



Spiritual Reminiscence & the Search for Meaning

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Aide Memoire by Glen Sorestad

The world begins and ends in memory;
what I remember is what I am.

Did that blade of grass I plucked
as a boy to vibrate with my breath

really burst the air with shrillness?
A remembered world holds truth

and realities far clearer than echoes.
In the cupped hands of remembrance

the thin green reed of what we are
trembles with a sound so rare.

From: *Leaving Holds Me Here: Selected Poems*. Thistledown Press, 2001.

The Importance of Addressing Spiritual Concerns in Healthcare

- Patients who have regular spiritual practices tend to live longer, have a more positive outlook and better quality of life, and tend to have enhanced recovery from illness and surgery.
- Treatment teams can amend therapeutic protocols to help patients achieve the dreams and goals that give them meaning, especially for those nearing the end of their lives.
- Practicing a compassionate presence ensures that patients are not ignored or forgotten by healthcare professionals, as is often observed in dying patients.

Puchalski, C. M. (2001). The role of spirituality in health care. *BUMC Proceedings*, 14, 352-357.

What is Spiritual Reminiscence?

- Based on research conducted by **Elizabeth MacKinlay** (**Spiritual Growth & Care in the Fourth Age of Life**, London & Philadelphia, Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2006)
- a process of assessment to determine where the individual is on his or her spiritual journey
- an acknowledgment of the need for human connection and the spiritual dimension of each person

Spiritual Reminiscence ...

- is story-telling by the resident with a focus on reflecting on life events (a “life review”) and exploring the meaning of those events
- captures the person’s story in relation to his or her spiritual life journey as an individual who:
 - is part of a family and community; and
 - who is in relationship with the Divine

Purpose of Spiritual Reminiscence

- to make connections between the resident's past, present, and future
- to encourage sociability and the formation of new relationships
- to confirm a sense of unique identity and encourage feelings of self-worth
- to assist in overall assessment of functioning and the formation of care plans
- to preserve and transmit cultural heritage

Through Spiritual Reminiscence ...

- a resident may:
 - find meaning in their present life and grow in the acceptance of changes in life
 - experience transcendence and find hope in spite of feeling vulnerable
 - become empowered to find inner sources of healing and acceptance

Spiritual Reminiscence ...

- may result in a resident experiencing anger, guilt, or regret in relation to a memory.
- through revisiting the memory and re-examining it with the help of a spiritual care practitioner, the resident may find some therapeutic value.
- re-examination may allow for forgiveness of self, others, and the Divine.

Spiritual Reminiscence involves:

- a two-step process:
 - taking a **spiritual history** (i.e. broad questions regarding a person's involvement in a particular faith tradition, significant activities and relationships, and general coping strategies)
 - **asking questions** to elicit a person's own life story and spiritual reminiscence.

Spiritual Reminiscence Topics

- Ultimate meaning in life
Who or what means the most to you in your life?
- Response to ultimate meaning
Is religion and/or spiritual life important to you? If yes, in what way?
- Transcendence of loss and disabilities
Has your faith helped you in coping through difficult times? If yes, how?
- Moving from provisional to ultimate meaning
Looking back over your life, what do you remember with sadness? With joy?
- Finding intimacy with the Divine and/or others
Do you ever share your struggles and joys with God?
- Finding hope
Are you hopeful? What do you hope for?

In the Fourth Age of Life ...

- residents become even more conscious of their own mortality and are easily invited to engage in meaning-making in terms of their personal lives
- residents may be assisted in sharing their life story through putting together a “life storybook” which is a scrapbook contains photographs, mementos, written recollections, favourite souvenirs, or other valuable items.

Life Storybook ...

- is a “living, working document” that can be changed or expanded as needed.
- may involve a loose-leaf binder with plastic pages to hold writing, pictures, and other items.
- is very individual and personal and must be treated with respect. It is up to the owner to decide if visitors can have open access or if it is to be viewed on a selective basis.

Key Concept ...

- spiritual reminiscence is not about relying on the resident's memory to ascertain the veracity of events
- it is about the articulation of meaning as perceived by the storyteller when exploring life events
- this allows people with cognitive difficulties to participate in spiritual reminiscence sessions

Study:

Spiritual Reminiscence Sessions

In 2010, E. MacKinlay and C. Trevitt conducted a study where older adults with dementia, living in aged-care facilities, were allocated to small groups for spiritual reminiscence.

MacKinlay, E., & Trevitt, C. (1996). Living in aged care: using spiritual reminiscence to enhance meaning in life for those with dementia. *International Journal of Mental Health Nursing*, 19(6), 394-401

Results

MacKinlay and Trevitt found that:

- spiritual reminiscence is an effective way to give emphasis to meaningful questions of older people that are often otherwise not explored.
- reasons for not exploring them included: lack of time on the part of staff, staff feeling ill-equipped to deal with patient responses, and the belief that the older adult would be unable to communicate adequately to respond.

Following one session, a participant confirmed this, saying: “Thank you. It is not often I get to talk of these things.”

More Results ...

- As well, MacKinlay and Trevitt found that the group sessions helped the participants of the aged-care facility relate to each other in a more effective way. Observations during the reminiscence sessions included physical support between group members: hand touching or a hug.
- Additionally, the participants were able to remember week-to-week session times and location, exclaiming: “Oh, I cannot believe it's Thursday again!” This was unexpected of patients with dementia, suggesting the importance these reminiscence sessions held for the participants.
- The spiritual reminiscence sessions were also valuable as they gave the nursing staff an opportunity to connect with those with dementia in a deeper and more meaningful way.

Briefly ... one resident's story

- Mary – a 95 year-old resident with a long list of co-morbidities including congestive heart failure, renal failure, pleural effusion, macular degeneration, and amputation of leg above the knee
- wife (her husband died 5 years ago), mother, grandmother, great-grandmother
- Ukrainian-Catholic farmwife who raised two daughters
- Her faith and family have been extremely important to her
- She finds meaning and hope in her continuing relationship “with Jesus” and with her daughters and their families. She keeps interested in church and in recreational activities at St. Joseph’s.
- She is at peace with those around her and is at peace with her eventual death, knowing that she will be “with Jesus”.

Why is this important?

- MacKinlay emphasizes that our story is part of our identity and the sum of our being. We don't just have a story, but we *are* the story.
- Our stories have a spiritual aspect since they express what is meaningful to us in life and constitute the process whereby we create and discover our personal identity.
- Through spiritual reminiscence, residents can begin to reflect on the meaning of life events. In this way, they can grow in their self-understanding and gain resources to move forward into the future.