HONORING OLDER ADULTS’ STORIES
The Importance of Narrative Care
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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
- 1 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) - styling 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’s involve implicit/explicit codes re telling/listening, authority, airtime (c/w “6 min average”)
- NE’s mediate prejudices, assumptions, “master narratives” re older adults, old age, aging
- NE’s 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’s
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, 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 fiction
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)

[There 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


