

# Animals as Lifechangers and Lifesavers: Pets in the Redemption Narratives of Homeless People

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Leslie Irvine<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This paper examines personal narratives in which homeless and formerly homeless people construct their companion animals as having changed or saved their lives. The analysis considers selfhood a narrative accomplishment, the strategic outcome rather than the source of the stories people tell. These particular stories employ the theme of redemption, in which tellers describe overcoming adversity to face a better future, with animals playing key roles. The analysis reveals the narrative elements through which animals become vehicles for redemption. As dependent others, animals encourage a sense of responsibility. As the providers of unconditional love, they reward the fulfillment of responsibility. And as silent witnesses, they keep the tellers from lapsing into risky behavior. Narratives that describe animals in these ways allow for the construction of a positive moral identity. They also indicate that commitment belongs among the recognized languages of redemption and highlight the social embeddedness of autobiographical experience.

## Keywords

homeless, narrative, redemption, self, pets

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<sup>1</sup>University of Colorado, Boulder, CO, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Leslie Irvine, Department of Sociology, University of Colorado, 219 Ketchum, 327UCB, Boulder, CO 80309-0327, USA.

Email: [irvinel@colorado.edu](mailto:irvinel@colorado.edu)

For several decades, scholars from many disciplines have portrayed selfhood as a narrative accomplishment (Berger and Quinney 2005; Bruner 1987, 1994; Holstein and Gubrium 2000; Irvine 1999, 2000; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008; McAdams 1993, 2011; Mitchell 1981; Neisser and Fivush 1994; Polkinghorne 1991; Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992; Josselson 1996; Josselson and Lieblich 1993, 1995; Lieblich and Josselson 1994). Despite disciplinary differences in method and focus, these scholars maintain that stories constitute “the self’s medium of being” (Frank 1995, 53). In this formulation, people construct and revise their sense of themselves by telling stories or “personal narratives,” which describe “the evolution of an individual life over time and in social context” (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008, 4). People shape characters, memories, hopes, and experiences into a compelling tale. But they do not create these tales randomly or capriciously. The logics of storytelling and the perceptions, values, and beliefs of the time and place influence the kinds of stories people tell. As Frank (2010, 13) explains, “People’s access to narrative resources depends on their social location: what stories are told where they live and work, which stories do they take seriously or not, and especially what stories they exchange as tokens of membership” (see also Zussman 2000). Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett write that “the stories that people tell about their lives are never simply individual, but are told in historically specific times and settings and draw on the rules and models in circulation that govern how story elements link together in narrative logics” (2008, 3). In sum, social structure and culture shape and require particular kinds of personal narratives. These narratives thus constitute accounts of the tellers’ lived experience and, simultaneously, evidence of how society “speaks itself” through people’s lives (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, 7; see also Berger 2008).

The theme of redemption exemplifies how historically and culturally specific models of stories combine with subjective experience in personal narratives. In its simplest form, redemption refers to deliverance from suffering or distress. The concept has roots in the Hebrew Bible and the related social and legal customs, but it found its fullest expression in Christian theology, through the atoning crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus Christ. In secular stories of redemption, it involves deliverance from some form of adversity. Scholars point out that the redemption theme resonates with uniquely American ideals (McAdams 2006a; see also Bellah et al. 1985). For example, the Puritans viewed their “city on a hill” as a model community that would redeem the religious persecution they had endured (Erikson 1966; Wills 1990). Later, the popular (and to some, laughable) Horatio Alger stories took variations on the redemptive plotline of hard work, crisis, struggle, and eventual success.

Inspirational stories in which a better life emerges from adversity often appear in popular culture. For example, McAdams (2006a, 20-22) found the theme of redemption in more than half of the feature stories in *People* magazine over an eight-month period. Redemption also constitutes a significant element in popular self-help discourse. Groups based on the Twelve Step rhetoric of Alcoholics Anonymous offer a particular formula for redemption stories. Participants learn to construct narratives in which personal growth comes out of addiction and “dysfunctional” relationships, thereby redeeming the hardship and abuse (Irvine 1999).

Redemption stories take the following general plot line: *My life took the wrong course. I almost lost hope, but things turned out for the best.* They depict a moral arc, with redemption entering somewhere between losing hope and turning out for the best. Redemption can enter the story in various forms and combinations of forms. It can enter through religion, in the path from sin to salvation. It can enter in the form of serious illness or injury. It can also enter because of separation through divorce or death. In the stories analyzed in this article, redemption takes animal form. I examine personal narratives in which homeless and formerly homeless people portray a pet dog or cat as either motivating them to change their lives or preventing them from taking their lives. This intersection of topics engages this research with several literatures. The analysis has an obvious affinity for the literature on human–animal interaction, and it adds a previously unarticulated role for animals to this body of work (Arluke 1987, 2002, 2003, 2004, 2006, 2010; Arluke and Sanders 1996; Fitzgerald 2007; Flynn 2000a, 2000b; Irvine 2004a, 2004b; Jerolmack 2007a, 2007b, 2009; Sanders 1990, 1991, 1993, 2003, 2007). It also adds to the literature on the construction of self-worth among the homeless and the marginal (Anderson and Snow 2001; Gowan 2010; Snow and Anderson 1993; Wasserman and Clair 2010). It adds a new dimension to the research that recognizes the importance of pets in homeless people’s lives (Baker 2001; Irvine, Kahl, and Smith 2012; Kidd and Kidd 1994; Labreque and Walsh 2011; Rew 2000; Singer, Hart, and Zasloff 1995; Taylor, Williams, and Gray 2004). In addition, this research extends and enriches the literature on the narrative construction of identity. More specifically, it builds on the work of psychologist Dan McAdams, who has studied the topic for decades. McAdams identifies the typical teller of a redemption story as an American adult in midlife, concerned with what Erik Erikson (1950) called “generativity.” I cannot do justice here to the theory of human development in which Erikson defined the term, but I can summarize generativity as an interest in leaving a positive legacy and making the world a better place. Generativity usually manifests itself in middle adulthood because, at that time, people typically engage in

actions that involve productivity and caregiving. Following Erikson, McAdams (2006a, 11) depicts generativity as “the central psychological and moral challenge adults face, especially in their 30s, 40s, and 50s.” To understand generativity, it can help to place it against what Erikson posed as the contrasting potential outcome of the same life stage: stagnation, the feeling of not contributing.

McAdams most often hears redemption stories from American adults who score highly on psychological measures of generativity (2006a, 2006b, 2008; McAdams et al. 2001). He argues that the roots of redemption stories extend back to childhood, reflecting a particular set of circumstances and experiences. In particular, he found that generative adults often began life with some advantage. This could have taken the form of economic privilege, but it could also have manifested itself as a talent or skill, a special destiny, or even the sense of being deeply loved. Whatever the case, the child gained a sense of being special. In addition, while growing up, he or she became aware of the suffering of others, and consequently developed a robust sense of empathy. By adolescence, generative adults usually have strong religious, political, or ethical beliefs, which motivate the desire to take action, to help, and to make things better. Generative adults make warm, involved, albeit disciplined parents. But their generativity extends to the community and beyond. Generative adults engage in prosocial activities, such as volunteering or civic leadership. Their lives give them the skills and resources to struggle and triumph over adversity. Their personal narratives essentially say, “I bear fruit; I give back; I offer a unique contribution. I will make a happy ending, even in a threatening world” (McAdams 2008, 20).

McAdams suggests that redemptive hope originates in the combination of early advantage with moral commitment. The teller feels endowed with an essentially good self, guided by upstanding principles. This prompts him or her to see positive outcomes even from negative events. Without these factors in the person’s background, the stories would most likely take another tack (see McAdams et al. 2001). This study challenges these assumptions by examining redemption stories told by *nongenerative* adults. The tellers either were homeless or were off the street but living in circumstances most of us would not want to emulate. Their backgrounds include addiction, alcoholism, jail, prostitution, disabling mental illnesses, and HIV. While their generative peers-in-the-making developed moral commitments through religion or politics, they focused on staying high, staying out of jail, or staying alive. They nevertheless construct stories of redemption, with animals as the source of hope. After briefly describing the methods used in this research, I present several personal narratives that construct animals as the medium for redemption.

Then, by analyzing what makes animals especially well suited for redemption stories, I bring an alternative to the “generativity paradigm” to light. I then examine what these particular narratives accomplish for those who tell them, and I conclude by discussing their theoretical and empirical implications.

## Methods

In this paper, I draw on qualitative interviews conducted with homeless pet guardians in Boulder, Colorado, and Sacramento and San Francisco, California. The research received approval from the University of Colorado’s Institutional Review Board. The narratives presented here constitute a subset of those collected for a book-length project examining the meaning of animals in the lives of homeless people.<sup>1</sup> The larger project includes other narrative depictions of such relationships, in addition to redemption stories. Using the inductive practices well acknowledged in qualitative sociological research, the analysis also revealed constructions of animals as best friends, family members, children, protectors, and “my everything.” Here, I limit my focus to the theme of redemption—and thus to the small number of stories that have this as their exclusive focus. Consistent with the logic of decisions made by other analysts who explore a small number of stories (Duberman 1993) or even just a single one (Behar 1993; Laslett 1990, 1991), I maintain that the stories discussed here bring new theoretical insights to the research on narrative. In addition, they reveal previously unarticulated coping strategies, views, and concerns through which people on the margins characterize their experiences.

With the exception of Boulder, where I approached people in a downtown park, I conducted the interviews at street clinics for the pets of the homeless. Sacramento and San Francisco have well-established veterinary clinics of this sort. I cannot overstate the importance of veterinary gatekeepers for gaining access to homeless pet owners. The usual ways of accessing homeless people through shelters or on the street will not work for homeless pet owners. In the first case, most homeless shelters do not allow animals because of safety and health concerns. The absence of pet owners ruled out shelter as a site for recruiting sufficient people for research. In the second case, as I learned in my initial attempts to recruit people by approaching them on the street, many homeless people regard researchers with suspicion. Pet owners, in particular, fear confrontations about their ability to care for their animals (Irvine, Kahl, and Smith 2012). Fortunately, the street clinic setting alleviated people’s wariness. During intake at the clinics, veterinary technicians explained the research and listed those willing to participate. I then interviewed pet owners as they

waited for the veterinarians to examine their animals. I asked about numerous aspects of the person's relationship with his or her animal. The interviews did not capture entire life histories; although that would constitute a valuable task, I wanted to learn how homeless people narrated the slices of their lives that involve a relationship with an animal. All interviewees received a gift card redeemable for five dollars at local pet food and supply stores. To avoid incentivizing participation, interviewees did not learn about the gift card until after the interviews. I employ pseudonyms throughout the discussion.

I use an analytic approach characterized as "personal narrative analysis" (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008) or "socio-narratology" (Frank 2010). The analysis focused on narrative as the *object* of analysis rather than as a *mode* of analysis (Zussman 2000, 6). The latter involves describing and classifying the types of narrative and showing how their components work together to accomplish meaning (Barthes and Duisit 1975; Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2008, 70-97). To the extent that I undertook analysis of this type, I sought to decipher the narrative themes through which homeless people talked about their lives with animals. For example, analysis revealed the themes of "Lifesaver" and "Lifechanger" that I discuss here.<sup>2</sup> But my real interest lay in treating stories as the objects of analysis, and thus in allowing them to exercise their unique ability to describe subjective experience. However, the subjective element does not limit the narratives to the individual or idiosyncratic. Because they combine particular life circumstances with culturally specific forms and frameworks, personal narratives reveal the social embeddedness of subjectivity. In striving to convey both the individual and the social dimensions of personal narratives, I let the tellers "have their say," but I remained mindful of my "authorial" obligation to make sociologically informed sense of their stories (Berger and Quinney 2005; Gubrium and Holstein 1999; Holstein and Gubrium 2000).

## **Constructing Animals as Lifechangers**

### *Donna's Story*

I met Donna in San Francisco at an event called Project Homeless Connect (PHC). PHC offers "one-stop shopping" for homeless people in more than two hundred cities in the United States. By collaborating with businesses, nonprofits, and government organizations, PHC events provide everything from haircuts and dental work to legal assistance and veterinary care. They feature music and food, and even "parking areas" for the shopping carts that hold the life's possessions of many homeless people. In San Francisco, the

veterinary clinic regularly participates in PHC. I had the opportunity to interview people who brought their animals to the event in Bayview Park, in the southeastern corner of the city. A 2011 article in *The New Yorker* described the predominantly African American Bayview-Hunter's Point area as "the poorest and most violent neighborhood in San Francisco" (Tough 2011, 25). But music and a festival atmosphere filled Bayview Park that day. When we arrived before the official start of the event, clients had already begun to line up with their animals.

Donna did not have an animal with her that day. Nevertheless, she waited in line and signed up for an examination. She returned to check on the progress of the list and walked off again. I asked the veterinarian about her. "That's Donna," she said. "You really have to hear her story." When Donna came back again, I introduced myself. She explained that she had come with her friend Emily, whose dog, Hobo, needed a checkup. Donna has a car, and she had provided transportation. Hobo does not like other dogs, so the three of them sat away from the crowd. Emily stayed with Hobo while Donna periodically checked on their position on the list. Because this kept Donna busy, I first talked with Emily about her relationship with Hobo. As our interview ended, she told me, "You know, you really should interview Donna." Clearly, I had to hear her story.

Donna and I sat on the sidewalk and leaned against a brick building with our legs stretched out in the sun. A petite, almost elfin-looking woman, with long, light brown hair, Donna's deep-set brown eyes held my gaze intently. Her weatherworn skin and missing teeth belied her fifty-three years. She explained that she now lived upstairs in her mother's home, but had lived on the streets for several decades. At fifteen, she began drinking and using heroin. She set out not only to follow her older sister's lead but also to become "a bigger dope fiend" than her sister was. She left home so that her mother would not have to see her hooked on heroin. She soon added crack to her repertoire, and began turning tricks to buy drugs and food. I asked her about first time she sold her body. "I was scared," she recalled. "But I had to have that drug. I didn't care."

After leaving home, Donna's life consisted of homelessness, prostitution, drug addiction, and abusive relationships. She hitchhiked cross-country numerous times, turning tricks at truck stops from Chicago to Washington State. "Somebody was protecting me," she said, "not to get really hurt with all the things I've been through." She recounted the time a john who refused to pay for her services pushed her out of a moving tractor-trailer cab, and she bragged that she "tucked and rolled" when she hit the ground. Eventually, she "got the virus," referring to HIV, and she still does not know whether it came

from “the sex or the needles.” She has a son, now twenty-one, who, fortunately, “came out negative.” “I would never, ever shove a needle in my arm anymore,” she told me. I asked her how she quit. She paused while tears sprang up in her eyes. She said softly, “Athena.” She paused again, then looked at me and said, “She was the love of my life.”

Athena, a German shepherd/Labrador retriever mix, was Donna’s companion for ten years. I asked if she had a picture of Athena on the phone she held. She did not, but it mattered very little, because with obvious admiration and attention to detail, she described Athena’s thick black-and-sable coat and her amber eyes, rimmed in black, with the brow spots over them that make the dogs so marked especially expressive. In his book, *Merle’s Door*, Ted Kerasote reports, “The Hidatsa, a Native American tribe of the northern Great Plains believe that these sorts of dogs, whom they call ‘Four Eyes,’ are especially gentle and have magical powers” (2007, 3). This certainly seemed to fit Athena, at least in Donna’s description of her.

Donna became Athena’s guardian through a woman named Sita, long a common denominator between homeless people and homeless animals in San Francisco.<sup>3</sup> About a decade ago, Donna lived with her abusive boyfriend in a garbage-strewn encampment under a freeway. Worn out from addiction and hard living, they began camping in Donna’s mother’s backyard. Sita and Donna knew each other from the streets, and, as Donna explained, “Sita said, ‘You need a dog in your life.’” Sita had rescued three-year-old Athena from death row in a shelter. Although it might not seem that a homeless drug addict in an abusive relationship would make the best guardian for a dog, the match saved two lives. As Donna recalled, “Athena did everything for me. She got me out of an abusive relationship. And it was either the dog or him, and I chose the dog. He used to take my money. My shoes. Everything. The guy used to beat me up, and Sita told me it was either the man or the dog, so I chose Athena. I got the dog. Got rid of the man.” With the boyfriend out of the picture, Donna moved into her mother’s house, to a space she described as “the upstairs.” But Sita had also said, “You have to be clean to have the dog.” Her mother agreed, so Donna faced a decision. “I realized Athena meant everything to me,” she told me. “I said to myself, ‘My dog comes first in my life. Would I rather use drugs, or feed my dog?’ And I fell in love with Athena, so I gave up the needle. Gave up the pipe. I gave up liquor. Everything.”

This intrigued me, to say the least. I had heard and read horrendous accounts of alcohol withdrawal. I knew that absolute misery accompanied withdrawal from heroin. I could not imagine adding crack cocaine to the mix and withdrawing from all three. I wanted to know how Donna did it. She said, matter-of-factly, “Cold turkey.”



“You went cold turkey?” I asked in amazement.

“Cold turkey,” she said again.

“By yourself?” I asked. “You went through withdrawal?”

“Yup,” Donna said. “I went through withdrawal, and from there, I went to the methadone clinic. Got on methadone. Athena went with me, and everybody loved her, too. Athena was everything, OK? Athena was everything. Everywhere I went, Athena followed. She knew the pet stores. She sat down at the coffee shop. Everything.”

Donna also credits Athena with improving her HIV status. After becoming clean and sober, she felt better and began taking care of herself. She went for her blood test and the results provided proof. “She helped get my HIV level down. Yeah. Having Athena got my T-cells going up. When Athena came into my life, everything was beautiful.”

Donna has never worked at any job other than being a prostitute, and her HIV combined with dyslexia uncovered late in life prevent her from working now. Considered fully disabled, she receives Supplemental Security Income (SSI). Athena died over a year ago, from cancer, at age thirteen. A local pet supply store held a memorial service for her. The veterinary clinic arranged for cremation, and Donna has kept the ashes because she wants them mixed and distributed with hers when she dies. “We made it so that when I die, I’m going to be with her,” Donna explained. Having journeyed together in this world, they would be together at the final destination.

Donna, however, is in no hurry to die. Sita found her another dog, and a cat, too. She showed me pictures of both. “I hope I don’t die,” she told me. “I got to take care of Buddy, my new dog. I will start AIDS medication Tuesday because I want to live for my dog. I’m going to take the HIV medicine because it’s going to make me live for my dog.” Donna quickly added that she loves the cat, too. “They mean everything in my life,” she said. But she considers the dog special because she believes Athena chose him. As she explained, “After Athena died a year ago, Sita asked me to help another dog. So Athena sent Buddy. They have the same temperament. Everything Athena had, Buddy has. They’re afraid of the same things. They like the same things.” Donna was in the hospital recently and her only thought was getting home to her dog and cat. “It killed me,” she said. “Every day, I asked the doctor, ‘When can I go home so I can be with my pets?’ Just to have them in my life means everything.”

## *Tommy's Story*

I met Tommy in Sacramento, as he waited along with a hundred or so other people in the parking lot of the homeless center where the veterinary clinic takes place each month. Tommy had brought his young dog, Monty, for a checkup and nail trim. Tommy sat in a folding chair and I sat cross-legged on the ground next to him. The sun shone brightly and warmed us after what had begun as a chilly morning. Tommy and I speculated about Monty's bloodlines, and we agreed on Rottweiler and some kind of terrier that had made him on the small side. Monty weighed about thirty pounds. He let me pet him and he took the treat I offered, but all the other dogs around held much more interest for him than I did. He wagged his black tail, sniffed the air, and ventured out to the end of his leash before returning to check in with Tommy. He panted and did a little dance with his front paws. Then he repeated the routine all over again. As we watched Monty, I asked Tommy about his ten years of homelessness. At first, he shrugged and said he had been "down on his luck." As Snow and Anderson found, this common explanation "exempts the homeless from responsibility for their plight, and it leaves open the possibility of a better future" (1993, 204). After all, bad luck can happen to anyone. Thus, as a causal account, it salvages one's sense of self-worth. But as Tommy continued his story, he clearly saw less random forces at work. "I was a bad kid for many years," he told me. "I stole and I did drugs. Fighting. Stabbings. Shootings. Years of abuse." He had done time in jail.

When I met Tommy, he had lived in his van outside of Sacramento for several months. The van does not run, but friends allow him to park it on their property. Someone had abandoned Monty as a puppy at the church Tommy attends. After no one came looking for Monty, the church staff suggested that he would make a good companion for Tommy. "I took him home," he said, using the language of the houseless but not homeless to describe his van, "and he's been the best thing for me."

Tommy suffers from debilitating depression. I could not discern which came first, the depression or the addiction and the violent behavior. In any case, I saw neither of those afflictions during our conversation. For my purposes, what mattered was that when Tommy talked about his depression, he said, "Monty helps with that." I asked him to tell me more:

He makes me come out and walk with other people. He gets me socializing with other people. And he's like my best friend because being homeless, you don't really have friends unless you're drinking and doing drugs and all. You just walk the streets and just try to find what

you can on the streets. He gives me energy because he can make me get out and walk. He's just adorable to other people. They just come up, and it makes me feel better because I have mental illness also, where I don't like to be around people. And he just, he's just a joy to be with. He's good when people come up to our camp or something. He'll bark and let me know that somebody's there.

In this brief statement, Tommy assigned Monty numerous roles. He acts as best friend and serves as "social facilitator," initiating interactions with other people (Messent 1983; see also Robins, Sanders, and Cahill 1991; Sanders 1999; Irvine 2004). He provides emotional support and protection. He also promotes physical health, motivating Tommy to walk, which helps his arthritic knees.<sup>4</sup> In short, Tommy drew fully from the cultural vocabulary available for describing an animal's role in one's life. As the story continued, however, Tommy constructed Monty in another role, which I came very close to missing.

Now approaching forty, Tommy had worked in the building trades for many years until he witnessed a fatal accident on a construction site. He saw his boss and another man die when they both fell from a great height. "I haven't worked since then," he told me. "It really screwed me up." A few months before we met, Tommy had started receiving SSI benefits after a long struggle to do so. As he explained, "Seven years, I was fighting for my SSI. It took seven years to get that."

"No kidding?" I asked.

"Till they finally figured out that I'm not mentally stable. They wouldn't take me for the physical. Three times, I had to go before the judge."

Now, Tommy and Monty get by on the modest disability check. Tommy has made it onto a waiting list for a low-income apartment. He said he is doing well now, thanks largely to Monty's companionship and what he referred to as his "psych pills." I had begun to consider the interview only marginally useful, providing more of the same kind of information I already had. But then, as we wrapped up, Tommy casually said that he would soon start treatment for hepatitis C. I had already begun to turn off the recorder when he said, "Monty also got me off alcohol and got me off drugs. Now I'm sober and I'm healthy." Clearly, the story had more to it. Doctors refer to these moments as "doorknob conversations." After an uneventful office visit, when the patient already has begun to leave, he or she says, "By the way, it's

probably nothing, but . . .” I asked Tommy how Monty had helped him stop drinking and using drugs. He explained that he had gotten sober by necessity in jail. After his release, he started attending the church where Monty turned up as a stray. Tommy felt he had begun to get his life back on track, but Monty provided the key motivation. As he recalled, “When I got out of jail, I told myself that I would never drink again or smoke again, and I told that to Monty, and every time I want to go to get a drink, he just looks at me, almost shaking that head, saying, ‘You know what you just went through the last 35 years!’”

Donna and Tommy both tell personal narratives that construct their dogs as the catalysts for turning from addiction and abuse. Whereas their stories credit their dogs with *changing* their lives, the following section examines stories that construct animals as *saving* people’s lives.

## Constructing Animals as Lifesavers

### Trish’s Story

I met Trish on a cold December day in Boulder. She stood on the median at the exit of a busy shopping center with her Jack Russell Terrier bundled up in a dog bed beside her. She was “flying a sign,” or panhandling, with a piece of cardboard neatly lettered in black marker to read, “Sober. Doing the best I can. Please help.” I had done some shopping and noticed her with the dog on my way out. I could not stop because of the flow of traffic, but I circled back and parked nearby. I went into the nearby restaurant and bought a large cup of hot tea. I brought it over to Trish and introduced myself. She expressed interest in my project and agreed to talk. In fact, she said, she would enjoy the company.

Trish’s dog Pixel came from a pet store where Trish had worked eight years ago. Then a puppy, Pixel had contracted parvovirus and survived through Trish’s diligent care. But the storeowner no longer considered Pixel sellable, and offered him to Trish. Although she could hardly afford to feed herself, she had always loved animals, and the two have remained inseparable ever since. Trish said she sometimes tried to leave Pixel in the mobile home in which they now lived, the first physical dwelling that they have ever shared. But after being with Trish around the clock, curling up next to her in cars and under bridges, Pixel has separation anxiety without her. “It’s funny,” she said, “because we have a place now, and he won’t stay. He won’t. He would rather be out here, cold, and with me, rather than being there by himself.”

Trish told me that she had been homeless “off and on” for over ten years. For her, not being homeless meant sleeping in a car or in the back of a store where she briefly held a job. In her younger days, she had followed the Grateful Dead around the country, and eventually landed in Boulder. By then, she had become a heroin addict. When she could not get high, she turned to drinking to dull the cravings. “I didn’t really like to drink,” she explained, “but if I was sick from not having opiates, I had to drink, because I couldn’t walk, you know, or eat or do anything.” She and Pixel slept under a bridge well known in Boulder as a homeless camp. When I met her, she had been clean and sober for two years. She had found an addiction rehabilitation facility that covered the costs of her treatment through a well-timed state program. “It was awesome,” she said. “I just happened to call when the government was doing this study. They were paying for people’s treatment, and then they wanted to follow them for six months. So, I went there, and got sober.” She found a friend to care for Pixel, “someone with a house,” while she went through what she described as a “severe detox.” After rehab, Trish recounted, “I wanted to get off the streets but I had to find a job and try to do all those things I couldn’t do before because I was messed up, which was really, really weird. It had been so long since I had to have a schedule. I loved it, though. I was like, ‘I can do this.’” She supported herself by working various jobs that paid under the table, mostly cleaning houses. “I had three people that I was going there once a week and cleaning their places,” she explained, “and then other ones were just one time deals, stuff like that. It took about six months, and I got us off the streets. We lived out of my car.” But that work had recently dropped off. “As it got colder, I started losing jobs,” she said, “not by anything that I was doing, but I don’t know, maybe they’re afraid of the economy, afraid of whatever and they’re trying to hold onto their money. The holidays are coming, and this and that.”

When we met in mid-winter, Trish and Pixel lived in a condemned mobile home for which the trailer park manager nevertheless charged her a “lot fee” of three hundred dollars a month. Without a job, Trish still needed to earn at least forty dollars a day. She could not get work easily because of a felony on her record for possession of heroin. “I had that charge fifteen years ago,” she explained. “It was a felony then. Now it’s a misdemeanor, apparently. But back then, twenty dollars worth of heroin was a felony, so I have that on my record. I am having a hard time getting a job even at Burger King or McDonald’s. Everybody does background checks now, so if I don’t want to be homeless again, here I am.” She waved the cardboard sign to illustrate her point. Trish said that Pixel kept her going, even during her darkest times. She even said that Pixel kept her alive.

It was something to lose, you know? Yeah. I was [on the streets]. I hated it. I was totally at rock bottom. I just wanted to die. But I couldn't, because he needed me. I didn't want to be out here anymore. I couldn't see the light at all anymore. And I'd asked for help so many times and I couldn't get it, so at some point, I was just, like, "I'm done. I can't do this anymore." But I couldn't give up because I had something else to take care of besides myself. So he kept me alive.

I asked, "You mean you might have committed suicide if it weren't for him?" "Yeah," she said. "I don't know if I actually could have gone through with it. I just wanted it over. I just didn't want to be here anymore. I never really thought about, 'I'm going to get a gun, or a knife, or a razor blade,' but I was losing all motivation. But, you know, I still needed to feed him and keep him warm at night. I didn't care about myself, but I had to care about him, you know? He got me through a really tough spot. If I would've had to be without him out there before, I don't think I would have made it, at all."

In the two years since that "tough spot," Trish credits Pixel with helping her stay sober. "He definitely helps keep me on the straight and narrow," she said. She claims that Pixel "hates the smell of alcohol," and he keeps her away from "bad elements, or groups of people, because of the alcohol, the drugs, and all that." She claims that the dog will nip the heels of people who approach smelling of alcohol. "He's an awesome judge of character," she said. "He just knows." She looked down at Pixel and added, "Right, buddy?" The little dog never took his eyes off her.

### *Rudy's Story*

Like Trish, Rudy credits his dogs, a pair of Dachshunds, with keeping him alive. He had one of the dogs, an eight-year-old male, with him when we met at the Sacramento veterinary clinic. We sat in the shade on folding chairs and talked while he waited for his dog's turn to have a routine examination and vaccinations. Rudy hesitated to talk to me at first because he did not consider himself homeless. He prided himself with never having slept on the street, but he had slept in nearly every kind of habitation imaginable. Now in his sixties, he stayed with family members around Sacramento. After his initial reluctance, Rudy decided that talking with me would pass the time. But even then, he repeatedly told me that he did not have much to say. On the contrary, he said quite a lot about the strength of the bond he felt with his dogs.

Like Tommy, he had worked in construction for most of his life. He had lost a finger and part of his thumb along the way, but only cancer forced him

to stop working. He crossed his remaining fingers and smiled as he said, "But right now, it's in remission." His SSI check provides him with almost nine hundred dollars a month. This more than covers his expenses and care for his dogs because, as he told me, "Unlike most of the people around here who get Social Security, I don't spend it on drugs." Perhaps because Rudy saw himself as resourceful enough to have avoided sleeping on the street, he seemed to want to distance himself from the "truly" homeless people all around us (see Snow and Anderson 1993). I asked him to describe how he spent his time. He smiled again and pointed to the dog.

I take him out about 20 times a day. Walk, walk, walk. I take him to the park. I got a female, too, that's ball nuts. She could play ball all day long. I talk to them. Pet them. He sleeps in my bed. They both do. One's up by my head. Other one's down by my feet. Other than that, I don't do much else. I take good care of my dogs. If I didn't have my dogs, I'd be unhappy.

Not long ago, Rudy had shared an apartment with a roommate, whom he described as "someone I thought was my friend." But Rudy had gone to jail for sixty days on a "trumped up" drug charge. While in jail, the landlord evicted Rudy and the roommate sold everything—except the dogs. "Couldn't find nobody to buy 'em, I guess," he said, and added, "It's a good thing, too, 'cause they're keeping me alive." "How are they doing that?" I asked. As a man of few words, Rudy struggled to answer. "I can't really say," he told me, "just their aura, I guess you would call it." I pressed him to explain, "Their what?" I asked. He looked at his dog, smiled, and looked back at me, sheepishly. "Love," he said. "It's unconditional. It's like mine for them." I could tell he felt embarrassed speaking this way. Just to ease the awkwardness I said, "So they just care for you, no matter what?" "Yeah," he said, softly, as he stroked his dog's smooth copper coat. The dog looked up at him adoringly. "Just like I do with them. I just love 'em, just like they was real people."

### *Denise's Story*

Cats, too, figured into the lifesaving role. For example, I met Denise and her cat Ivy at a veterinary clinic in San Francisco. White, middle-aged, slender, and nicely dressed, Denise looked nothing like the stereotypical homeless person. Ivy, a tiny, black-and-white cat, sat sphinx-like in a carrier, her white paws tucked neatly underneath her. I put my finger near the door of the carrier for Ivy to sniff. She leaned forward to check it out, and proclaiming me

safe but uninteresting, she turned her head just enough to look past me into the middle distance, as if to say, "Ho hum." Denise and I found some shade on a nearby cement staircase, and we sat down to talk.

Denise had worked as a self-employed graphic artist, but severe depression caused her to miss deadlines. Major clients lost faith in her, and the accounts gradually dwindled. She fell behind on rent, and her landlord evicted her from her apartment. She tried to find another place before the eviction deadline, but time ran out. She put her belongings in storage and moved into her car, where she and Ivy had lived for over eight months when we met. "Half of the car is taken up by her stuff," Denise said of Ivy. "There's a big carrier, which she sleeps in, and then her litter box, and her bowls, so she essentially has the whole back seat, and then I'm in the front seat." Denise said she feels like she lives in a "glass display case." She parks in her former neighborhood because it feels safe. But San Francisco laws prohibit living in a vehicle, so Denise tries to avoid trouble by obeying the parking laws.<sup>5</sup> "My time is taken up just moving the car," she told me. "I have to keep moving it. I can't park more than two hours." Even when she can find a place, traffic and lights keep her awake. "I get very little sleep," she said. "I'm very sleep deprived." She admitted that she occasionally shuts herself in her storage locker just to rest in dark, quiet privacy for a while. Sometimes she brings Ivy with her, but other times she lets the cat sunbathe on the ledge of the rear view window. Although Ivy enjoys this, it puts Denise at risk. "I'm really afraid that somebody is going to come along and go, 'Oh, no! Animal cruelty. A cat's locked in the car,' and report my vehicle," she said. "So I don't want to do anything that draws attention to the car at all, which means I don't want people to see her." A friend allows Denise to shower at his apartment twice a week. She brings Ivy and claims, "She seems to know that we're going someplace else where she can run around. So she chirps, and her tail's up, and she purrs, and it's incredible to me. And it helps lift my spirits."

The eviction has made it difficult for Denise to find another apartment. Many landlords simply will not rent to prospective tenants who have an eviction on their records. In a tight rental market such as San Francisco's, landlords can easily find other tenants. In addition, Denise's situation does not qualify her for many of the housing programs available to the homeless. She never imagined she would live in her car for over eight months. As she explained,

I have a caseworker working very aggressively to find me housing, but in my particular situation, I kind of slip through the cracks. I don't fit into the demographic profile of the different housing prospects that are



available. I'm not the right age. I'm not the right ethnicity. I'm childless. If I had children, there would be some housing.

Having Ivy initially made finding housing even more difficult. When I asked Denise if she had considered finding Ivy another home, she shook her head and began to describe their unspoken bond. She had adopted Ivy as a kitten five years before. Ivy had come from an abusive situation. As Denise explained,

She was a bit distant when I first adopted her, and then she grew to know me, but she's very frightened still of any new people, new situations. So I've kept her pretty protected, and that's why, when I became homeless I didn't want to give her up, even though I know I had a lot of housing opportunities if I didn't have my cat.

Although Denise felt that keeping Ivy protected meant doing the best thing for her, people often said she had no right to keep a cat in her circumstances (Irvine, Kahl, and Smith 2012). When I asked how she responded to this, she explained:

I have a history with depression up to suicide ideation, and Ivy, I refer to her as my suicide barrier. And I don't say that in any light way. I would say most days, she's the reason why I keep going, because I made a commitment to take care of her when I adopted her. So she needs me, and I need her. She is the only source of daily, steady affection and companionship that I have. The only one. I can't imagine being without her, wanting to go on at all, without her.

By protecting Ivy, Denise had consequently built a bond so strong that it protected her, too. Through constructing Ivy as a "suicide barrier," Denise portrayed Ivy as returning the favor. Fortunately, Denise would not have to decide between keeping Ivy and finding housing. Her doctor had recently provided the document certifying Ivy as her necessary companion. The emotional support Ivy provides qualifies her as a "reasonable accommodation" for Denise's psychological state. Landlords could not refuse to rent to Denise because of Ivy, even if they usually do not allow pets. Meanwhile, Denise takes solace from Ivy's adaptability:

I don't know what I would have done if eight months ago I'd known that I was still going to be homeless, how I would have done it differently.

Because I actually do live each day thinking, “This has got to be the last day. I know I’m going to get a break tomorrow,” and it hasn’t come. So I actually have to sort of not really think about my situation too much because I become, I go into a state of despair. And it amazes me how she endures this. She knows where all her stuff is. She’s got her bed, she’s got her little cushion to lounge on. She’s got her little sun deck. She knows where the food is. This is her place. That helps me keep going.

## Animals as Vehicles for Redemption

In McAdams’s formulation, generativity and its precursors beget narratives of redemption. Without the right background, one’s orientation, and thus one’s personal narratives, would follow a different course. But the stories told by homeless and formerly homeless pet owners call for another interpretation. Their biographies did not predispose them to tell redemption narratives. Nevertheless, they envisioned brighter futures emerging out of their struggles. The construction of their stories around their pets highlights the unique power of animals as a medium for redemption.

As mentioned, redemption can enter a story in several ways, including the narrator’s perseverance, the help of friends or benefactors, good fortune, or divine intervention. McAdams outlines six “languages” of redemption, “sets of images and ideas that people routinely draw upon when they are trying to make sense of the moves in their lives from negativity and suffering, on one hand, to positivity and enhancement, on the other” (2006a, 41). These languages include *atonement* and salvation, borrowed from religious sources, and *emancipation*, which yields a narrative of freedom from oppression. They also include the language of *upward mobility*, in the familiar form of the rags-to-riches story, and the language of *recovery*, which applies to stories of healing the mind or body. In addition, they include the language of *enlightenment*, in which knowledge brings the teller out of ignorance, and the language of *development*, which draws from self-fulfillment and self-help discourses. People mix and match these languages in depicting their lives as moving from suffering to a more positive outcome, if not to triumph.

In the stories recounted here, animals provide the vehicle for redemption. One of Donna’s statements captures this well: “When Athena came into my life, everything was beautiful.” The other stories contain variations on this theme: *life is better because this animal is in it*. The redemptive power of animals works in narratives in three related ways. First, the dependence of

animals draws on and encourages the guardian's sense of responsibility. Providing for an animal's needs offers a purpose or a direction for one's life, and a reason to keep going. Rudy described his days, for example, as revolving around caring for his dogs. Moreover, for some of the tellers, the activities involved in caregiving, and the requirement to provide care constituted a potential turning point, as when Donna had to decide whether to continue using drugs or feed Athena and when Trish realized that Pixel gave her "something to lose." Second, the perceived unconditional love from animals rewards the caregiving with a sense of mattering, or "the perception that, to some degree and in any of a variety of ways, we are a significant part of the world around us" (Elliott, Kao, and Grant 2004, 339). Trish and Rudy for example, both describe caring for their animals and consequently *feeling cared for by them*. Tommy, too, described this in saying how Monty was "the best thing" for him and calling Monty "a joy to be with." Denise's story depicts the nexus of caring for and feeling cared for particularly well. Her caring comes through clearly in her decision to live in her car rather than enter housing without Ivy. In turn, she constructs Ivy as a reason to continue living.

A third factor that makes animals appropriate for redemption narratives involves our imaginations of them as innocents. Animals do not judge the disabled, the former addict, the ex-con, or the prostitute. They stand as silent witnesses to our behavior. Moreover, through the practice of "speaking for," narratives can cast them as incorruptible advisors and protectors. In "speaking for" a dog or a cat, a guardian "gives voice to what he or she understands to be the [animal's] thoughts or perspective" (Arluke and Sanders 1996, 67). For example, Tommy described promising Monty that he would not drink or do drugs, and the dog "told" him to keep his promise, saying, "You know what you just went through the last 35 years." In "speaking for" animals, narrators also construct their identities, for themselves and for others within the interaction. In this case, Tommy gave Monty an identity along the lines of an older brother or a knowing uncle, someone wise to Tommy's ways. In most instances of "speaking for," the party with greater social power—the human caretaker—defines the identity of the less competent actor, in this case, the dog. Quite often, guardians create rather simple-minded, albeit lovable, identities for animals, especially for dogs (see Sanders 1993, 1999). In contrast, Tommy constructed an identity for Monty that surpassed his own, in a moral and ethical sense. He portrayed Monty as having his best interests in mind. Monty "reminded" Tommy that he must continue on the straight and narrow path by staying clean and sober. Similarly, Trish gave Pixel the ability to judge people's character and keep her away from "bad elements," and thus to help her stay sober.

These three factors allow animals to serve as both the mode of atonement and the medium of salvation in redemption stories. The animal's dependence offers immediate ways to express care, allowing for the manifestation of a "good" self. The fulfillment of the associated responsibilities requires a sacrifice, which, in these stories, involves giving up drugs and alcohol or deciding to live in the car. The perceived unconditional love the animal provides, and the accompanying sense of mattering, rewards the sacrifice. And the construction of the animal as the provider of this love, while simultaneously innocent of the adversity in the teller's past and yet wise to it, adds an implicitly Christ-like element to the narrative. Moreover, animals' acceptance of their human companions, despite their histories, imparts additional Christ-likeness.

Narratives that construct animals as their redemptive hope thus draw on several existing languages of redemption. They contain distinct elements of atonement and salvation, with the teller moving from sin to forgiveness. Narratives of addiction and alcoholism show influences of the language of recovery, in which the teller moves from sickness to health. Similarly, Gowan (2010) found frequent use of sin and sickness discourses among the homeless, although in accounts of the path *to* the street instead of *away* from it. The narratives recounted here also use the redemptive language of development, suggesting personal growth and lessons learned in the struggle. More importantly, however, the stories depicted here suggest the need to expand the list of redemption languages. In particular, the narratives constructed around animals make sense of the tellers' moves from negative to positive, from instability to relative security, through fulfilling responsibilities to an "other." Consequently, I maintain that *commitment* should appear among the languages of redemption. Although a form of commitment appears in McAdams's (2004) work, it refers to a moral steadfastness across the life span, associated once again with the precursors of generativity (McAdams et al. 1997). In contrast, I use the term to denote commitment in the context of a relationship. Its language employs the virtues of friendship, love, and compassion to narrate a redemptive move from self-interest to interdependence, even selflessness.

Because of the culture's imaginations of animals as innocents and providers of unconditional love, they give even nongenerative narrators access to redemption stories. The benefits these stories hold for these particular tellers represent a unique strength of the language of commitment. All narratives constitute strategies for the construction of identity. They "are not merely a way of telling someone (or oneself) about one's life; they are the means by which identities may be fashioned" (Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, 1). Redemption, in general, casts identity in a positive light, portraying the

possessor as deserving forgiveness and salvation. In stories that emphasize commitment, however, accounts of the activities associated with caring for and about an “other” help to construct a distinctly *moral* identity, referring to one “that testifies to a person’s good character” (Kleinman 1996, 5; see also Katz 1975). Stories of commitment thus bestow or restore a moral identity and a sense of self-worth—essential for everyone, but especially difficult to accomplish when resources for establishing personal significance are scarce. For homeless people and others on the margins of society, the language of commitment can “salvage the self” (Snow and Anderson 1993) from reminders of a stigmatized status.

## Conclusion

My analysis of redemption narratives differs from the approach taken by McAdams in that it “attends to stories as *actors*, studying what the story does, rather than understanding the story as a portal into the mind of a storyteller” (Frank 2010, 13; emphasis in original). I have argued that the language of commitment in redemption stories allows for the construction of a moral identity, rather than assuming that an existing moral identity engenders a subsequent story of redemption. In the view of stories as actors, stories enable tellers to construct a sense of self. Although the details belong to the individual tellers, the capacity to create a self belongs to, or comes from, the story.

The addition of commitment to McAdams’s languages of redemption engages the analysis of narrative with an ongoing sociological debate. More specifically, the emphasis on commitment in the narratives analyzed here contrasts with enduring claims about American individualism. Although numerous scholars since Tocqueville have commented on this, the authors of *Habits of the Heart* summarized it especially well in writing, “Clearly, the meaning of one’s own life for most Americans is to become one’s own person, almost to give birth to oneself” (Bellah et al. 1985, 82). Narratives, in general, tend to emphasize self-invention, and tellers often overestimate the “originality” of the stories they tell (Frank 2010, 14). Redemption narratives can push individualism to extremes, reinforcing the image of a lone struggle against adversity. But the stories analyzed here unfold along the plotline of “this relationship saved my life.” The language of commitment introduces a contrasting sense of interdependence by making responsibilities to an “other” the medium for atonement and salvation. The existence of such stories disputes assumptions about the unanimous value placed on “giving birth to oneself.”

The emphasis on commitment in the narratives analyzed here can also inform two areas of the research on homelessness. First, it can enrich the debate about the supposed isolation and disaffiliation within that community. Until approximately the 1980s, isolation and withdrawal from social contact characterized the predominant image of the homeless person. More recently, scholars have disagreed on the accuracy of this image (see Gory, Ritchey, and Fitzpatrick 1992; Rossi 1989). The pets of the homeless represent an unacknowledged social tie, and the use of the language of commitment to describe these relationships contradicts images of isolation and withdrawal. Moreover, in their well-documented role as social facilitators, animals often initiate relationships between people, suggesting another way that a commitment to an animal can reduce isolation. Second, the language of commitment has implications for research on rehousing the homeless (Singer, Hart, and Lee Zasloff 1995). It highlights the importance of making pet-friendly housing available. In addition, stories about animals, and the relationships that animate them, suggest that the skills involved in pet-keeping can translate into those required for getting off the street. The qualities of responsibility and commitment, along with having a silent witness to one's conduct, can make one a good tenant as well as a good animal guardian. I certainly would not argue that every homeless person should have a pet; their care requires resources that not everyone can provide. But at least in some cases, a commitment to an animal can turn things around, and research could reveal whether and how redemption extends across the domains of one's life.

Finally, the telling of redemption stories by those on society's margins itself tells a story about selves in American culture. The particular kind of self a story can create highlights the cultural specificity of its narrative form and logic. As a storytelling convention, the theme of redemption illuminates the social and historical dynamics within which it makes sense. In particular, redemption reflects belief in the power of optimism and second chances. Stories of redemptive commitment to pets can circulate only in a time and place that honors such relationships and grants animals nearly divine powers, or at least does not rule them out. Moreover, stories of redemption and the selves they construct require cultural acceptance of the discourse that allows even a life out of control to change for the better. By showing how stories about commitment to animals construct moral identities, this analysis reveals the social origins of what we consider uniquely autobiographical.

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## Notes

1. The larger project draws on interviews with more than seventy homeless pet owners, and includes Berkeley and Miami.
2. These by no means exhaust the vocabularies available for narratives about relationships with animals, many of which I explore in the larger work.
3. Sita grew up on the San Francisco streets with a drug-addicted, mentally ill mother. When her mother died, then-teenaged Sita lived first with her father, and then in foster care, but soon ended up back on the streets. She evaded Child Protective Services to stay out of the foster care system. She lived on streets for twenty years. Sita tells her own redemption narrative, which credits a dog named Leadbelly, along with a drug program, with saving her life. She helped establish San Francisco's veterinary clinic for the pets of the homeless. Now in her forties, she runs a dog rescue.
4. Research has found emotional and physical benefits of pets for the elderly, ill, and disabled (e.g., Friedmann et al. 1980; Mugford and M'Comisky 1975; Wells 2007). However, reviews of the body of research conducted over the past thirty years conclude that "the pet effect remains an uncorroborated hypothesis rather than an established fact" (Herzog 2011, 237; see also Chur-Hansen, Stern, and Winefield 2010).
5. Gowan discusses the problems of the "vehicularly housed" (2010, see esp. 227-28). She writes, "People living in vehicles get relatively little attention in the literature on homelessness, but they make up a significant proportion of the American population outside conventional housing. One national survey has suggested that this less visible fraction could even constitute the majority of the literally homeless" (Gowan 2010, 253; see also Link et al. 1995).

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## Bio

**Leslie Irvine** is an Associate Professor of Sociology at the University of Colorado at Boulder. Her research interests include social psychology and animals and society.