

LIFESTORIES: PAST AND PRESENT STORIES CONSTRUCT THE FUTURE

This narrative describes my work with an older adult group called Lifestories. Through the use of a "talk it, teach it, do it" approach, group members uncovered the dominant stories of their past and present. Talking about death as a life event aided both the worker and the group members to construct future lifestories.

by
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Since high school I've had a personal and professional interest in older adults that's become more serious as I grow older. As I approach mid-life, my work with older adults appears like self defense, that is, "If you can't beat them, join them." Most older people I've worked with genuinely seem to like me. I'm energetic and optimistic, and try to treat them with respect and regard. I found that taking on the therapist role made it easier for me to work with them: I can be in charge, and keep a professional distance. However, when I dropped that role, I learned more about the meaning of life and death.

This narrative is about a group I developed, called Lifestories. Eight men and women, ranging in age from 77 to 86, volunteered to meet as a group each week (8 weeks) to explore their own and each others' dominant life narratives: to discern how their primary stories influenced the character of their lives and impinged upon the present, and how they might be used to construct a future life story.

I knew that I wanted to try to combine traditional talk, storytelling, and some experiential games. Although there is a good deal of published work on group work with older adults,

there is not much on the use of experiential education approaches with this population. The idea of using the dominant story came from my interest in experiential education. These approaches appear to help facilitate change by assisting persons in examining and altering their dominant stories. My plan was to use experiential exercises each week to facilitate the group's dialogue. Discussing death and dying, I believed, would facilitate the work on the stories — as death plays a critical role in life's story. Our final product was an experiential group where older adults reconstructed their stories by talking, doing, and teaching.

Ask What If?

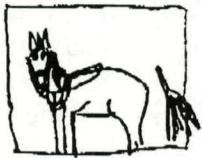


TALK IT: FORMING THE GROUP

Recruiting group members was a fairly easy task. The activities director of a retirement

community simply let residents know that I was looking for people interested in actively participating in a storytelling group. Prospective members were told that sensitive topics such as death and dying would be discussed.

After my initial meeting with the activities director, we began the group. We played games to remember names, and exercises geared toward getting to know each other and to examine values and beliefs. The games were fun and initiated trust and mutual aid in non-threatening ways. I must admit that the formative stage threatened me. I was afraid that the group members would view the games as childish and insulting. I found quite the contrary: group members seemed to have a great time. There was always lots of laughter and open sharing. In fact the group was so open that the exercises and games soon became unnecessary.



STORYTELLING

Before each member told of his/her dominant past and present story, I took the initiative to begin. Although my usual style is non-disclosure, I felt that this group experience warranted experimentation. I told them that the central theme in my life story was that by being a student and academic achiever, I captured my parents' approval and affection

and, that these traits structured my identity.

Through the members' narratives, we discovered themes of helpers, tenacious workers, and spiritual souls. Through each story we distilled that which described each person, and how the descriptive themes were used in his/her present story. Since they all knew each other through their shared living, they were able to provide examples of how major themes of each person's story were played out. For example one member's history, identified as a helper, was designed around assisting others:

Ruth's Story

Ruth was raised in a wealthy family in the East, surrounded by material goods, and had been protected from the world. At one time bodyguards had become a part of her daily life because of threats to her family. Her story was like that of a fairy tale princess growing up in a castle. She reported that in spite of a privileged upbringing, she was unhappy and lacked satisfaction. To satisfy her longing for meaning, she sought to serve others in any volunteer capacity she could find.

Ruth initially apologized to the group for having nothing of interest to say. Repeatedly, she said that she hadn't worked or done anything worthwhile on her own, and had led a sheltered, protected life that wasn't worth much. Immediately, I focused on her volunteer service, and the meaning it had in her life, and the lives of others.

Group members rein-

forced these attributes as they spoke about her current helping efforts at the retirement center. She had some difficulty acknowledging that she actively gave and served others in her current life, and found it difficult to acknowledge her own contributions and deem them worthy.

There was nothing magical or even complex about this part of the group process. As the worker, I played an active role in facilitating the discussion. I took the lead in making the connections and drawing out the discussion. For example, with Ruth I explored the meaning of volunteerism by asking her what would it say about me, if I did what she did. Finally, I spoke more directly. The same attributes she assigned me described her as well. For the most part, the group members were open, generous, and supportive.

John's Story

Although John had volunteered for the group, he was not an active participant. Shy and reticent, careful with words, he rarely commented or voiced support. Although he said that the group was important to him, he did not go beyond the statement. John and his wife, the only married couple in the group, always sat together on a love seat while the others frequently moved around. At some point, John and his wife began to sit apart. I think it might have been in response to the group members' subtle messages.

A common topic during the formal meetings and before the group began, was about being

a widow, being alone, and adjusting to loss. At times, I thought there were expressions of animosity toward John: the other members' husbands had died, and he remained. There was no direct comment by any group member, but John's physical presentation may have made him appear to the others as incapable of empathy.

When John was asked to tell his dominant life story he wove a tale of early poverty, struggle and fierce family loyalty. From his earliest days, he worked long and hard on the farm to support his family. He told of his family's financial ruin during the Depression. He spoke of his feelings and those he cared for. Previously, it had been about work or business. His self disclosure was powerful and allowed us to experience his other dimensions.

One of John's life challenges had its roots in his physical appearance: a scarred complexion and a large bulbous nose. I had wondered what his story was, as I'm sure the others had. John told his history of terrible acne and the ridicule he endured as a young man. As he talked we saw and felt his pain. I think for the first time, at least in the group, John cried. The members reacted with concern, support, and understanding — and a few reached out to touch his arm. John continued his exploration, describing the severe infection in his nose that he had contracted as a youth. At that time, few antibiotics were available and money was sparse. The infection cannibalized the tissue of his nose, leaving him seriously disfigured. John presented it as if — he went through high school

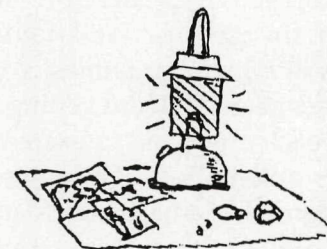
without a nose. Later he saved enough of money for plastic surgery. It still left him disfigured.

His self disclosure propelled John into the group, out of the marginal position that he occupied. Members told him of the strength, tenacity, and loyalty they observed in him at the retirement facility. We also talked about the way that John tended to be outside of the group and that trust did not come easily. Undoubtedly, this was rooted in the cruel treatment and words of others he experienced growing up. Learning about his struggles helped us understand his perseverance, sensitivity, loyalty, and work ethic. Following John's story, he became more talkative, extended himself to others more than he had in the past, and at times reached out to physically comfort others in pain. Throughout the course of the group experience, John trusted others more and, eventually, became the participant leader, organizing activities and calling members to remind them of group events.

TRANSITIONS

Before we moved into the next group phase, I asked the members to share personal mementos that symbolized their stories. Once again, this was an attempt to solidify the dominant stories. For example, one member told a story of her love of the outdoors and adventurous spirit as she passed around old camping equipment, lanterns, and memorabilia from her early experiences in the Girl Scouts. With others we saw pictures, held jewelry, and saw many beloved

items. These objects were used to give further detail about their life-stories. I think seeing and touching these concrete objects reinforced the stories as they made the themes appear more solid.



TALKING ABOUT DEATH

To complete the "Talk It" phase of the group, we decided to construct future stories, and to determine how the strengths and weaknesses of past stories contributed to the present and the future. It has sometimes struck me that older adults frequently lack a future story and function without a defined future direction. I also know that there is some consistency in the life story over the years, and that the strengths of the past and present can be used to construct a future. One of the ways we began was to explore the topic of death. I knew that loss and death were events of great significance in their lives. I also knew that even though society is more open to discussing and witnessing death than it has been in the past, there are many taboos. I have seen this in my class on death and dying. Students seem able to discuss death in fairly abstract ways with each other. When older adults in the classroom, the discussion seemed more sub-

dued. The bottom line is that it is not easy to discuss death with people who are waiting outside its door.

In the group, we began by sharing our ideas about life, death, and the afterlife. I was an

active participant in this process. This was the point in the group that frightened me the most. What would I do if members refused to talk? What would I do if someone lost control? Who am I to try to facilitate a discussion on death with people who are closer to the event than I? Most importantly, what would I do if I lost control? I had lost my father four years ago, and still had grieving to do. What would I do if I couldn't handle this kind of discussion? I felt apprehensive, self-conscious, yet excited that I would be breaking new ground for myself. I had spent a professional career being in charge and safe, and I was now ready to take personal and professional risks. On the other hand, I felt safe. I cared about these people. Their faces lit up when I came in for group. I knew I had a lot to learn, that they accepted me, and were open to teaching me.

I began by talking about my dad, and how I watched him go downhill physically before he died. I also shared what I found to be positive aspects of this experience. I grew closer to my father as he died, and I wished that we could have achieved this kind of intimacy when he was alive. Despite the fact that he was headstrong and rarely showed that he was vulnerable, he let us take care of him in the end. He rarely complained, and I am able to say that we had some of our best times together as he was dying.

I believe he knew when he was about to die since he withdrew. My brother and I didn't realize that he was in the process of dying. Looking back, I now know that dying is a process one goes through. It was late at night that

I witnessed his passing. He was just sixty, strong, and had given to others. He was my role model. On the other hand, there was something peaceful about his death. When it finally happened, he seemed to just let go. I told the group that I felt that by being with my father when he died, I had learned a lot about the process of living and dying.

After I shared this story, some members told of their grief over the loss of spouses and children, with the more outgoing members taking the lead. Everyone had experienced widowhood, sometimes twice. There was talk about the emptiness they felt and the sense that their best friend was gone. Tears were shed and support poured out among the group members. Others had witnessed the deaths of their loved ones, and recalled many images and feelings. They felt that it had been a privilege to be with their loved one at the end, and that lessons about life were learned through the process of death.

It was deeply moving to see older adults recalling their spouses, feeling the pain of the loss, and having others know exactly what they had experienced. This sharing seemed to solidify the group, and it became a safe place to share and grieve. This was demonstrated by the affirming statements and physical touching between group members.

In a way, I felt like an outsider during this phase of the group as I had not experienced widowhood. Even though some had been widowed for many years, they said that the pain was still intense. The thought of go-



ing through this myself is frightening — the sense of loss and emptiness seemed so deep. A few of the group members had also lost children to death. The members added that this pain was the most unspeakable.

Other discussions focused around the fear of dying. When I ask the students in my death and dying class what they fear about dying, they typically reply — fear of being buried alive or that there is no afterlife. They also were fearful of a violent, painful death. On the other hand, the group members anxiety was about becoming a burden, especially to their children. They wanted to die with some dignity, in their homes surrounded by the ones they loved. But like the students, they too feared pain. They seemed at peace with the idea that death was coming, and only wanted it to come in peace. These sessions were difficult, yet profoundly meaningful.

As the facilitator, I took a fairly non-directive, supportive role during this segment of the group process. Being a mother, it was devastating to hear another mother talk about losing her baby at birth. After all, it wasn't that unusual in their time for birth trauma to result in a stillborn baby.

We ended by talking how talking about death is really about life, and that understanding and forming beliefs about death helps shape the future story. This segment of the group was critical. As the facilitator and group conveyer, I felt responsible for the group's emotional safety. I had tried to help create a trusting and caring environment, as had the group

members. Yet, as we all know, talk about death and grief uncovers hidden feelings and issues that intensify emotional reactions.

FUTURE STORIES

With this in mind, we proceeded toward the future within a framework of past and present, and beliefs about death. This might seem like an unusual approach, but I believe that you cannot help older persons develop a vision of the future without incorporating their feelings about their last task on Earth. To begin to address present accomplishments and satisfactions, we identified the three things that could be said about us if we died today.

Most responses fell into the categories of family, work, and personal characteristics. Members said that they had been good parents, hard workers, and good honest people, obviously supporting positive self-feelings. Others identified areas where they had fallen short particularly in not spending enough time with their families. For example, one member said he had focused solely on work in his life. Another said that she had been introverted and a loner.

Following this assessment, group members modified their list and included three things that they would like to have said about them if they were not facing imminent death. Changing the exercise was geared toward assisting clients to reexamine who they are, and who they want to become. When not facing death, we have more time to make changes. This illuminates what we would like to do if given the chance.

Some of the statements that emerged were: She was a great grandmother, He was well educated, She was a very loving person, She was outgoing and sociable. These were additional things that the group members wanted to be said about themselves if they had more time. These statements formed the basis for setting goals, and were used to illustrate ways future stories could be enriched and past weaknesses corrected. Due to time constraints, we did not set goals for all group members. However, we began to move toward goal setting in the construction of the future story. For example, the member who stated that she was a great grandmother was encouraged to connect with her family. The member who wanted to be well educated was encouraged to explore local college options. What this illustrated is that talking about death is really and most fundamentally about life, and the life-affirming power of continuing the life story. This exercise also emphasized that change and growth are always on the horizon, and may alter our life story.

TALK IT, THE WORKER REFLECTS

Looking back, I think that many of the group members had a rough time discussing death, as I certainly did. Although I have described the emotional nature of our discussions, in the early phase most conversations were about the deaths of relatives and details that need to be covered at the time of a death. Participants wanted to talk about funeral arrangements

and the cost of death rather than the feelings associated with it. Surely, it's easier to place the discussion at this level.

The superficial narrative was more comfortable for me as well. I was uncomfortable with sharing the intimacies of death. I also felt that I had no right to push them in directions that they did not want to go, as this brought out many of my own fears and insecurities. If I've learned anything from working with older adults, it is that you must and will confront your own mortality in your interactions. Despite my many years of work with older adults, the journey down this road is still scary. Facing death is unpredictable and it carries with it a sense of illegitimacy. These feelings made me feel like an imposter—someone who "hadn't been there" and couldn't understand.

In the midst of my soul searching, it was a twist of fate that helped me and changed the entire tone of the group. My brown Labrador retriever was found dead by the road by animal control the day before a group meeting. My family loved this dog dearly for nearly 9 years, and we were devastated. When I came to group the day after Casey's death, I wanted to share this experience. I was distraught and tearful about the loss. I was aching and felt safe that I could share this pain. I was hoping to get support, love, and care. I hoped that after I shared my grief

I could continue with group. I certainly wasn't prepared for the effect my story would have.

Almost immediately, the members shared stories about the loss of their pets, some of which had been dead for ten years. The superficial nature of the sharing was gone, and we were down to raw emotion. They had moved to a deeper level of sharing and trust. It was almost like the floodgates opened and the river began to flow. From that point on, the group members were able to talk about their fears and issues in more meaningful ways.

TEACH IT

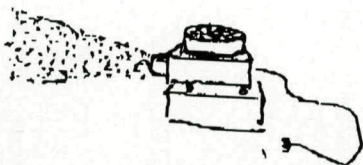
To solidify and reinforce the dominant stories, we asked group members to teach us something that represented their dominant stories. Again, this technique came from my interest in action oriented methods of working with people. As such, I was hoping that by asking the group members to teach their dominant stories would be yet another way of reinforcing their themes for themselves and each other. This request produced a great deal of anxiety. Here were wonderfully accomplished people telling us that they had nothing to offer, and that there wasn't anything that they could teach. It was also difficult at first for the group members to see the relationship between their stories and the teaching.

It struck me that those of us in the helping professions often act as teachers and tell older people how to act, what to try, and what to talk about. Rarely do we put them in the role of teacher. This role was hard for me to give

up, since I was used to being in control. I was nervous that this part of the group would flop, and that the participants would not cooperate or that it just would not be meaningful. I was anxious about giving up control. Again, this related to my training as a therapist which taught me to be in charge, and to take responsibility for individual and group sessions. Some members were enthused about teaching, while others reluctantly agreed to participate. The topic, format, and presentation were the responsibility of the member in charge of the particular meeting. We had wonderful sessions on the intricacies of the postal service in the 1940s, the birth of a career in girl scouting which led to national recognition, and on the mysteries of reincarnation. John presented an hour-long slide show depicting his experience in World War II.

Once this segment of the group got underway, interest increased. People dressed up, prepared notes, and obviously put a great deal of time and effort into their presentations. Some members were quite nervous, and had shaky hands and voices. Despite their style, it was clear that this challenge was taken seriously and was a powerful learning experience for the group members and myself.

We learned about the Depression and other events that I have never experienced. They had all lived through essentially the same period of time. They laughed about the good times and became teary about the bad. It almost seemed that these discussions helped buffer the sense of loss that many of these people



had, as they were talking about common life events. A sense of enthusiasm also seemed to grow in the group. Members began to arrive early for group and the atmosphere was positive. I enjoyed this phase of the group, and admired the breadth and depth of experience that group members had to offer.

PROCESSING THE TEACHING

Following the teaching, our task as a group was to determine how the participants' dominant story was revealed through their teaching. This was done at my direction with a great deal of processing. We saw the tenacity and strength of our member who was a postal service worker and had learned to overcome physical disability. We learned about reincarnation and alternate realities from our spiritually oriented member.

To solidify the dominant stories in the teaching experience we helped identify major themes. This was sometimes difficult, and some of the group members were uncomfortable with having their stories analyzed.

The final part of our group asked participants to put their dominant stories into action. Its purpose was to give people ideas about how to continue their stories into the future. Once again, learning through experience expanded definitions of self. With each member as an excursion leader, we've been behind the scenes at the post office, had a tour of a historic cemetery, and visited a local hospital to compare modern facilities with those of the De-

pression era. We also have a visit to an art museum to look forward to! Each group member choose an activity consistent with or representative of his/her dominant story. This was yet another way to promote growth, and to help develop a sense of the future.

We're still in the process of completing this phase of the group. I envision tying the "talk it, teach it, do it" theme together with some intense processing and work on constructing future stories. This last phase of the group will be a challenge and will require more active participation on my part. Perhaps we will write short essays detailing how "talk it, teach it, do it" has revealed and illuminated the stories. We must then use these insights to create a future story. I am committed to helping the group conceive of a future. If aging is about continuity, then a future story must certainly be there.

Lifestories has been a process, not only for the participants, but for me as well. I have learned that carefully directed storytelling can lead to a more focused present and a potentially richer future. In the course of hearing the intimate thoughts and fears of others, I have had to delve deeper into my own self to examine the demons and fears. As I have asked the group members to move out of their comfort zones, so have I.

At this point, I am unsure what direction the Lifestories Group will take. I do know that I've learned about the value of the story—the narrative of a life. I've also learned about listening to and being open to the value of the story in defining and shaping a life. Finally, I've realized that

many older adults have not constructed a future story. For many, life goes from day to day. Through capitalizing on the past and its impact on the present, I believe that this group assisted its participants in beginning to construct and alter their future stories. It has been an honor for me to be part of this process. □

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