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Mysticism and Reframing Memories in Life Review Groups

James Magee, PhD

ABSTRACT. This article presents a pilot project in which reminiscence group members read mystics from several religious traditions to select imagery about the mystical theme of an unconditionally accepted "Core Self." The perspective from "Core Self," in turn, reframes unforgiving judgments some members have made about their personal history, ameliorates meager levels of self-esteem through which they have reviewed their life, and draws from their reminiscences more functional ways of managing current issues. The article concludes with examples of members offering additional insights into the life review of three colleagues that enhance the benefits of the project. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-342-9678. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpressinc.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2001 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

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Life review is a normal, integrative, and often spontaneous process that occurs throughout the life cycle, peaking during the fifth decade and remaining strong thereafter. In this reminiscing, older adults reflect upon their personal history, dwelling on long forgotten incidents and recapturing the emotions that originally accompanied them. Often they are eager to convey these experiences to a listener. These vivid memories may focus upon any period of the life cycle and any aspect of a person's life (Haight and Webster, 1995).
Reviewers draw upon reminiscences for a variety of developmental and rehabilitative benefits. Their memories contain precedents to guide them in problem solving, offering evidence of successful performance and a depository of tales ready for the raconteur (Thorsheim, 1990). Awareness of personal mortality, moreover, increasingly prompts older adults to appreciate the continuity of self throughout the life cycle. In short, life review is an opportunity for older adults to

- assume responsibility for their life story within the cultural context which conditioned its progression;
- appreciate the satisfactions they experienced;
- accept forgiveness for the harm they did and the good they did not do;
- confront the reality that they will die “unfinished”;
- plan, all the while, purposefully for their future (Magee, 1988).

The benefits of life review flow, too, from the structure and dynamics of reminiscence groups themselves. The senior centers, Y’s, libraries, parishes, skilled nursing facilities, and other community settings that sponsor these groups encourage voluntary participation, with publicized agendas and conveniently scheduled meetings. They often incorporate engaging, educational themes that correlate life review with literature, film, art, travel, and historical events. As participants socialize and discover commonalities among themselves, the gradual bonding among members encourages sharing and attentiveness. Members credit one another for persevering beyond earlier traumatizing events, returning now to them in memory despite the discomfort involved, and revising the opinions and sentiments they had at the time of these events (Price, 1995). Such exchanges can move participants closer to appreciating how the details of their lives “had to be and, by necessity, permitted no other substitutions” (Erikson, 1963).

THE CONTINUUM OF SELF-ESTEEM

Group members fall, of course, along a continuum of self-esteem, i.e., the abiding judgment they make about their competence and worth, that lens through which they review their personal history and discern meaning in their lives (Branden, 1994). At one end are older adults with hearty self-esteem. Their reminiscences disclose that, as children, they internalized the positive regard that 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 professed ideals and they ordinarily responded by bringing it into line. Now, as older adults, they live with a self-confidence and self-respect that who they are and what they do continue to matter.

At the other end of the continuum, however, are older adults whose life review shows that they 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 have lived with a haunting assumption that they are persons who remained “fundamentally defective, unworthy, not fully valid as a human being” (Lewis, 1995).

They obsessed that their inferiority was exposed to others who scornfully concurred in their self-assessment. This preoccupation, in turn, aggravated the acute discomfort of shame experiences by raising blame-protection as the primary consideration in decision making, and amplifying any criticism to a global indictment of themselves. Now their life review focuses upon memories of injuries inflicted and received, missed opportunities, and recycled patterns of dysfunctional behaviors.

THE MYSTICS’ “CORE SELF”

For the past three years I have facilitated reminiscence groups in an assisted living residence. I typically merge personal memories with a broader oral history, sometimes using period music scores, decades-old newspaper headlines, members’ photo albums and scrapbooks, or their favorite poems to prompt recall and encourage discussion of the meaning that their memories now held for them.

I invite residents to sign up for five-member groups, each meeting for six sessions. Residents at least moderately alert have participated actively in all the sessions, advertised the benefits of the group by word of mouth, and occasionally joined subsequent groups. Those who withdrew from groups before they concluded have been either less alert or found the experience of life-review exacerbating long unresolved issues. It was in response to this latter group, that I designed a pilot project to enhance the self-esteem
of all the members, while especially benefiting those who had lived with life-long shame.

I advertised that the next two reminiscence groups would address life review from the perspective of *Core Self*, a theme which appears in the imagery of many mystical traditions. I assembled from public libraries copies of mystical classics from a variety of religious traditions, highlighted chapters especially relevant to *Core Self*, and encouraged the new participants to read excerpts they found particularly engaging and exchange them with one another. The new members stayed through all the sessions, and residents who held no religious beliefs were also interested in participating. Some were curious about mysticism and comparing its expression in different traditions. Others found spirituality in experiencing the grandeur of the universe as a wellspring of awe from which *Core Self* flowed. One quoted Dag Hammarskjold's (1964) conviction, "We die on the day when our lives cease to be illumined by the steady radiance, renewed daily, of a wonder, the source of which is beyond all reason."

*Core Self* presents a metaphysical, rather than socially constructed, foundation for understanding self which members can use as a new perspective for reviewing their reminiscences. From this vantage point, they can appreciate the significance of relationships, extenuating circumstances, ambiguities, and nuances of meaning that they had not previously considered and that can now elicit more compassionate self-acceptance. Drawing upon G. K. Chesterton’s epigram that “the essence of every picture is the frame,” this new perspective reframes their reminiscences (Kenner, 1948). Even though the events and relationships recalled remain unaltered, the change in perspective alters their meaning and mood.

For mystics *Core 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). Here God’s esteem is the foundation for self-esteem, with each self residing in God’s unconditional acceptance. Accordingly, my initial orientation to the group about the theme of *Core Self* included the following excerpts from mystical sources:

Between God and our soul there is neither wrath nor forgiveness. For our soul is so wholly united to God that nothing can interpose . . . .

Though we find in ourselves anger, contention, and strife, still we
are all mercifully enclosed in God’s mildness and meekness. (Julian of Norwich)

The Tao gives birth to all beings, ... creating without possessing, acting without expecting, guiding without interfering. (Welch, 1966)

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)

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)

Then during the ensuing weeks participants themselves perused the authors of several mystical traditions. Some wanted to recover the "saying" of a beloved author that they tentatively recalled, others were curious about content of traditions other than their own, and many chose randomly from sources with which they were thoroughly unfamiliar. All returned in the following weeks with selections they identified as illustrative references to Core Self. A sampling of their findings includes:

In seeing your true self, He is your mirror and you are His mirror in which He sees nothing other than Himself. (Fakhruddin ‘Iraqi)

Whether they know You or not, all creatures bend but toward You. All love for someone else is but a whiff of Your perfume: none else can be loved. (Rumi)

Penitence is present in the depths of existence because it was projected before the creation of the world, and before sin had occurred there had already been readied the repentance for it. (Kook)
Our soul sits in God in true rest, and our soul stands in God in sure strength, and our soul is naturally rooted in God in endless love. (Julian of Norwich)

The experience underlying ‘Love they neighbor as thyself’ has to be the experience that the other is no other than myself. (Aitken and Stendl-Rast, 1996)

Persons will enter the life of glory but individuals will not. Personality—our way of relating to others—remains, but individuality—which separates us from one another—disappears. (Teilhard de Chardin)

**REFRAMING REMINISCENCES**

Reframing life review from the perspective of being unconditionally accepted had three results. First, without distorting the details remembered, they attended more to the background of their memories, to the unquestioned assumptions guiding relationships, and the intergenerational transmission of family rules and roles. In lighter tones they discussed their personal history as “the fruits” of their “rooted self.” Finally, they discovered untried strategies for managing current issues involving self-esteem.

One participant, for instance, recounted how she had not attended a movie or live theater show for the last fifty years because she had become so anxious about “having to monitor her reactions to plots, scenes, and dialog that might be salacious.” This prompted another to own that she still shyly followed her mother’s example of asking the butcher for “chicken chests,” rather than “chicken breasts.” They could laugh with the group now because neither felt alone. Both had finally distinguished the differences between inhibition and modesty, and even asked group members to shout out during movies shown at the residence, “Here comes a hot scene!” The good humored compliance of their colleagues wonderfully defused the anxiety that had been in place.

Another member’s reminiscences recycled the theme of reluctantly conforming to others’ expectations, withholding her own opinions to avoid criticism, and yet worrying about others ignoring her. She buried her self by appearing pleasant when she was angry and entertained when bored. She took responsibility for the feelings of others, in effect, letting their mood determine her own acceptability.
Her family regarded references to one’s own needs as weakness. The received motto was simply, “You have to dip-to-rise on your own,” i.e., learn how to cope with new situations until you achieve a higher level of performance. The process never ended, however, since solutions to earlier problems became new problems and accrued knowledge became obsolete. Even harder for her, she seemed “to dip” without a corresponding “rise.” In the course of a single year, for instance, she added cumulatively to her schedule of working in her husband’s shop babysitting her granddaughter, then caring for her terminally ill father, and, finally, attending to her mother’s clinical despondency.

From *Core Self* she learned that she was already accepted and had no need to earn it. In reframing her recollections she saw how her exhausting self-denial was also a denial that she even had a self. She concluded that over the decades she had, in fact, “risen” repeatedly to cope with crises, even when she had made them more difficult than they needed to be. A colleague interjected at this point, “But the ‘rises’ feel slight compared to the severity of the ‘dips.’ That’s all right. Listen,” and she quoted:

> Is my gloom, after all,  
> Shade of His hand outstretched caressingly.  
> –The Hound of Heaven

“That’s it,” she replied to the colleague. “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.’”

A third participant was a retired fire chief. His reminiscences were replete with incidents of him rejecting his supposed “rejectors” by spitefully thwarting their authority. For example, when he had 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. He “showed” them by foregoing college and joining the fire department directly after high school. Only after his parents’ deaths did he begin college courses in the evenings and take the examinations culminating in chief. This regimen, however, had 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.”

From the inclusive perspective of Core Self, however, he recalled the family folklore about the relationships between each of his parents and their own parents. His grandparents had mislabeled their children’s efforts at self-expression as disloyalty or eccentricity and, in turn, affected his own parents’ parenting. Other members encouraged him to read histories, biographies, and historical fiction about political, economic, and religious practices that could have affected his grandparents’ attitudes toward their children. What he learned about the intractability of issues and 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.”

CONCLUSION

The imagery of Core Self, drawn from a variety of mystical traditions, did reframe the content of shame-driven memories among the members of this pilot group. The perspective of Core Self freed them to review their personal history compassionately, rather than judgmentally, be less reactive to praise and criticism, and more trusting of their own experience as a source of wisdom. It evoked attentiveness to personal boundaries and opportunities for mutual support within the pilot group. Indeed, these initial, though very limited and anecdotal, findings encourage more elegant research into the effects of integrating mystical imagery, Core Self, and reminiscing. One participant summarized the effects upon her by musing that she can finally follow her beloved poet Rilke’s (1978) admonition:

Be patient toward all that is unresolved in your heart. . . . Try to love the contradictions themselves. . . . Do not now seek resolutions, which cannot be given because you would not be able to live them, and the point is to live everything. Live the contradictions now. Perhaps you will then gradually, without noticing it, live along some distant day into the resolutions.
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