

Linda's Story

[NOTE THAT THIS PIECE WAS PREPARED BY THE COURSE INSTRUCTOR AS AN EXAMPLE OF A RESPONSE TO THE LIFE STORY ASSIGNMENT.]

15-16: Waiting for life to start

This story begins when Linda was 15; a junior in high school. Her family had just moved from northwestern Connecticut to Westport. Linda felt lonely, she did not like most of the kids in her new school. At her mother's insistence she was enrolled in an accelerated program, to finish high school in three years. She took almost all her classes with the same small group of other students.

She tried to go out for track, partly to meet other people, but this didn't work either. She ran long distance and hurdles races, which kept her apart from the other kids on the team. At one point she hurt herself badly going over a hurdle; her knee was gouged open and filled with cinders. Her coach offered little support; when Linda refused to run hurdles again, her coach was furious.

She recalled walking home from school every day, through the woods and fields (this was almost as quick as taking the bus). As she walked she would fret about all the things that had gone wrong that day. Then, it would be as if a switch would go off in her mind, and she would start to feel better. She would think about how beautiful the woods were, how they had been here long before she was born, and would still be here long after she was gone. She would make up songs and stories, or think about something she was working on in school, or something that she was reading with her father.

What would she fret about? Almost anything. Her mother, she said, was always on her case about something. "I was a dreamy kid. My mother would pinch me – hard – to make me snap out of it. She always told me, 'People are watching you, and they don't like what you are doing.'" She felt terribly self-conscious, certain that everyone was staring at her, making fun of her, putting her down. "I would try to convince myself that I wasn't ugly; that it was ok to be smart." "My mother kept saying that with my grades I could do anything; I could be a star. But it didn't really feel like praise; it felt like she was pleased for herself; something she could boast about – not something that was good for me."

The worst blow came when she had big fight with her father. Up until then he had been her ally in the family. They would read books of all sorts together and talk about them, but at one point they read some books on philosophy, and Linda started to get interested in more esoteric stuff: tarot, kabala, the *I Ching*. She made herself a set of *I Ching* sticks to see how the patterns worked. Her father discovered her doing this and assumed that she was into something terrible -- witchcraft, sex, drugs – who knows what? This led to a terrific argument that ended with him saying, “I’ll kill you,” and her answering, “Go ahead.” This was in the spring of her senior year; they barely talked to each other for the rest of the summer. By then she was thinking that she needed to get out of the house as fast as possible – maybe things would get better when she went to college.

College

She had always planned to go to Cornell, but at the last minute her mother told her that they could not afford it. Instead, she discovered, she would be going to UConn, a school picked out by her mother and guidance counselor. She knew nothing about it, had no interest in the place – but anything was better than home. Her parents drove her up. “By the time we were an hour away, I was already gone in my head.” The farewells were brief and unsentimental, “My mother had something else she wanted to do that day.”

Almost immediately it seemed that everything changed. She made a batch of new friends, liked her courses. However, in her second week, her roommate brought home a boyfriend. Both of them were drunk. The roommate fell asleep; the boyfriend raped Linda. She moved out immediately, into a group house off-campus. When she called home to tell her parents her father flew into a rage. Somehow he never heard her explanation; instead, this seemed to confirm his fear that she was moving off-campus to indulge in drugs, sex, and whatever else hippies did. He continued to pay her tuition, but refused to pay for housing, food, or anything else. Linda began paying her own way. She had a series of jobs (daycare, working the night shift at IBM). The best of these was a summer job as a life-guard at a lake owned by the college. She would take the bus out to the lake each week-end, spend her days working and her evenings eating and hanging out with a small group of regulars, then camp out in her tent. It was a wonderful time; “I got paid to do what other people did for fun.”

In her first week at school she met Jeff, another student, who quickly became her best friend. They began spending nearly all their time together; “Everyone assumed we were a couple,” but they were not (more on this in a

moment). Jeff was an art student; he encouraged Linda to take a drawing class with him. The class was a revelation to her. She had always loved drawing, but never taken it seriously. She had never been to an art museum, never heard of Picasso. Suddenly she discovered that being an artist might be a real career if you were talented enough – and her teachers seemed to think she might be. She had been planning to become a veterinarian; now, she switched into Art. Her parents, needless to say, were dismayed. Her father cut off the remainder of whatever financial aid he had been providing. It would be years before he acknowledged her new career: he told everyone that she was a social worker because she ran an art program for inner-city kids. This changed when she won a pair of highly competitive grants for significant amounts of money. But we are getting ahead of the story.

At school, her budding art career blossomed. She spent almost all her time working in the studio. She was, if not the very best student in the program, close to the top. She began to get a lot of individual attention, including invitations to have dinner with various faculty members. This opened up a new world: people who talked casually about museums and exhibition openings, and who treated her as if she too were a member of that world. She sold her first paintings for a few hundred dollars each.

Meanwhile, things with Jeff were becoming complicated. Linda wanted a more romantic relationship, but Jeff – she discovered – was gay. She remembers vividly the day he told her, “It was like a pit opened up in front of me. And then I thought, “He’s still my best friend, and he always will be.” For a time she imagined that they might get married anyway, and each have lovers on the side. She even converted to Judaism, partly for his sake. (This part of her story was a bit confusing. I’m not sure how much she and Jeff talked about all of these plans. It is also unclear whether her parents ever knew about her conversion.)

In her last year of school there was another disappointing incident. Her favorite art teacher had offered to help her get established in a prestigious NY gallery, but only -- as he not-too-subtly hinted -- if she slept with him. Linda refused. In other ways too, the end of college seemed a let-down. All of her friends went their own ways. Jeff moved to NYC to explore the art scene (and the gay scene). Linda finished her summer job, then took a long, solitary hitchhiking trip across the country. (Among other things she saw the ocean for the first time.) She spent part of the summer in NYC, where she had a fellowship to study art. She lived in the East Village, surrounded by junkies, prostitutes, and drag queens,

and loved it. The drag queens taught her to walk like a man so that she wouldn't get mugged.

When she finished this part of her story she remarked, with some surprise, how much she had left out. She had not, for example, mentioned the four boyfriends who passed through her life during those years. Evidently they were fairly incidental figures. Jeff and her art career were what mattered. Nor did she say much about her increasingly rare, and brief, visits home. Apparently she had been right: Driving up to UConn that first time, she was already gone.

21-27: Starting a professional life

In the fall she moved to New Haven to start her graduate studies at the Yale Art School. (She had applied to several graduate programs and been accepted everywhere; Yale gave her a full scholarship, so she that is where she went.)

Linda originally planned to study painting, but this did not seem to work out. One problem was that the only instructor of painting who still had space in her studio was a particularly unpleasant woman, "a real witch." Linda worked with her for a while, but soon discovered printmaking, where she felt that she had found a real home.

Since she still needed money for rent, food and art supplies, she began teaching at a community art center, then started running after-school art programs for grade school kids. It was, she said, a stressful time, running between her jobs and school, but fun.

Sometime during her first year Harry – an old boyfriend from UConn – showed up in New Haven. He was considerably older: He had dropped in and out of UConn for 10 years. She said, "He seemed a nice enough guy," but he was certainly not the great love of her life. (If anyone was, it was Jeff.) She had not planned to continue seeing Harry after she graduated but now, here he was on her doorstep. They began dating again, without any great enthusiasm on Linda's part. At first, Harry moved into her apartment, but Linda was not happy with that arrangement, "I wanted to date other people." She moved out, and lived with a friend, Karen, for the next 6 years, until Karen left town. All through that time she and Harry dated, though she also saw other guys from time to time. She said, "I always had reservations; I didn't really respect him; I thought that in some ways he was stupid, kind of a big kid."

In her third year at Yale she rented a studio where she could paint. She also began a more experimental kind of printmaking with a printmaking collective. This became the start of her real, professional career.

During this time she also began dancing semi-professionally. She joined a group who did a kind of English country dancing, this became another center of her life. She drove up to Middlebury every week for rehearsals; several times a year the group would go on tour, including one major trip to a dance festival in England. This group of dancers and musicians became her main circle of friends. (Here again, she was a star performer.) Harry also danced with a different group – but as Linda quickly pointed out, he danced with the people who really were not very good at it.

After she graduated from Yale she still needed to support herself. She took a full-time job running a children's art program in a housing project. This job, she said, was really hard. Although she never felt threatened, there were always stories of people being stabbed. In addition, the director was a very difficult woman to work for (years later, Linda learned that this woman was struggling with breast cancer). Linda stuck it out for three years, then resigned – the only job she has ever quit.

She was now 27; launched on a career that she loved, but still scrambling to pay the rent, still unsettled in the rest of her life. At this point Harry proposed and Linda – without much enthusiasm – accepted. Why did she agree to marry him? At first she said, “He just wore me down; he was so persistent.” Later she explained that life was just so tough. Harry offered to support her: she could have time to work, a studio, a retirement plan.

Everyone from the dance troupe came to the wedding; they wrote songs and plays and performed them. Her parents also came, though they had never much cared for Harry. She remembers her father saying, “I just want you to know that you have ruined my life.”

“How did you feel?” I asked her. “Mostly relief, like I had made a deal, a business deal. I could concentrate on my art, my career. And I liked him well enough. We had separate lives. Sometimes we would show up separately at the same party, because I would be coming from the studio and he would be coming from work. Once someone asked me if there was anything wrong. But I didn't think about it much.”

She didn't talk about it much either. I had to ask her repeatedly, "What was going on with you and Harry during this time?" Each time, her answers meandered off in other directions: She had much more to say about the printing press that she was able to buy with her first really big grant. That was a really big deal: 2000 people applied, only three people won, she got \$10,000, and her father stopped describing her to friends as a social worker and started saying, "She is an artist." Retelling the story now, that is the highlight of her account. Her marriage, in contrast, is something she would just as soon forget.

27- 36: Marriage, motherhood, career

At first, after their marriage, Linda and Harry lived in the house Linda had originally rented with Karen. Harry wanted to buy a house, but everything seemed too expensive. Then, they learned about a group of artists who were planning to buy an old warehouse, called the Bowery Building, and convert it into artists' lofts. They joined the group, invested \$10,000 (every penny of their savings), and became heavily involved in the planning. This was a long, drawn out affair, with many fierce arguments among the members, but eventually, after about two years, they were able to move in. They had no money to finish the interior, and so their loft remained somewhat rough-hewn ever after.

Their lives began to drift steadily apart. Linda said that he was nice enough: He went to Linda's openings, helped out with the big, yearly show that all the Bowery artists shared; they went out for birthday dinners, and so on. However, they spent less and less time together. Harry was working very long hours at Ajax. Often he would receive emergency phone calls after midnight and have to rush back to work. Linda spent her time printing. She had bought a press with her first grant, but it was set up in another artist's studio. She was also teaching at several colleges: the usual long hours and short pay of part-timers. Her relationship with Harry, she said, was "Ok, nothing great."

Malcolm was born in their fourth year of marriage (Linda was 31). He was not planned; in fact, Linda had originally said that she did not want children. Harry worried whether they could afford a child; Linda worried what this would do to her career. However, neither of them considered an abortion. It was a very difficult birth; Linda was in labor for 48 hours.

Malcolm got very sick shortly after the birth (he had a temperature of a 103) and needed emergency hospitalization. Linda stayed with him for three days, sleeping in a chair; Harry did not visit at all. He said that he was saving his leave

time for when Linda and Malcolm would be at home. When they did return home, Harry seemed distinctly uncomfortable. Linda said that he was always running out of the house, supposedly to buy something they needed – but he would be gone for hours. When he returned, he would discover that he had forgotten something, and leave again.

Linda's mother came to help out for four days. She was very good with Malcolm, but seemed, if anything, too cheerful: unable to hear how difficult things had been for Linda and how upset she was. Jeff also came up for ten days and was wonderful: cooked, shopped, and so on. But he too was puzzled when Linda, at one point, started crying. "What's wrong--you have a beautiful baby!" he said.

Linda had little to say about the next three years. Malcolm continued to have difficulties. He cried incessantly; Linda was perpetually exhausted. A doctor suggested that Malcolm had a disorder that made it difficult for him to integrate stimuli from different sources. For instance, if another child touched him innocently, Malcolm might smash the child in the face. He seemed unable to learn how to play with other children. He might, for example, start patting another child on the back, and go on far too long, until told, "Leave me alone already!" Linda took him to therapy, then enrolled him in a special school, at \$4000 a year. Harry, who did not recognize any problem, refused to pay, so Linda needed to earn all that money.

One crisis came near the end of Malcolm's first year. Harry went to England for two weeks with his dance troupe (the trip had been planned for a year). Linda came down with pleurisy. The hospital wanted to admit her, but there was no one to care for Malcolm. Her mother, Linda said, refused to take time off work. Linda was barely able to breathe; often unable to walk. She recalls crawling across the floor, dragging baskets of laundry up and down the stairs. At a friend's insistence she called Harry in England and asked him to come home; he refused.

During this time Linda's relationship with her parents was still rocky. She described a vacation she took with them and her two brothers when Malcolm was one. They drove up to Nova Scotia, crammed into the car for hours, with Malcolm crying all the way. At one point Linda pleaded to get out of the car and go for a walk. Her mother reluctantly consented, then, after 20 minutes, said, "Let's go." Linda refused and walked off with Malcolm for an hour. When she returned, her mother was furious. "This is your brothers' trip, and I won't have you ruining it. You have always been difficult; that's why I always liked them better." Linda

said, “I always knew that was how she felt, but I was still crushed to hear her say it.” She didn’t speak to her mother for months after that.

The next crisis came when Harry lost his job at Ajax and was out of work for a year. He cashed out his pension, and this is what they lived on. Eventually he found a job, lost it, then found another one reasonably quickly.

Somewhere in this time, (Malcolm was now about 3), Linda said that Harry began “flipping out.” He would come home from work, sit down at his computer, and spend hours online. He belonged to several online chat groups: one for dog owners, one for dancers, and so on. He was silent and moody; he would grunt a one-word answer if Linda tried to talk to him. If Malcolm interrupted him, Harry might fly into a rage. If Linda tried to get between Malcolm and Harry, he might scream at her, shake her, throw dishes or frying pans. Once he put his fist through a wall; once the neighbors called the police. Jeff, who witnessed such a scene on one visit, suggested that Linda leave Harry and move into Jeff’s apartment in NY, but that was not really a practical idea.

Linda began escaping whenever possible. She went back to her parents’ house for two weeks at a time (things were now somewhat better with them). She did not tell them anything about what was going on in her life, “What could they do?” she said.

Harry’s tantrums continued to get worse over the next year; but there was still no talk of divorce. In retrospect, Linda seemed to feel puzzled and a bit ashamed that she stayed in the marriage so long. Her explanation was partly that she could see no other options: How could she support herself and continue her career as an artist? At least Harry was still paying the rent. Then too, she had managed to construct a life that was, if far from ideal, at least livable. When she was away from Harry – making art, dancing, spending time with friends – she could be reasonably happy. If managing the monster back home was the price she had to pay to do this, she could manage.

The last straw came when she discovered the truth about their financial situation. While looking through a drawer for a lost key, she discovered Harry’s credit card bill: He apparently owed \$11,000. She recalls feeling sick looking at it. Under it was the bill for another card, and another under that; ultimately she would discover that they owed \$60,000. When she confronted Harry he blamed her, then said, “I work hard; I am entitled to some things too.” She has no idea what he

could possibly have bought for that much money. At the time, he was earning \$70,000 a year; she was contributing to the family income as well.

In the end, it was Harry who asked for a divorce. Linda said, “He told me I had ruined his life; he threw me out of the apartment and told me not to come back.” Harry changed his mind a couple of days later, but by then Linda had decided that she wanted the divorce too.

The last chapter

Originally, Linda and I planned to talk about what happened after the divorce. Eventually she remarried, got a full-time job teaching, bought a new house. After a rocky few years, Malcolm seemed to settle down a bit. The new house did not have room for her printing press; it is still in storage; maybe there will be room for it in the house when Malcolm goes to college in two years. She is still working ridiculous hours trying to earn enough to pay the mortgage (her new husband, an out-of-work professor, contributes very little to the family income). From time to time she mourns the studio that she had to abandon when she moved. But there is a garden in the enormous backyard instead of the urban grit that surrounded the Bowery co-op; vacations in the Caribbean, and a new husband who, if not perfect, is a hell of a lot better than the one she left. Who wouldn't be?

DISCUSSION

How did you do the interview? What was easy; what was hard? What advice would you give anyone else?

I began by describing the project to Linda. I then asked her to divide her life into chapters, from just before leaving home until now. This was pretty easy for her. We talked about each chapter, then took a break. Sometimes we talked at her house, and I took notes. Sometimes we went for a walk and talked, and I wrote notes after we came back. The interview was very long: almost an hour for each of the four chapters. I did not have to ask her many questions; she had a lot to say about every chapter (much more than I could use). The hardest part was to get her to say *less*. I had to keep telling her that I had heard enough about some event, and that we should move on. She was always willing to do this. It was helpful to know how many years we needed to cover for each chapter, so that we could stay on track. It might have been better if I had said, “OK, we only have 15 minutes to talk about this chapter,” and stuck with it, but then I would have heard a lot less. Even

though the interview was much longer than I expected, it was very interesting for both of us, I am glad we took the time.

General impressions of Linda's life

The story that Linda told me about her life centered on three elements: her career, her marriage, and her relationship with her parents. (Actually, it might be more accurate to say that this is what I encouraged her to discuss; there may have been other elements that were important to her but that I did not encourage her to discuss in as much detail. These would include her friendships, her activities outside of art – especially dancing – and her son. By encouraging her to focus on some things rather than others, I may have inadvertently distorted the story that she would have written without me.)

Of the three main elements, the most important and fulfilling was clearly her career. By this, I mean her career as an artist, not the various jobs she took on to make a living. Her career as an artist was the central feature in her life from early on in college; over the years, it became more fulfilling in two ways. First of all, she grew steadily more successful. When she started, she knew virtually nothing about the art world; step-by-step, she impressed her professors, won national grants, exhibited her work (and sold it) at major galleries and museums, and built a small business as an instructor of printmaking. Equally important, she seems to have found her own style. She started out as a painter (of the “colorist” school); a choice determined largely by whoever was available as a mentor at Art School. However, she gradually found her way to printmaking, and then to her own, innovative style of monotype.

In contrast to her art career, her other jobs were never as engaging. These other jobs certainly grew more prestigious and better paid over time. As a teenager she was a lifeguard, in her twenties she ran an inner-city art program, by her 30's she was an adjunct professor, she became a full professor several years ago. But although she took all of these jobs seriously – and did quite well at them – none of them mattered to her as much as making her own art. I have the impression that she would have gladly abandoned any of them had something else come along that paid better. Her real “career” and what she did to pay the rent were two very different things.

Her marriage was the second main element in her life; however, it was never anywhere near as important to her as her art career. She seems to have married Harry chiefly because he was persistent (and no one else asked), and he offered

financial security at a time when she was worn down trying to support herself with grueling, dead-end jobs. (Nowhere did she say that she loved him or found him attractive.) Almost from the start, she built the main part of her life apart from him (how fitting that her press – the symbol of her art career – was set up in someone else’s apartment). She seems to have tried to build a life in which her marriage would be a minor element – at best, relatively stable if not terribly fulfilling, at worst, something that she could escape whenever she needed. Had this worked, she would have been, psychologically, a single mother with a vibrant career, who (very parenthetically) happened to be married. As it turned out, of course, this arrangement proved unstable, as Henry became increasingly abusive. Painful as the divorce was, I have to wonder if this didn’t help rescue her from an arrangement that was, at best, like being half-asleep.

Her relationship with her parents, which was another main element, also improved, but less so. She went through some very difficult times with both parents; this extended into marriage and motherhood, well beyond the usual turmoil of “leaving home.” Although she seemed to reach a *détente* with her mother, this was mostly a matter of learning to limit their contact and avoid fights. She rarely confided in her mother or asked her for help; when she did, she usually felt let down. In contrast her relationship with her father seems to have gotten much better. After some very difficult times in her late teens and early 20’s, they now seem to have closed the gap. They seem to love and respect each other; she has started to confide in him more, though she is still cautious about how much she tells him.

A consistent theme in her life story

One theme that I noticed, and that puzzled me, was how often people did not seem to realize that she was hurt. (Her running coach did not realize how seriously she was injured; her father didn’t understand what she was doing with the *I Ching*; her parents didn’t realize that she was raped; Jeff and her mother didn’t understand why she was upset after Malcolm was born; Harry didn’t understand how bad her pleurisy was; she never told her parents how bad her marriage was.) It is hard to believe that this was all a coincidence; I wondered if Linda habitually hid her pain from others, and if so, why. After we were done, I asked her about this; she said that it all related to her mother. Her mother had very little sympathy for anyone who was hurt; she would make fun of Linda if she complained about any injury. This may be related to the mother’s history: apparently she was taught that if you were injured it was your own fault – and that the family could not afford doctor’s bills.

Despite her repeated emphasis on tough times and little support, I found myself feeling that this version of her life may be misleading -- she seems to me highly resilient and constantly engaged with all sorts of things. (In addition to being a single Mom, a successful artist and a professor, she has been a semi-professional dancer and a musician, she has taught skiing and kayaking, and so on.) I am not sure how much of this comes across in what I have reported here. This seems like a pretty grim story, however, I have known Linda for years, and the person I know is not grim at all. If you met her, you would probably think of her as very energetic, talented, optimistic, and sunny; she is the sort of person who lights up a room. I suspect that little of this comes across in what I wrote. This biography describes, accurately enough, what happened, but somehow it does not capture what sort of person she is.

The claim that her story makes about her life

I think that Linda was surprised (and upset) at how grim a story she told; I do not think that this is usually how she regards her life. Nevertheless, I think that this version of her life is part of how she makes sense of herself. I do not mean to say that she exaggerates the tough times; I do mean that, like everyone, she puts a particular spin on her history. Again and again, she talked about how betrayed she felt by people who should have realized how hurt she was, physically or emotionally, and how much she had to care for herself. In telling her story this way (to me and probably to herself) she emphasizes the injustice of what she has had to overcome – and her own resilient self-reliance.

How useful was Levinson's theory in understanding Linda?

I found Levinson's ideas surprisingly useful, despite the fact that he wrote chiefly about conventional, middle-class men. Sometimes he helped me see what was happening in Linda's life, sometimes, he helped me clarify how her experience was unusual. To begin: I found that his idea of dividing a life into stages was useful; it certainly helped organize the interview. As for whether those stages described Linda's life – that was a mixed bag. Her experience of "leaving home" was far less ambivalent than Levinson suggests; by the time she went to college, she had left home completely. Levinson's account of "getting into the adult world" describes her experience, but only in part. It is true that she had many jobs, none of which lasted long. However, her real "career" was that of an artist, and I think she was thoroughly committed to this right from the start. I think she may have had an "age 30 transition," though it started at age 27. Right around then

was when she got married, bought a condo, and set up her studio. These moves brought to an end an earlier, less-settled period of her life. Throughout her 30's she certainly tried to "settle down" and build a career, though of course her art career and what she did to make money were two different things. All through this time, she seems to have been guided by what Levinson calls a "dream": that of becoming a professional artist. This part of her life seems to have worked out: she found a style of work that mattered to her, and turned it into a near-fulltime, paying vocation. Levinson's scheme is helpful in understanding all of this.

On the other hand, his scheme does not say much about the problems women face, trying to coordinate a career, marriage, and motherhood. The tensions among these were obviously a major part of Linda's experience; Levinson has little to say about this. It is also difficult to apply his scheme to someone whose vocation (making art) is sharply distinct from whatever she does to earn a living. I suppose that is not really an important criticism of Levinson; after all, most people's careers are probably not divided in this way. However, this did limit his usefulness when it came to understanding Linda.

A final comment

I think Linda had an unusual life, so it is hard to generalize from her experience. One thing that I did notice is the importance of money. I guess this seems pretty obvious, but I never really thought about it before. So many of her decisions had to do with what she could afford, everything from where she went to college to whom she married. Since I like her so much, it makes me a bit uncomfortable to think that she married Harry because he could support her, even though she didn't love him. But maybe I am being naïve about this. I guess she did what she felt she had to do. Maybe that is true of many people. We like to think that marriage (and work too) is a choice that you make from the heart, but maybe, for many people, it really is more like a business deal. You size up your options and you make the best deal that you can. That's not the Hollywood version of life, but maybe it is a more accurate description of what most people really end up doing.