



Deep Story: A Way forward in Narrative Gerontology?

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Editorial

The importance of story has long been recognized in the field of aging. But stories differ. In this brief editorial, I want to suggest the benefit of a deep story: radically inclusive of what is unknown or neglected. This will enable a full story to emerge which has the potential to be transforming. While this can happen at any time in life, there are advantages that an older person, with considerable life experience, can bring to this task.

Why story? The value of a personal story or narrative has been appreciated in caring for the aged. Robert Butler developed the idea of a 'life review' which becomes important as we mature [1]. Indeed, Crites noted that narrative is the way we structure human experience, "Consciousness grasps its objects in an inherently temporal way, and that its temporality is retained in the unity of its experience as a whole" [2]. Certain kinds of human understanding are irreducibly narrative in form [3]. This is potentially integrative and therapeutic. Pennebaker and Segal noted some advantages, "The beauty of a narrative is that it allows us to tie all the changes of our life into a broad comprehensive story" [4]. There are narrative approaches in various disciplines, but a few that have interested me include narrative therapy and narrative theology [5,6].

A rich language of story has emerged. The terms include reminiscence, life review, life history and 'story-telling'. These have been used somewhat interchangeably, but some distinctions have been made. Generally, reminiscence is associated with therapy and change, life history with research and life review with the evaluation and re-synthesis of memories [7,8]. It is widely recognized that telling one's story can assist a process of recovery [9].

More recently the field of narrative gerontology has developed [10]. This has been applied in various ways including avoiding "narrative foreclosure" [11], taking opportunities for "narrative repair", and the creative expression of an evolving "life myth" in storytelling [12]. It has been seen as a means of promoting wisdom and finding markers of transcendence [13]. It is a truth about the person "that is always on the move" [14]. All have found benefit with the aged. I would also add that in story there is an easy integration of spirituality. This has also developed into spiritual reminiscence in the work of Elizabeth MacKinlay [15].

It is quite natural for people to tell stories, but the problem is in what is missing. Usually the first chapters are unknown. The story

is 'edited' with unacceptable parts unacknowledged and left out. Sometimes the story has no coherence, leading nowhere, and no overall purpose or meaning. This is what the idea of a deep story tries to address.

The telling can begin at any age. But as we get older we get better at coming to terms with our past, usually gaining a momentum of positive change and often find the courage to face what 'lies ahead'. The key idea is that maturity, gained with age and experience, makes us better able to integrate 'the rough and the smooth' of life.

Ask someone to tell their story. Usually you will get a mixture of remembered incidents and 'stream of consciousness'. Some will show a degree of insight. Perhaps an acceptance of painful events. The story may have a plot with a sense of meaning or life purpose. It may show some coherence. Perhaps even some spiritual understanding. Maybe? Maybe not.

So what makes a story deep? I recommend that the beginning story needs to face a series of challenges. The story teller is encouraged to go deeper through the following actions:

Discover: This refers to the 'early chapters' in which we learn without words. The first challenge is for implicit learning to come into awareness and be given 'voice'. There are practical ways that this can happen such as sentence completion. You might try something like: The most important thing I learnt as a child was... (and finish the sentence a few times and see if anything seems significant).

Test: There is no guarantee that what has been learned will be true. There is an evaluation of the fuller story, through a rational process of comparing emergent learning with wider life experience. This testing is to determine 'what is true for me'.

Integrate: Both discovery and testing leads an inclusive story with a more coherent sense of self.

Re-author: This creates a new theme for the life story. We can choose a new story to guide our living, essentially what would we like our story to be?

Perform: Living the new story is essentially a performance. The spiritual challenge is to do this in a way that benefits others.

I have developed the life tasks model and applied it to aging [16]. I am now working on using it to develop a narrative gerontology in the book I am presently writing.

There is nothing more human than telling a story. The attention is held. If it is a good story it is memorable. The challenge I would offer is to tell a deep story. One naturally expressing spiritual understanding and lived values. Potentially a deep story is life transforming.

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