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# Using Reminiscence Group Members' Family Slogans and Epitaphs to Enhance Their Planning Abilities: A Case Study

James J. Magee

**ABSTRACT.** Introducing a focus on family slogans and epitaphs into reminiscence groups serves three functions. It facilitates the group process by engaging all members in selecting the slogans and epitaphs that they discern in the memories the reviewers share. It also shows how these family dynamics over the grandparents' and parents' generations condition, if not determine, the slogans and epitaphs of the reviewers themselves. Finally, it enhances reviewers' planning for themselves by alerting them both to the accommodations they may need to make to their programming and to the talents they can draw upon because of the family they were born into. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2005 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

**KEYWORDS.** Family slogans, family epitaphs, reminiscence groups, life review, planning

Life review is a form of reminiscence. Reminiscence occurs when a person recalls long forgotten incidents, dwelling on them and recaptur-

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ing the emotions that originally accompanied them, often while trying to convey these felt experiences to a listener. These recollections are usually clear and vivid, accompanied by pleasant or uncomfortable emotions varying in intensity. They may focus upon any period of the life cycle and any aspect of a person's life.

Life review increases dramatically in middle age and continues unabated among older adults. In life review individuals reflect upon their personal history and accept responsibility for it. It is a process in which reviewers gradually reconstruct and assess their past, using their current values to weigh behavior that memories progressively return to consciousness. It need not, however, be a coherent progression of memories. Usually it proceeds circuitously through reverie, dreams, diary or journal entries, correspondence, and story telling. A critical evaluation of life experiences with the goal of integrating them in an acceptance of oneself here and now is the unifying theme throughout these recollections (Garland, 2001).

Life review has manifold benefits. It focuses the attention of older adults upon the continuity of their identity over the life cycle. It eases their readiness to take responsibility for their life story by locating it within the cultural and familial contexts that conditioned its progression. It moves reviewers to savor the satisfactions they derived in the past while forgiving themselves for the harm they did and the good they did not do. It draws upon their capacity to find in their memories resources for anticipating their needs and planning for the most satisfying ways of meeting them (Haight & Webster, 2002).

During the past five years I have facilitated ten reminiscence groups in an assisted living facility. Each group, composed of seven members, met for nine, ninety-minute sessions. Residents signed up on a first-come basis in response to in-house publicity and, primarily, to word of mouth from earlier participants. On three occasions a member even re-enrolled for a second group. Group membership reflected the heterogeneity of the residence: about three women to one man; four residents with professional careers, both men and women, to one with a working class career; all experienced with the give-and-take of task groups, but few initially comfortable self-disclosing with relative strangers. This article presents a case study of the particular model which these group members followed that enabled them to fruitfully anticipate their needs and successfully meet them.

### **THE GROUP MODEL**

The reminiscence groups serve two specific purposes. The first is easing the adaptation of members to living in the assisted living facility without becoming institutionalized. The groups facilitate fraternizing among participants, comfort in speaking candidly from the heart, and attention to helpful feedback from others “in the same boat.” The second is enabling members to find in their recollections precedents for coping with issues similar to ones now accompanying their increased physical limitations and attenuated family ties. Such precedents sustain their ongoing self-acceptance and sense of efficacy in the face of adversity. In written evaluations that participants complete privately during the week following the last session, they have uniformly assessed the groups as achieving these purposes by encouraging supportive give-and-take, awareness of their continuity of self, and a felt self-empowerment in planning for their well-being (Kotre, 1995).

During the first group session I explain the meaning of family slogans and “epitaphs” as integral, though often unattended, components of life review. Family slogans are those aphorisms that convey a family’s definition of the “good life, of how things ought to be, and ought not to be.” Consider how “Better to be safe than sorry” or “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” typically convey familial attitudes. Other slogans pertain to enjoying one’s body; the importance of appearances or of being educated, wealthy, or religious; how caring and anger should be expressed; how much self-expression is acceptable; how leisure time and savings should be used. Behavior that does not conform to the slogan is viewed as foolish or deviant (Carter & McGoldrick, 2000).

“Epitaph” is a term used metaphorically, referring to a cryptic statement, usually without qualifiers or elaboration, that family members use to summarize another person’s life. It is irrelevant whether the person is alive or dead. The epitaph conveys the value judgment and interpretation the speaker makes and different kin can impose different epitaphs upon the same person, e.g., “She wouldn’t spend a nickel to see an earthquake” and “She married outside the faith.” Because epitaphs select only one or two criteria for assessing the entire worth of another person, they often have a life-long tenacity (Lawton, 2001).

I then explain how the first-half of each meeting is devoted to a reviewer reminiscing sequentially about her/his relationships with grandparents, parents, uncles and aunts, then her/his own siblings and cousins, and finally, time permitting, about relationships with younger kin. This was the only structure I proposed for the reminiscences—that

reviewers begin with the oldest generation they can remember. I advised the other group members that they were to listen both to the recollections and to the family slogans and epitaphs with which the reviewer narrated them. Some listeners prefer to write these down, while others find that the novelty of the assignment keys their memory wonderfully.

The second-half of the session is devoted to the six listeners bringing to the reviewer's attention the slogans and epitaphs which s/he used in her/his narrative. Their feedback includes slogans or epitaphs for at least one person in each of the grandparent and parent generations, and one that the reviewer used for him or herself. Each session ends with the reviewer responding to the feedback from colleagues by sharing her/his own *conscious* choice of family slogans and epitaphs for kin and self from those brought to his or her attention.

Group members have been enthusiastic about this agenda. They report that slogans and epitaphs are manageable concepts that capture the ambience and family dynamics pervasive in one generation and that contribute to them in the next. They appreciate too that the feedback from their colleagues is offered tentatively and that each reviewer selects for her/himself the most appropriate slogans and epitaphs.

At the last group session members share how they have used the feedback addressed to them, as well as to other members, to plan judiciously the ways in which they can take good care of themselves. As they listened to their colleagues' reminiscences and the slogans and epitaphs they evoked, they report that the sessions amplified the continuity of family identity over the generations and the prescriptive impact of family dynamics upon the members. So, given their understanding of how slogans and epitaphs both drive and circumscribe them, they are now in a better position to make informed plans about their future.

### ***FAMILY SLOGANS AND EPITAPHS***

The following two sections show how the group process played out with a particular reviewer whose experience is representative of the members who completed the project. This section presents the family slogans and epitaphs that characterized the reviewer's grandmother and mother. The reviewer is Frances, a seventy-seven year old retired architect, who spoke eagerly about her maternal grandmother Aude. Aude emigrated from La Rochelle, France, as a seventeen-year old indentured servant to escape an arranged marriage. She worked through her con-

tract over the next decade, apprenticed to a seamstress in New Orleans. She showed particular talent in copying designs right from mannequins and without patterns. After a few more years she invested all her savings in a train ticket to Baltimore. There she assisted a dressmaker and soon opened her own establishment. She sang in the choir of the Huguenot church and was courted by several of its communicants. After she eventually chose a captain in the fire department, she worked out of their home. She was also widely regarded as moving her husband to persevere at the civil service examinations that brought him to the rank of battalion chief. Aude had three miscarriages before giving birth to Florence, her only living child and Frances's mother.

Frances's colleagues used the following slogans to capture Aude's attitudes and behavior:

- Where there's a will, there's a way.
- Stand on your own two feet.
- Keep your nose to the grindstone.
- Pull yourself up by your bootstraps.
- Make your bricks even without straw. This was Frances's own choice. She preferred it both because it had not become so culturally clichéd and yet emphasized that her grandmother was to accomplish her tasks even without the necessary means to do so.

The members also attributed the following epitaphs to Aude:

- She made the grade. Frances enjoyed this epitaph because she could pun that Aude not only succeeded in satisfying rigorous requirements, but also did this going up hill all the way.
- She made a virtue of necessity.
- She put her shoulder to the wheel.
- She was her own person.
- She had a one track mind. This epitaph was Frances's own choice for Aude. By observing the slogans and living up to the epitaphs, Aude lived out the repeated theme of exercising her resourceful ingenuity.

Frances's mother Florence attended teachers' training school, and taught in the Baltimore school system for thirty-one years. She married the manager of a prominent department store, and over the years referred her most reliable students to him for employment. In her own mind she was proudest of two episodes involving her career. One was

her public support for hiring as teachers members of the Abraham Lincoln Brigade who fought as volunteers on the side of the Republic during the Spanish Civil War. These Americans had been tarred as Communists and encountered significant resistance when they sought teaching positions.

The second episode was not public. It concerned Frances's relentless efforts to make her mother retire. Frances had a sister eight years older than herself who dutifully attended school, and stayed with Aude until her mother got home. Frances would have none of this arrangement, even though her sister would escort her to and from school. Over a six month period while Frances was in the first grade, she feigned stomach upsets, threw ink and pointed scissors at her sister, and hyperventilated in the classroom. Florence did not relent, however, and after all kinds of fits and starts, Frances acquiesced to the routine.

Frances's colleagues saw Florence driven by the following slogans:

- Come through with flying colors.
- Stand up and be counted.
- Push the envelope.
- Make your mark.
- Bell the cat. Frances preferred the last slogan because she lifted it from the *Piers Ploughman* text she taught, in which the mice decide to put a bell around the cat's neck as a warning device but then can find none among them to do the job. She would do the job!

The members also attributed the following epitaphs to Florence:

- She stood her ground.
- She was one for the books. Frances noted the appropriateness of referring to "books" since Florence's life as a teacher involved both texts and her own entry in the "book of records."
- Her nose was out of joint.
- She cut the mustard.
- She brought others to heel. This epitaph was Frances's own choice for Florence. Although she could appreciate her mother's discipline with students and her advocacy with the board of education, Frances felt forced "like an animal" to obey her mother's insistence that she attend school.

### ***PLANNING TO TAKE GOOD CARE OF THEMSELVES***

This section shows how the slogans and epitaphs attributed to the reviewer herself, as well as the feedback noted above, guide Frances's plans for taking good care of herself. Frances's description of herself revealed the daring, resilience, and self-confidence that characterized her grandmother and mother. Attentive to her own gifts, she pursued professional education that prepared her for a career in architecture. A novice in this "man's" field, she demonstrated her commitment by routinely doing the work of two colleagues and collaborating, with no desire for praise, with an interdisciplinary team of engineers, contractors, lawyers, and public officials. Over the decades she made partner in the firm.

Frances married an aviator who was frequently away from the family. When she was managing a single parent household, she "ran a tight ship" scheduling meals and after school activities with her two sons. One of the boys graduated from West Point and the other from a graduate degree program in art therapy. When Frances was first widowed, she moved to a residence hotel and used this time to review several assisted living facilities. She eventually chose one within comfortable driving distance from her children.

Frances's colleagues saw the following slogans affecting her attitudes and behavior:

- What goes around comes around.
- Prime the pump.
- Take it in your stride.
- The mills of the gods grind slowly.
- Separate the men from the boys. This last slogan was Frances's choice because, she admitted, it reflected her propensity to judge others' personal value on the basis of their technical performances.

The group members also attributed these epitaphs to Frances:

- Take her on her merits.
- She's the power behind the throne.
- She's a cut above.
- She makes a difference
- She pulls her own weight. This epitaph was Frances's own choice because it conveyed her own ethic of ambition and teamwork. She got ahead as she helped all involved to succeed at their work.

At the last session of the reminiscence group, Frances drew upon her awareness of the intergenerational descent of slogans and epitaphs to explain her plans for taking good care of herself. She noted that these slogans and epitaphs flowed down not as a shower but as a waterfall that swept away many of her designs before it. She saw, first of all, that she bore a legacy of “making the better the enemy of the good.” She needed to ease into satisfactory, “good enough” relationships with the other residents of the facility. She decided she would accept their nomination of her to the residents’ advisory board as an opportunity to learn what mattered to her companions.

She was adept in commanding excellence, though it could now reduce her relationships with her children’s families to ritual, rather than caring, encounters. Instead, she called her daughters-in-law twice a week, and inquired about the activities of her grandchildren. In response, they invited her to their activities, and Frances relaxed into proud, and enjoyable, attendance at dance and orchestral recitals, dramas, and athletic events. Finally, she chose to extend her contacts beyond the family and assisted living facility, and volunteered her services as an art instructor in an after school program that provided transportation for her.

Frances began a needlework tapestry for her own leisure. Her work was not only exquisite, but it jocularly recorded her family’s disposition “to separate the men from the boys,” or in this case, “the wheat from the chaff.” From her reading of *Mont-Saint-Michel and Chartres* by Henry Adams, she worked into her needlework this thirteenth century poem in which Satan speaks:

All the *grandes dames* and ladies fair  
Who costly robes and ermine wear,  
Kings, queens, countesses, and lords  
Come down to hell in endless hordes,  
While up to heaven go the lame,  
The poor, the hunchbacked, and the maimed.  
To heaven go the whole riff-raff;  
We get the grain and God the chaff.

“It is no little accomplishment,” Frances observed, “for me to laugh at my readiness to categorize others rather than empathize with them, to judge them as saved or damned. I accept this is my programming. Now I want to use this awareness—as only a ‘*grande dame*’ can—to install ‘accepting others’ in the place of ‘assessing them.’”

## CONCLUSION

Introducing a focus on family slogans and epitaphs into reminiscence groups serves three functions. It facilitates the group process by engaging all members in noting the slogans and epitaphs that occur in the memories each reviewer shares. It shows how slogans transmit family dynamics across the grandparents' and parents' generations and so weight the meanings of the slogans and epitaphs with which reviewers refer to themselves. Finally, it enhances reviewers' planning for their own well-being by heightening their self-awareness about the programming, hazards, and resources they bring to their planning from the extended family of origin into which they were born.

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