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Confidants Help Older Religious with Life Review

James J. Magee

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In a previous article in this journal (Magee, 1984), I described the findings of my dissertation concerning the life satisfaction of older women religious. Among the findings I reported a significant correlation between access to a close friend or confidant and a high level of life satisfaction. This article focuses upon that correlation by examining the ways confidants can enhance the spiritual and psychological well-being that proceeds from an insightful life review.

Life review is a form of reminiscence concerned with the meaning that individuals attribute to their behavior in the past. Discerning this meaning is an evaluative process in which persons assess their behavior in terms of the extent to which it conformed to deeply held values. In more profound experiences they may even assess the appropriateness of the values themselves as normative guidelines for personal behavior.

The ease with which older women religious may spontaneously experience occasions of life review is an asset and not an indication of pathology. At each stage of their life cycle they have already drawn upon reminiscences for precedents to guide them in their problem solving, for evidence of reassuring successful performance and for tales available to the raconteur. Similarly, at each stage, crises and transitions have precipitated moments of life review that
assisted them in differentiating themselves within their family of origin, in
recognizing their vocation, and in persevering in their primary apostolate. In
their later years, retirement, chronic ailments, sensory decrements and the
increasing proximity of death have become additional transitions and crises
that elicit life review (Lewis and Butler, 1974).

These experiences of life review, then, are familiar opportunities that
older religious have used over the decades to assess the trajectory and progres-
sion of their lives. Life review in these later years, moreover, confronts them
with the persistence of their personal limitations and can move them to
exclaim with St. Augustine: “Our hearts are made for You and they shall not
rest until they rest in You.” The memories evoked in life review may be
seen as parables that encourage older women religious to reflect upon the
goals they have pursued, to perceive the ways in which God has shared in
their personal history, and to affirm the metanoia required to give God first
claim to their hearts. By appropriating their own past, they can experience
life review as a purposive, not merely spontaneous, activity revealing the
significance of their individual existence.

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

Sharing the memories, emotions and self-assessment evoked in life review
is essential in order to derive meaningful insights from them. Older women
religious who do not discuss their recollections with a confidant are prey to
their own selective memories and to the defense mechanisms in service to an
easy self-esteem. Some communities facilitate this sharing by sponsoring
groups devoted to life review. The participants are usually attentive, expecting
to receive this same respect in their own turn. Similarities in scenes and themes
remembered 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 achiev-
ing personal insight. For older women religious without a confidant, these
groups are essential. For others, these groups can complement the special
assistance that confidants can provide.

Usually discomfort or gratification with an event or relationship in the
current experience of an older woman religious precipitates recall of earlier
scenes which involved her with the same issues or themes. However circuitous
the association of memories may be, issues or themes that are emotionally charged eventually lead to memories of early family relationships. A confidant who is familiar with the family lore, expectations and values that the older religious has shared over time and who may even have a close relationship with the extended family can be especially helpful in assisting the reviewer to bring a peaceful closure to these reminiscences. As a result of this familiarity, the confidant is positioned to recognize how the reviewer’s problematic relationships and counter-productive behavior that occurred as a member of the community or in assignments were recycled and adapted from her patterns of functioning in her own family.

Confidants should encourage older women religious to appreciate life review not only as individual reminiscence but primarily as a family reminiscence. “The tree of the knowledge of good and evil” can be seen as a metaphor for their own family tree; original sin a metaphor for the cumulative effect of the limitations, liabilities, weaknesses that their families have transmitted to them and that they have internalized within their own personalities. This familial orientation provides them with a perspective for assessing the hazardous inheritance they have made their own.

Although older women religious may have lived the greater part of their lifetime in the community, some reactiveness to those issues that have been toxic within their extended family for generations inevitably remains. Like their kin, they internalized at an early age their family’s attitudes toward these toxic issues. Later in the community they may or may not have reassessed their thinking about these issues, but the original emotions associated with these attitudes maintain a lifelong liability. 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?).

Toxicity appears in the inability of family members to resolve the issues. Instead, members react with such anxiety when the issues occur that their denial, projection and overreacting entrench the issues and transmit them to the next generation. The disproportionate number of abusive parents and alcoholics who were raised by abusive and/or alcoholic parents, testifies to the intractible power of toxic issues.

A process of triangulation ensures the transmission of toxic issues over generations and their persistence throughout a lifetime. 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 any other emotionally charged relationship, e.g., with colleagues or superiors in the community (Fogarty, 1975).

Sometimes older women religious may feel disheartened when life review traces patterns of triangulated 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 of the family into which they were born.

This insight has often dissipated anxieties that life review of issues still unresolved initially evoked. "More tortuous than all else is the human heart, beyond remedy; who can understand it?" (1 K 8:38) This is both a religious and a psychological query. John (1 Jn 3:20), however, responds: "God is greater than our hearts and all is known to him." The reply focuses not only on God's omniscience but also on God's winning engagement with the tortuousness of our personalities.

Life review, then, can reveal how God accommodates this tortuousness so that her/his engagement conforms to our "personality profile."

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 women religious to discern God's caring presence in their own lives on those occasions when, enmeshed in toxic issues, they were able to engage in acts of timorous advocacy for someone oppressed, of disgruntled forebearance 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 concur with reviewers that emotions evoked by life review may be discomforting, even unnerving. For this malaise is itself an invitation to prayer, to share the upset with God, to stay in creative passivity to receive God's healing. Thus, when memories elicit upsetting emotions, reviewers can turn them into occasions of gratitude for having been able to proceed beyond those troubling events. If older women religious are struck with the losses in health, professional roles, or friendships they have sustained, perhaps by their own doing, this companionate review can help them to accept these losses as "a part of the dying and rising which Christians must undergo in the experience of conversion" (Studzinski, 1985, p. 96).
The claim that God is a ready companion for life review does not assure that older women religious 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 confirm a life of losses and failures.

Many older women religious, however, report a common passage through this aridity. First, they complained to God about the distance that they felt from her/him and about the gloom or agitation that their memories enhanced. Then, they began to stay with the emotion, to be flooded by it rather than to resist it. Eventually, through association they remembered similar episodes that they had survived or even managed to “muddle through.” The mood would gradually begin to lift. Finally, they did feel God-with-them, continually drawing them to seek God out. For them the process of their seeking God was clue to God being already at hand.

Confidants help, too, by encouraging older women religious to expand upon the metaphors, symbols and pictures that their imagination associates with episodes or themes from their life review. An image that “fits” the feelings and self-assessment it epitomizes seems to “package” reminiscences so that they feel more manageable for ongoing review. Older women religious 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 incomplete or distorted understanding of the past.

Reviewers can use these images in prayer, sharing with God the meaning that they hold for them and discerning God’s response as they “enter” an image through their senses. On the eve of her surgery for a knee replacement one woman religious recited a snippet of Edmund Waller’s Old Age:

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 her conviction that the “battering” which aging imposed through decrements and limitations had become an occasion for prayerful understanding that otherwise might not have occurred.

Older women religious who use life review as a spiritual way concur that it has helped them to recognize their lifelong progression in understanding their relationship with God. One shared 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.

She recalled her resolve as a novice to a “letter perfect” observance of the
rule of the community and the "hard edges" of the images of God that she held fast. Among the graced moments in her reminiscences she singled out the leave she had received to tend to a terminally ill unmarried sister. She remembered the tension she felt, as a confirmed workaholic, sitting by her sister's side and champing with a sense of aimlessness. Certain that only love had sustained her in her role of "being with" instead of "doing," this memory had strengthened her preferred perception of God as the Unconditional Lover.

Confidants are also helpful when they attend to the themes that reappear in the reminiscences shared with them. On the one hand, these themes may point to some current discontent which confidants can help to remedy. A frail religious whose deteriorating condition indicated that she should enter the community's infirmary discussed recollections replete with incidents of loss and bereavement. The confidant accompanied her in visits to the facility, arranged for discussions with the staff and meals with the residents, and facilitated additional visits from friends in the community during her first months in the facility. Acceptance of her new environment was evident in the new focus of her life review upon her successes in responding to different challenges that confronted her at each stage of her life.

On the other hand, the recurrence of themes may indicate that the reviewer has not yet accepted them as integral elements of her own personal history. Confidants help reviewers to achieve this self-acceptance by attending non-judgmentally to the content that is shared, the interpretations made about events remembered, and to the feelings accompanying the narrative.

Confidants can help by recommending that others who are knowledgeable about the events remembered join in the discussion. Sometimes these expanded discussions reach a consensus about facts that may alter judgments based upon less accurate data. Sometimes the additional parties were protagonists in the events and they are able to share how they felt at the time and how they feel now.

Confidants can help by affirming the accomplishments that older women religious demonstrated in the scenes remembered. Often the reviewer is concerned about errors in judgment or failures in character. The confidant does not engage in debate but comments upon the reviewer's ability both to proceed beyond the event and to return to the event in reminiscence despite the discomfort involved.

This attentiveness on a confidant's part requires particular self-control. Often older women religious may raise in life review issues that are no less toxic for the confidant. A confidant's anxiety can precipitate interruptions, a change in topic, or a reluctance to participate at all. Sometimes a confidant has strongly identified in a given issue with the other parties from whom the
reviewer is estranged. Sometimes a confidant realizes that she is currently distressed with the older religious over the same issue that the latter has raised as one especially painful for her to address.

A confidant can buttress self-control by approaching her role in a spirit of enlightened self-interest. When a confidant's primary objective is reducing the control of toxic issues in her own life, it is easier to attend without judgment to triangulated relationships and toxic issues in the life of another. Awareness of the parallels between the reviewer's situation and her own tempers the confidant's readiness to offer glib advice or patronizing insights. Confidants are more helpful when they admit that the life review they are witnesses to is a resource that they can use for themselves.

Life review does impress upon older women religious that they will die "incomplete," constrained by family issues and without having realized their potential to become all they are capable of being. A religious perspective confirms, however, that this is not the last word. Completion is ultimately God's work, for it encompasses inclusion in the very life of God an invitation to grow "to the full maturity of Christ the head" (Ep 4:25). Indeed, life review can trace the subtle ways in which God has been drawing older women religious to full maturity and can station them in creative passivity to live fully the time remaining to them. A confidant's caring attentiveness must be valued among those ways.

REFERENCES