

HONORING OLDER ADULTS' STORIES

The Importance of Narrative Care

Bill Randall, St. Thomas University, Fredericton, NB, Canada, brandall@stu.ca

Gerontology and Geriatrics

- geriatrics is a branch of medical science; gerontology is a multi-disciplinary field; but in both ...
- the default focus is to the “bad news” of aging - i.e., deficits, disabilities, disease, death
- aging is seen as a (medical, societal, existential) **problem** to solve, vs an **experience** to explore
- older adults are problematized, pathologized, negativized as “bed blockers”, as a “tsunami”, etc
- dominance of “medical model” & “narrative of decline” - which, sadly, many OA’s internalize ...

Narrative Gerontology

- begins with what we often find most intriguing about OA’s, i.e., the stories of their lives
- sees later life as the “post-mythic stage” (McAdams), “narrative phase par excellence” (Freeman, 2010)
- honours the narrative complexity & uniqueness - the **novelty** - of people’s lives
- focuses on the **inside** of aging (vs outside), on **biographical** (vs biological) aging (Birren et al, 1996)
- sees **biographical aging** as just as important - and intricate - as biological aging
- sees the positive potential of **growing** (vs getting) **old**, and no intrinsic limit to our development
- explores links between the **narrative complexity** of our self-stories & our level of **resilience**
- appreciates the links b/w aging & **memory, meaning, wisdom, & spirituality** (Randall & McKim, 2008)

Narrative Psychology

- ↑ interest in storied complexity of human life - in psychology/therapy, sociology, medicine, etc.
- humans as **meaning-makers**, as **story-makers**, continually (re)composing “*the story of my life*”
- our stories as key to our emotions, relationships, beliefs, identity - to who we are & how we live
- we **story** experiences uniquely: 2 people, same event, different story (form vs content) - **storying style**
- sees identity / autobiographical / narrative development as continuing into later life ...
- ideally(?) → increasingly “good life story form” re **coherence, openness, credibility** (McAdams 2001)
- **Big Story** contemplation vs **Small Story** construction - detachment-immediacy, unity-multiplicity

Narrative Care

- capitalizes on the transformative potential, the healing benefits, of lifestory-telling
- means listening closely **to** a person’s unique story - and **for** their *back story, shadow story*
- is not a frill added to medical care, etc. but is **core** care: i.e., **person-centred care par excellence**
- goes to the “cœur” of who a person is, because it honors their story, identity, who they **are**
- concerns **quality of connection** more than quantity of time; attitude more than activity
- entails helping people tell their stories in ways that make them stronger (Wingard & Lester)

Narrative Environment

- we **story & re-story** our identities with others in families, communities, cultures, religions, etc
- each larger grouping has its own story & own N environment - e.g., a nursing home
- NE’ts involve implicit/explicit codes re telling/listening, authority, airtime (c/w “6 min average”)
- NE’ts mediate prejudices, assumptions, “master narratives” re older adults, old age, aging
- NE’ts can be open/closed, flexible/rigid, growth-enhancing or -inhibiting (e.g., *Fortael for Livet*)

Narrative Openness vs Foreclosure (+ Narrative Loneliness, Loss, Knots, Dispossession, Depression, etc.)

- in NF, our *life* is not over, but we believe our *story* is; we live in “epilogue time”
- developmental tasks of LL entail **storywork**: meaning-making, life review, reconciliation, etc
- main inner resource for facing later life resiliently is a **good strong story** - **Narrative Resilience**
- re-opening stalled life stories so people can get growing again, can re-genre-ate → adventure, etc
- **nursing homes as nurturing homes**: as supportive, empowering, growth-focused, NE’ts

Best Practices in Narrative Care

- NC is listening to & for what a person says & how they say it, plus what they don't: **back story**
- what stories people tell depends on who is listening & how they are listening (**co-authoring**)
- need for a culture of storylistening; deep listening elicits deep telling - **Wisdom Environment**
- there are multiple entry-points into people's unique **storyworlds** ...
- practicing narrative care through **a multi-pronged approach**, e.g.
 - simple reminiscence, guided autobiography, *Fortael For Livet*, resident biographies, good conversation
 - storytelling circles, life-writing groups, one word exercise, story boxes, 1 question per visit, scrapbooking
- **narrative ethics** for narrative care (Baldwin); narrative care for persons with **dementia** (Hyden, Crisp)
- **NC begins at home** by valuing the richness of our own stories (e.g., our "*signature stories*")

Developmental Tasks of Later Life

- to accept - and affirm - the life we have in fact lived, warts and all
- to **"read"** the complex texts (memories, stories) that time has laid down inside us (Randall & McKim)
- to engage in **life review**; to make peace with the past & prepare for the future (including our death)
- to discover, articulate, and celebrate our own unique **Wisdom, Legacy, Truth**
- to deal with **unfinished business**; to say "I'm sorry", "I forgive you", "I love you", "Goodbye"
- to face the challenges of the final phase of life with more **inner resources** and **resilience**
- to appreciate what we've contributed to the wider world & to future generations (**generativity**)
- to **write the last chapter** - The Ending - to our lifestory (**generativity script**)
- to see our lives as part of a larger historical process (e.g., interest in **genealogy**)
- to **make sense** of distressing, traumatic, confusing life events & **assimilate** them into our story
- to experience **redemption** - i.e., find good in the bad of our lives and positive in the negative
- to move from obsessive-escapist reminiscence to **adaptive-integrative reminiscence**
- to navigate the Identity Crisis of later life w/ **a good, strong story** ... of ourselves & our world
- to go from *narrative foreclosure* to *narrative openness*
- to shift from (physically) **getting old** to (emotionally, spiritually) **growing old**

The Healing Benefits of Lifestory-telling (Birren & Deutchman, 1991; Wong, 1995; Pennebaker, etc.)

- A sense of increased personal power and importance
- A recognition of past adaptive strategies and their application to current needs and problems
- A reconciliation with the past and a resolution of past resentments and negative feelings
- A resurgence of interest in past passions, activities, or hobbies
- A greater sense of meaning in life
- An ability to face the approaching end of life with a feeling that one has contributed to the world
- An acceptance of one's past ("all things considered") as significant and worthwhile
- An acceptance of negative past experiences and the integration of them with the present
- A reconciliation of past conflicts and an acceptance of those who have hurt one in the past
- A sharing of traditional values and cultural heritage
- A passing on of the lessons one has learned in one's life, or one's personal wisdom

The Sacred Art of Lifestory-Listening

- is the heart of *Narrative Care*, unsung or unresearched though it's been so far
- is comparatively rare (e.g., we have lots of "Talk Shows" but few "Listen Shows")
- is not invasive, intrusive, or interruptive but respectful, empathetic, and compassionate
- is therapeutic, though not Therapy as such (i.e., think of a time you felt truly listened to)
- listens for verbal & non-verbal both, for posture, gestures, eyes, for telltale themes and sayings
- involves mindfulness of one's own body language, as listener - e.g., posture, gestures, eyes, etc.
- acknowledges our own biases, prejudices, and reactions BUT puts them on hold
- invites the teller to elaborate ("that must have been hard for you"; "can you say more on that?")
- is alert to what is NOT being said, to the stories behind the stories and between the lines
- is concerned with meanings more than facts, with emotional truth more than historical truth
- sees memory not as a video-recording but as selective and interpretive; not as fact, but as *faction*

- finds the teller *interesting*, whoever they are and whatever their story is
- honours the deep meanings embedded in a person's set pieces and signature stories
- is sensitive to the possibility of opening old wounds, of triggering regret or depression, and yet ...
- invites deep telling, which inspires deep listening, which invites deep telling in turn ...
- transforms both the teller and the listener (i.e., facilitates *re-storying*)

FOR FURTHER REFLECTION

Every time an old person dies, it's like a library burns down. (Alex Haley)

There's no story without a listener. (Susan Baur)

A life story is an internalized and evolving narrative of the self that incorporates the reconstructed past, perceived present, and anticipated future in order to provide a life with a sense of unity and purpose. (Dan McAdams)

You can't tell who you are unless somebody's listening. (Sam Keen & Anne Fox)

We make stories about the world and to a large degree live out their plots. (Carol Pearson)

Each one of us makes for himself an illusion of a world - poetic, sentimental, joyful, melancholic, ugly or gloomy according to his nature. (Guy de Maupassant)

Everyone one's life is worth a novel. (Gustave Flaubert)

We are what we remember ourselves to be. (Edward Casey) We are the stories we like to tell. (Roger Schank)

When you are in the middle of the story it isn't a story at all, but only a confusion; a dark roaring, a blindness, a wreckage of shattered glass and splintered wood; like a house in a whirlwind, It's only afterwards that it becomes anything like a story at all, when you're telling it, to yourself or to someone else. (Margaret Atwood, *Alias Grace*)

As the horizon of self-understanding shifts, it may become apparent that we were not in the middle of the story we thought we were in the middle of. Perhaps we thought our life was a tragedy and all along, unbeknownst to us, it was a romance. Or perhaps we thought our life was almost over, at least in terms of the future holding anything new, and it turned out there was a lot more to it. (Harry Berman)

We turn our pain into narrative so we can bear it; we turn our ecstasy into narrative so we can prolong it. We tell our stories to live. (John Shea)

Biologically, we are not so different from each other; historically, as narratives - we are each of us unique. (Oliver Sacks)

In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we "tell about" our lives. ... I cannot imagine a more important psychological research project than one that addresses itself to the "development of autobiography" - how our way of telling about ourselves changes, and how these accounts come to take control of our ways of life. (Jerome Bruner)

... the mysterious thing that we call a self is best understood exactly as a story ... (Stanley Hauerwas)

There are many stories of Self to tell, and many selves to tell them. (Paul John Eakin)

[T]here is little of greater importance to each of us than gaining a perspective on our own life story, to find, clarify, and deepen meaning in the accumulated experience of a lifetime. (Birren & Deutchman)

FOR FURTHER READING

Baldwin, C. (2006). Narrative dispossession of people with dementia: Thinking about the theory and method of narrative. In Milnes, K., Horrocks, C., & Kelly, N. (Eds.), *Narrative, memory, and knowledge: Representations, aesthetics, and contexts* (101-109). Huddersfield, UK: University of Huddersfield Press.

- Basting, A. (2009). *Forget memory: Creating better lives for people with dementia*. Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Chaudhury, H. (2008). *Remembering home: Rediscovering the self in dementia*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Birren, J., & D. Deutchman (1991). *Guiding autobiography groups for older adults: Exploring the fabric of life*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Bohlmeijer, E., Westerhof, G., Randall, W., Tromp, T., & Kenyon, G. (2011). Narrative foreclosure: Preliminary considerations for a new sensitizing concept. *Journal of Aging Studies*.
- Burnell, K., Coleman, P., & Hunt, N. (2011). Achieving narrative coherence following traumatic war experience: The role of social support. In Kenyon, G., Bohlmeijer, E., & Randall, W. (Eds.) *Storying later life: Issues, investigations, and interventions in narrative gerontology* (pp. 195-212). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Coleman, P. (1999). Creating a life story: The task of reconciliation. *The Gerontologist*
- Crisp, J. (1995). Making sense of the stories that people with Alzheimer's tell: A journey with my mother. *Nursing Inquiry*, 2: 133-140.
- de Medeiros, K. (2013). *Narrative gerontology in research and practice*. New York: Springer.
- Freeman, M. (2010). *Hindsight: The promise and peril of looking backward*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kenyon, G., Bohlmeijer, E., & Randall, W. (Eds.) (2011). *Storying later life: Issues, investigations, and interventions in narrative gerontology*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Kenyon, G., Clark, P., & de Vries, B. (2001). (Eds.) *Narrative gerontology: Theory, research, and practice*. New York: Springer.
- Kenyon, G., & Randall, W. (1997). *Restorying our lives: Personal growth through autobiographical reflection*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Kunz, J. & Soltys, F. (eds.) *Transformational reminiscence: Life story work*. New York: Springer.
- McAdams, D. (2001). *The person: An integrated introduction to personality psychology*. (3rd edition). New York: Harcourt College Publishers.
- McAdams, D. (2006). *The redemptive self: Stories Americans tell*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Noonan, D. (2011). The ripple effect: A story of the transformational nature of narrative care. In G. Kenyon, E. Bohlmeijer, & W. Randall (Eds.), *Storying later life: Issues, investigations, and interventions in narrative gerontology* (pp. 354-365). New York: Oxford University Press.
- Randall, W. (2015). *The narrative complexity of ordinary life: Tales from the coffee shop*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Randall, W. (2015). Lives as sacred texts: Toward a narrative theology of aging. *Caring Connections: An Inter-Lutheran Journal for Practitioners and Teachers of Pastoral Care and Counseling*.
- Randall, W. (2014). *The stories we are: An essay on self-creation*. (2nd ed.) Toronto: University of Toronto Press.
- Randall, W. (2013). Aging, irony, and wisdom: On the narrative psychology of later life. *Theory & Psychology*, 23(2). 164-183.
- Randall, W. (2013). The importance of being ironic: Narrative openness and personal resilience in later life. *The Gerontologist*, 53(1). 9-16.
- Randall, W. (2012). Positive aging through reading our lives: On the poetics of growing old. *Psychological Studies*, 57(2).
- Randall, W. (2010). The narrative complexity of our past: In praise of memory's sins. *Theory & Psychology*, 20(2): 147-69.
- Randall, W. (2010). Storywork: Autobiographical learning in later life. In C. Clark & M. Rossiter (Eds.), *Narrative perspectives on adult education: New directions for adult and continuing education*, 126. (pp. 25-36). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Randall, W. (2007). From computer to compost: Rethinking our metaphors for memory. *Theory & Psychology*, 17(5). 611-633.
- Randall, W., Baldwin, C., McKenzie-Mohr, S., McKim, E., & Furlong, D. (2015). Narrative and resilience: A comparative analysis of how older adults story their lives. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 34: 155-161.
- Randall, W., & Kenyon, G. (2001). *Ordinary wisdom: Biographical aging and the journey of life*. Westport, CT: Praeger.
- Randall, W., & McKim, E. (2008). *Reading our lives: The poetics of growing old*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Randall, W., Prior, S., & Skarborn, M. (2006). How listeners shape what tellers tell: Patterns of interaction in lifestory interviews and their impact on reminiscence with elderly interviews. *Journal of Aging Studies*. 20: 381-296.
- Rybarczyk, B., & Bellg, A. (1997). *Listening to life stories: A new approach to stress intervention in health care*. New York: Springer.
- Wyatt-Brown, A. (Ed). (2003). Listening to older people's stories (Special Issue). *Generations*, 27(3).

