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Ted Sarbin was born on May 8, 1911 in Cleveland, Ohio. He died on August 31, 2005, in Carmel, California. He was born into a poor Jewish family from eastern Europe, and died at his home — beloved by his friends and family, and acclaimed by his professional colleagues as a psychologist of distinction. This article traces the course of his life — with special attention to the formative influences in his education as a psychologist. As a psychologist, he became a significant critical voice — arguing for a psychology that would embrace narrative as a principle of understanding human life, and contextualism, as opposed to mechanism, as a world view.

Keywords: Narrative psychology, contextualism, social psychology, biography, critical psychology

It was August, 2005. Ted Sarbin was introduced to a packed auditorium at the conclusion of an American Psychological Association symposium on narrative psychology, held in Washington, DC. Kenneth Gergen chaired the session. Gergen had dedicated the symposium to Sarbin. It featured four presentations, followed by Sarbin’s commentary and discussion. He spoke incisively and appreciatively of the four presented papers and then concluded by remarking that even though he had more to say, he found himself to be out of breath. The audience, perhaps sensing that these were his final public words, rewarded him with a standing ovation. At the time, he had been an active member of APA for over 66 years — a record at that time. And those were, in fact, his final public words.

After the symposium, a dinner was held at the Maryland home of Ki-Taek and Misoon Chun. Ki-Taek is one of Ted’s former students — about 15 of whom, Requests for further information should be directed to Karl E. Scheibe, Wasch Center for Retired Faculty, Wesleyan University, 51 Lawn Avenue, Middletown, CT 06457, Email: kscheibe@wesleyan.edu.
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plus spouses, were gathered for the occasion. During the drive to their home, one of us (KS) put this question to Ted. “What would you think of our writing a biography of you?” His immediate and sincere reply was, “I don’t think that anybody would be much interested.” There the matter rested for some time — but the idea of writing such a work has lived on. In capsule form, this article is a result of that intention. Ted’s modest statement was in character — but those of us who knew him share a conviction that his quiet brilliance merits wider attention. For those of us who were his students, that brilliance is more evident now than when he was among us. No one has emerged to assume his mantle.

Ted returned to his home in California immediately after the convention. When one of us (FB) met him upon arrival, he was asked how his performance had been received. He responded by raising his arms above his head and saying with a smile, “I’m a rock star!” Ten days later, on August 31, 2005, Ted died peacefully at home. It was, all things considered, a graceful departure — one accompanied by family and friends. Some details of his final days on earth bear reporting — but this we shall defer until the end of this article.

Through the years of his mentoring and friendship with us, Ted told stories of his family and early life. With help from his family and friends, we share here some of these stories — together with a rough chronicle of his life. All biographical works are partial and incomplete — and this one is no exception. The reader should know that our partiality is linked to our deep affection for our subject, for which we make no apology.

Early years in Cleveland

Ted Sarbin was born on May 8, 1911 in Cleveland, Ohio. He was the fourth of six children. His father had a business of rolling cigars in a small shed in the back yard of their home and supplemented that business with retailing vegetables. Even though 18 years later the Great Depression created massive unemployment and hardship in Cleveland, wealthy smokers continued to want tobacco — so the business of hand rolling cigars consistently produced enough income for the family to survive. Ted often assisted with the grocery business — getting up early in the morning to help his father buy and stock fresh vegetables.

Ted’s father and mother had emigrated in the 1880s — his father, Samuel, from the Ukraine and his mother, Annie, from the part of Russia that later became Poland. The father was one of seven children, all of whom came to the United States — in two waves. The first wave included five of the siblings. But the two others, including 11-year-old Samuel, Ted’s father, were barred from boarding the ship because of eye infections. The immigration officials transcribed the surname
of the first wave as Serbin. A short time later, Samuel and his brother, arrived in the U.S., but this time, their names were written as Sarbin — and so they remained. This is an example of something accidental becoming something essential — an idea Ted Sarbin later came to think of as important. Our identities are formed out of myriad accidents, but are owned as essential, not adventitious.

The Serbin family came to be centered in Pittsburgh, while the Sarbin branch came to live in Cleveland. As Jews, they carried on their orthodox religious practice, not intensively but occasionally. Ted recalled being summoned to the local synagogue in order that a minyan (of ten men) might be constituted to comply with the requirements for prayer. The family was poor. They had travelled to America in second-class cabins, not steerage — so they were not destitute. Ted described his father as hard working, a good provider, and caring for his children — a kind and generous man. He told a story about his father wearing a pair of his son’s shoes in order to break them in properly before giving them over.

Ted entered East Technical High School in Cleveland. He had a part-time job at night and also helped his father to sell vegetables. Helping his father in the morning meant that Ted was often late for his 8:00AM class in French, taught by a Mr. Carbineri. Because Mr. Carbineri did not like him to come in late, Ted stopped coming to his class altogether. Mr. Carbineri related this delinquency to Mr. Duff, who was Ted’s homeroom teacher. This provided the background for Ted’s expulsion from the high school. On one previous occasion, Mr. Duff was late to class, but announced to the students, “In eleven years at this school, this is the first time I have been late.” Later, Ted was late in appearing in Mr. Duff’s classroom. When he was taken to task for this, Ted performed an imitation of Mr. Duff’s earlier proclamation of it being the first time he had been late in eleven years at the school. The performance was complete with posture, expression, and accent. The unappreciative Mr. Duff arranged immediately to have young Mr. Sarbin expelled from the school — a fate which Ted later described as a result of his having been, “A wise ass.”

I have often mentioned to students that this outstanding psychologist was a high school dropout — as an object lesson about how early setbacks in life can be overcome. During his high school years he learned to be good with his hands. Throughout his life, he was able to fix things, do plumbing and electrical work, and was particularly adept at carpentry. He was proud of having constructed a drill press in a high school shop class from a bunch of old pipes and other junk parts and helped his son, Ted, to construct a wooden boat. He respected manual labor and practiced it. He later experienced what he referred to as a conversion — returned to night school, became an honors student, and completed his high school degree in 1931.

While Ted’s parents were not highly schooled they demonstrated a great respect for educated people. They did everything they could to encourage scholastic
interest and engagement. And Ted was a willing pupil: “I was an inveterate reader. As long as I can remember, I made use of the public library. I read novels, biographies, plays and poetry” (Sarbin, 1994, p. 10). He read much of Shakespeare’s works and even some of the works of Freud and other psychologists.

Throughout his life, Ted had been a quick study. This is illustrated in the following story about how he learned to drive.

The Sarbin family in Cleveland did not own a car — and Ted did not learn to drive until he was 18 — after dropping out of high school. He had a job at the Printz-Biderman garment manufacturer in Cleveland. In the course of his daily duties, he came to know one of the owners of the factory, Mr. Printz, and through him, was introduced to his daughter, Dorothy. After knowing her for some time, Dorothy asked Ted to be her escort for a formal dance to be held at the Hotel Cleveland. Mr. Printz offered to lend his Ford roadster to Ted, so that he might pick up the daughter and bring her in style to the dance. Initially, Ted declined the invitation, protesting that he had a rehearsal scheduled for the evening of the dance — a story he confessed was “not entirely true.” But when he told this story to one of his co-workers, he was met with incredulity. “Are you crazy?” said his friend. “Don’t you want to get ahead in this company?” Ted reconsidered and assented to go on the date. But the only problem was that he had never before driven a car — did not know how to drive. So on the Saturday afternoon of the dance, after the roadster had been delivered to the factory, Ted induced another friend to give him a quick driving lesson. He learned how to start the car, put it in gear, shift, steer, use the clutch and the brakes. The entire course of instruction could not have taken more than two hours. From another friend, he borrowed a tuxedo, and at the appointed hour he took the car to the Printz home, picked up Dorothy, whom he admitted looked quite splendid in her gown, and drove to the Hotel Cleveland. He said that in the entire distance of about eight miles to the hotel, he did not encounter a single red light. Upon arrival at the hotel, his concern about parking was relieved when he found a place on the street near the hotel that was big enough for three cars. After the dance, he took Dorothy home, by the same route — and while he did on this trip encounter some red lights, he was able to maneuver the car with adequate skill. He modestly concluded his story by saying that he did not remember whether he gave Dorothy a good night kiss. This was their only date. From that time onward, Ted was able to drive a car.

On the road

Ted had what he described as a *wanderjahr* in 1932. He spent several months travelling in empty boxcars on the rails — travelling west from Cleveland to the West Coast and back again. Along the way, he lived among the vast army of men who
were cast into vagrant life by the Great Depression. But he was a healthy young
man, 21 years of age. Ted certainly did not join this army of drifters out of neces-
sity, but rather out of choice. It seemed to him, as he later related, a way of broad-
ening his contact with the world, something of an adventure, a means of exploring
the country and introducing him as well to a new sector of humanity.

Among the lessons he learned on this trip was a tripartite classification of un-
employed men. *Hobos*, among whom he classified himself, were itinerants who
would work when it was possible. *Tramps* were itinerants would avoid work when-
ever it was possible. And *Bums* were non-itinerants who would also avoid work
whenever it was possible. Not yet the social psychologist he would become, he nev-

ertheless was an attentive student of the social order — learning from the natives
their categories and classifications. In some ways, these early observations presage
his later analyses of hippies, criminals and other social types. This experience also
was a preparation for his lifelong preoccupation with deviant conduct and margin-
alized social groups — later to focus on criminals and on mental patients.\(^1\)

One of the practical lessons Ted learned in his time of living among the dis-
possessed in hobo jungles is that one should always sleep in these places with one’s
shoes as a pillow. But he also remarked that another profound lesson he acquired
by his association with hoboes. And that was a lesson about kindness and car-
ing — about common decency among the poor — a concern for one’s fellow hu-
man being — their health, their access to food and clothing and shelter. Certainly
this experience did not harden him to the problems of others. His wanderings
among the poor were of kind similar to what George Orwell reported in “Down
and Out in Paris and London.” Like Orwell, Sarbin developed a genuine sympathy
for the poor and a critical appreciation for systemic and institutional forces that
had somehow produced their degradation.

**College years**

Travel and work, combined with night-school courses, occupied young Ted Sarbin
in his late teens and early 20’s. In 1934, at age 23, he entered the undergraduate
program at The Ohio State University with the plan of obtaining a job in social
work, where he had heard there were opportunities for employment. His advisor
suggested that he help satisfy his general education requirement by enrolling in
Introductory Psychology 401. As it happened, the instructor of this course was
Frank Stanton, then an advanced graduate student in psychology and later to be-
come the President of the Columbia Broadcasting System. Ted offers this account
of how this coincidence became a critical event in his life.

\(^1\) See Sarbin, 1969a, and Sarbin, 1969b.
During the discussion period following the second meeting of the class, he called on me to discuss a topic from his lecture. My response went beyond the contents of the assignment. After class, he asked me the source of my information. I had read *Seven Psychologies* by Edna Heidbreder (1933) as part of my informal reading before entering the university. The same book, Stanton told me, was the assigned text in a graduate seminar. He decided that I should be in a more advanced class and arranged for me to take the previous quarter’s final exam. I passed, was given credit for the course, and enrolled in Psychology 402. (Sarbin, 2005, p. 15)

Sarbin completed his undergraduate work at Ohio State in 1936, after just two years in school. In the next year he returned to his hometown of Cleveland and took a Master’s degree in psychology at Western Reserve University (later Case Western Reserve University). In 1937, he returned to Ohio State and completed all of the required courses and examinations required for the Ph.D. in one year. In 1938, lacking only a dissertation, he left Ohio State for the University of Minnesota, where he took a job doing student personnel work, while in his free time working on completing his doctoral dissertation for Ohio State. Ohio State awarded him a Ph.D. in Psychology in 1941. Thus, in seven years he obtained three degrees, and now, at age 30, was about to embark upon his career in psychology.

Because his undergraduate and graduate education was so concentrated, there was little time in his life for extracurricular pursuits. Even so, a couple of features of his student life should be reported.

During his undergraduate years he had a job in a Greek fraternity as a “hasher” — a kitchen aide and waiter. This employment allowed him ample access to food and provided needed income as well. He could not have afforded becoming a brother of this or any other fraternity. And in any event, his Jewish identity was a bar to his being invited into WASP fraternities. With plenty to eat, many friends, and a rich academic menu, Ted loved his undergraduate years. As he later said, “I had it made!”

Hints of anti-Semitism became even clearer when Ted returned to Ohio State as a Ph.D. student in psychology. When asked by his advisor to state his career aspirations, he said that he looked forward to becoming a college professor. Whereupon his advisor informed him that the academic world was not at that time hospitable to the prospect of Jews joining their faculties. Since the department at Ohio State by custom took responsibility for finding jobs for their graduates, he was advised to revise his professional aspirations accordingly. The counsel was delivered in a matter-of-fact manner, without rancor — and Ted accepted it as such.

He recalled a parallel experience that was more emotionally consequential for him, and perhaps equally formative. A psychology fraternity, a chapter of Psi Chi, was active on the Ohio State campus. Ted observed that of the 25 or so graduate students in psychology, only he and another student, also Jewish, were not invited to join the fraternity. Ted did not fight or protest this exclusion — but he combined
it with his observations that the students in the fraternity were quite ordinary, even if they were somehow in tune with the prevailing ethos of the psychology faculty. Near the end of his life, Ted recalled this incident of institutional exclusion as a reason for his taking a critical and even oppositional role in relation to the dominant trends and practices of the psychological establishment. He early cast himself in the role of a critic of that establishment — if only because of his experience of being symbolically excluded from it.

Ted had another story about his undergraduate years that he was fond of retelling. It is significant also in that it provides yet another illustration of the young man's ability as a quick study — and also provides an early instance of the power of dramatic enactments — something that would become a central feature of role theory. It is a story of how Ted became a fencer.

One of Ted’s undergraduate friends was Eliot Caplin, who was the brother of the man who at just that time was becoming famous as Al Capp, the creator of the comic strip, Li’l Abner. As it happened, Eliot Caplin was captain of the men’s fencing team at Ohio State. One day, he approached his friend Ted Sarbin with a crisis. One of his teammates had volunteered to demonstrate the technique of sabre fencing to the women’s fencing team. Alas, the teammate had fallen ill and would not be available. After some conversation, Eliot convinced Ted to take the position of his demonstration partner. They spent the afternoon at the gym, during which time, Ted was taught the basic ritual moves of sabre fencing — the salute, the initial posture, the basic techniques of thrust and parry. In order to protect Ted from the necessity of verbal explanations of technique, they contrived together the story that Ted was Italian — in fact, a fencing master from Rome — and spoke no English. In the evening, at the appointed time, the two men appeared in full costume before the women’s team — in the company of their female coach. They proceeded to go through their rehearsed performance with reasonable prowess and were not challenged. But at the conclusion of this performance, the woman fencing coach addressed Ted in perfect Italian, evidently expressing appreciation for his performance. Ted managed to get by with something like, “Prego,” and beat a hasty retreat. He said that at a subsequent meeting with this woman, she told him, “I knew that you were not a fencing champion, but I was convinced that you were Italian.”

Bold and unafraid, young Ted Sarbin early learned the practice of “Fake it until you make it,” —long before this phrase became popular. He also related a story of how he once visited a tennis court in Cleveland, dressed for tennis and carrying a racquet, but without knowing how to play. He says that an older gentlemen asked him if he was a tennis player, and if so, would he like to play. Ted readily assented. But after a rather embarrassing display of incompetence for 15 minutes or so, his partner terminated the session with this pronouncement: “If you are a
tennis player, then I am the King of Sweden.” Ted could then claim that he once played tennis with the King of Sweden.

Among other things, stories like this demonstrate a keen sense of humor as well as a rare social courage — both of which remained strongly in evidence throughout Ted’s long life.

**Minnesota years**

Ted married Anne Kochman, a social worker, in 1936, while still an undergraduate student in Ohio. He had known her in Cleveland before entering Ohio State and they had carried on a romance by correspondence. They moved to Minneapolis in 1938 and stayed there until 1941, when his doctoral dissertation was completed and his Ph.D. awarded by Ohio State. A son, Theodore R. Sarbin Jr., was born to Ted and Anne in 1940.

Ted worked full time in the student personal office at the University of Minnesota and managed to develop a dissertation topic that took advantage of his access to students and to university records. Clinical psychology was not a well-formed subfield of psychology in those years. State laws regulating the practice of clinical psychology did not come into being until the 1960s. The practice of psychotherapy at that time was largely the province of psychiatry — and clinical psychologists were often employed as administrators of psychological tests or as part of treatment teams in large mental hospitals, both private and public. Ted was later to work in such hospitals in Elgin, Illinois and again in Lincoln, Illinois. But he described his early formation as a psychologist in this way.

“In the early part of my career, I was trying to establish my identity as a scientifically oriented clinical psychologist “ (Sarbin, 2005, p.15). He wanted to be a clinical psychologist, in part, because he had been told that the doors of academia were generally closed to Jews. But he wanted to be “scientifically oriented” because he frankly did not have much respect for the ability of clinical psychologists to separate truth from fiction.

The research he did at Minnesota was a direct challenge to the authority and power of clinical psychology. He compared the accuracy of clinical vs. statistical means of prediction for academic achievement. He obtained information from student records of their high school rank in class and a measure of overall academic aptitude. From these independent variables, by means of a regression equation, he predicted university grade point averages for admitted students. Independently, for the same group of students, he obtained clinical predictions of these same averages from clinical psychologists who had access to a much wider range of predictive information, including clinical interviews. The result was in general that
Statistical predictions were at least as good as clinical predictions — and in some cases, clinical predictions were actually inferior to those produced statistically.

Ted published a number of articles describing this research (Sarbin, 1941, 1943) and later wrote a book, jointly with two students, on the general problem of Clinical Inference and Cognitive Theory (Sarbin, Taft & Bailey, 1961). Paul Meehl (1954) included extensive discussion of Sarbin's work in his text, Clinical vs. Statistical Prediction. This work received wide and positive notice in psychology, and established Ted Sarbin as the scientifically oriented clinician he wanted to be.

**Post-doctoral work at the University of Chicago**

After obtaining his Ph.D., Ted applied for and received a post-doctoral fellowship from the Social Science Research Council — initially for one year, but renewed for a second year. He chose to spend this period at the University of Chicago, where he divided his time between the department of sociology and the psychiatric branch of the medical school. He became part of treatment teams at nearby Elgin State Hospital during this period. Ernest Burgess, the distinguished urban sociologist, became his sponsor. George Herbert Mead (1863–1931), who obtained his Ph.D. in Psychology at Harvard under the direction of William James, spent most of his academic career in the Department of Sociology at the University of Chicago. The experience at Chicago was of critical importance in the development of Ted's psychological ideas; the influence of Mead was strong. He states this as follows:

> "Associating with faculty and graduate students in sociology, I became immersed in the works of George Herbert Mead. Although Mead had died a decade earlier, his influence on social theory and research was very much alive. In the psychiatric ward of the university hospital, I was given the kinds of responsibilities usually given to faculty members. Most of the staff subscribed to psychoanalytic doctrine, a perspective that was unconvincing to me. However, my clinical contacts with inpatients and outpatients provided me with opportunities to employ role conceptions to interpret their personal stories" (Sarbin, 2005, p. 17).

In the second year of his post-doctoral work, Ted elected to travel to New York in order to visit Jacob Moreno, who had just recently gained some fame as a dissident psychiatrist, the progenitor of psychodrama as theory and as practice. He visited Moreno at his newly established institute for psychodrama at Hastings-on-Hudson. He also visited Moreno in his New York office. They established a relationship that would last for many years. Ted became a member of the editorial board of Moreno’s journal, Sociometry, and later published two articles in that journal — both involving the use of psychodrama techniques in the treatment of patients.
with psychiatric disorders. He remained on the editorial board of the journal until 1950, when he began his teaching at the University of California at Berkeley.

In an article on the development of dramaturgy in American Psychology, Hevern makes this summary observation about the influence of Moreno on Sarbin’s life:

The attention Moreno gave Sarbin and his inclusion of Sarbin’s work in his journal set this newly minted Ph.D. into the company of a range of quite influential senior researchers and theoreticians in psychology and sociology. It also came at the point when Sarbin was deciding upon the direction of his professional work and at a time of significant changes in his own personal life (Hevern & Blatner, 2011, p. 12).

When Sarbin completed his postdoctoral work in Chicago, he took a job at a mental hospital in Lincoln, Illinois, about 150 miles southwest of Chicago. He was effectively the clinical director at the hospital, but stayed in the job for only six months. He found the experience entirely disagreeable — particularly the intrinsigence and lordly attitude of the psychiatric staff he encountered there. The 4000 patients at the facility were treated poorly, and were required to perform all sorts of menial duties for the doctors in their homes and offices. In a communication with Hevern, he reported that, “…most of the personnel were political appointees and resisted the changes I wanted to introduce.”

One story from this period illustrates how Ted was experimenting in his clinical practice and beginning to form theories and concepts that he would later bring to fruition in his research. He was working with patients who had the time were labeled “feeble-minded,” a category of mental deficiency that was in use until the 1940’s. These patients had trouble communicating and were kept in a special residence, requiring 24-hour care. Ted decided to try an experiment. He invited a few of the staff who played band instruments to form a band. To others he gave percussion and rhythm instruments. He conducted the newly formed band in John Phillip Sousa marches. He and the other staff were surprised as they witnessed how well the patients were engaged and able to concentrate and play competently. He recalled one particular uncommunicative patient who played the triangle bell. He would wait and count and hit the bell at just the right time at the end of a particular chorus. The staff and patients began to look forward to this bi-weekly activity and even performed a few concerts.

This experiment would foreshadow a number of themes in Ted’s development as a clinician and scholar. First, Ted was at root a humanist who noticed the unintended consequences of using science to diagnose mental deficiencies. He was unhappy with the label “feeble minded” and felt that it was a self-fulfilling constraint. In later years, Ted would write about the formative potential of social
science, how researchers and theorists wedded to positivism and behaviorism are helping to create the very world they assume they are documenting as real. His later work on role theory and the narrative is in many ways an attempt to escape from the constraints of mentalist labels and theories of behavioral determinism. He insisted, as this experiment would demonstrate, that humans be encouraged to refuse to comply with the implied limitations associated with scientific labels. Thus liberated, they can surprise us with creative activity. His work on schizophrenia is a devastating critique of the unintended consequences of categorizing patients with labels of mental deficiency (Sarbin & Mancuso, 1980). Secondly, Ted had an intuition that musical language is an embodied activity and that the best possible treatment for mental difficulties is initiating activity. This is a theme that becomes more prominent in his later work.

Pivotal years in Southern California

In 1944, the small family moved to Flintridge, near Los Angeles, where Ted opened a clinical practice, sharing an office with a dentist in Beverly Hills, and did some consulting with the Veterans Administration hospital in Los Angeles. But the marriage became difficult and soon he and Anne separated and then divorced, initially sharing joint custody of young Ted, but with Anne serving as the primary parent. Following the separation, Anne enrolled in a graduate program at the University of Southern California and received a Ph.D. in child psychology.

It was during this period that Ted developed a strong desire to obtain an academic appointment. He missed the colleagueship he had enjoyed at the University of Chicago. He taught as a visiting faculty member at Long Beach City College and at Los Angeles City College, all the while letting it be known that he was seeking a full-time academic position.

In this period, Ted met Genevieve Allen, also recently divorced and the mother of two sons, Jim and Ron, for whom she was the primary parent. They dated for several years — two attractive young people, both with children, one Jewish, one Catholic — from quite different socioeconomic backgrounds.

They were married in 1947. It turned out to be a marriage made in heaven, a love for the ages. Those of us who were privileged to know Ted and Genevieve throughout the many years of their lives together are unanimous in testifying that this is one of the most vital and committed marriages we have witnessed. Genevieve was a tall, stunningly beautiful strawberry blond — artistic, tanned and athletic. Ted was also a decent athlete — and became a competent tennis player despite his earlier experience with the King of Sweden. But he was distinctly an academic type, outgoing and gregarious to be sure — but decidedly bookish. They fit together like hand and glove — a model of connubial success.
The University of California at Berkeley: An academic home

A decision had been made to develop the program in clinical psychology at Berkeley. Ted Sarbin was not only an experienced clinician, having worked both in mental hospitals and in private practice, but he was also already a widely published author — with 27 articles in print at the time of his first academic appointment — including pioneering work on hypnosis and on clinical prediction. In 1949, he was called to Berkeley to interview for a one-year appointment and was offered the job. He remained at Berkeley for 20 years — continued to publish at a prodigious rate, and supervised more doctoral dissertations in psychology in this period than anyone else in the department.

Ted’s progress through the academic ranks at Berkeley paralleled his speed in earning his university degrees. He spent one year as Lecturer, one year as an Assistant Professor, five years as an Associate Professor, and was promoted to the rank of Professor in 1956, just seven years into his academic career. In most universities, seven years is the normal probationary period for an Assistant Professor.

Even though his basic views and theoretical orientation were to change away from the behaviorist-positivist orientation of his graduate training to a preference for contextualism, humanism, and the narratory principle, his ardor for fresh inquiry into fundamental psychological problems remained with him throughout his life.

While Ted came to Berkeley primarily as a clinician, he soon was to be identified as a social psychologist. One of the major events in this transformation derived from his being invited to contribute the chapter on Role Theory for Gardner Lindzey’s (Sarbin, 1954) authoritative edition of the Handbook of social psychology. Here is Ted’s own account of this event:

The narrative that supports my identity as a role theorist begins from a remote source. I read an article by Theodore Newcomb in 1947 in which he discussed the process of taking the role of the other. The contents of the article prompted me to write him a letter in which I pointed out certain features that were not consistent with G.H. Mead’s formulations. Newcomb saw attitude as prior to role, I argued that role was prior to attitude. A decade later, after I had had a number of collegial contacts with him, Newcomb told me that he had recommended to the editor of the Handbook that I be invited to write the chapter on role theory. … The story of my authorship of the role theory chapter in the widely used Handbook was an important validation for my identity development in that my name became associated with role theory (Sarbin, 2005, p. 20).

Newcomb told Ted that never before or since receiving his initial letter had anyone taken the trouble to send him a three-page, single-spaced letter in response to something he had written. From this unusual exercise in initiative, a significant
change in identity was realized. Within a short time, Ted Sarbin was referred to in the department and by psychologists everywhere as, “Mr. Role Theory.” It was a appellation that was to stick with him.

In 1957, Ted was appointed as chair of newly formed research group at Berkeley — the Center for Social Science Theory. It was an interdisciplinary group — including economists, sociologists, anthropologists, and psychologists. The sociologist in the group was Erving Goffman, just at the beginning of his academic career. Goffman’s (1959) seminal work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, was just about to be published in the United States. Many intense conversations with Goffman had a profound effect on Ted’s thinking — particularly about the social and contextual explanation of so-called abnormal conduct. Ted appreciated the importance of what Goffman described as “impression management” in ordinary life as well as in the breakdown of conduct that one observes in mental hospitals.2

The Sarbins were able to purchase a gracious home just north of the Berkeley campus. They were a family of five. Genevieve’s sons, Jim, age 15, and Ron, age 11 were joined by Ted, Jr., age 8. Ted, Jr., at that point in his life, left the home of his mother in Los Angeles and came to live permanently with the Sarbins in Berkeley.

In Ted’s first year of teaching at Berkeley, he had responsibility for a clinical training seminar. He took the bold step of holding the seminar in their home. As he observed, “The ambience of a family home appeared to bring out the best in the students” (Sarbin, 1994, p. 20). This marked the beginning of a practice that continued throughout his 20 years at Berkeley. Seminars were commonly held in the Sarbin home. Genevieve was always there in the background, ready to serve refreshments. It was homey and welcoming.

In 1960, Ted invited a group of students to meet weekly in their home for an informal seminar. Because the group commonly would convene at the Sarbin home on Tuesday mornings, they became known as the Tuesday Morning Group. This group became the focus of graduate student life for its members.3 The discussions ranged freely over a wide range of topics in psychology and related fields. Individuals used their colleagues to discuss their thesis problems. The group

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2. It is said that everyone who knew him has a favorite Goffman story — often highlighting Goffman’s distinctive manner of managing his own impression. Ted several times told a story of inviting Goffman to the Sarbin home for a dinner party. When Goffman arrived at the door and was shown in, he immediately asked to take a tour of the house — just to look around. But he asked that he be allowed to do this on his own, without the host or his wife as a guide. He was granted permission for the solitary tour.

3. The original members of the Tuesday Morning Group were Vernon Allen, Rolf Kroger, Karl Scheibe, Milton Anderson, Eldred Rutherford, Kenneth Craik, and Robert Sullivan. All received their Ph.D. in psychology at UC Berkeley. Karl Scheibe and Milton Anderson are the only two surviving members at this time.
generally met for about two hours per week, and was graciously served coffee by Genevieve before the crackling fireplace.

Whenever a member of the group would have a success, such as having a baby, passing oral examinations or having a thesis accepted, Genevieve would arrange a party to celebrate the occasion — to which wives were invited. Ted referred to these parties as “rites of intensification.” They certainly resulted in a strong bonding of the group members to each other and to Ted. This group continued to meet for over two years. These were not relationships that ended with graduation and departure from Berkeley. Ted maintained contact with all of the members of this original group for as long as life permitted. The first of the group to die was Vernon Allen, who had become a distinguished professor at the University of Wisconsin. Ted made several visit to Wisconsin after Vernon was diagnosed with cancer, and went again to comfort his widow, Patti, when he died, far too early, in 1986.

He recalled one story from his days at Berkeley advising doctoral students. He felt that too many of his students at Berkeley were accepting theories prima facie. He knew that accepting a theory prima facie was tantamount to laziness. He was suspicious of dogma and knew that dogma drives out curiosity. It’s hard to imagine how much independence it must have taken in the late 1930’s, when he was a graduate student, to avoid being enamored by Freudian theory. He said that he was suspicious of Freudian psychoanalysis because so many accepted it based on faith. “They’d give answers in empirical terms,” he said, “but they stated their analysis like it was theology, like it had to be accepted based on belief.”

He recalled how his students had been enamored of Jung’s conceptual schema including the notions of collective unconscious and archetypes. He wanted them to think for themselves, so one day he made reference to Jung’s concept of the super-conscious and when students expressed interest, he said he was surprised they had not heard of it. When a few of the students went to the library to learn more about the “super conscious,” they realized that he had made it up. Ted wanted them to be aware of their own gullibility and the temptation to buy into concepts and thereby stop searching.

During the course of 20 years at Berkeley, Ted had several experiences at other places that had a strong influence on his life. In 1962, he won a Senior Fulbright Fellowship, which took him to Nuffield College at Oxford. There, in the genteel atmosphere of Oxford, Ted found strong intellectual stimulation in conversations with his English colleagues — particularly Michael Argyle, a distinguished social psychologist. Now Ted saw his professional identity as a social psychologist, not just a clinician.

Also, a more profound change occurred with respect to the basic assumptions that he brought to psychology. He described it this way: “The period at Oxford was a turning point. I discarded the remnants of my earlier adherence to positivism
and I identified myself as a symbolic interactionist” (Sarbin, 1994, p. 22). The subsequent award of a Guggenheim Fellowship in 1965–66 allowed him to return to Oxford for yet another year of unencumbered intellectual exploration. This was soon followed by a year in 1968–69 at Wesleyan University’s Center for Advanced Studies — where he continued his exposure to a range of academic disciplines outside of psychology, particularly with the Pulitzer Prize winning novelist, Paul Horgan, and the philosopher, Phillp Hallie.

The move to Santa Cruz

The year at Wesleyan also brought to the fore a certain restlessness in Ted’s professional life. Ted and Genevieve lived in a comfortable house near the Wesleyan campus for the year and he truly enjoyed the collegial life he had with colleagues — most of them not psychologists, but scholars in the humanities. One of us (KS) was at the time a member of the psychology department at Wesleyan, and Ted let it be known that he might be amenable to a job offer from Wesleyan. He and Genevieve liked the social atmosphere of Connecticut and began to think of purchasing a suitable property there. The offer from Wesleyan was well on its way to coming through when another offer was presented to Ted that won him away.4 Here is his commentary about this move:

In the fall of 1969, rather than return to the Berkeley campus, I accepted an invitation to join the faculty at the recently established Santa Cruz campus of the University of California. The transfer to the Santa Cruz campus was not capricious. When I first came to Berkeley, the psychology department was a community of scholars. Interactions with faculty were frequent and rewarding. Over the years, the department added more and more personnel. The frequency of interaction tapered off. Berkeley had become a large and impersonal workplace. Each of the 50 faculty members of the department was a specialist and intellectual interaction was quite limited. Furthermore, most of the faculty members directed their energies to their own research and the teaching and supervising of graduate students. Teaching undergraduates had a low priority. … I was fortunate in being able to modulate the effects of this intellectual isolation. Two non-psychologists with whom I had collegial relations at Berkeley were the late Henry Nash Smith

4. Here is an account, from his son, Ted, of the decision point for the job offer from Wesleyan. “When he was in Connecticut he was walking Pierre, the French poodle that they had adopted. The day was cold and there was snow and ice on the sidewalk. Pierre pulled on the leash towards the back and Ted slipped and fell on his back. While in that position, looking up at the gray sky, he decided to accept the position at Santa Cruz. A man in a car saw him fall and stopped to help him get up. He wasn’t injured in the fall, but knew better where he was heading.”
and Marvin Rosenberg. Smith, a distinguished Professor of American Literature and one-time curator of the Mark Twain papers, was a fount of information on the humanities. We discussed many topics, including the psychological analysis of novelistic figures. Even after I moved to Santa Cruz, we had occasional correspondence about his or my papers in preparation. Rosenberg was a Professor of Dramatic Arts, a Shakespeare scholar, with whom I continue to share ideas about dramaturgy and narrative. It is noteworthy that these collegial relations were initially nurtured, not at the Faculty Club, not in committees, but on the fairways of Tilden Park Golf Course (Sarbin, 1994, p. 27).

This passage is revealing in several ways. The heading that precedes it is this: The Santa Cruz Adventure. It is as if Ted became bored with the tedium of working in a large department of psychologists who all seemed to keep their heads down, their vision narrowed. The two people he came to value in the latter part of his career in Berkeley were both literary types — encouraging discussions of psychology as it might relate to works of drama and fiction. The mention of golf is also significant — for Ted became an avid golfer at Berkeley and remained so until he was in his 90’s. (He once reported with pride that he had “shot his age” when he was about 88.)

One major advantage of the Sarbins moving to Santa Cruz rather than to Connecticut was that Ted could remain in the University of California system. All of his annuities were vested there, and his established record in the system was transferred to Santa Cruz, where he was soon named a University Professor of Psychology and Criminology. Another advantage is that Santa Cruz is located near Carmel, California on the Monterey peninsula. This charming, upscale town had long been an attraction to the Sarbins — and they already owned a retreat home there. When they moved to Santa Cruz, they became preceptors in a dormitory on the campus, where they took pleasure in being known as Mr. and Mrs. Chips — after the famous Ronald Colman role in the 1939 movie, Goodbye Mr. Chips. This living arrangement allowed them to purchase a larger home in Carmel where they could live in comfort before and after retirement — with plenty of golf courses nearby.

Style of life was of high importance to the Sarbins. Ted’s modest beginnings were in no way evident in his mature years. Genevieve was to the manor born — and was a full partner with Ted in cultivating a genteel manner of living.

Ted was an active faculty member at Santa Cruz for seven years. During this period he taught several graduate students — an activity he engaged in with great dedication. He was also a teacher and role model for undergraduate students. His creative work of scholarship continued unabated — and continued long after his retirement.
Retirement as an opportunity to start anew

Ted retired from active teaching at Santa Cruz in 1976, at age 65 — very much at the height of his powers. Thereafter, he was invited to teach an occasional seminar at Santa Cruz. In 1979, Ted was invited to join the faculty of the Naval Postgraduate School in Monterey as a part-time Adjunct Professor. This led in 1987 to an opportunity to join the Defense Personnel Security and Education Center (PERSEREC, a research branch of the U.S. Navy) as a Research Psychologist. These appointments led to the development of important new personal and professional relationships, most notably with Frank Barrett at the Naval Postgraduate School and with Ralph Carney, a former graduate student at Santa Cruz, now at PERSEREC.

His research position at PERSEREC was always part-time — entailing a couple of trips each week from Carmel to Monterey. He valued the collegial atmosphere at PERSEREC and was much valued by his colleagues there. He became involved in a variety of projects — most conspicuously on problems of national security. He helped to organize a symposium on “Trust and Betrayal” — resulting in a book of essays entitled *Citizen Espionage*, of which he was senior editor (Sarbin, Carney, and Eoyang, 1994). He also conducted an extensive study of the question of the extent to which homosexuality among members of the armed services posed a security threat. His conclusion, after extensive analysis of all the available studies, was that there was no evidence that the incidence of security breaches was any greater among homosexual service personnel than it was among others. This work gained significance and importance as the political question of how to treat homosexuality in the armed services became a hot topic in the years of the administration of President Clinton.

Ted observed the custom of listing his professional publications in sequential order in his *vita*. When he retired in 1976, his publications numbered 135. When he died in 2005, his publication list finally topped out at 265. In the last 30 years of his life his publications almost equaled in number those published in the first 39 years of his professional life. At his retirement dinner and party in 1976, Vernon Allen suggested to Karl Scheibe that they undertake the project of gathering a selection of Ted’s published work into a single volume. This idea led eventually to the publication of *The Social Context of Conduct* (Allen & Scheibe, 1984). Little did they know at the time that Ted was only about half-way through his writing and publishing career. Suffice it to say here that while one may observe continuity between the first half and the second half of his writings as a psychologist, the more recent work can be seen as an efflorescence of earlier themes — assured, fresh, and bold.

Ted continued for some years to maintain his licensure as a clinical psychologist and saw a few clients in his home. His regimen also included regular golf
matches with colleagues and often tennis with Genevieve and friends as well. He took pride in his cooking, and often would prepare imaginative gourmet meals in their Carmel kitchen, to the delight of friends and family. Both of Genevieve’s sons married and took up residence in California — Jim in Marin County and Ron in Monterey. Ted Jr. lived in Reno, Nevada and was a frequent visitor.

The Sarbins’ lifestyle in the post-retirement years was intensely social — with frequent visits with friends and family, including some colleagues from Berkeley who had also moved south to Monterey and Carmel. They also retained friends in the San Francisco Bay area and would make trips to visit them. Each year also normally included a European trip — to Italy, Switzerland, or England, to Sedona, Arizona, and necessarily, attendance at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association.

Gatherings of Sarbinites at the APA

From about 1970 onward, Ted would make a point of organizing a dinner for colleagues at the annual meeting of APA, held in late summer. Former students would be invited, with spouses. Other close psychology colleagues from other schools would be invited. Space would be reserved at one of the host hotels, and the dinner, preceded by cocktails would be scheduled, typically on a Friday evening. These gatherings came to be known as Role Theory Dinners — and one of their common features included the naming of that year’s Role Theorist of the Year. One requirement of receiving this award was that the recipient had to be present at the dinner. Ted referred to the careful deliberations of the selection committee in making the award, while everyone in the room knew that the committee consisted of him alone, perhaps in consultation with Genevieve.

Ted’s after-dinner speech always included a recognition exercise, in which he would proceed around the room to name, one-by-one, every person present. Attendance would vary between 12 and 50 — with a typical dinner including 30 people. Not only would he name the person, but he would say a few words — detailing an accomplishment or telling a brief story about that person — with no exceptions. He never used notes for this exercise — and it was something of a marvel to see him succeed at this task, which he obviously relished, year after year. And it had the additional effect of bringing the entire group together.

The first Role Theory Dinner took place in August, 1965, not at a meeting of APA, but at the Claremont Hotel in Berkeley. In that summer, a number of the former members of the Tuesday Morning Group happened to be present in Berkeley. The dinner at the Claremont featured the naming of the first Role Theorist of the Year, Vernon Allen, who had just recently been appointed to the faculty at the
University of Wisconsin. Another feature of this dinner was an attempt by Vernon to pay the bill for the evening dinner by presenting the waiter with a check carefully made out for the sum of $1,000,000, initially presented to him by Ted as the prize for being Role Theorist of the Year. It was, in all, an evening marked by hilarity and good spirits. Before sitting down to dinner, the couples in the group had the pleasure of dancing to the music of Count Basie, who was playing at the Claremont. Genevieve managed to dance with most of Ted’s students, as well as with the master of ceremonies.

Over the course of the 40 years between this event and Ted’s death in 2005, an estimated 35 years featured a Role Theory Dinner — providing an opportunity for all of Ted’s most faithful students, and a number of others as well, to be named Role Theorist of the Year. Each year, a small engraved trophy was presented to the recipient (it would be ceremoniously removed from a purple Chivas Regal velvet bag). In the late 1980’s, previous winners got together and contrived to have a trophy engraved and presented to Genevieve — inscribed to “Mrs. Role Theory.”

The last Role Theory Dinner occurred in August, 2005, just weeks before Ted’s death in Carmel. The scene was the 2005 meeting of APA, to which reference has already been made in the beginning of this article. Present were 62 guests — in the dining room of the DC Coast restaurant in Washington. Once again, Ted proceeded to name and offer comments about each and every one of the guests present — aided, on this occasion by his companion, Karin Sobeck. Instead of naming a Role Theorist of the Year, Ted had the responsibility of naming the first recipient of the Sarbin Prize, an award that had just been established by APA’s Division 24 (The Society of Theoretical and Philosophical Psychology) in Ted’s honor. The first recipient was Jefferson Singer, Professor of Psychology at Connecticut College. Singer was not a student of Sarbin’s — but had made significant contributions to the development of narrative psychology, particular in the conceptualization and treatment of psychopathology. This prize has subsequently been awarded each year by Division 24. It was a gala occasion — and everyone in the room knew it would be Ted’s last Role Theory Dinner.

The death of Genevieve and the end of a beautiful marriage

Beginning in the mid-1990’s, Genevieve was diagnosed with breast cancer. Eventually, the cancer was to spread. On Friday, January 9, 1998, she finally succumbed to the illness. She was a proud and vigorous woman all of her life. When the end finally came, she accepted her fate with dignity. Ted was brokenhearted. Shortly after Genevieve’s death, Karl Scheibe flew out to California just to spend some time with him. They took long walks together in Carmel, on trails
overlooking the ocean — familiar scenes for Ted and Genevieve. Ted cried copiously and without shame. He was deeply grieved. But he knew how to deal with grief — to go through it rather than to deny it or go around it. He emerged a few months later with the lasting scars of sadness, but with no regrets and also with renewed energy for his own future.

Ted continued to live in the same house that he and Genevieve had occupied for many years. Genevieve was an accomplished artist — and many of her paintings adorned the walls of rooms in the house. Ted did not remove them but exhibited them with pride to visitors.

The loss of Genevieve was the greatest blow Ted ever suffered in his life. They were married just short of 50 years, and during that entire time Ted averred that they had never been separated for more than two consecutive nights. Theirs was a rare love — one that radiated assurance and joy — an inspiration for all who knew them. In our times, such successful marriages are not common.

Moving on

After Genevieve’s death, Ted was lonely and sad. His friends and family were loving and supportive, but no one could fill the need for intimacy after Genevieve’s death. Throughout his life, Ted had enjoyed light-hearted and flirty friendships with women. His attention and genuine care was something women found attractive. Fortunately, he and Genevieve had a friend, Karin Sobeck, who would come to be a partner for Ted in his last years.

Karin Sobeck is a woman who knew Ted and Genevieve well. They met in connection with the activities of the hospice unit at the hospital in Carmel, later to be integrated with the Hospice Foundation with headquarters in Monterey. Karin was a nurse who worked in intensive care and later with organ transplants. She met the Sarbins in 1979 — and often had been a guest in their home as well as participating with them in hospice events and fundraising activities.

Three years after Genevieve’s death, in 2001, Ted and Karin fell in love. They were separated in age by some 40 years, but that did not seem to matter to either of them. Karin maintained her own home in Carmel until after Ted died. They never married nor did they live together — though they much enjoyed travelling together — particularly to Italy. The relationship with Karin was constant and full — a source of comfort, satisfaction and happiness for both of them. They began to date in 2001, and soon established a bond that would last for the final four years of Ted’s life.

During those years, Karin would accompany Ted to annual meetings of APA. Soon she came to know the regular crowd of Role Theorists — Ted’s students. She
Karl E. Scheibe and Frank J. Barrett

seemed to fit in beautifully. It was evident that she provided Ted with much needed companionship, care, and pleasure — and it was entirely reciprocal.

Karin’s presence in Ted’s life was received with at least a certain bemusement among his family and friends. At a celebratory dinner held in 2004, Karin’s mother was present. In his after-dinner remarks, Ted recalled being asked by Karin’s mother about his intentions with respect to her daughter. Ted reported responding in this way. “I can assure you, Ma’am, that my intentions toward your daughter are thoroughly dishonorable.” It was evident that he had no reservations whatsoever about the propriety of this May-December relationship — and his good-humored invitation to others was simply to accept it. Indeed, it was relatively easy to accept for Ted’s family and friends, for Ted and Karin obviously enjoyed each other’s company.

An idyll in Tuscany

In the spring of 2004, Ted and Karin organized a trip to Italy — to the village of Tavernella, in Tuscany — just south of Florence, north of Sienna. They invited four couples to join them for a week in a villa for which they had already made arrangements. The four couples were: Ralph and Caroline Carney, Frank and Madeleine Barrett, Ki-Taek and Misoon Chun, and Karl and Wendy Scheibe. This group assembled at the villa on June 19, 2004 and remained until June 26.

The couples took turns preparing the evening meals at the villa. Ted and Karin arrived first and prepared the initial dinner. Days were occupied in excursions to nearby towns and villages — Volterra, Siena, Monte Figgione, San Gimignano. Much wine was consumed — and perfect al fresco luncheons were improvised in wooded retreats in Chianti wine country. The villa had a swimming pool which was much used. The major feature of each day was the evening meal — followed by prolonged and animated conversations around the table. Ted was encouraged to tell stories of his youth and later life — and willingly complied. But the conversation ranged over vast territories of shared experiences — and all were included. The group also played board games — good fun.

Near the end of their stay, the group performed a collective reading of the play, Metamorphoses, by Mary Zimmerman. This play is based upon Ovid’s fables. It has exactly ten characters — matching the number of actors at the villa. While there was no audience beyond the company of actors, all agreed that the reading was a resounding success. What could be more appropriate for a bunch of role theorists?

Panache. Among Ted’s favorite fictional characters is Cyrano de Bergerac. The play by Rostand begins with Cyrano interrupting a theatrical performance that he
considers to be worthless, and in compensation throwing onto the stage a bag of coins — all the money he has. It is a gesture of panache, something unanticipated and spectacular that comes at a cost to the donor but to the benefit of a larger company. Ted displayed such a gesture on the second evening of the stay at the villa. The initial agreement among members of the group was that the cost of renting the villa would be shared equally by the five couples. This was the firm plan. When one of the members of the group asked Ted what the charges were so that a check might be written, he responded by saying, “It is all taken care of.” Later, at dinner that evening, the member of the group who had received this reply to his offer told the story to the whole company. There was much initial protest — “No, we insist on paying!” etc. But Ted calmly stood his ground — saying that it was his pleasure to pay the entire bill — that he was old, would not have opportunities like this in the future, and concluded by suggesting that another little bite in his inheritance would not be noticed by “Little Albert” — a mythical offspring to be sure, but a stand-in for those who would shortly be dividing up the patrimony. The group relented from its pleadings — and graciously acknowledged that which had been graciously offered. It was a true instance of panache.

Is there ever a time of absolute perfection in our lives? Sometimes, the ambient pains, the confusions, the stumbles, the lapses, the mistaken words, the sense of fatigue — all are forgotten in the overwhelming atmosphere of deep friendship, a beautiful setting, a sense of genuine joy in company with familiar people — converging for a week set apart from the ordinary pathways of life. The week in Tavernelle was such a time. When in later times any of us have met and referred back to that time, it is with a sense of awe and gratitude for the magic of it all. The memory is like a perfect and imperishable jewel — even as the various members of that original party of ten divide to their separate pathways.

**Living to the limit (including the final days)**

It is meaningful to have the objective of living until the moment of death. For it is entirely possible to give up on living long before the physical advent of death — and depending upon the circumstances of illness and decay, this gradual course can be inevitable. But in the case of Ted Sarbin, it can truly be said that he lived until he died.

In June, a few months after returning from the idyll in Tuscany, Ted fell and broke his hip. A few weeks later he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. His remark to Karin on learning of his diagnosis was, “I’ve got a lot of work to do.” Indeed, he had half a dozen papers in various states of completion, and he managed before he died to complete them all. He reported his response to his oncologist
when he learned of his diagnosis as this: “I didn’t think I was immortal.” But we, his students and friends, had come to think of him as immortal. It took us all some time to adjust to his absence. It was not just a sadness; it was also something like bewilderment. As Ralph Carney queried at a gathering of former students after his death, “What do we do now?”

Even in this physically failing state, Ted’s spirits seemed to soar. He retained his impish sense of humor. Two days after he fell and broke his hip and one month before his cancer diagnosis, he needed to go to the doctor. He was in pain and had a very difficult time walking, even with a walker. Two of us had to help him out of bed and it took an interminable time to walk him down the hallway to the front door and we were quite nervous about getting him down the stairs. Just as we were on the front porch the phone rang. We froze and neither of us moved for a moment. The phone kept ringing and then finally Ted broke the silence when he said: “That’s Harvard calling. Tell them they’re too late.”

The last several weeks of Ted’s life

Ted wrote that our lives become credible to us and to others through narrative structures. We actively emplot our lives, live imagined stories, create lives that have unity and purpose through narrative resources. But we cannot do it alone. We depend upon others to legitimize our stories. In the last few months of Ted’s life, so many themes that he had developed came to life.

Ted thought that one benefit of emphasizing narrative as the central metaphor for life, was the possibility of inviting enchantment back into the world, not likely when we think of the human person as acting out of internal forces (mentalism) or external stimuli (behaviorism). In his last few months, especially after the diagnosis of terminal cancer, Ted’s home was filled with family and friends telling stories, sharing memories. It was a time of laughter and gratitude — indeed a period of enchantment. Over the last three months of his life his home became a locus for daily gatherings — lunches, dinners, conversations — with an array of friends and family actively remembering, laughing, and telling stories.

Ted would occasionally tire and need to rest for short periods, but soon he would return to the group and encourage people to return the next day for more reminiscing and storytelling. Ted recalled stories about his father and mother, his siblings, his earliest days as a scholar, his time as a hobo, his beloved students, his numerous friends over the years. And in this context Ted talked repeatedly about how moved he was to have had such friends. His talk frequently turned to friendships and memories of friends departed.
He refused to accept any statistic as an easy or final answer. After he heard of his cancer diagnosis and the negative prospects, he soon found an article by Stephen Jay Gould that debunked belief in statistics that predict survivability. The average means nothing he said. It only means that there’s a cluster of people who live that long. Every case is unique. Stephen Jay Gould lived 20 years beyond the period he was predicted to succumb from terminal disease. Ted said, “Why can’t I be one of the outliers who lasts 12 more years?” Many of us believed him.

Some people have end-of-life instructions that request that no extra efforts be made to resuscitate. Ted made a prominent sign posted on the refrigerator directed to emergency responders that gave a directive: In case he should fall into unconsciousness and is unresponsive, if there is any chance that he could be revived, they were to make all efforts to do so. His fervor for life inspired us all.

In his study he had a list of nine writing projects that were in progress and a list of six new research projects he wanted to begin — including the social construction of adolescence and the aesthetics of spirituality. In fact Ted was reluctant to assume the role of a person who is dying. At one point he said wistfully, “It seems that I’ve been thrust in the role of the moribund person.” He did not like that role and in fact continued to work on articles for a few hours each day. He continued to work on his final collection of papers until the end. He refused to take any pain killers stronger than Tylenol so that his mental faculties would be alert.

Finally, in the last few days, his energy waned and he drifted off to sleep more often. What turned out to be his less than 24 hours before his death, he was half drifting off to sleep and suddenly raised a fist and said “Will power! Let’s get back to work.” On the morning of the last day of his life he returned to his study and put the finishing touches on his last journal article.

Anyone who has been to Ted’s study could have seen immediately the importance of friendship in his life. His Wall of Fame held pictures of many of his friends over the years; he once said that when he would sit at his desk writing, his friends were looking over his shoulder. At his memorial service, many of his friends in attendance were decades younger than he. Most people at this stage of their lives have lost most of their friends. Ted had lost many friends too, but he never stopped making new friends; and he never stopped investing in his existing friendships. In particular he spoke often of the importance of reciprocity.

One week before he died, he asked one of us (FB) to bring him a copy of the C.S. Lewis book, *Four Loves*. There is an essay on friendship in that book and Ted had been thinking of his own friends. “Friendship,” he said, citing C.S. Lewis, “is the primary form of love.” All other relationships, including romantic and intimate relationships are secondary to friendship. Lovers, he said are face to face; friends stand side-by-side searching for the truth. He valued his friends; for him, the line
between friends and family was indistinguishable. FB asked him a few weeks before he passed if he was afraid of death. He said, “No, but I’ll miss my friends. I know that’s ridiculous because I won’t be here to miss them. I worry about what effect my death will have on my friends.”

In his last week, several of his friends wrote letters and emails recalling favorite memories. One of us would sit at his bedside and read these to him. He was very moved and sometimes moved to tears.

As mentioned previously, among his favorite novels was Cervantes’ *Don Quixote*. So in his final weeks, when Ted was spending more time in bed, his friends would sit at his bed side and take turns reading Don Quixote aloud to him. His joy was palpable. He laughed at the Don’s various exploits, corrected mispronounced words, and then would slowly drift off to sleep. The next morning he would recall episodes, the imaginings.

Two weeks before he died he had a dream about two of his married friends who were facing a difficult choice and in his dream he had imagined that they had negotiated a creative resolution that would nurture their love for one another. The next morning when he awoke he made it a point to call them both and tell them about it and how vivid it was and how he imagined them together.

Two nights before he died, several of his family and friends, including two of his grandchildren, gathered at the bottom of his bed and sang “The Impossible Dream” to him. All of us were moved. He began to sob. In the Jewish tradition, an important ritual acknowledges that the youngest person in the room has a very important role. This is the role of the naïve questioner, the one who wonders why this night is unlike other nights, the one whose memory will be affected so that he or she can carry on an essential identity narrative to future generations. True to his tradition, amidst sobs, Ted turned to his 25-year-old granddaughter and said: “This is for you Chelsea. You are creating memories.”

With the passage of time, it is possible to discern with clarity the major themes in Ted Sarbin’s life. Like the fictional life of Don Quixote, the legendary creation of Cervantes imagination, Ted’s life was an adventure — from beginning to end. What were its themes?5

*Engagement:* Ted held the radical idea that human experience has no meaning for the individual alone — that Defoe had to give Robinson Crusoe his man, Friday, in order for there to be a sustainable human story. In a chapter he wrote near the end of his life, he told the story of his professional development and activities. It is a story of successive engagements with professors, colleagues, friends, and students. He took the time to list the most important professional collaborations of his life — from his graduate student days to the present. In making the point

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5. (empty footnote, no text in source document!)
that identity unfolds in dialog with others, he mentioned 48 people with whom he shared and exchanged ideas most intensively in the course of his professional life (see Sarbin, 2005). Those of us who were fortunate enough to be his partners were ourselves sustained, nurtured in our own ability to think and write productively about the mysteries of human life. One cannot engage life alone. Our humanity is inherently social.

**Independence:** If one were to read just his published work, with no knowledge of the man, one would be struck by the intellectual power, but one would also think of a person who is nonconforming and even contentious. He made a life work of challenging established ways of thinking within psychology — whether it was about the sagacity of the clinician, the nature of hypnosis, the reality of mental illness, or the tendency of psychologists to act as if human beings were mere machines. He described his professional posture as ‘oppositional and non-conforming’. And yet everyone who knew him came away impressed with his consistent equanimity, his gentle manner, his ability to listen, his patience, tolerance and good humor, combined with rigorous intellectual standards. He put it this way: “My oppositional behavior, my taking positions on the margins, was a way of demonstrating that the traditional frameworks — with which I identified those who excluded me — were unproductive and not useful for the psychology of human action.” Without rancor, but with telling effect, he made it a life work to attack ‘traditional frameworks’ that give tacit support to social injustice.

**Caring:** On the last day of his life, Ted’s sister, Ruth, came from Ohio to visit her brother in Carmel. They had remained close over their many years — with Ted often joining his sister in Cleveland for the annual celebration of Seder, the one manifestation of his Jewish identity that he maintained. She was 90 years old and a person with the same fundamental qualities as her brother. She spoke of their humble origins, of the difficulties of mere survival for the Sarbin family of eight, making do on the meager income of Samuel Sarbin. She spoke of Ted getting a job as soon as he could, in order to make his contribution to the family’s survival. It is said that the capacity to care depends on being cared for — and one could see at once this symmetry in Ted’s life. His relationship with Genevieve, over the 50 years of their marriage, stands as a testimony to the possibility of marriage working beautifully, the realization of love. Later, to behold Ted and Karin together was to witness a rare and proud example of the joy of love — entirely blind to age. Suffice it to say here that he was a romantic and that relationships were supremely important to him, even though they entailed the risk of loss.

**Abundance:** For the reading of the Mary Zimmerman play, *Metamorphoses*, Ted happened to be assigned the role of Erysichthon, to whom nothing was sacred. This is not a case of good character alignment, for Erysichthon was as greedy and shortsighted as Ted was generous and visionary. Even so, some of the lines
fit — particularly the refrain, “More, more — I want more!” — and the rest of the company had a good deal of fun with Ted’s evident relish for this line. Indeed, he wanted more — always more. He wasn’t content to die — you may be sure. Here is a scene: It was late afternoon on the last day of his life. He was on his bed, with Karin beside him, half a dozen others in the room. He asked to hear again the Adagio movement of Beethoven’s 9th symphony. Someone started the music by means of the remote control for the CD player on his bed stand. He motioned with his hand to increase the volume, which was done. His hand swayed in time with the slow, Adagio rhythm — but soon he wanted more volume. Someone went in search of his hearing aid, found and installed it. Still he wanted the volume higher. Not a sound in the room, save Beethoven. Ted motioned with his hand for more, still more. It is a soft movement, but it was playing at full volume. And then it was over. There was no continuation to the famous 4th movement, the chorale, the setting of Schiller’s *Ode to Joy*. It was joy enough for all to witness, in these final and failing moments, this dear man’s passion for more and yet more of beauty, of art, of life.

As noted, Ted had no illusions about his own immorality. Even so, a common response from those around him was, “But we thought you were immortal.” Indeed, we did. So solidly grounded was Ted Sarbin, so thoroughly present in our lives — even though we might live thousands of miles away from him — so steady and constant in his gentle knowing, his caring, his concern, so generous with his affection, so lively and responsive his mind — that we, his younger friends, came to depend upon him, not allowing the thought that this living pole for grounding our own lives might actually perish. He was not immortal after all, as he was quick to recognize. But his legacy to us is timeless, if not immortal. His legacy is a demonstration of how it is possible to live a life of dignity and decency, full of friendship and love for our companions on the road and in our homes, a life dedicated to the questioning of traditional frameworks, and a life that makes a lasting contribution to the reduction of social injustice and of human suffering.

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**References**


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