Life Review: A Spiritual Way for Older Adults

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ABSTRACT. This paper presents an integrative model of life review as a readily accessible resource for the spiritual well-being of older adults. The model contains a sequence of three interdependent, developmental components. The first component examines the family context within which life review occurs and the pervasive influence of this context throughout the life cycle. The second component explains the role of designated groups or confidants in facilitating the sharing of memories, emotions, and self-assessment evoked in life review. The final component explores the ways in which this companionate life review elicits and affirms for older adults new, more gratifying images of God.

A substantial body of investigation has elaborated upon the nature of life review and its contribution to mental health. Life review is a form of reminiscence concerned with the meaning that individuals attribute to their past behavior. Discerning this meaning is an evaluative process, eliciting a variety of emotions, in which persons assess their behavior in terms of the extent to which it conforms to deeply held values. In more profound experiences there can even be an assessment of the appropriateness of the values themselves as normative guidelines for personal behavior.

Life review is a normal, integrative, and often spontaneous phenomenon that occurs throughout the life cycle. At each stage older adults have already drawn upon reminiscences for prece-
dents to guide them in their problem solving, for evidence of successful performance to help minimize self-doubt, and for tales available to the raconteur. Similarly, at each stage crises and transitions have precipitated experiences of life review that assisted them in differentiating themselves within their family of origin, in choosing their careers, and in relating to their spouse and children. In their later years retirement, grandparent and great-grandparent status, chronic ailments, sensory decrements, and the increasing proximity of death have become additional transitions and crises that elicit experiences of life review.²

These experiences, then, are familiar opportunities that older adults have used over the decades to assess the trajectory and progression of their lives. The memories evoked may be seen as parables that encourage them to assess the goals they have pursued, to perceive the ways in which God has shared in their personal history, and to affirm the metanoia (repentance) required to give God ultimate priority in their lives. By appropriating their own past, older adults can experience life review as a purposive, not merely spontaneous, activity revealing the significance of their personal existence.³

For many older adults this self-preoccupation can entail whisps of nostalgia, regret, anxiety, or guilt. Moreover, current crises can exacerbate a mood aroused by memories of longstanding unresolved issues. For most older adults, however, the hazard of obsessive rumination precipitating depression is usually dissipated when they can share their life review with a confidant or participate in group sessions devoted to review.

The older adults at risk of feeling terrorized or suicidal through life review have been identified as those who have consistently tended to live in the future rather than the present, who have been consciously intent on injuring others, who are characterologically narcissistic, or have extremely low self-esteem. For this population intervention by a mental health professional is indicated.

**FAMILY CONTEXT FOR LIFE REVIEW**

Although individuals experience life review as an assessment of their own personal history, they can use it more insightfully when they perceive it in terms of family reminiscence. Three
components of family systems, "family scripts," "toxic issues," and "triangulated relationships," have been particularly productive in focusing the family context so that life review successfully enhances a person's "reconciliation to the past, reconciliation to others, reconciliation to the self, and reconciliation to God." A script is a "personal plan for living which determines the direction and main events that will occur in one's lifetime." "Script" is an apt term because this life plan is "written," as it were, through transactions between a child and its parents that occur generally before the age of six and encapsulates the issues which will belabor an individual throughout the life cycle. Both scripts and the transactions that determine them, moreover, are generations old. Their origins and trajectories can be discerned in a family's adherence over the generations to anecdotal folklore with its emotionally charged images of kin whose "ways" brought honor or dishonor upon the family.

Family lore contains generations of ancestral "slogans" and "epitaphs." Slogans are those aphorisms ("A penny saved . . .") and epitaphs those terse summaries of a person's life ("He always wrote to his mother.") that become unquestioned assumptions about the way to live. In their excesses the virtues they prescribe become our faults.

So too, family lore records the likely impact of names and nick-names and the influence of gender and ordinal position. "John, Jr.," for example, "is expected to follow in his father's footsteps; Jesse is expected to raise hell; Gigi is expected to be sexy; and Alfred is expected to be well-ordered and neat." Similarities in the gender and ordinal positions of parents and siblings in their respective generations affect the kinds of expectations parents convey to each child. Parents, for instance, "can identify more easily with that child of the same sex among their children who has a similar position to their own, and can relate more easily to that child of the opposite sex who has a similar position to a sibling of the parents." In like manner, a parent's sibling position can pattern the quality of relationships among the children. A mother who is herself the oldest daughter and had an estranged relationship with her youngest sister so often witnesses the same difficulties occurring between her oldest and youngest daughters.

The convergence of these variables in the life of individuals
virtually ensures that they will internalize family attitudes toward those toxic issues which have recurred regularly over the generations. Such issues characteristically include wealth (how much is enough; who has access to it; how is it to be spent?), health (use/avoidance of preventive and rehabilitative services, hypochondria, phobias), sexuality (knowledgeability, scrupulosity, homophobia, pre-marital and extra-marital activity), work (workaholism/inertia, process/product orientation), anger (forms of expression, targets, openness to resolving differences), religion (freedom to participate/disaffiliate, questioning institutional teaching), and autonomy (what decisions are mine to make; where can I live; how often am I expected to contact kin?).

These issues are called "toxic" because of the inability of family members to resolve them over the generations. Instead, members react with such anxiety when the issues occur that their denial, projection, and over-reacting exacerbate the issues and transmit them to the next generation. The disproportionate number of abusive parents and alcoholics who were raised by a parent her/himself an abusive parent or alcoholic is brief testimony to the intractable power of toxic issues.

The process that primarily ensures the transmission of toxic issues over the generations is triangulation. Triangulation means that when a given issue is activated between two family members, a third is inevitably drawn in. This person serves to stabilize the relationship between the original parties at some level acceptable to them, however dysfunctional it may be in terms of resolving the issue at hand. Even worse, once family members have committed themselves to an intransigent position around an issue in their family of origin, they maintain this same position whenever the issue arises in their relationship with their spouse, children, in-laws, and, in fact, in any subsequent emotionally charged relationship. From this perspective, older adults would be able to recognize their involvement in problematic relationships and counter-productive behavior in other areas of their lives as analogues of triangles and toxic issues from their family of origin.8

Consider the situation of a son who carries out a stabilizing function between his parents who are estranged over any subject involving finances. The mother invests in a compensatory rela-
relationship with the son, while the father maintains a deprecatory attitude toward him. The son rallies toward the mother, but also experiences increasing anxiety over the intensity of their relationship. Later, with his own spouse and children, he remains sensitized to expressions of anger, even disagreement. He is unable to resolve arguments, feels drawn to one family member against another, and yet believes he must work everything out among them. Finally, he is locked in opposition to the financial requests of his children.

**SHARING SELF-REVELATION IN GROUPS AND WITH CONFIDANTS**

According to the second component of this model, sharing the memories, emotions, and self-assessment evoked in life review is essential for deriving meaningful insights from them. Older adults who do not discuss their recollections with a confidant are prey to their own selective memories and to defense mechanisms serving a placid self-regard. Some have the good fortune to participate in groups devoted to life review. The shared purpose of the group facilitates self-disclosure. Members are often attentive, expecting to receive this same respect in their own turn. Similarities in scenes recalled may prompt further candid recollections from the participants. On the other hand, a group that is proposed, rather than self-designed, demands highly motivated members. Otherwise, the recollections shared may be those considered "safe." Moreover, should personality conflicts occur, the stories told may be intended more for "topping" one another than for achieving personal insight.

Because speaking with a confidant is more self-directed, it offers special benefits. Often, on a one-to-one basis a confidant can more easily attend to the themes that reappear in the reminiscences. A confidant who is familiar with the family lore, expectations, and values that an older adult has referred to over time and who may even have a close relationship with that extended family can be especially helpful in assisting the reviewer to bring productive closure to her/his reminiscences. Older adults, for instance, may feel disheartened when their life review traces patterns of triangulated relationships and issue-driven behavior.
When reviewers recount the ways in which they have consistently undone themselves, confidants can help by pointing to the inevitability of these lifelong patterns, given the toxic issues and scripted roles of the families they were born into.

Confidants can also point out that dysfunctional behavior patterns bear steady witness to God’s fidelity. It is not difficult to see how God intervenes in family history through members whose lives were exemplars of generosity or courage. The graced insight is for older adults to discern God’s caring presence in their own lives on those occasions when, enmeshed in toxic issues, they managed to engage in acts of timorous advocacy for someone oppressed, of disgruntled forbearance with someone inept, or of slender hospitality to someone unexpected. However haltingly performed, these may have been acts of exceptional quality for them.

Confidants are helpful when they affirm that emotions evoked by life review may be discomforting, even unnerving. For this malaise is itself a summons to remain in creative passivity, waiting to feel God’s healing. When memories arouse upsetting emotions, reviewers can turn them into occasions of gratitude for having been able to proceed beyond those original troubling events. When older adults are struck with their losses in health, professional roles, or friendships, perhaps by their own doing, this companionate review can help them to accept these losses as “a part of the dying and rising which they must undergo in the experience of conversion.”

An older woman described the sequence of stages through which she progressed in a life review concerning a specific toxic issue. In the first stage, she became aware of the meanness that she felt and generated through the chronic competitiveness that characterized her relationships with her siblings, her spouse, and her children. In a flood of recollections she saw the harm and waste that her competitiveness caused over her lifetime.

In the second stage, she recognized the inevitability of this fierceness in her life. Folklore about her great grandparents glorified tales of how they strove to best one another. Competitiveness permeated her family, not only her own household, but those of her parents and their brothers and sisters.

In the third stage, she began to perceive that all of them were
to some extent both victims and collaborators in perpetuating the issue. In accepting herself and her kin she experienced her first relief from rancor, from desiring to even old scores and to have the last word. She even enjoyed the insight, "How could you have been born into your family and not have been crazy!" This was a moment of conversion, when she thanked God for the gift of forgiving herself and her family.

In the fourth stage, she began to detoxify the issue. When she was with family members, she purposefully talked about her competitiveness and its distasteful consequences. She credited the contribution of in-laws in introducing traits that helped to contain dysfunctional characteristics of her own family. She monitored her relationship with her grandchildren to catch her modelling of competitiveness for them. At the same time, she was aware of her relative powerlessness to affect the control that the "family curse" held over the lives of others. Accordingly, though she was customarily very intrusive with her opinions, she tried to respect the autonomy of family members and to appreciate for the first time the uniqueness of each one's potential.

**DELIGHTING IN NEW IMAGES OF ONE'S RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD**

According to the final component of this model, groups and confidants are especially helpful by encouraging older adults to expand upon the metaphors and symbols that their imaginations associate with episodes or themes from their life review. Older adults point to the exhilaration that accompanies the "fit" between an image and the feelings and self-assessment it epitomizes. The images seem to "package" the reminiscences so that they feel more manageable for ongoing review. Reviewers note, too, how different images can supplant previous ones as symbols of the same event. This sequence cues them to the progress they have made in revising an inaccurate understanding of the past.

Older adults can recognize that the images their own lives evoke are God's gift along the spiritual way of life review. Delighting in them, recording them in personal journals, and sharing them in correspondence and conversations with confidants and kin are expressions of gratitude for this gift. They use the
images in prayer, sharing with God the meaning the images represent for them and discerning God's response as they "enter" images through their senses.

The following are some of the images that older adults have associated with themes from their life review. "The tree of the knowledge of good and evil" was presented as a metaphor for one's own family tree; "original sin" a metaphor for the cumulative effect of the scripts and toxic issues that families have transmitted to their members and that they, in turn, have internalized. This frailty of the human condition reveals the unconditional, embracing posture of God who summarizes the lesson of every life review in the image, "I shall still be the same. When your hair is gray, I shall still support you. I have already done so. I have carried you" (Isaiah 46:3-4).

A terminally ill nursing home resident shared memories of how her alcoholism had undermined her marriage and estranged her son. She noted with repose, however, how God had enabled her to achieve sobriety and assist others with problems of addiction, even though her own son remained alienated from her. She quoted Ezekiel (34:15-16) to clarify the point she was making: "I myself will pasture my sheep. The lost I will seek out, the strayed I will bring back, the injured I will bind up, the sick I will heal." She identified herself with the lost and injured and surmised that her condition seemed to elicit, all the more, the caring initiatives of God.

The claim that God is a ready companion for life review does not assure that older adults will feel this presence. Often a dearth of current gratification, perhaps from loneliness or physical limitations, elicits an agitated mood that precludes the felt presence of God. This agitation, in turn, selectively arouses memories which seem to portray a life time of disappointments and failures.

Many older believers, however, report a common passage through this aridity. First, they complain to God about the distance that they feel from Her/Him and about the gloom that their memories enhance. Then, they begin to stay with gloom, to be flooded by it rather than resisting it. Eventually, through association they remember similar episodes that they have survived or
even managed to “muddle through.” Gradually the mood begins to lift. Finally, they do feel God with them, continually drawing them to seek Her/Him out. For them the process of their seeking God is clue to Her/Him being already at hand. One older man who had proceeded through this sequence now saw all his past as grist for an ongoing, though halting, conversion. Paraphrasing the delight of the prodigal’s father, he exalted, “We have to celebrate and rejoice! I was dead and have come back to life. I was lost and am found” (Luke, 15:24).

This same exhilaration appears in an older adult’s recital of the following lines from James Russell Lowell’s The Vision of Sir Launfal:

For a cap and bells our lives we pay,
Bubbles we buy with a whole life’s tasking:
‘Tis Heaven alone that is given away,
‘Tis only God may be had for the asking.

She no longer dwelt upon the harm or waste or tragedies that her life review had surveyed. An appreciation that God had already gifted her with Her/His own life discounted the losses entailed in adhering to her self-aggrandizing script.

Similarly, older adults also draw upon their current losses for insight into God’s providence. During an orientation session conducted for applicants about to enter a nursing home, an older woman withdrew a snippet of Edmund Waller’s Old Age from her purse and read to the group:

The soul’s dark cottage, battered and decayed,
Lets in new light through chinks that Time hath made.

Better than any formal text, this doublet expressed the applicant’s conviction that the “battering” which aging imposed through decrements and limitations had become an opportunity for understanding that otherwise might not have occurred.

In summary, the life review of many older adults confirms that their understanding of God has evolved over their lifespan. That was the theme of a group’s response to these lines from Two Gods by Sam Walter Foss:
God greatened in his growing mind;  
Each year he dreamed his God anew,  
And left his older God behind.

Moreover, their perception of their personal history appears to alter along with their images of God. Initially, many were preoccupied with the realization that they will die incomplete, without having achieved their potential to become all they are capable of being, without having provided restitution for the harm they have inflicted, and without having blunted for their descendants the sorry heritage of scripts and triangles that they have helped transmit. A religious perspective, however, led them to a different assessment. As they discern God’s presence throughout their lives, older adults delight in the way God apprehended them through the vagaries of their “incompleteness.” They have concluded that, indeed, “God’s folly is wiser than men and His weakness more powerful than men” (1 Corinthians, 1:25) because they have seen God’s wisdom and power through the apertures of their own folly and weakness.

NOTES


