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Using Poetry as an Aid to Life Review

James J. Magee

ABSTRACT. Growing numbers of gerontological settings have discovered that poetry is a readily accessible resource to prompt and enrich life review among groups of older adults. Participants can sample poems at their leisure, reflecting upon them and the memories they evoke from their own lives. Many older adults find poetry replete with images and themes that express the meaning of events and relationships that surface in their life review. References to these images and themes are especially helpful in easing the participation of introverted or troubled older adults.

Growing numbers of settings that service older adults have been developing programs to enhance the process of life review. Adult care and long term care facilities, Ys, Senior Citizen centers, public libraries, and organizations sponsored by parishes and synagogues have initiated groups in which participants can share their reminiscences with one another. The only investment may appear to be educating the staff member involved concerning the nature and benefits of life review.

DEFINITION OF LIFE REVIEW

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

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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 focuses attention upon the connectedness of their past with their current sense of themselves, evoking memories of formative experiences that influenced their personal development (Merriam, 1980).

Life review is seldom a coherent progression of memories. Usually it proceeds circuitously through reverie, reflection, 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.

**BENEFITS AND RISKS OF LIFE REVIEW**

The benefits of life review are significant. Older adults use their recollections to assert the continuity of their identity throughout their life cycle. They use it to cope with current stresses by drawing upon the skills and self-confidence that aided them in comparable situations in the past. Ultimately, they use it to achieve “ego-integrity” by evaluating their personal history and finding it “good enough.”

Training a staff member, however, does not ensure the success of groups devoted to life review. Some older adults are very private persons for whom life review is an experience unshared, except perhaps in journal entries. Others prefer to share their recollections only with a trusted friend or family member. Still others may participate, only to become increasingly depressed, rather than affirmed, by the groups sessions.

In this third category, Butler (1963) identified three groups. One group consists of those who “have consciously exercised the human capacity to injure others.” Many of these people cannot imagine that they could be forgiven by those whom they have injured.
They feel that no recourse exists to undo the personal or societal harm they have inflicted, to provide restitution, nor to draw a modicum of good from the evil they have perpetrated. Often they appear obsessed with a theme or event, discussing it with one listener after another. Somerset Maugham’s observation about reminiscence is poignantly relevant to members of this group: “What makes old age hard to bear is not a failing of one’s faculties, mental and physical, but the burden of one’s memories” (Maugham, 1959).

Butler described the second group as characterologically arrogant and prideful. This group may overlap with the previous group, but not all its members necessarily have undertaken directly hurtful actions. Their narcissism is probably particularly disturbed by the realization of death.

Members of this group use life review not to appreciate the gratifications that their memories recall, but to accentuate that their accomplishments and sources of life satisfaction are now behind them. Moreover, because they have built their self-esteem upon recognition for their achievements and affiliations rather than on their inherent worth as human beings, they view aging as distancing them further from the bases for their self-worth.

Life review may also lead to depression for a third group who have tended throughout their life cycle to live in the future. Their memories surface a lifetime of opportunities missed because they were focusing upon tomorrow rather than upon today. Feeling powerless to modify their future-orientation and seeing death as foreclosing further opportunities, they despair over a life that appears to them as wasted.

Staff members facilitating life review groups should be alert to detect members of these vulnerable groups when they grow depressed, and encourage a referral to an appropriate mental health service.

**USES OF POETRY TO ENRICH LIFE REVIEW**

This article proposes that settings which sponsor life review groups consider the benefits of using poetry to enhance the fruitful participation of older adults. The procedure is simple. Staff members distribute anthologies of English language poetry to the partici-
pants. Excellent anthologies by Allison (1983), Baldwin and Paul (1985), Campbell (1983), Clark and Gillespie (1979), Friebert and Young (1982), Johnson (1969), Nims (1981), and Williams (1980), are readily available. The staff then invite the older adults to select poems for their next session which express themes that have been prominent in their own lives.

Introverted participants are pleased with the opportunity to talk more about the poems than directly about themselves. Troubled participants identify themselves by choosing poems which reflect their depression and anxiety. In explaining the reasons for their choice, they often touch upon the characterological issues that are currently bothering them. All have the advantage of choosing poems that they can be comfortable discussing. They can also listen to the sentiments of colleagues who often elaborate upon the significance in their own lives of the themes and images that others have brought up.

In general, most older participants 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. Some older adults have already identified favorite verses that express a dominant theme in their lives. The verses may be chosen from the works of their favorite bard or selected from poems treating a treasured subject, such as nature's beauty, marital and parental ties, or perseverance in adversity. Others, who in their earlier years may have been indifferent to poetry, are often attracted later to images that recapture a deeply felt experience from their own lives.

The following sections describe the ways in which older adults used four poetic themes to enhance meaning and comfort in their life review. The themes concern (1) the attributes of older adults, (2) the value of reminiscence, (3) providence, and (4) death.

**The Attributes of Older Adults**

Older adults use poetic imagery to express their own experience of how it feels, of what it means, to be older. The following examples come from older adults who were participating in an oral history project sponsored by their local public library. The staff had
asked the participants the week before to identify a poetic image that corresponded with their experience of aging.

Florence spoke up first. She was a widow who retired from her realtor’s career after she suffered a disabling stroke. She read from John Keats’ “Ode to a Nightingale”:

Fade far away, dissolve, and quite forget
What thou amongst the leaves hath never known,
The weariness, the fever, and the fret
Here, where men sit and hear each other groan;
Where palsy shakes a few, sad, last gray hairs,
Where youth grows pale, and specter-thin, and dies;
Where but to think is to be full of sorrow
And leaden-eyed despairs,
Where Beauty cannot keep her lustrous eyes,
Or new Love pine at them beyond tomorrow.

She identified a “peaceful perseverance” as the characteristic which she associated with her own life. For her each day was a challenge to accept and ennoble the chronic physical limitations that beset her later years. The cadenced dignity Keats gave to her sometimes wearisome task helped to sustain her resolve.

Marvena, on the other hand, was a vigorous volunteer in an adult literacy program. She recited from Tennyson’s “Ulysses” to confirm the value of her “noble work”:

Old age hath yet his honour and his toil.
Death closes all; but something ere the end,
Some work of noble note, may yet be done,
Not unbecoming men that strove with gods.

More than all other characteristics, however, poetry exalts the wisdom of older adults.

Louise, age 77, was also a volunteer, a foster grandparent. Six months before, however, she had had to interrupt her participation in the program for open-heart surgery. Grateful for the extension of her health and without children of her own, she saw in the well-being of her foster grandchildren fruits of her own generativity. “I
am doing something that matters, and I have a poem about it." With that she read from John Masefield's "On Growing Old":

So, from this glittering world with all its fashion
Its fire and play of men, its stir, its march,
Let me have wisdom, Beauty, wisdom and passion,
Bread to the soul, rain where the summers parch.
Give me but these, and though the darkness close,
Even the night will blossom as the rose.

Although there appeared to be nothing extraordinary in Louise's commitment to the program, she knew that she had received the "wisdom and passion" the poet longed for.

**Reminiscence**

The incidence and content of reminiscence among older adults has also been a serious poetic theme. Many older adults find in the treatment of this theme an affirmation of their attention to the past. At a retirement community in southern New Jersey, the instructor for a continuing education course in creative writing provided multiple copies of anthologies of British and American poets. For their first assignment, the participants were asked to respond to any poem concerning reminiscence.

Francine began the next class session by reading from Shakespeare's "When to the Sessions of Sweet Silent Thought":

When to the sessions of sweet silent thought
I summoned up remembrance of things past,
I sigh the lack of many a thing I sought,
And with old woes new wail my dear time's waste;

* * *

And moan th' expense of many a vanished sight;
Then can I grieve at grievances foregone,
And heavily from woe to woe tell o'er
The sad account of fore-bemoaned moan,
Which I now pay as if not paid before.
She had written at length about the pertinence of the poem to her own experience. She mentioned estranged relationships and failed goals that smarted in her memory as self-imposed and that continued to pain her now that she had endured their consequences.

Neighbors in attendance had heard Francine raise these points before. Mario spoke next. He introduced his remarks by saying that he “heard” the despondency which the sonnet echoed for Francine. He thought, however, that memory, when shared, contains its own relief, projecting the rememberer into the future. He preferred “The Descent” by William Carlos Williams:

The descent beckons
    as the ascent beckoned.
   Memory is a kind
of accomplishment,
    a sort of renewal
even
an initiation, since the space it opens are new places
    inhabited by hordes
heretofore unrealized,
of new kinds—
    since their movements
are toward new objectives
(even though formerly they were abandoned).

Mario acknowledged that the “descent” of their advanced years distracted older adults from “new objectives.” Nonetheless, he insisted, memory is not merely neutral, but in service of “renewal,” of wholeness and healing.

Dorothy Ann sought the floor next. She had rummaged through the texts of poetry until Robert Southey’s “Remembrance” struck her with the verse:

Life’s vain delusions are gone by;
Its idle hopes are o’er;
Yet Age remembers with a sigh
The days that are no more.
She appreciated the manner in which it expressed an ambivalence inherent in reminiscence. She recognized that on occasion she felt twinges of nostalgia even for periods that had been filled with “delusions” and dead ends.

**Providence**

Older adults who are religiously motivated often look to poetry for images of providential guidance in their lives. Some rely upon explicitly religious images but many find in the symbols and metaphors of secular verse compelling witness to a divine companionship that they now recognize had managed “to write straight with the crooked lines” of their personal history.

At an ecumenically sponsored community center for older adults, a long established coterie of women had been discussing their favorite poems. Agnes spoke up first. She had discovered an expression of her own belief in William Wordsworth’s “The Excursion: Despondency Corrected”:

One adequate support  
For the calamities of mortal life  
Exists—one only; an assured belief  
That the procession of our fate, howe’er  
Sad or disturbed, is ordered by a Being  
Of infinite benevolence and power;  
Whose everlasting purposes embrace  
All accidents, converting them to good.

The group agreed that events “sad or disturbed” could, nonetheless, reveal a caring beneficence that draws persons to achieve their potential.

Julie spoke up next, prefacing her selection with reminiscences about a compulsion to sabotage the lives of those who befriended her. She found God’s presence in the anguished consequences which finally moved her to examine and moderate her behavior. She addressed God with the words of John Donne’s “Holy Sonnets, XIX”:
Batter my heart, for you
As yet but knock; Breathe, shine, and seek to mend;
That I may rise and stand, o'erthrow me and bend
Your face, to break, blow, burn, and make me new.

Lucia, the oldest member, was a bit taken back by Julie’s intensity. She clarified that God is present, too, in less tempestuous ways. For her, God maintained a constant fidelity, however failing or distracted she might be. In keeping with her own experience, she chose from Edith Lovejoy Pierce’s “Thou Art Within Me Like A Sea”:

Thou art within me like a sea,
Filling me as a slowly rising tide,
Thou art within me like a sea at dawn.

She asked to read a second piece, this from Edmund Waller’s “Old Age,” that continued the theme of God’s fidelity. The losses and decrements that accompany aging, she suggested, are really opportunities for self-knowledge and self-fulfillment. She read:

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

Death and Dying

Older adults find many images in poetry that express their own sentiments toward dying. The following examples of imagery are from members of a life review group who were living in a hospice residence.

Ephtihia was in her eighties when she died. Two weeks before her death, she read from “We’ll Go No More A-Roving” by Lord Byron:

For the sword outwears its sheath,
And the soul wears out the breast,
And the heart must pause to breathe,
And love itself have rest.
She commented that her "soul and mind" had exhausted their "instrument." After a life time of "sharing and receiving love," she longed for a "rest."

Ann Margaret, also in her eighties, was an unmarried woman who had a long career as a nurse. A week before she died, she had chosen John Neihardt's "Let Me Live Out My Years" to illustrate her own stance toward dying:

And grant me, when I face the grisly Thing,  
One haughty cry to pierce the gray Perhaps!  
O let me be a tune-swept fiddlestring  
That feels the Master Melody—and snaps!

She admitted to "a certain bellicosity" toward the prospect of dying which she hoped would not prevent her from some "final feeling of expansiveness."

A third member of the group was Thomas, 79 years old, who had been living in a municipal shelter for the homeless. He refused to share information about his past, but did participate enthusiastically in the group. He had selected a particular poem because it expressed his ambivalence-tinged hopes about dying. He quoted from Pope's "The Dying Christian to His Soul" to illustrate his own experience:

Vital spark of heav'nly flame!  
Quit, oh quit this mortal frame;  
Trembling, hoping, ling'ring, flying,  
Oh the pain, the bliss of dying!  
Cease, fond Nature, cease thy strife,  
And let me languish into life.

He concluded by adding that he was "ready for something better than this time offered" and hoped that upon dying he would find things much improved for him. Then he cited from "The Word" by John Masefield:

And may we find, when ended is the page,  
Death but a tavern on our pilgrimage.
CONCLUSION

Poetry is a readily accessible resource that prompts and enriches life review. Anthologies of British and American poetry are likely to contain some entries for every taste. Older adults can sample poems at their leisure, reflecting upon them privately or sharing the poems and the memories they evoke with a confidant or with a group organized for that purpose.

Many older adults find poetry replete with images that express the meaning of events and relationships that have surfaced in their life review. The beauty and dignity with which poems portray the attributes and concerns of older adults enhance the benefits of their life review. The poetic themes which older adults identify with their own lives are also valuable indicators in assessing those individuals who may be in need of mental health services.

REFERENCES


