The Relevance of Life Review to the Vowed Life

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The Relevance of Life Review to the Vowed Life

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In response to the "graying" of their membership, many religious communities have begun to draw upon the reminiscences of their older members as a valued resource. Communities have sponsored groups to tape oral histories of the personalities, geographical sites, institutional crises, and developmental issues for which only the older members can give first-hand accounts. They have asked members who are retired from their primary ministries to record the challenges that invariably confront those who succeed them. They have encouraged them, too, to value the increased involvement in life review that accompanies aging as occasions for healing memories and discerning God's gracious intervention throughout their lives.

Life review is a form of reminiscence in which persons 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 recollections are usually clear and vivid, accompanied by pleasant or uncomfortable emotions varying in intensity.

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 and the Daily Examen**

This description of life review overlaps several of the functions of the daily examen. A critical evaluation of life experiences with a goal of integrating them in an acceptance of oneself here and now is common to them both. Life review, however, is seldom a structured progression of memories. Usually it proceeds circuitously through reverie, reflection, dreams, diary or journal entries, correspondence, and storytelling.

More significantly, life review enhances the fruitfulness of the daily examen by focusing upon the vowed lifestyle as a way of life that can release its members from compulsions that impede their self-actualization and intimacy with God. Like everyone who engages in life review, older religious become enmeshed in memories which join their own personal history with the history of their family. They particularly recognize the ways in which they have mishandled in their own lives some issue(s) that they know various family members have mishandled over generations. In a previous article in this journal (Magee, 1987), I indicated that these intergenerational issues characteristically include the following:

**WEALTH.** (How much is enough? Who has access to it? What is supposed to be done with it?)

**HEALTH.** (Use/avoidance of preventive and rehabilitative services, hypochondria, phobias)

**SEXUALITY.** (Knowledgeability, scrupulosity, homophobia, premarital and extramarital activity)

**WORK.** (Workaholism/inertia, process/product orientation)

**ANGER.** (Forms of expression, targets, repression, degrees of openness to resolving differences)

**RELIGION.** (Freedom to participate/disaffiliate, questioning institutional teaching)

**AUTONOMY.** (What decisions are mine to make? Where can I live? How often am I expected to contact kin?)

These issues recur in families over generations because they have never been resolved. Instead of coping with them when they arise, family members react with a heightened anxiety which spurs demonstrations of denial, projection, and somatic symptoms. One authority refers to such issues as "islands of sensitivity" in a family. When family mem-
bers even approach one of the "islands," no more than a particular kind of look, gesture, word, or tone of voice is needed to arouse an emotional explosion (Fogarty, 1977).

**Life Review and the Vowed Life**

How appropriate, then, that the lifestyle of living in community under vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience should lead religious to confront the very issues which hold such intractable control over most people's lives. Texts concerning formative spirituality consistently emphasize the inevitability of the vowed life engaging religious with their tenacious, problematic attitudes toward status, sexuality, and autonomy. It is to be expected, then, that life review will elicit memories that reiterate the difficulties religious had in observing their community's way of life precisely because that lifestyle addressed issues of exquisite sensitivity in their families.

Consider the situation of a son who intervened between his parents who were estranged over any subject involving finances. The mother, in turn, invested in a compensatory relationship with her son, while the father maintained a deprecatory attitude toward him. The son rallied toward his mother, but experienced increasing anxiety over the intensity of their relationship. Later, after entering his religious community, he remained sensitized to expressions of anger, even disagreement. He was unable to resolve arguments, felt drawn to one member against another, and yet believed he must work everything out between them. Finally, he remained particularly scrupulous about observing the letter of his vowed poverty, and alert to any apparent laxity in the observance of other community members.

A second example concerns a woman religious who was raised in a patriarchal household in which daughters were assigned, without right of protest, the least challenging and most wearisome chores. Although she demonstrated exceptional organizational abilities in her community, she participated only reluctantly whenever her superior asked her to coordinate retreats conducted by a priest rather than by another woman religious. In fact, whenever community liturgies involved several male celebrants, she suffered symptoms severe enough to keep her from attending the services.

A final example concerns a friar who grew up in a tradition-oriented family in which the eldest son for four consecutive generations had assumed direction of the family business. In this man's case, however, he entered his community even though he was the firstborn and had been christened with his great-grandfather's name. He maintains that his
choice of vocation was the only discontinuity with his family of origin. For the family's entrepreneurial orientation and expectations for his ascendance continued throughout his life to compound his difficulties in sharing in the give-and-take exchange of community living and in observing prescribed consultations with his superior.

**Life Review and Depression**

For most older religious, life review affirms their self-esteem as saved sinners, "in Christ, a new creation." Insight into the heritage of their family-based compulsions demystifies so much of their dysfunctional behavior. With faith, they see their frailties of character as graced opportunities "to boast of nothing but the cross of our Lord Jesus Christ."

For a troubled minority, however, life review, like the examen itself, can lead to depression instead of peace. For three groups, life review can precipitate a crisis of conscience and faith. One group consists of religious who "have consciously exercised the human capacity to injure others" and cannot imagine that they could be forgiven by those whom they have injured or by God (Butler, 1963). They feel that no recourse exists to undo whatever harm they have inflicted. Often they appear obsessed with a theme or event, discussing it with one listener after another. Somerset Maugham's (1959) 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."

Members of the second group are those characterologically arrogant and proud. They 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 become disconsolate over a life that appears to them as wasted.

These three groups are in crisis about their spiritual life and their men-
tal health. Their depression requires professional mental health attention.

Conclusion

Increased investment in life review is a developmental attribute of aging. As members of religious communities age, life review becomes a more potent resource. It enhances the quality of the daily examen. It helps religious to understand lifelong difficulties they may have had with their vowed community lifestyle. Finally, it helps in identifying religious who need mental health services as well as spiritual direction.

REFERENCES