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At the Confluence of Memory and Meaning— Life Review With Older Adults and Families: Using Narrative Therapy and the Expressive Arts to Re-member and Re-author Stories of Resilience

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In this article, the author focuses on ways in which counselors can adapt narrative therapy and expressive arts therapy techniques to cultivate and support their clients' creativity for use in the life review process. The counselor acts in a cocreative and consultative role, drawing on the client's expertise about his or her own life and constructing a collaborative process that also can engage the client's family, caregivers, and important others in the client's community. The writer suggests expressive arts techniques such as bibliotherapy, journaling, and the making of memory books, self boxes, life maps, and time capsules, along with videography as among a myriad of ways to tap into an ongoing creative meaning-making process necessary for life review. The collaborative process described facilitates deconstructing problem stories and constructing unique outcomes in their place for the client and quite possibly for the family and important others.

Keywords: *life review; expressive arts therapy; older adults, families, and caregivers; narrative therapy and older adults*

Through learning at my later date things I hadn't known, or had escaped or possibly feared realizing, about my parents—and myself—I glimpse our whole family life as if it were freed of that clock time which spaces us apart so inhibitingly, divides young and old, keeps our living through the same experiences in separate distances.

It is our inward journey that leads us through time—forward or back, seldom in a straight line, most often spiraling. Each of us is moving, changing, with respect to others. As we discover, we remember; remembering, we discover;

and most intensely do we experience this when our separate journeys converge.

—Eudora Welty, *One
Writer's Beginnings*
(1984, p. 102)

The beloved Southern writer Eudora Welty called that which makes up the human memory the greatest confluence of all. Utterly unique to each of us, memory, she says, is a “living thing.” “During its moment, all that is remembered joins, and lives—the old and the young, the past and the present, the living and the dead” (Welty, 1984, p. 104).

A product of Welty's own life review process, in which her past and the present moment met, is evident in *One Writer's Beginnings*. Published when Welty was 75, the autobiographical work captures the family and the surroundings that helped shape her personality and her identity as a writer. Its three chapters—“Listening,” “Learning to See,” and “Finding a Voice”—mark the movements of her narrative composition and mirror her understanding of how her languid Mississippi childhood contributed all the ingredients necessary to a writer's sensibility.

The slim volume stands as an accessible and elegant example of life review similar to that advanced by psychiatrist Robert Butler (1963). Butler described life review as a “naturally occurring, universal mental process characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and, particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts; simulta-

neously, and normally, these revived experiences and conflicts can be surveyed and reintegrated" (p. 66). Butler constructed his life review therapy on the foundation of Erikson's (1963) theory of psychological development as an antidote against the despair of a life unexamined prior to its closing.

Even with the pervasive influence of a life-stage rubric, and in spite of advances in research on aging and Alzheimer's, we continue to pathologize aging in Western culture. Reminiscing has been interpreted as a sign of early stages of dementia or Alzheimer's instead of the rumination necessary to achieving ego integrity and the "naturally occurring" process of life review that Butler envisioned. As families have become more fractured, distance complicates further attending to the needs of the aging adult by midlife adults, who are grappling with their own life-stage tasks incumbent in generativity versus stagnation while juggling the demands of career and a youthful family (Myers, 1989). However, with all the creative resources that counselors, clients, caregivers, and families can bring to bear on life review, the process can be a shared re-collection of memory and become central to meaning making in our communities (Grimm, 2003).

Myers (1989) advocated a reciprocal life review process wherein family members are enriched by accessing the family history that might not be available from other sources, and aging parents, in turn, can encourage and assist adult children in coping with midlife transitions and their tasks. The key to achieving this reciprocity is in developing empathic listening skills over the more usual family dynamic of actions or statements and responses. Each person learns to concentrate on reflection and trying to understand the other's frame of reference rather than reflexively telling the other what is best. "By making an effort," says Myers, "often seemingly an impossible one, to break the typical cycle of interaction, new and more positive patterns of relating may be established" (p. 155). In addition, life review has been shown in a number of studies as clinically effective in relieving depressed symptoms in older adults (Dhooper, Green, Huff, & Austin-Murphy, 1993; Fry, 1983; Serrano, Latorre, Gatz, & Montanes, 2004).

COLLABORATIVE AND CREATIVE TECHNIQUES IN LIFE REVIEW

"The strands are all there," said Welty (1984). "To the memory nothing is ever really lost" (p. 90). A central task of the therapist, then, is to assist with picking up and picking out strands of memory and collaborating with the client, the family, and even the client's community in a recreative and co-creative process. Narrative and expressive arts techniques are ideally suited for life review. Each client has a story of his or her own, and each client has a preferred mode of expression. Many practicing expressive arts therapists consider it the privilege of the counselor to bear witness to the story (Appa-

lachian Expressive Arts Collective, 2003). Even more so, a careful and creative therapist can bring techniques from bibliotherapy to journaling to videography into an active collaboration with clients who otherwise might never have acknowledged being creative themselves, much less have drawn on their creativity in the service of their own life stories.

The client's story is both the place of beginning and the end result of life review. How we shape our perceptions and create our story can, in turn, shape our experience. In effect, then, our story is both our creation and our creator (Bruner, 1986; Roth & Chasen, 1994; White & Epston, 1990). Narrative and expressive arts techniques allow us a myriad of ways to tap into this ongoing creative meaning-making process in all our lives. The following are a few possibilities described by this writer.

Videography and Slide Shows

Many parents and grandparents find their way to computers and other of today's tools of technology through their younger children and grandchildren. These same children have completed earlier versions of life review as part of their classroom assignments, using state-of-the-art computers, software, and other high-tech tools to tell their stories through ingenious film shorts and slide shows. Many of them have already mined the rich mother lode of family photographs and video clips and have incorporated text drawn from oral history interviews. These budding ethnographers are eager to take the video camera down off the shelf or sit down at the computer to share their expertise. According to Myers (1989), "Life review activities can be a meaningful way to enhance intergenerational family relationships" (p. 175). The counselor can then act in a consulting as well as a cocreative capacity and be available in the event that the process uncovers unresolved conflicts or other-than-positive outcomes.

How many of us have longed for the comfort of a departed loved one's voice and presence along with the many mementos and artifacts of a long and interesting life? What would it be like to use the tools readily at our disposal—if not in our homes, then in our public libraries, public schools, and through community agencies—to document the life review processes of our family elders and have these documents as a legacy for families and communities? One acquaintance went so far as to create her own Web site to document her midlife journey of discovery along the Appalachian Trail so that children, spouse, aging parents, and her extended community of supporters could travel with her. Following her college graduation, a 21-year-old client plans to document on film and in journals her biking journey across Europe with her two midlife parents. Both generations feel the stresses and the excitement of coming change in their lives and have found a unique, therapeutic way in which to capture and make meaning of their separate and intertwined stories.

Memory Books and Life Maps

This writer's grandparents, both Southerners from large farming families, used the tools available to them at the time to record their life stories: Each kept a journal in the margins of his and her Bibles as they read their daily passages. Now, the generations that follow look within the pages of these two most precious memory books for the record of important occurrences, births, marriages, deaths, and the indelible imprint left by these historical events on their stories.

Counselors can assist each client in writing his or her own book as a feature of life review. Guided prompts and journaling in and outside of sessions can aid in generating more specific memories. Computers, scanners, and color printers can aid in adding a visual component to the journal/memory book with the inclusion of drawings, doodles, photographs, and other images. The memory book has yet another level of meaning when generated by families for their elders with Alzheimer's. Assembled in the early stages when memory remains, it becomes a potent and poignant reminder of those who continue to play pivotal roles in the client's story once memory begins to fade. Expressive arts therapists who work in hospice settings use the memory book with aging clients and with clients who have terminal illnesses to work out unresolved conflicts or to leave a lasting record for families and friends. When families participate in the writing and the compiling of the book, they are constructing their own stories of grief and loss alongside the family member who is at the end of life.

Another technique drawn from narrative and expressive arts therapies is the life map. In seeking to make meaning of our stories, we create and collect images and symbols that "serve to connect our outer physical world with our personal, inner experiences" (Woodworth, 2003, p. 144). According to physicist David Peat (as cited in Woodworth, 2003), "Maps, symbols, mandalas, petroglyphs, and other symbolic works are used all over the world to express the link between the inner and the outer, between the self and the world, the individual and the environment. Such maps enrich us and bind us together" (p. 14). The map then becomes a visual representation of the life journey both outwardly traveled and inwardly lived. A life map coconstructed with counselor, client, and others can be a powerful prompt for more specific reminiscences in the life review process.

Self Boxes and Time Capsules

Like the life map, a self box presents a means through which to link the inner and the outer realms of experience and also to unify opposing perceptions. "By decorating a self-box, a three-dimensional symbol of the personality, a client uses the interior-external dialectic to differentiate, understand, and represent both public persona and inner self" (Farrell-Kirk, 2001). The enclosed space of the box presents a

"limiting context," providing a restricted and more manageable space in which the client can externalize the problem and work out issues (Farrell-Kirk, 2001).

The time capsule is another method that suggests a collaborative, intergenerational means of "re-membering," wherein client, caregivers, family members, and others can contribute selectively from their individual stories and create an artifact of the collective experience. Traditionally, time capsules are sealed, entombed, and unearthed at a later time. These same ritual functions might be carried through on a symbolic level and the artifact(s) retained in a place and in a manner that can be retrieved in the future and added to in successive generations of a family.

CONCLUSIONS

The creative interventions covered here are only a few of the many means available to the counselor in engaging the client, the family, and important others in facilitating life review. The counselor, acting in a cocreative and consultative role, draws on the client's expertise about his or her own life. The resulting collaborative process encourages deconstructing problem stories and constructing unique outcomes in their place for the client and, as shown here, for the family as well. *One Writer's Beginnings* and our clients' processes teach us the meaning-making possibilities that arise from the "re-collection" of memory and how we access it through listening, learning to see, and finding a voice.

"I'm prepared now to use the wonderful word confluence, which of itself exists as a reality and a symbol in one. It is the only kind of symbol that for me as a writer has any weight, testifying to the pattern, one of the chief patterns, of human experience" (Welty, 1984, p. 102).

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