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Don Redmond

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Don REDMOND
Mercer University - Atlanta

LIFE IS GOOD: A NARRATIVE APPROACH TO GERONTOLOGICAL INTERVENTIONS

“We live in a life immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed. We are in the middle of our stories and cannot be sure how they will end; we are constantly having to revise the plot as new events are added to our lives.”

Donald Polkinghorne

1. Introduction:

The creative use of narrative theory and interventions has become increasingly common with a range of ages. In the emerging sub-discipline of narrative gerontology, story-telling and story-listening techniques can be used to approach developmental concepts such as identity and spirituality (Randall & Kenyon, 2004). This paper will focus on the case study of an extraordinary 92 year old subject and the range of gerontological concepts that surfaced throughout her interviewing process, the construction of a digital story narrated by the subject, and the reflections and lessons learned by the author.

2. The Story of Frances

I (the author) arrived for the first of two interviews with Frances on a January morning in Atlanta, GA. After being invited to the living room in her senior living facility and comfortable introductory talk, I began our digitally recorded interview. This initial session lasted for approximately an hour-and-a-half, then I returned for a second interview two weeks later. My questions were open ended, and although the interview didn't fit a rigid script, my underlying goal was to listen for details from Frances' life so far that involved the display of strengths. Understandably, some focus was on her marriage of 58 years to her husband, of her two children, one of who succumbed to cancer not long after Frances' husband died in the early 2000's. However, the interview also took a decidedly spiritual tone, and as I would learn, this spirituality would provide an important foundation of identity Frances continues to carry with her;

“I was a senior in high school, and one night I heard the voice of God wanting me to be a missionary. I thought ‘this is crazy’; I had never known a missionary. I went to a church where we had services twice a month. I didn't know anyone in full-time Christian work. And just being around anyone like that terrified me. But I kept having this call over and over again, and I could hear it so distinctly: ‘I just want you to be a missionary.’ I thought ‘I will never do that...And I'll never forget it; I got up one night, and the moon was shining, and I went in to my parent bedroom. And I said, ‘God's called me to be a missionary.’ And [my parents] said, ‘if God wants you to do that, we don't want you to do anything else.”

Frances followed the ‘calling,’ to seminary school, where she would meet her husband, and then to 20 years of service as a missionary in Nigeria;

“Somehow I got the impression that when we got to Nigeria, the people there would be so happy to have us, they might bring a brass band!...And I learned right quickly; you know what, we've got to adjust to their way, they're not going to adjust to ours...And the people were just wonderful, I didn't have any problem relating...I have this strong feeling for women's rights and I think it came from that experience.”

Frances' story continued to her more recent past, and as she spoke, it became clear that she was still in Erikson's Stage 7 of generativity, while also displaying a humility that most would link to wisdom. Further,

Frances provided a wonderful example of what Freeman (2011) describes as narrative openness: the ability to continue to evolve independent of lifestage;

“When [my husband] and I retired I continued my desire to help international folk find their way in the USA. It seems new friends pop up constantly. I don’t know why God did that [at this age] but I’ve got such wonderful friends; Muslim, Hindu, even an Atheist are friends of mine. I mean, I don’t know what my role was in that, but they’re sweet and wonderful. I think that what it’s taught me is that everybody’s the same. And you have to make the first move, you can’t wait...my thing is that life is good. I’ve had some pretty rough spots to go through, but life is good.”

3. Reflections

At the Center for the Study of Narrative (CSN) at Mercer University, founded in January of 2014, the author and his faculty, student, and community collaborators use principles of narrative theory to seek out and learn from stories of resilience. CSN is inspired by the work of Erik and Joan Erikson, the developmental and wellness model of the field of counseling, and the positive psychology movement led by Martin Seligman. Further, CSN is also indebted to the examples of Michael White and David Epton and the Dulwich Centre, Molly Andrews and her collaborators in East London at the Centre for Narrative Research, Dan McAdams at the Foley Center, and particularly William Randall at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research in Narrative at St. Thomas University in New Brunswick, Canada.

As CSN has evolved in our first year, we’ve been fortunate to conduct storytelling events with Atlanta-area community agencies serving adolescent and young adult populations having experienced especially difficult life events such as the premature death of a parent, abuse, and homelessness. Doctoral students are at various stages of conducting research by examining the stories of cancer survivors, siblings of victims of interpersonal violence, and women dealing with the diagnosis and emotional symptoms of uterine fibroids. Also, students in graduate level counseling courses have conducted service learning projects involving narrative interviewing, writing research papers, and presenting digital stories of populations that are some combination of ‘other-abled’, recovering addicts, and over the age of 60.

My interviews with Frances became CSN’s ceremonial first interview, and as many of us are learning, being an interviewer can, at the risk of understating, be as least as meaningful as being interviewed. As an example, my interviews with Frances resulted in several lessons and stoked curiosities;

First, it reinforced the fact that first impressions are not always accurate. When I sat down to interview Frances, I had little knowledge of her other than her age, and a referral who suggested she was spirited. Upon noticing Frances’ distinct ‘Southern’ accent more prominently as she shared, “I was born in a small town in South Carolina...” an immediate concern flashed into my mind: could a white woman growing up during this era possibly be unaffected by the deep-seated racism and classism of Jim Crow oppression?

Then, moments later, I saw why I along with many writers, counselors, and readers are drawn to narrative, particularly first-person narratives: they are often full of fascinating surprises. My education was further reinforced in creating Frances’ digital story, with the significant help of doctoral student, Cherry Hymes. When Frances viewed a ‘first draft’ of the digital story, she mentioned that the only thing missing was enough emphasis on her current life (obvious to me in hindsight, though not so at the time!). As McAdams discusses within a “life story” model of identity, Frances seemed to be immersed in a post-mythic stage where people “recast, revise, and retell their own life stories so that the past is seen as giving birth to the present and the future, so that beginning, middle, and ending make sense in terms of each other.” (p.143).

Secondly, with advances in medicine, technology, and health-related research leading to both an increased life expectancy and richer experiences for adults in later life, perhaps the profession of counseling, and the field of narrative, should focus more on sharing the stories of someone like Frances? Could it help inspire others to form a future narrative based not on decline but on interpersonal adventure and new opportunities to experience generative activities?

Third, upon hearing of Frances’ five grandchildren and five great-grandchildren, if future generations had access to digital stories about their ancestors, narrated with the actual voices of these relatives, might this help with the formulation of one’s own identity?

4. Epilogue

In early November of 2014, toward the end of an eventful year at CSN, including a CSN-sponsored Narrative Theory study abroad course—culminating in Paris at the 2014 *Narrative Matters* conference with a wonderful workshop led by Bill Randall for Mercer’s graduate counseling students—an unexpected ‘evite’ popped up in my electronic mailbox. Frances was hosting her annual “International Thanksgiving Dinner.” Thanksgiving is a U.S. holiday originating in the 1600’s and in addition to giving thanks and family gatherings, it’s known for eating. As I would learn, Frances’ version of the holiday was a ‘potluck’ and guests were asked to bring a dish from their home country. So in addition to food from the USA, delicacies, and friends, came from

India, Indonesia, Canada, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Trinidad & Tobago, Turkmenistan, Russia, China, Ivory Coast, Ethiopia, Mexico, and Sweden. And perhaps one of the guests most cherished by Frances, a Mercer doctoral student studying ways to help women back in the student's home country of Nigeria.

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