



THE  
**BIG**  
**STORY**  
FALLS APART

**Glenn Martin**

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*Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace*

*The Little Book of Ethics.*

*The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived  
experience of the I Ching*

*Sustenance*

*To the Bush and Back to Business*

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# THE BIG STORY FALLS APART

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## Author's Foreword

All of my books are about values, both the non-fiction books and the “fictional” ones.

This book is the fourth I have written as a National Novel Writing Month (Nano Wrimo) project. There are only two rules in Nano Wrimo: write a novel of at least 50,000 words, and write it in one month (the thirty days of November). Each time I have done it I have brought nothing. It is a matter of turning up at the computer on the first of November and seeing what transpires.

It is the opposite of what I do most of the time. My other writing work is planned and constructed.

One way or another, all of my work is about values and ethics. Over time I have formulated a framework of ideas about ethics, based on five core human values, that I think is useful. It makes sense of experience for me and it frames my thinking about people and situations. This is theory, if you will.

But the framework rose out of my experiences, not just my reading and reflection, and at a certain point I knew I should talk about my experiences. At the beginning and at the end, life is story, not merely a suite of shining concepts. So, fortuitously, I entered the Nano Wrimo river, and once you enter, you can only keep swimming until you reach the other shore.

I told a story, and it put flesh on the bones of my ideas.

It has become deeper in my subsequent Nano Wrimo ventures. The first two times there were particular episodes whose story needed to be told. But the third time, no such convenient scaffold was offered. This time, once I had entered the story space, I came to learn that I had to make my own way forwards, without being able to see very far at all. The first two times, the whole story hovered above my head, just needing me to pay attention and pull it out of that cloud.

The third time I had to watch the ground in front of my feet. There was no distant marker in sight. Only when I had taken one step

did the next step become clear. It was in that way that I painted the whole picture, filling in pieces, exploring, holding a sense of what the whole picture might be.

And now, the fourth time, “the big story falls apart”. In writing it, the theme was the one thing that was evident early on, by about Day 5. There was, to start with, the story of my disenchantment in my early adult years. I wanted to tell that story. It was the turbulent, iconoclastic time of the early seventies and I was embroiled.

As John Lennon said, “My role in society, or any artist’s or poet’s role, is to try and express what we all feel. Not as a preacher, not as a leader, but as a reflection of us all.”

Understood. Accepted. So I was prepared to write the story of the big story that falls apart. But gradually, as I kept writing, I came to see that the story kept going. Indeed, it has kept going continuously, and I can understand my life in terms of my changing orientation towards the big story. What makes sense? What has value? It is the same questions, the same quest.

The issue of value (I read from Madeleine Grumet\*), “summons us to consider the concrete, visceral, motivated interest we have in what goes on”. It’s not ideas on their own that are important, it’s how they are enticed out of or wrested from our experience. Our understanding of, and our feeling for, life, are inherently embedded in our bodies, our surroundings, and our entanglements with people.

Madeleine says it this way: “Our stories are poorly insulated structures. All kinds of creatures creep in and find refuge under the eaves, building nests in the attics and basement cupboards.”

And so you will find here. The big story fell apart, at moments and in places. The continuities failed. But there were threads, even as the threads unravelled, and there were little stories that continued to happen, and omen birds that sat in trees at night. I articulated those stories, I gathered them and carried them with me. This was my work.

Madeleine Grumet has this to say of this kind of work: “Although our work cannot control the future, it can help us to think

about the meaning of our past. That, in effect, changes the past and then, necessarily, the future too, though not in ways we can describe or predict.”

Tell me there is method in this, because the days now seem to be singing and full of joy.

\* From a chapter in the book, *The paradigm dialog*, edited by Egon Guba (Sage, Newbury Park CA, 1990). Madeleine Grumet’s chapter is called “Show-and-tell: A response to the value issue in alternative paradigms for inquiry”, pp. 333-342. My line of inquiry is idiosyncratic and fed by the fortuitous. I spied this book at a book fair, and purchased it for three dollars. I have gleaned much from it, particularly Madeleine’s chapter.



## Part 1: Disintegration

This is safe space. No one comes here. It's not the country, but there is the anonymity of a suburb, streets and endless houses, each one looking different but only as permutations nuance a theme. When you arrive there is a long driveway, and a tall fence that seems to discourage intrusion.

That is where the writing room is, behind the wall, looking out onto the garden. You might think it would be easy, to gather thoughts here and write. I have certainly collected a bounty of the thoughts of others to prompt, remind and entice me to articulate my own story. The walls are lined high with books, the fruit of an eager questing for ideas and the experiences of others who have written.

Years. But nothing matters unless it comes, somehow, to matter. There need not be a story. Perhaps there have already been too many. Perhaps the problem is that we have forgotten the old stories.

But of course I don't believe this. I grew up on old stories, and they kept us in our place while we were growing up. There was the story of what your place was in life, what was acceptable, and what not to think about. I kept open the possibility of older stories that might be deeper and wiser, but I found only moments in poetry and occasional fantasy novels.

The stories are unwinding. The stories are contesting with each other, they are vociferous. But even as they contend, the stories are beginning to lack conviction in the telling. The stories come and go, and mostly, they go quickly. They are set aside and people go about their business, going to work, playing their part in the social fabric, filling up on television, suffering depression and taking valium.

Everything is okay, I say, reminding myself. Everything is exactly as it needs to be right now. Because everything evolves, or at

least, it can – it has the capacity. Behind my fence I have planted a new lawn. At first there was bare soil, brown, and now it is an expanse of rich green, still somewhat patchy in parts, but bright, lush, verdant and deepening. The mystery of the alchemy of earth and water and sunshine. This is still a true story.

I know there is constant passage between order and disorder. There is loss and gain and they dissolve into each other in turn. When things fall apart we look again, for cause and alternative. Some of us direct our wrath at others. Some of us simply lose heart.

Where did this start? Always with a story. Being four, and my parents moving to a new home. We had lived in an old settled suburb, near to a busy road. The sound of cars was constant, it was a drone in the background, and the busy-ness was ever-present. On the street there was always someone walking, or a dog, or a conversation at a distance. In the new home there was silence and bush. We lived in a little, thin-walled cottage, rough-built, with bush all around and no neighbours close by. At night it got dark and the only sounds were night sounds, crickets in the summer, a bird. Stars twinkling.

Which meant that growing up was about this bush-filled space getting cleared and replaced with houses – stocked, you might say. It was enthusiastic, cheerful and relentless. When you are young you absorb such things, but part of you, a deeper, inarticulate part, may resist. That part of me was cringing.

Outwardly I played out social roles. Allotted. School, church, sport, scouting. Active, aligned, and with acquired competence. But growing up meant choices I was not ready for. And things fell apart. The leaders of the scouting group left, and we were left, disbanded. My father died one weekend without warning, in my final year of high school. Of course you carry on, you continue to do what's in front of you. You say, "There is still that".

I went to university and hated the course, but endured it even so for two years. So hard to extricate, so hard to say I was wrong, and harder still to decide what else I should do, and then believe in it. I

chose again, and it was a desperate choice – I couldn't see a path to where I wanted to be, just a stop-gap measure. My second university had embraced the ferment of the time and decided that all roles should be subject to upheaval. My humble efforts to apply myself to my new choice of learning were overtaken by chaos.

I bailed out, and went inwards. A critic might say I was merely following the crowd. There was a host of others who were taking a similar path at the time. But I went my own way. All I was doing with others was swapping notes from time to time. There was no track and I hadn't chosen any leader. What prominent voices among the alternative people said, I listened to. There were left wing politicians, fundamentalist Christians, New Age astrologers, health disciples, organic gardeners and drug explorers. There was hope in the air, clashing with the outrage of the defenders of tradition and dosed with righteousness, lunacy and depression.

Noise, noise. Why do I tell this story? Because I am here, and one wonders how one got here from there. And just exactly where one is now. One wonders about that too, because that defines what direction one goes in from here.

Yes, there were pathways, and discontinuities. I am not interested in retracing all the steps. Some bridges just burn.

The story that you tell depends on how you want people to see you. You could tell a story of pain, or heroism, or cleverness, or stoic persistence. Yes, after long enough, I have experienced many things. What does it matter?

I went to the sacred mountain and I asked the tiger spirit, "What is the story I should tell now?"

And the tiger spirit said, "I will not tell you. But I will tell you this. After all the experience, and after all the stories that have already been told (and many of those will be forgotten and that is fine), the story that you tell should be a story of the Way. And I will tell you two things about the Way. It is like a mare that is strong and that runs boundlessly

on the earth, not in arrogance but receptively. And the Way is an exercise in beauty, it is a celebration of grace.”

Everyone, it seems, believes in stories now: “We all have a story”. It is a central article of faith. What does it mean? Some people have a story which is just what they would like you to believe. Some people have a story and it is self-promoting, or grandiose or sentimental. Or, to you or to me, it is trivial. There is something patronising about it too, like you would say to a child: “What’s your story?” And you expect it to be a little story, cute, naïve, innocent, sweet and often mistaken in some basic understanding.

Stories rigidify. This, of course, is both a good thing and a bad thing. After I left the city, and found a small country town to live in, there was a man who told stories. One time, I heard old Tom tell the same story. What struck me was that the story was exactly the same, virtually word for word. He had obviously told this story over many years and it had solidified into this particular form of expression. The same aspects were noted, the same acts and reactions took place and the same conclusion was reached. Even the final expression on Tom’s face was the same.

I wondered about this. I have told stories of incidents and episodes, and they have taken form and accent to suit the audience and the time. I wondered what was different about what he was doing and what I do. I think he had arrived at his lessons and saw his job as the patient delivery of those lessons to others. I’m sure I have been treading the same course, but my lessons are either more complicated or I am still in flux. The lessons are still arriving and taking shape.

I’m also aware that a story is just one perspective and any story has a multitude of perspectives. But I’m happy to carry a perspective. You can’t not be somebody in your own story. The reality is that you do something, for whatever reasons, even if you know it’s imperfect at the time. We live in the material world, in real time. Fortunately we usually

get the chance to do things many times, we are in effect practising, taking the next chance to get it right. There is an aesthetic to life.

The question is, how do you tell the story now, and what does it mean now? I think the meaning changes. Old Tom, the storyteller, told his stories because time changed and he could see a world of experience disappearing out of reach. He told stories to bind us across time. What did I learn from him? That people, when he was young, responded to the world around them in the way that people do, which is to say, if we had been them, we would probably have acted the same. Or maybe we would act worse, and that is the point. So perhaps a particular story is a call that beckons us back to remember to be courageous, or keep our sense of humour, or not be gullible.

There were limits to Tom's stories. They were about wanting to value his experience, to make sense of it in a world that had changed. His stories were prefaced by statements about the context – this happened when there was no television, not even electricity, and it took two hours by cart to get to town, and you only went to town once a fortnight.

I said there were limits to Tom's stories. What did I mean? It was that all his stories came out of a constant perspective, which was the belief in a constant perspective that made sense of life. You might describe this as western, white, Christian society, a belief in progress combined with the value of decency. It seems necessary to add that I say this without criticism or sociological haughtiness, just to say that Tom lived inside this framework. The world to him was constituted thus.

I saw it differently. I have stories, sure. This is simply to say I have had experiences and I remember things, and I have observations to make about those experiences. I remember, for instance, the boy in fifth class who was a very angry child, I know not why, and one day when mild-mannered Mr James asked him to stop doing something, Billy exploded in wrath, shouting abuse at Mr James. This in our quiet, orderly and industrious room of forty boys. Mr James asked Billy to go to

the principal, and he refused. And when Mr James came up the aisle to grasp him and take him, Billy picked up the compass on his desk and stabbed Mr James in the arm.

Mr James kept his composure, and bundled Billy out of the room. I don't know any more than this. I suppose Billy got the cane. I know the classroom went very quiet, and everyone was shocked. I felt sorry for Mr James, who had not done anything to attract such ire. I felt sorry for Billy, because something must have been going on in his life for him to explode like that, but I had no idea. I only knew my own family, I didn't know what other homes were like.

So this is a story. Our lives are made up of stories like this. Events that make more or less sense. There is obviously a lot going on that we don't know about, and we can gird ourselves by adopting defensive attitudes, or we can keep such incidents in the difficult space, the space where we allow that the reasons are beyond our ken, but if we knew, it would make sense.

But this is a story within a story. The big story, for me, was the falling apart of a way of life, the loss of belief in it. This threw everything into question, from going to church through to growing up and getting a job. This was the only story I was interested in, because the ending was outside of the boundaries; not just unpredictable, but as yet unfashioned. Even now it may be only just taking shape. It's still hard to tell. It may be nothing, it may be that things will just dissolve into a whimper.

What do you do when you think something is over? It's not as if there is One Right Thing To Do. Perhaps the thing to do is stay and argue, to try and work it out, to try harder. Sometimes it is just best to pack your bag as quickly as you can and leave. Other times it is even judicious to give in, to submit and go along. Every time you have to ask yourself, which time is this? Is it a fighting time, a submissive time, or a running time? Fight or flight? Or freeze?

Running. I packed and ran. Perhaps I did it badly, or untidily. Perhaps I would do it better this time around. The singer Nora Jones said, "I don't know much about leaving, but I know I should do it today". My first effort at leaving was when I left the city. This was not so badly done. I planned for weeks, looking for a suitable place to go, finishing up at my job, acquiring a reliable car, jettisoning things that would not be needed.

I went a long way away, to another state, another community, even another climate. I packed my books and study notes into boxes, not knowing when I would look at them again. I got a job teaching, and did that conscientiously, although without great gift for teaching. The town was a long way from what had been home, so that was a good thing.

But once people come into view, and they are no longer strangers, you have to ask yourself, in what way is this better or worse than where I was before? It was naïve, what I was doing. People had said, this will be like going back into the past, a conservative and belligerent past. But then, it was just somewhere else, a long way away. And I wanted to be a long way away from the city.

Living there, I found it crude and cruel. Local people were not cruel to each other, but they cut stern lines between themselves and outsiders, and being savage to outsiders and the unknown was their way of protecting what they had. There was a camaraderie among them, a mutual understanding, in their attacks on anyone who was seen as different.

At school the children were polite in a subdued way, as if they had already learned what it was not acceptable to be. There were no creative fires smouldering there, ready to burst into flame. Occasionally there was a hint of subversiveness, perhaps a book on esoteric Christianity that was passed from hand to hand without drawing attention. The dominant voices were brash, established in their power, while the tide below the surface was riddled with corruption.

I lasted eighteen months. If my departure from the city had been reasonably well-planned, there was a quality of haste about this

departure. I am generally methodical, and in any case there was a house to sell this time, and a household of furniture to pack. Nevertheless, there was an undercurrent of urgency, to get out of there, and inevitably there were strands that were left untied. And a lack of explanation.

The pupils at school didn't understand why I was leaving, especially as it wasn't the end of the year. So, I make up an implausible reason, which is to say, I know you will know that this is not the real reason, but I can't tell you the real reason, and maybe it's not even clear to me. I just have to go, now.

I left behind pupils I still remember. The Aboriginal boy who said to me, with a wry, mischievous smile, "You know, you're not bad for a white fella." Clive, the country boy who used to put a package on the side of the road and then hide in the cane field. When a car came and the driver thought, "It must be my lucky day", he would pull on the string he had tied to the parcel. While the driver was stopping his car, the parcel would disappear.

Sometimes, said Clive, the driver would see him and realise what was happening. And sometimes, he said, they would get angry and chase him. Clive was a good runner, but he thought it was disappointing that a person should get angry about a trick that was just funny, and also a little bit clever. I could see his point. But he was philosophical about these incidents. He was treating the exercise as a study in the propensities of adults for humour and humility.

END OF SAMPLE





**There are many stories – the stories we hear from others, the stories that we make ourselves, and the stories we live inside of.**

I have told stories that I felt needed to be told, about striving and letting go, about hurt and healing, about going and coming back, and about holding onto purpose.

But all those stories depend on the continuities, and what transpires when the continuities begin to fail us? This book is about the big story unravelling, the one that holds all the necessary certainties, the certainties I wanted and yet found wanting. I talk my way through, remembering, recounting, rejecting, resolving. Tell me there is method in this, because the days now seem to be singing and full of joy.



**Glenn Martin** writes about ethics, leadership, spirituality and development. He has written and published books and articles on business ethics, as well as three books reflecting on personal experiences, growing up in Sydney, living in the hills on the far north coast of New South Wales for twenty years, and coming back to Sydney.

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