle Award. "There is always something left to love," she said. "And if you ain't learned that, you ain't learned nothing." What if Harry Potter had stayed in the closet? J.K. Rowling wrote, "Happiness can be found, even in the darkest of times, if one only remembers to turn on the light."<sup>5</sup>

And I love the title of Dick Cluster's book, referencing the ultimately victorious student sit-ins at lunch counters in the Civil Rights movement. He called it, *They Should Have Served that Cup of Coffee*.

Beloved spiritual companions, it's up to us; with every choice we make, we change the ending. Let's close with English poet David Whyte's *The Journey*.

Above the mountains  
the geese turn into  
the light again

Painting their  
black silhouettes  
on an open sky.

Sometimes everything  
has to be  
inscribed across  
the heavens

so you can find  
the one line  
already written

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<sup>5</sup>J.K. Rowling, *Harry Potter and the Prisoner of Azkaban*

inside you.

Sometimes it takes  
a great sky  
to find that

first, bright  
and indescribable  
wedge of freedom  
in your own heart.

Sometimes with  
the bones of the black  
sticks left when the fire  
has gone out

someone has written  
something new  
in the ashes of your life.

You are not leaving.  
Even as the light fades quickly now,  
you are arriving.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> David Whyte, "The Journey," from *The House of Belonging*, Many Rivers Press