2007

Life Review, Paradox, and Self-Esteem

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The developmental benefits of life review occur because the reminiscing process gives older adults repeated opportunities to reflect on 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 their memory progressively returns to consciousness. Life review focuses attention on the connections between their past and their current sense of themselves, evoking memories of formative experiences that influenced their personal development.

Life review is a normal, integrative process that occurs throughout the life cycle, peaking during the fifth decade and remaining strong thereafter. It usually proceeds circuitously through reverie, reflection, dreams, diary or journal entries, correspondence, and storytelling. The process can be spontaneous or planned, solitary or in groups. Reviewers recall long-forgotten incidents, dwell on them, and recapture the emotions that originally accompanied them, often while trying to convey these felt experiences to a listener.

These reminiscences are usually vivid, accompanied by pleasant or uncomfortable emotions of varying intensity. They may focus on any period of the life cycle and any aspect of a person’s life. The underlying theme that unifies the recollections is the goal of integrating them in an acceptance of oneself here and now (Haight & Webster, 2002).
Achieving self-acceptance is a task with several dimensions. Looking toward the past, it requires readiness to take responsibility for one's life story and locate it in the historical and cultural contexts that affected it. Looking at the present, it draws on one's ability to savor the satisfactions derived throughout the life cycle and to forgive oneself for harm done and good not done. Looking toward the future, it includes the capacity to anticipate needs and plan for the most satisfying ways to meet them (Magee, 1988).

Reminiscences are often precipitated by retirement and by an increase in aging-related decrements. Retirement, by severing older adults from significant, gratifying roles and relationships, endows memories of seemingly trivial events with value beyond their original character, since these memories are the principal links to the person's previous identity (McAdams, 1993). Some older adults intentionally reminisce about former occupational and social roles to claim role parity with or superiority to those on whom they are now dependent. Others use their past as a reservoir of entertaining tales and for problem-solving precedents to help them address uncomfortable decisions that confront them in the present.

Identification with the competence and self-determination that characterized their performance in earlier decades tempers the painful constriction of personal autonomy arising from failing physical capacities and patronizing societal expectations. In addition, the increasing proximity of death enables life review to become a form of anticipatory grief work and a part of letting go (Garland, 2001).

THE ROLE OF CONFIDANTS AND FEEDBACK

Ongoing clusters of aging-related diminishments that threaten health, relationships, and empowering roles can evoke reminiscences with corresponding themes of inadequacy and disillusion. Current crises tend to elicit memories of comparable unresolved issues. For most older adults, however, the hazard of obsessive rumination precipitating prolonged and profound mood swings is usually dispelled if they can share their life review with a confidant or receive feedback from other reminiscence group members.
Those who share their memories and self-assessment with a confidant can transcend their own selective memories. A confidant, for instance, can point out the good character hidden in the shy person’s memory of timorous advocacy for someone oppressed, the impatient person’s disgruntled forbearance with someone inept, or the fastidious person’s slender hospitality toward an unexpected guest. When the reviewer focuses on a failure of character, the confidant does not engage in debate but remarks on the reviewer’s courage in getting through the scene in real life and in returning to it now, despite the discomfort involved. Finally, emotionally charged issues often lead to memories of early family relationships. A confidant who is familiar with the family lore, and may even have a close relationship with the extended family, can help the reviewer bring some closure to these issues (Kotre, 1995).

Seventy-seven-year-old Florence had been sexually inhibited throughout her life. She told a friend in their assisted living residence that she had not attended a movie or live theater show for the past 50 years because she had become so anxious about “having to monitor my reactions to plots, scenes, and dialog that might be salacious.” This prompted her friend to confess that she still shyly followed her mother’s example of asking the butcher for “chicken chests” rather than “chicken breasts.” They could laugh, because now neither felt alone. Both had finally distinguished the differences between inhibition and modesty. They decided to start shouting out during movies shown at the residence, “Here comes a hot scene!”

Matthew was a retired fire chief. His reminiscences were replete with incidents in which he rejected his supposed “rejecters” by spitefully thwarting their authority. For instance, when he admitted to his second grade teacher, “I can’t do this math problem,” she replied that “can’t” was not permitted in his vocabulary and held a conference with his parents. They concurred with the teacher and set aside a shelf in the living room to hold the academic trophies that they assured him he would win when he applied himself. Matthew “showed” them by forgoing college and joining the fire department directly after high school. After his parents’ deaths he started taking college courses in the evenings and took the examinations that culminated in his being appointed chief. This regimen, however, made him an absentee father to his sons and left his wife an “examination widow.”
He saw his distant parenting as the pattern for the current alienation between his sons and their children. Of course, whenever he offered them advice, he only “made the mess worse.”

These reminiscences prompted a weekly visitor, the driver of the chief’s official car, to say that he saw parallels between his family relationships and those of the chief. His own grandparents had mislabeled their children’s efforts at self-expression as disloyalty or eccentricity; this attitude had, in turn, affected his parents’ parenting. He encouraged Matthew to read histories, biographies, and historical fiction about political, economic, and religious issues that could have shaped his grandparents’ attitudes toward his parents. What Matthew learned about the intractability of these issues and about family survival strategies over generations fed a warmer acceptance of himself and a respectful indulgence toward his children and grandchildren. “I give no lectures, just tell stories. Whenever an ancestor ‘messed up,’ I show how I did much the same. I leave it up to the younger folks to figure out that there may be no exemptions for them, either.”

**SELF-ESTEEM AND LIFE REVIEW**

Like everyone else, older adults fall along a continuum of self-esteem; that is, the abiding judgment we make about our competence and worth, the lens through which we review our personal history and discern meaning in our lives (Branden, 1994). At one end are people with hearty self-esteem. Their reminiscences disclose that, as children, they internalized the positive regard their caregivers had for them and then proceeded through life with the conviction that they were inherently “good enough.” For them, an experience of shame was a signal that their behavior was inconsistent with their own ideals, and they usually responded by bringing their behavior into line. As older adults, they enjoy self-confidence and self-respect, and believe that who they are and what they do continue to matter.

At the other end of the continuum are people who entered adulthood with self-esteem in tatters. Theirs is a shame transmitted over generations and embedded in their childhood’s emerging, tentative self. As children, they responded to insufficiently empathic attitudes of caregivers by fusing shame and identity, and throughout life they have lived with a haunting assumption that they are “fundamentally defective, unworthy, not fully valid as a human being” (Lewis, 1995, p. 11). Not surprisingly, the life
review of these older adults focuses on memories of injuries inflicted and received, missed opportunities, and recycled patterns of dysfunctional behaviors. They obsess that their inferiority was exposed to others who scornfully concurred in their self-assessment. Caught in the circularity of viewing themselves through the distorted lens of their own shame, they thwart the developmental potential of life review. To recover this potential, reminiscing must occur from a different, more gracious lens, a perspective that reframes troublesome memories.

The following section will examine how paradoxes provide more compassionate perspectives from which shame-filled older adults can assess their life review. These perspectives do not raise the basic level of reviewers' self-esteem. They do, however, elicit assessments of memories that are characteristic of higher levels self-esteem and stretch reviewers to embrace a self-acceptance that had been beyond them. Reviewers can measure their progress by discerning how their reminiscences now facilitate their ability to do the following:

- Allow them to make mistakes rather than raising blame-protection as the primary consideration in decision making (Schneider, 1992)
- Base decisions on what is in their best interest rather than bypassing shame and attending, instead, to emotions less acutely distressing (e.g., guilt, anger, and depression) or to the addictions and eating disorders that shame fuels (Nichols, 1991)
- Own their thoughts, statements, and actions rather than projecting onto others the impulses and personality characteristics that elicit shame in themselves (Nathanson, 1992)
- Evaluate themselves realistically rather than depreciating their competitors and fantasizing themselves as superior
- Rely on their own informed conscience and problem-managing capability rather than conforming to others' expectations, continually seeking positive feedback, and withholding their own opinions (California Task Force, 1990)
- Express feelings frequently and directly rather than anxiously monitoring any spontaneous behavior
- Draw upon multiple, benign metaphors that transcend their childish comprehension of God as Judge
GUIDING PARADOXES

Guiding paradoxes are the strategies I use to enable reviewers to stretch their self-esteem. To the reminiscence groups I facilitate, I explain that these paradoxes are seemingly contradictory statements pertaining to shame-inducing themes that recur in life review. The paradoxes alter the frames of reference from which older adults have been evaluating past events and “change the meaning and value of the events without changing the facts” (Bednar, Wells, & Peterson, 1989, p. 20). They stimulate a creative tension by seeking both-and answers to either-or dilemmas. As contradictions, paradoxes cause a dissonance that frustrates unquestioned acceptance of shame-driven interpretations. At the same time, they draw reviewers to syntheses that transcend the contradictions and offer novel perspectives for reviewing memories. By considering memories from these several viewpoints, reviewers can appreciate the significance of details they had previously overlooked, for example, the tenacity of specific issues over generations, extenuating circumstances surrounding decisions, and ambiguity about the meaning of people’s intent and behavior (Magee, 2002).

I use three kinds of guiding paradoxes with life review groups: paradoxical wordplay, dream analysis, and the metaphysical self.

Paradoxical Wordplay

Paradoxical wordplay is an engaging method of discovering alternative meanings that reviewers can attribute to their memories. To prepare a reminiscence group to use the paradoxes, I provide a cache of sources (period music scores, decades-old New York Times front pages, anthologies of poems and plays, books of children’s rhymes), and ask the participants to look through them and list examples of paradoxical wordplay that they found meaningful.

One kind of wordplay consists of the poetic metaphors older adults choose for themselves. Many people find that poetry is an inexhaustible resource that revives significant memories, captures the emotional tone of scenes from their past, and expresses the meaning that these scenes now hold for them. Those who have few literary associations refer to the lyrics of songs and family jingles in lieu of poems.

Delia, for example, was an 81-year-old caregiver for her diabetic husband. She avoided mentioning her own needs, since her family regard-
ed references to one’s needs as weakness. Her received family motto was simply, “You have to dip-to-rise on your own” (i.e., learn how to cope with a new situation until you achieve a higher level of performance). The process never ended, however, as solutions to earlier problems became new problems and accrued knowledge became obsolete. Even harder for Delia, she seemed to “dip” without a corresponding “rise.” Her life review revealed that, in the course of a single year, she had added the following to her regular schedule of work in her husband’s picture frame shop: babysitting her granddaughter, caring for her terminally ill father, and attending to her mother’s clinical despondency.

In reframing her recollections, Delia saw how her exhausting self-denial had been, in fact, a denial that she even had a self. She tempered a mood of depression by peacefully reciting from “The Hound of Heaven,” by Francis Thompson:

Is my gloom, after all,
Shade of His hand outstretched caressingly?

Delia saw that over the decades she had “risen” repeatedly simply to cope with crises. When a colleague interjected at this point, “But the ‘rises’ feel slight compared to the severity of the ‘dips,’” she replied, “No problem. I know my mood is a caress. I acclaim it so each time I sing our African-American anthem, ‘Lift Every Voice and Sing’:

Shadowed beneath Thy hand,
May we forever stand.

Timid 87-year-old Madelyn shared how she zealously conformed throughout her career to supervisors’ expectations, too anxious “even once to speak the truth to power.” She dignified her earlier self-image with a metaphor from Samuel Taylor Coleridge’s “Rime of the Ancient Mariner”:

Fear at my heart, as at a cup,
My life-blood seemed to sip!

She said, “But now I am intent on visiting my favorite harbors as I continue my nautical journey in my mind.” Then, quoting from Alfred Lord Tennyson’s “Ulysses,” she added, “and I mean to make this other traveler’s words my own:”

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Old age hath yet his honor and his toil.

Madelyn’s “honor” now lay in the courage to replace her openness to others’ expectations with a new, unmonitored openness toward her own feelings, motives, and personal experiences.

The oldest participant, 93-year-old retired schoolteacher Veronica, used a metaphor that regally epitomized her group’s vital task of accomplishing ego integrity. Erik Erikson describes this accomplishment as “the acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no other substitutions (Erikson, 1963, p. 87).” Veronica captured Erikson’s challenge with her recitation from Percy Bysshe Shelley’s “Ode to the West Wind”:

Make me thy lyre, ev’n as the forest is:
What if my leaves are falling as its own?
The tumult of thy mighty harmonies
Will take from both a deep autumnal tone.

She passionately articulated her awareness that a rich quality of life in her own autumnal season involved imperceptible, yet nonetheless heroic, alterations within herself. Not least among them was giving up the notion that her self-acceptance could occur without some “tumult.”

A second type of wordplay that I introduce is buried in homonyms from the reviewers’ own speech. Group members are asked to bring to one another’s attention that they are using two or more words that sound alike but differ in meaning. I encourage them to free-associate about the alternative meanings of the soundmate of a homonym that a reviewer uses. This feedback disrupts the problematic mood initially arising from the reminiscence and creates an opportunity for the reviewer to reapply the intended meaning of the homonym as a novel, refreshing viewpoint from which to approach memories.
For example, Agatha, a 74-year-old lawyer, was forced to retire because of emphysema. Her life review focused on the compulsivity with which she had approached her career and her painfully meticulous preparations for courtroom presentations. Her colleagues pointed out her repeated use of “read” as a homonym term. She responded that read/reed did have resonance for her. She recited a text she had heard often in church as a young girl: “A bruised reed He will not break; and a smoking flax He will not quench” (Isaiah 42:3). She added, “But that’s the trouble. I bruised myself continuously—obsessing over details, concealing the conviction that I was less competent than my colleagues, driven and unable to relax—and all that time succeeded as a lawyer. Excruciatingly, I could always manage both to suffer and read.”

Though her forced retirement had stirred feelings of depression, she hoped that her reminiscence group colleagues could accept her as a “bruised reed” that did not have to justify its existence. She recognized that her compulsive preparations had been her way of keeping depression and shame at bay, and at last she was allowing herself to feel them.

Constance, age 79, and Nell, age 76, were sisters who lived in separate apartments at a development for older adults. They argued vigorously with each other or exchanged sarcastic swipes, only briefly and intermittently making peace. Whatever the disagreement, the topic invariably included their lifelong grievances. Constance complained that she and her late husband had had to rescue Nell repeatedly from “the sordid relationships and financial ruin” that accompanied her sister’s alcoholism. Nell excoriated Constance for her self-righteousness and controlling intrusiveness. However, in doing the “homework” assignment, Nell had read the score from Show Boat and “had a new take” on their relationship. “We’ve kept at each other all this time because that’s how we show we care. It hit me when I caught the paradox in ‘We Could Make Believe I Love You.’ The song requires that the singer already be in love in order to make believe. So, today, Constance, let’s begin by making believe we love each other.”
Lennie, a retired landscaper who now kept a critical eye on the residence groundskeepers, gave his opinion: “I’m not worried about you two working out your differences. Your family tree, like a hickory, has an anchoring taproot that conducts all the nutrients you need.” Constance replied, “The only tap route Nell knows is the map to a pub.” With gentle humor, Nell broke the tension by adapting a line from the Marquise de Sévigné, “Constance, you lack only a few vices to be perfect.”

Seventy-eight-year-old Gladys, hemiplegic since her stroke seven years earlier, was not able to speak clearly enough to express herself, so she had made copies of these lines from Christopher Fry’s *The Lady’s Not for Burning*:

I travel light; as light
That is, as a man can travel who is
Still carrying his body around because
Of its sentimental value.
She added this postscript:
Silence means assent, and I hope that my halted voice somehow expresses acceptance of my condition. You are looking at a woman who is graced in her infirmities. Over the past seven years I have had many dips emotionally, but now I am in ascent. The very limits the stroke imposed are vantage points that give the grandest perspective on my life. From Edmund Waller’s Old Age, consider:

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

**Dream Analysis**
The second kind of guiding paradox is older adults’ interpretations of their dreams. In introducing dream analysis, I explain the interplay between reminiscing and dreaming. The long-term memories raised in life review groups are fertile catalysts for evoking thematically similar dreams. Dreams, in turn, raise in metaphorical imagery themes that reviewers may have ignored, weighed too lightly, or failed to use in resolving current
problems. When group members understand dreaming as "simply the form our consciousness takes at night to make us aware of our feelings" (Ullman & Zimmerman, 1979, p. 52), they can more readily grasp how dreams can help them discern emotional issues in their life review.

I explain that though metaphors in dreams appear as a variety of persons, objects, colors, sounds, and situations, they generally represent aspects of the dreamers themselves. Thus, reviewers need to identify the associations—any word, mental picture, feeling, or memory—that occur to them as they speculate about the revelation a metaphor is making to them about themselves. Eventually, they will feel drawn to attribute one meaning more than any other to a given metaphor (Johnson, 1986).

Eric, for example, had dreamed three nights during the week that he was free-body flying. He was a recently retired corporate executive who had joined the Y's reminiscence group primarily because it was scheduled shortly after he finished his daily racquetball "competition." (The term was his own for an activity that others referred to as a game or exercise.) His life review emphasized two themes: a family history of underachieving men and the character-building quality of "spirited competition" that enabled him to transcend that history. However, he recognized that instead of expressing how he had "soared," his dreams revealed how "sore" his body felt from his racquetball regimen. He shared with the group that he seemed to be resisting the transition to retirement by perpetuating his adversarial attitude.

Muriel was a 79-year-old widow who integrated dream interpretation with religious themes in her life review. She had rejected three suitors because their religious affiliation was different from her own. For four decades, she had been a foster parent in her church's child welfare program. She was a lifelong choir member and now a volunteer worker in the church's telephone reassurance program with elderly shut-ins. In the preceding week she had had similar dreams on two consecutive nights.

Although she had not lived away from her parents until she married, in the dreams she appeared as a 12 year old at a summer camp. Each
morning the entire camp attended a religious service. In the first dream, she was wearing one shoe and one sneaker. Although campers were expected to wear sneakers, she had lost one when her canoe overturned. She awoke still feeling the dread that her peers would notice and ridicule her. In the second dream, she wore sunglasses in the chapel because her eyes were tearing from the glare of the lights and candles. Again she awoke feeling anxious about the other campers’ reactions. In her dream analysis, she attended to many metaphors. She interpreted “being 12” as being in transition and the chapel as the religious identity that tempered each transition in her life. She had married in a chapel and had not “slept away” beforehand. The uncomfortable affect in the dreams, however, led her to revise her perception of her religious identity. Of the many associations she made with footwear and sunglasses, she noticed that her solutions to the problems in both cases drew attention to herself, which she found threatening. The sunglasses suggested that attention to her own needs was equivalent to posing as a starlet. She was showing the ability in her life review to question whether she had loved herself enough while she was trying to love her neighbor.

The Metaphysical Self

The third kind of guiding paradox occurs when older adults review their lives from the perspective of the metaphysical self, which appears in the imagery of many mystical traditions. For mystics, the metaphysical self refers to “the depths of people’s hearts where neither sin nor desire nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality, the person that each one is in God’s eyes” (Merton, 1966, p. 208). Here God’s esteem is the foundation for self-esteem, with each self residing in God’s unconditional acceptance. From this perspective, shame-filled older adults can accept themselves because God already has.

The metaphysical self is a paradoxical lens with which to review memories, for it does not enable reviewers to trace how it has healed and sustained them throughout their personal history. They can only approach life review in attentive passivity, awaiting those gifted intimations that may serendipitously reveal the metaphysical self in their reminiscences. One reviewer discerned “how God wrote straight with crooked lines” in her life.
Another recognized a providential design in her life review and applied it Psalm 139:5: “You have hedged me behind and before, and laid Your hand upon me.” A third was able to glimpse in his reminiscences the significance of extenuating circumstances, ambiguities, and nuances of meaning that he had not previously weighed and that now encouraged more compassionate self-acceptance (Magee, 2001).

I assembled from public libraries copies of mystical classics from a variety of religious traditions, highlighted chapters especially relevant to the metaphysical self, and encouraged the participants to read excerpts they found intriguing and exchange them with one another. The culturally idiomatic expression in works from Middle Eastern and Eastern spirituality can be particularly engaging, and typically elicits an expansive exchange of insight, self-disclosure, and continuing feedback. Even residents with no religious beliefs were curious about mysticism and participated in an effort to compare its expression in different traditions.

The following were among the most popular quotations chosen from the sources I distributed:

“The soul is so completely one with God that the one cannot be understood without the other. One can think heat easily enough without fire and the shining without the sun, but God cannot be understood without the soul nor the soul without God, so utterly are they one” (Meister Eckhart, in McGinn, 1986, p. 167).

“One went to the door of the Beloved and knocked. A voice asked, ‘Who is there?’ He answered, ‘It is I.’ The voice said, ‘There is no room for Me and Thee.’ The door was shut. After a year of solitude and deprivation he returned and knocked. A voice from within asked, ‘Who is there?’ The man said, ‘It is Thee.’ The door was opened for him” (Kwaja ‘Abdullah Ansari, 1978).

“In seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees nothing other than Himself” (Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi, 1982, p. 85).
“Man’s essence is only the soul that is within him, which is a portion of God above. Thus, there is nothing in the entire world except the Holy One” (the Maggid of Mezhirech, in Uffenheimer, 1993, p. 74).

“You are my face. No wonder I can’t see you” (Rumi, in Breton & Largent, 1998, p. 168).

Sarah was an 86-year-old unmarried woman, a retired potter, who had supported herself by selling her fine crockery at fairs along the East Coast. Her compulsive management of time both hid poor self-esteem and ensured prodigious volume. She rigidly scheduled her time and felt agitated whenever she was interrupted or underproductive. This discomfort permeated her life review as well. She repeatedly compared her reputation and productivity to the artistic success of her grandparents and great aunts and uncles in Europe. On a deeper level, she intuited an anger toward her parents for their fervid expectations for her artistic career. She did not actually feel this anger so much as it aggravated a competitiveness that detracted from her ability to delight in her work for its own sake. An indeterminate sense of loss permeated her life review.

She had already perused several of the mystical authors and reported that she had found the metaphysical self to be a theme that evoked a mood of wonder rather than self-criticism. Before, she would have exhumed from her life review incidents of recycled frustration. Now, she appreciated the irony that God’s unconditional acceptance of her meant God’s embrace of a self in large part prescribed by her family’s programming. In fact, she could finally enjoy the paradox that the sources of her personal talents were in her entanglements in family relationships.

Daniel was a retired dentist, 81 years old. He reminisced at length about his lifelong commitment to civil rights. He recalled the challenges in creating dental clinics for migrant workers, mentoring minority interns, and serving Medicaid patients others had turned away. However, he was despondent over his hidden satisfaction in seeing himself as more honorable than those who had not taken the same risks he did. He was fixated on the idea that his work had all been self-serving.
When he finished speaking, group members joined in a spirited discussion about the severe, emotionally loaded words Daniel used to assess himself. A colleague observed that the dentist's concern about the purity of his intentions was preventing him from acknowledging that everyone's behavior is the result of multiple motives. Another commented that he needed to know and love himself with the compassion with which God knows him and loves him. "You're right, of course," Daniel answered. "I recall from the sources we read how God addresses each person, 'As far as my love for you is concerned, it does not matter whether you change or not, for my love for you is unconditional" (de Mello, 1984, p. 164).

**CONCLUSION**

Mental health professionals and graduate students in nursing, social work, psychology, pastoral counseling, and gerontology can use the guiding paradoxes to complement their strategies for addressing recalcitrant problems involving older adults' life review. Facilitators conducting groups in senior centers, YMCAs/YWCAs, libraries, parishes, and skilled nursing residences can adopt many of the paradoxes to amplify the benefits of life review. Family members, confidants, clergy, and physicians can use these guidelines for reframing the memories older adults share with them. Older adults who are aware of the benefits of life review can use paradoxes to evoke reminiscences that suffuse their personal history with the conviction that it is good enough.

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