Narrative Works

Aging, Spirituality, and Narrative: Loss and Repair

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Résumé de l'article

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In this paper, we explore how narrative loss may impact upon one's sense of self and the spiritual process of meaning-making and purpose. We argue that we are narrative beings that make sense of our selves and our social, physical, and ideational worlds in and through narrative and that this process, which involves matters of purpose, truth, and values, is at one and the same time a spiritual activity, as both spirituality and narrative involve a sense of openness and indeterminacy, and the generation of meaning and purpose. As we age, however, physical, mental and social changes may disrupt how we narrativize our lives, and social and ideological (or meta-) narratives might frame what stories we can tell, and how we can tell them, in ways different from the past. We explore some of the narrative losses associated with aging and then, drawing on practices in spiritual direction, discuss some possible ways of countering such losses, in particular the development of narrative literacy, the re-ignition of narrative desire, the making of narrative connections, and the deepening of autobiographical reasoning. In this way, we hope to illustrate how narrative works in the spiritual lives of older adults.

Our starting point is that storytelling is part and parcel of being human. "We are story-narrating animals, ceaselessly creating stories and dwelling in story-telling societies" (Plummer, 2013, p. 209). Further, the stories we tell construct and reconstruct our lives, bringing personal chaos into order (Plummer, 2013). This process of narrativization—that is, shaping our lives through storying—spans all aspects of our lives and as such is deeply important to our sense of self, our understanding of others, and our functioning in the world. Narrative as a meaning-making process—articulating goals and purposes, and inscribing truth and values—is, we suggest, a spiritual activity, and here we are interested in the links between narrative, spirituality, and aging.

As we age, however, changes in ourselves and in how others see us may constrain or curtail the narrativization process. We may become less able to construct our lives narratively and may have fewer

opportunities to do so. Further, societal metanarratives of aging may corral the types of stories that we can tell or that can be told about us. These threats to the narrativization process we call *narrative loss*.

In what follows, we seek to explore these themes: the narrative self, spirituality as a narrative process, narrative loss, and what we might do in order to address those losses, to narratively repossess those whose stories are under threat. This is a preliminary sketch, designed to raise questions about the nature of the issues and proffer a tentative suggestion of what might be done.

Narrative and the Self

There has been much written on the relationship between narrative and the self. Much of the extensive literature on the subject can be located within two very broad traditions. In the first tradition, narrative is viewed as reflecting the self and as a means, therefore, of gaining access to the self, providing a sort of window onto the world of the individual. In the second tradition, the self is viewed as constituted by, in, and through narrative—our own and those of others; without narrative of some form or other there is no self. These we will refer to as the *epistemic* and the *ontologic* positions, respectively.

The epistemic position is represented by social science research that seeks to understand the experience of individuals and groups and is akin to the mystery story in which the reader, faced with a series of events, facts, places, and people is called to find out "what happened"—that is, by the desire to know (see Ryan, 2008). This process is encapsulated in Haglund's (2004) discussion of the elicitation and analysis of life histories of adolescents:

> I analyzed data by using a modified type of narrative analysis … I divided transcripts into narratives, then condensed them into adequate paraphrases. The *elements of each narrative* that the participants emphasized most heavily *formed the adequate paraphrases*. I entered the paraphrases into NVivo and coded them, eventually *revealing* themes related to descriptions of sexual abstinence and to contextual influences of sexual abstinence. (p.1311; emphasis added)

In this approach, the narratives of individuals (or groups) are worked on to discover or reveal that which already exists, though hidden or below

the surface, the narratives themselves being the means of discovery. The pre-existing self is thus made visible, an object of scrutiny and surveillance.

In contrast, the ontologic position understands the self as constructed and performed in, by, and through the stories that individuals tell about themselves, finding expression in the philosophical works of authors such as Ricoeur (1992) and Carr (1991); psychological tracts such as Schechtman's (1996) *The Constitution of Selves*; and Bruner's wide-ranging works (e.g., 1987a, 1987b, 1990, & 2006). The position is encapsulated in Oliver Sacks' (1998) words: "We have, each of us, a life-story, an inner narrative—whose continuity, whose sense *is* our lives. It might be said that each of us constructs and lives, a 'narrative,' and that this narrative *is* us, our identities" (p.110). But the role of narrative in the construction of the self is wider than Sacks' "inner narrative." The self is, in a deeply Bakhtinian fashion, dialogic (e.g, see Hermans, Kempen, & van Loon, 1992; de Peuter, 1998); that is, the self is not simply constituted by the individual through an inner narrative but in the interaction of the individual with other selves and with wider communal, social, and discursive narratives:

> *I am a self only in relation* to certain interlocutors: in one way in relation to those conversation partners which are *essential to my achieving* self-definition; in another in relation to those who are now crucial to my continuing grasp of languages of self-understanding—and, of course, these classes may overlap. A self *exists only* within what I call "webs of interlocution." (Taylor, 1989, p. 36; emphasis added)

These "webs of interlocution," or what we might term *circulating narratives*, constitute the narrative environment of lived experience. While this environment is not deterministic, it is does act as a moulding force on the self. To misquote another of Taylor's (1991) works: "No one acquires the [narratives] needed for self-definition on their own" (p. 33).

This ontologic position seems to be gaining ground in narrative research and (though perhaps to a lesser extent) in health and social-care practice. This approach forms the basis of our argument in this article and so the promotion of narrativity and the creation of narrative unity can be seen as part and parcel of pursuing the good life in the Aristotelian sense of *eudaimonia* or human flourishing (see MacIntyre, 1984).

In taking this approach, we are not unaware of the criticisms leveled against it by authors across disciplines such as Dershowitz (1996) from law, Strawson (2004) from philosophy and literary criticism, and Tammi (2006) from comparative literature, all of whom view the extension of the narrative metaphor to be detrimental to our understanding of "real" life. Here is not the place to engage in a thorough debate, only to say that the arguments presented by each of these authors is undermined by their limited presentations of narrative. Dershowitz (1996), for example, criticizes the narrative approach on the grounds that not all narratives are dramatic (in the Chekhovian sense), and that life is messy with much that is trivial and meaningless:

> Everyday life, after all, is rarely structured by the canons of dramatic narrative … In real life, most chest pains are indigestion, coughs are colds, insurance policies are followed by years of premium payments, and telephone calls are from marketing services. (pp. 100-101)

While we would agree that not all narratives are dramatic, even in the law, within which discipline Dershowitz is writing, this argument can go only so far as saying that some stories are mundane—a view with which we would agree and which does not undermine our argument that life is narrativized. Strawson (2004), from the stance of philosophy and literary criticism, opposes narrative as linear *and* extensive, arguing that some people do not experience their life as a narrative whole but episodically. Again, we would agree, but this does not undermine our argument that life is narrativized; Strawson's episodicity seems to allow for the narrativization of shorter spans of time and events, which are then linked, not by an overarching sense of life as story, but in other ways, such as links between similar stories, links by meaning, links by people or place. Finally, Tammi (2006) is limited by his reliance on sequence *and* point (or moral) as necessary features of narrative. Certainly there are stories that demonstrate sequentiality leading to a point (moral), but there is nothing inherent in a story that requires this to be so. We are not in opposition either to sequentiality or to stories having a point, but to insist that a story must have both is to limit one's appreciation of what constitutes a story. By the criteria established by Dershowitz, Strawson, and Tammi, many fictional narratives would not pass muster; see, for example, Brooke-Rose's (1975) novel *Thru*; Saporta's (2011) book-in-a-box, *Composition No. 1*; or Joyce's (2001) hypertext fiction, *Afternoon, a*

Story. There seems to be little argument that these do, indeed, constitute stories.

Narrative and Spirituality

Spirituality, too, can be understood narratively. We do not simply experience the spiritual, but what we understand as the spiritual or spirituality is framed within layers of narrative. Within the tradition we know best, Christianity, story plays an important part in understanding God's role in history and the relationship humans have with God: through the story of Christ's birth, life, death, and resurrection, through the lives of the saints, through the stories of the community of believers, and through the testimony of individuals. Indeed it is only through understanding these stories and accepting the relevance of them to one's life that Christians become Christians: that is, come to understand themselves and the world in Christian terms (e.g., Navone, 1977, 1990). And while we would not be so arrogant as to speak of the centrality of narrative in other faiths, it does strike us that narrative has a role in them, in that narratives speak to and of the faithful. In Judaism, for example, the rabbinic tradition illustrated by the life and work of Rabbi Shlomo Carlebach (Carlebach, 2004); in the teachings of Sufism through song, dance, and narrative (Shah, 1993); in Zen Buddhism in *koans* or encounter stories (McRae, 2005); in Raëlism in the origin story of extraterrestrial creation (Raël, 2005); and in humanistic spirituality in the construction of a vision and the means to realize it (Croft, 2009).

What links these diverse traditions, at least in our minds, is an openness to oneself, in the sense of becoming; heterotelism, or living, at least in significant part, for the goals of others (which may also result in one's own development; see Sabat, 2003); exocentricity, or openness to the world; and living with transcendence, mystery, and surprise. Spirituality, in this sense, is "experienced as being of fundamental or ultimate importance and [is] thus concerned with matters of meaning and purpose in life, truth, and values" (Cook, 2004, pp.548-549). For Seeber, Park, and Kimble (2002), "spirituality is the center or nucleus in human experience from which all other dimensions find ultimate meaning" (p. 76). Of course, the specific expressions of spirituality vary enormously. Even within a particular tradition, such as Christianity, spirituality takes a number of forms: Protestantism, Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and evangelicalism (see Demarest, 2012). Within these forms it is possible to identify further varying spiritualities; for example, within Catholicism

those of the Augustinians, Benedictines, Carmelites, Dominicans, Franciscans, and Jesuits, to name but a few. Just as narrative selves are unique in their configurations even when the backdrop and narrative environment for individuals are similar (as is the case in families), spirituality is experienced uniquely and is uniquely framed, even when imbued with communal meanings, traditions, rituals, and sacred texts.

From the admittedly brief discussion above, the parallels between the narrative self and narrative spirituality should be obvious: both are concerned with meaning-making, and both are framed within narrative environments that shape who we are (see Ruffing, 2012). The two converge in a number of important ways. First, both act as centres of "narrative gravity" around which our lives cohere (Dennett, 1992). While the self and spirituality may not have any physical properties and are thus not locatable in any meaningful sense, they serve as *abstracta*—abstract objects—that perform certain functions within the frameworks of our lives, just as the abstractum "centre of gravity" plays a "nicely defined, well delineated and well behaved role within physics" (Dennett, 1992, p.103). These abstracta allow us to understand ourselves, others, the world, and our place in it. Narrative may serve as the means to integrate (or if not integrate, at least help align) Neisser's (1988) five selves: the ecological, the interpersonal, the extended, the private, and the conceptual.

Second, both the narrative self and narrative spirituality are able to accommodate the tensions between the competing vectors of *determinacy,* features of existence that act to consolidate who we are based on the past, and *indeterminacy*, the always-present possibility of change. The interaction between determinacy and indeterminacy is highlighted in spectacular fashion through Stelarc's (2014) third-ear projector; Orlan's (n.d.) carnal art; or, in the case of transableism, the need to move from being able-bodied to disabled (Arfini, 2010), in which the determinacy of the body is challenged. Less controversially, the interaction is highlighted through forms of psychotherapeutic interventions such as cognitive therapy, in which previously determinate, irrational cognitions are challenged and replaced by more rational thinking (see Beck, Rush, Shaw, & Emery, 1987) or narrative therapy (see Freedman & Combs, 1996; White & Epston, 1990), in which the past is rewritten. What makes the discontinuity between these various states meaningful is, according to Korsgaard (1989), a sense of narrative agency:

> Where I change myself, the sort of continuity needed for identity may be preserved, even if I become very different. Where I am changed wholly by external forces, it is not. This is because the sort of continuity needed for what matters to me in my own personal identity essentially involves my agency. (p. 123)

Third, both the narrative self and narrative spirituality are highly relational, whether those relationships are with other people, God, nature, or the cosmos. We are who we are—spiritually or secularly—because of the stories we have been born into, and/or have adopted for ourselves. Our identities are thus always, in some sense, co-authored narratives. If this is so, then the loss of them is not simply unfortunate, but threatening; disruption to (or exclusion from) these webs of interlocution risks the absolute death of "being unheard, unrecognized, unremembered" (Bakhtin, 1984, p. 287). It is to the issue of narrative loss that we now turn.

Narrative Loss

Narrative loss, it seems, is an inevitable part of aging. As we age, we have to adjust to changes in the narrative environment within which we constitute our selves—for example, the loss of narrative opportunities through the loss of family and friends through death, or the substitution of formal, institutional relationships for personal ones through admission into long-term residential care—and changes in our own narrative capabilities, perhaps through the onset and progression of dementia. To be sure, changes in the narrative environment may affect us at any time during our lives, but as we age, there seems to be a greater likelihood such changes will be as a result of some form of loss.

Such narrative losses occur at, and impact upon, all levels within the narrative environment: the individual, the interpersonal, and the societal. At the individual level, we might fall prey to two threats: the first is the threat to the self that may be posed by a failing body; the second is a self-imposed premature foreclosure of our life story. The first threat, a failing or at least vulnerable body, impacts upon the self not only because we may no longer be able to do things that we once could, and thus have to change our perception of our abilities, but also, at a deeper level, because we are embodied selves—that is, we experience our self, others, and the world through our bodies (see Atkins, 2008a, 2008b). Thus, changes in how our bodies perform directly impacts the selves that we are

able to be (see Bullington, 2006, for a discussion of the self and the aging body). For example, one of us, over the years, has developed arthritis, which forces upon him certain inabilities and behaviours which, in turn, prompt him to re-evaluate how he sees himself. For many years he has enjoyed walking and has done so without much thought about falling. However, with the onset and progression of arthritis, he is now far more cautious when walking in the snow, for if he falls, the pain from the shock to his arthritic joints far exceeds that from any physical damage resulting from the fall itself. His caution is visible in his gait and less visible but nonetheless there in the fact that he now carries a mobile phone when out walking. This is more than simply a sensible, precautionary act; it is a way of being in the world for which he needs to make narrative accommodation. For example, his narrations of these shorter, less challenging walks include descriptions of uneven ground and weather conditions, and accounts of knee pain and his slower pace. In some ways, his storying of such walks has become contaminated by the restrictions imposed by arthritis.

The second threat comes from what Freeman (2010) calls *narrative foreclosure*, a form of narrative constraint that limits our abilities to be open to what the future might hold or offer. Freeman describes four types of narrative foreclosure. First is the dead end, in which individuals believe they know how their lives will end and this sense of ending shapes their current state. This compares to hearing a joke to which you already know the punch line. In the dead end, nothing new can arise to take the narrative in another, unanticipated direction. Second is the "point of no return" in which individuals feel they have exhausted the ability to live meaningfully and their story no longer holds purpose. Both of these types are future-oriented foreclosures. Freeman's third form of narrative foreclosure turns to the irrevocability of the past, a view of the past as solid, unchangeable, and unforgiving—a past which no amount of wishing, hoping, or desiring can change. This is, perhaps, a narrative of regret, of paths not taken, of thwarted hopes, desires, and plans and a resignation to the fact that one's life was not as one had hoped. Freeman's fourth form of foreclosure is the extreme of existential despair that comes with the sense that nothing can be done to rectify, redeem, or reopen one's story as life flies toward its end. In illustration, Freeman quotes from Tolstoy's Ivan Ilyich: "There is one bright spot there at the back, at the beginning of life, and afterwards all becomes blacker and blacker and proceeds more and more rapidly—in inverse ratio to the square of the distance from death" (p.11).

While Freeman's four forms of narrative foreclosure speak to how individuals view their lives, life events, too, may impact upon our abilities to give narrative shape to our lives (and thus our identities). With the onset and progression of dementia, for example, the ability to tell a coherent, consistent, linear story may be adversely impacted. As memories fragment and/or fade, our stories are in danger of becoming less internally coherent or consistent; people within our stories may be out of place—for instance, now-adult offspring may be storied as little children—and the lived experience that becomes the stuff of stories is not retained in memory. As gaps become larger, inconsistencies eventually make stories impossible to recount; memories of people, events and experiences fade, becoming tangled and fragmented.

At the interpersonal level, we may experience narrative loss in a number of ways. Bearing in mind Taylor's (1989) concept of "webs of interlocution," our narrative self is shaped by the stories that others tell about us and by those who populate our stories about ourselves. As we age, this web threatens to unravel and strands break as our friends and family members die. While those still living may tell stories involving those who have died, our narrative environment is impoverished through their absence. There can be no more shared experience about which to tell mutually authored stories, and of course, the dead can no longer tell stories about us. Thus, our web of interlocution is weakened. For example, not long ago, the father of one of us died, and while father and son did not live on the same continent, they were in frequent, if not daily, contact. Through their conversations on Skype, he was linked into family stories in the UK, and his father was linked into his in Canada. With his father's death, those narrative threads disappeared. He can now only tell stories of his father in the past tense, and his mother and brother no longer have his father's stories of the conversations they had with each other. They are all, narratively, the poorer for his passing.

Our narrative environments may also be impoverished by other social changes that restrict the opportunities for us to narrativize our experience. For instance, a significant number of older people move from living in their own homes to living in long-term care facilities. In effect, they move from an environment in which they are embedded in the informal narratives of family, friends, and neighbours as well as the identity that is shaped by the respective narratives of place, to a totally different environment. There, they become embedded in more formal narratives of professional-service/user relationships; institutional narratives shaped by legal, ethical, and often commercial concerns; and

relationships with others who are similarly dislocated from family, friends, neighbours, and place. Data on the extent of family visits to relatives in long-term care is both sparse and difficult to interpret. In a critical review of the literature on family involvement in residential long-term care, Gaugler (2005) reports:

> The existing literature emphasizes that family members remain involved in the lives of their relatives following relocation to a NH [nursing home], ASL [assisted living facility], or FCH [family care home]. While the frequency and duration of visits vary somewhat, the data certainly seem to dispute the notion that family members leave their loved ones in NHs or similar types of institutions to die in isolation. (p.107)

This view would, on the surface, seem to challenge our view that the transition to long-term care results in a form of narrative loss. Gaugler's interpretation of the data, however, seems to be somewhat optimistic. For example, in support of his conclusion he cites a longitudinal study (Kane, Illston, Kane, & Nyman, 1989) in which the authors found that of 397 family care home residents and 395 nursing home residents in Oregon, 41% and 31%, respectively, reported the frequency of family visits in the past few months as "about weekly" (Gaugler, 2005, p. 107). This leaves 59% and 69% of residents, respectively, with visits of less than "about weekly." Similarly, Gaugler cites Hopp's (1999) study of informal care provided in board and care, which found that of 617 older adult residents, 36.9% had family members who visited two to three times per month or more (p. 107). Again, this leaves 63.1% who received less than two visits per month from family members. Unfortunately, we do not have any data on the extent of contact prior to the transition to long-term care to confirm our suspicion that contact declines following the transition, but the fact that many residents have so few visits does lend some credence to this view. Also supporting our argument are the findings of numerous studies, again cited by Gaugler (2005), which indicate that "family members' primary purpose in remaining involved in the NH was preserving the identity of the institutionalized older adult" (p. 108), a finding that supports the view that the move to long-term care, and thus into a different narrative environment, may threaten one's identity.

At the societal level, narrative loss occurs through the dominance of what Nelson (2001) calls master narratives—those narratives that

"serve as summaries of socially shared understandings" and act as "repositories of common norms" (p.6). One such master narrative is that which portrays aging as undesirable (witness the growth of anti-aging treatments: see Mehlman, Binstock, Juengst, Ponsaran, & Whitehouse, 2004) and older people as "inflexible, ill, senile, and unproductive" (Kane, 2006, p.860). Such ageist attitudes and behaviours are documented amongst medical and health care professionals and students, social workers and social work students, and criminal justice and law enforcement personnel (Kane, 2006). Robert Butler defined ageism as "a process of systematic stereotyping and discrimination against people because they are old" (cited by Palmore, 1999, p. 4). Underpinning these attitudes and behaviours are, first, social factors such as the process of modernization that creates "a greater supply of older persons than the society needs, by making their job skills obsolete, by increasing retirement, by undercutting their prestige as sources of knowledge, and by leaving elders behind in rural and deteriorated areas" (Palmore, 1999, p. 84); and, second, major value orientations of our culture that "tend to support negative ageism: active mastery, external world rationalism, universalism, and vertical relationships" with aging "threatening important outcome values in our culture, such as family security, freedom, a comfortable life, happiness, and equal opportunity" (Palmore, 1999, p. 99).

Such master narratives serve two purposes. First, they frame the stories that are told about older people, creating the narrative space in which stories such as those of Robert Lamm, governor of Colorado in the 1980s, who stated that terminally ill, older adults have "a duty to die and get out of the way" ("Gov. Lamm," 1984), or, more recently, Cooley (2007), who argues in the *American Journal of Bioethics* that the soon-to-be-demented have a moral duty to commit suicide before they lose their dignity as persons. Simmons (1990) identifies three core cultural metaphors of aging—aging as physical decline, aging as aesthetic distance from youth, and aging as a failure of productivity—and how these serve to marginalize older adults. Thompson (2007), in her discussion of ageism and spirituality, argues that ageism, operating on the personal, cultural, and structural levels, impacts spirituality in old age in three key areas: meaning-making, connectedness, and sense of direction or purpose. In terms of meaning-making, she says, ageism impacts upon how older people see themselves and their fit/lack of fit in the wider world; in terms of connectedness, older people may experience social isolation or a sense of being outside of the mainstream; and in terms of

sense of direction or purpose, "one of the most pernicious effects of ageism is to deny older people a future" (p. 174).

Second, master narratives limit the stories that older people can tell about themselves without falling foul of the normative assumptions within the master narrative. For example, master narratives impinge on stories of sexuality in long-term care facilities; issues related to early or delayed retirement (Harbison, Coughlan, Beaulieu, Karabanow, VanderPlaat, Wildeman, & Wexler, 2012); and narratives regarding health and wellness and financial security (Berkman, Maramaldi, Breon, & Howe, 2003). As Laceulle and Baars (2014) write:

> Cultural stories and images about aging influence individual aging identities, and often impede possibilities for ascribing a positive or enriching meaning to later life … Who we are is always partially decided by what other people think of us. In this sense identity is fundamentally social. Our opportunities to be who we want to be, and the way we perceive and experience ourselves, are inextricably bound up with our social positioning. We are not free to tell any self-narrative we want, since the credibility and acknowledgment of our self-narratives depends on the room provided by the cultural narratives about the groups we are a part of. (p. 36)

The loss of narrativity coupled with the loss of external narrative resources and opportunities may serve to fragment the cohesiveness of one's life story and impact adversely the narrative environment in which we seek to construct our identity and spirituality.

Narrative Repair

Faced with those who experience narrative loss, it is incumbent upon those in the helping professions to help find ways to re-establish a viable narrative environment in which individuals might undertake what Nelson (2001) calls "narrative repair." For Nelson, such repair comes from generating counter-stories, stories that attempt to shift oppressive master narratives (such as those of ageism, in our example) and, indeed, we would share such a concern. Here we want to focus on five general features that contribute to such counter-storying in the context of aging and narrative loss: the provision of narrative opportunity, the promotion of narrative literacy, the creation or reignition of narrative desire, the

making of narrative connections, and the generation of autobiographical reasoning.

The Provision of Narrative Opportunity

If much narrative loss in aging follows from the loss of narrative opportunity—for example, the losses incumbent upon the death of family and friends, the moving away of younger family members, retirement, physical impairment and so on—then an obvious means by which to ameliorate or overcome such losses is to provide opportunities for older adults to generate and participate in new stories: in particular, experiences that promote experiential and cognitive growth, involving "humanistic concerns like the importance of doing personally meaningful activities, cultivating personally meaningful relationships, and contributing to the development of society and future generations" (Bauer, 2010, p.68). One example of such an opportunity might be the "adopt a grandparent" projects in which families without grandparents and older adults without grandchildren (or those whose children and grandchildren have moved away) are partnered, providing young children with the opportunities to develop relationships with older adults and opportunities for older adults to be part of, and contribute to, ongoing family stories. Similarly, the development of "storymaps"—maps of neighbourhoods that integrate the stories of the young and old, meanings and places, and change and continuity—may serve to enhance community and generate engagement (e.g., the Regent Park Storymap, 2014-2015). The forms of narrative opportunities that are possible are manifold, limited only by the desire of participants to engage with one another and one another's stories. However, narrative opportunity is not enough on its own. In order to effectively forestall narrative loss, we need also to develop our ability to recognize different types of story—that is, our narrative literacy.

Narrative Literacy

In order to be able to work effectively with individuals through narrative, it is important to develop one's own narrative literacy (see Baldwin, 2010). By this, we mean the ability to recognize the nature of narrative, to understand the process of storytelling, to locate individual stories in a wider context, and to develop a pool of narrative resources on which to draw.

Taking our lead from Plummer (1995), we believe that it is important to be able to identify the nature of narrative. Some narratives serve to constrain, limit, oppress, and disempower ourselves and others; other narratives serve to extend, transcend, liberate, and empower. This is clearly seen in narrative therapy's focus on moving the individual from a problem-centred story to an alternative, more functional story (see White & Epston, 1990), but is also part and parcel of Nelson's view of the dynamic between master narratives and counter-stories (Nelson, 2001). For our purposes, we might ask: To what degree does the story express an openness to becoming, a heterotelic orientation, an exocentric approach to the world, and a realization and embrace of transcendence, mystery, and surprise?

A second element in narrative literacy is the understanding of the process of storytelling. When first told, a story often lacks the polish of stories frequently told. Indeed, when first told, stories might appear comparatively inarticulate, stumbling over the events on which they are based and the interpretations that can (or should) be attributed. The movement toward a more polished, more finished story (though bearing in mind that all stories are ultimately unfinished in that they can always be retold or rewritten) may follow what Tilley (1992) calls a "plot snake," a plot trajectory which captures increasing coherency and order while appreciating the forces acting against them. This increasing coherency and order can be encouraged in a number of ways. First, they can be encouraged through the retelling of key stories, since "significant and complex experiences do not yield their meaning in one narration" (Ruffing, 2011, p.107). Even when a story appears relatively polished, it may be worth having the individual retell it so as draw out possible alternative meanings. Kimble (1993), for example, describes his own "journey of aging" as punctuated by a number of spiritually significant milestones, and in later life finds himself "engaged in more reflection and teasing out of meanings of my life from the 'storehouse of the past.' A configuration, a mosaic of meanings, begins to take shape and leads me forward into the present and to the very precipice of the future" (p. 27). In this way, we can disrupt the premature foreclosure of a narrative that seems to serve to constrain or limit the individual whose story it is. Second, as all stories are selective in what they present, we may want to attempt to elicit three forms of the unsaid (see Ruffing, 2011): "through seeking further details about the story being told thus revealing further meanings and possibilities for the story; by drawing attention to what has been backgrounded in the story, thus 'inviting the "unsaid"' into explicit

awareness" (p. 120); and by identifying the clues or secrets that remain unsaid so that these may be, at some point, integrated into the rest of our stories. In these ways, it is possible to elicit other possible tellings and with these start to challenge foreclosure.

Narrative Desire

Narrative desire, according to Brooks (1984), is the desire to keep reading, though we do not need to embrace Brooks' alignment of such a desire with Freud's understanding of desire as Eros. For our purposes, it is enough to say that narrative desire is, simply, the desire to know how a story turns out. It is the desire that keeps us turning the pages of a novel; it is the desire expertly created by masterful authors of detective or mystery novels. In succumbing to this desire, the reader is seduced into engaging with the text. We are, again according to Brooks (1984), driven to read as part of our desire to find meaning in, and construct order from, the apparent chaos of experience.

While narrative desire is what keeps us interested in the story, if the story ends too soon we feel, at some level, cheated, or at least unfulfilled. The space between the beginning of the narrative and its closure is referred to by Barthes (1974) as "dilatory space," a space characterised by delay, deferral, and displacement, "a pressure toward meaning [but] which is never pinned down or captured" (Brooks, 1984, p. 56).

When Freeman (2010) writes of narrative foreclosure, he is, to all intents and purposes, writing about the premature ending of a story that leaves us feeling cheated. Life goes on, but the dilatory space that generates the pressure toward meaning no longer exists. How, then, can narrative desire and the means to resist narrative foreclosure be regenerated? We propose that the regeneration might be achieved through establishing narrative connectedness and autobiographical reasoning.

Narrative Connections

Although we have focused above on the importance of a sense of linearity, cohesiveness, and coherency, individuals do not always initially present their stories in this fashion. Sometimes, we are faced with fragments of narratives, or out-of-place stories, or stories that seem unrelated to each other—in other words, stories that do not fit the Aristotelian ideal of having a beginning, middle, and end. When faced

with such stories, it is important to be able to see beyond the immediate presentation to appreciate how what is being recounted may connect with other stories (complete or incomplete) in order to create meaning, or with other fragments to generate more easily recognizable stories. Thus we see Bamberg's (e.g., 2004) work linking small stories with the performance of identity amongst adolescents, or Boje's (2009) organizational story fragments containing, in holographic fashion, more complete stories. We see such narrative connectivity in Ruffing's (2011) description of spiritual direction in which the spiritual director encourages the directee to re-experience the events of the story with emotional power and to appreciate the experience more fully, making links with other stories and aspects of life. Further, through the discernment of stories, the director encourages the directee to examine the many storylines that are contained within the directee's life, linking the inner story of the directee's experience to outer stories drawn from cultural templates. Ruffing puts it this way:

> Directees absorb stories from films; from celebrities; from confessional talk shows on every imaginable subject; from plots of sitcoms, soap operas, and other television shows; from many written forms of personal narratives; and from cultural templates. These stories often define success in terms of financial status; they define self-worth in terms of sexual attraction or display; they define the use of force in terms of the only way to resolve conflict; they define the violence of human rights and civil liberties in terms of a necessity to calm fear. These stories live inside us right along with the stories of our faith. (p.115)

In making the connections between our personal stories and these wider, ideological narratives that shape our desires and thus our identities, the possibility of identifying conflicts is generated, and with this, the possibility of choosing to resist these metanarratives and instead author one that more properly aligns with our experience and our desires. For example, the dominant story of aging as senescence, or as something to be resisted (witness the plethora of anti-aging cosmetics) may be replaced in our personal stories by connections to stories that generate challenge and aspiration such as the Dark Horse Venture (2013), the activism of the Raging Grannies (n.d.), and the celebratory performances of The Zimmers (*Probably*, 2007).

In so doing, the directee can be aided to recognize conflicts between stories, or how some stories (for example, that of aging as

senescence) "restrict our imaginations, our desires, and, consequently, our actions" (Ruffing, 2011, p.115). Narrative connections can thus both strengthen our personal narratives and generate the space in which to author counter-stories to challenge those wider stories that may otherwise limit us.

Autobiographical Reasoning

A second means by which to generate narrative desire and to resist narrative foreclosure is through the promotion of autobiographical reasoning. Autobiographical reasoning is the active process of developing a coherent life story, and thus identity, by linking together the past, present, and future through establishing a coherent sequence of temporal events, connecting overarching themes, and developing causal coherence (Habermas, 2011). Autobiographical reasoning is thus a means by which individuals constitute themselves through the narrative lens they use to construct their life story and bind together their fundamental values, meanings, truths, and purposes. As Conway (1998) suggests:

> If we remember the past as a series of chaotic events governed by an impersonal and nonmoral fate or luck, we create a similar kind of future in our mind's eye, and that prophecy is usually self-fulfilling. If we see the past as fully determined—by economic forces, by genetic codes, even by birth order, and relationships with parents—we see ourselves as victims of those forces, with our best hope a kind of stoic resignation. If we see our past as a moral spiritual journey in time, our imagined future will continue that quest. (p. 176)

Kimble (1990) argues that we can give meaning to our lives by realizing our values. Citing Frankl, Kimble indicates three sets of values that give meaning: creative values, experiential values, and attitudinal values. If we see ourselves on "a moral spiritual journey in time," then we might continue this quest through the telling of "values histories," such as those outlined by Gibson (1990), histories that seek to inform others of what is important in one's life, such as relationships, autonomy, and attitudes towards life, dying, and death. Such values histories, although an idea developed for use with older adults in long-term care, as a second generation form of advance directive providing others with a more solid basis on which to make decisions for the older person should that person

lack capacity (Rich, 1996), could be adapted for use with older adults more generally as a means of reflecting on their lives. By asking older adults to recount stories in which they realized their values or maintained their beliefs in the face of adversity is a means by which it is possible to link identity and spirituality through the meaning-making of narrative. Telling stories of how we lived up to those beliefs or values that we professed, and how those beliefs and attitudes both changed and changed us over time, enables us to see our past as "a moral spiritual journey," and thus prepares us for the future.

Sequencing events in time is essential to creating meaning based on a linear progression to understand their relationship, attribute causality, and attach meaning (Bohn, 2011). This does not mean that one recounts events in the temporal order in which they occurred, but that underlying the narrative is a temporal order within which those events have a place. For example, while one might recount one's experience of divorce before talking about one's marriage, it makes no sense to talk about divorce if one had not previously been married. This underlying temporal order creates one frame of reference within which the story makes sense. A second frame of reference is constituted by establishing overarching themes of similarity and continuity between stories, themes or tropes that provide an overall framework for one's life narrative (Bohn, 2011). By identifying oneself as a parent, a spouse, an employee, or a teammate, individuals position themselves within a cultural context in relation to the other common themes of life. Causal coherence is the act of reasoning and attaching meaning to past events in order to emplot the stories that give shape to one's identity and life story (Bohn, 2011). Autobiographical reasoning thus offers depth beyond remembering an event by the amount of cognitive effort, construction, and interpretation involved in developing a relevant coherent life story and binding together what is fundamental in our lives. Actively constructing memories is a critical process of intentional reasoning which serves both to develop a sense of identity and a source of continuity (McLean & Fournier, 2008; McLean & Mansfield, 2011) and a sense of becoming or transcendence in which the story links us with others, the world, and, perhaps, a sense of mystery. This observation aligns with what Randall and Kenyon (2001) call "biographical" (as compared to biological) aging—a deeper understanding of the stories of who we are.

Conclusion

The stories we tell give meaning to our experiences and our lives. Narrative allows us to make meaning and to discover and reclaim our spirituality by coalescing our understanding of self, of others, and of where we fit in the world. The storytelling process is, we believe, fundamental to developing or constructing a viable sense of self, a self that does not simply drift through the flux of life but one that seeks to establish meaning and purpose, realize values and, at least on a small scale, establish truth.

Through narrative, we piece together our connected stories and weave together our own meaningful truths. The dynamic between our stories of our selves, and those others tell about us, shapes who we are and who we might become. Physical aging, life events, and normative values and beliefs all may act to constrain this process, potentially resulting in narrative loss. This loss can be resisted through narrative repair and counter-storying master narratives. Narrative points to the future, through the trajectory of its plot and through the narrative imagination of the narrator. Narrative can make and consolidate relationships through jointly told stories and the connections between stories of individuals, groups, and communities. Stories locate us in time and place, and thus provide a home. Keeping the storytelling and storylistening processes alive, linking experience with meaning, truth, values, and purpose is, we believe, of spiritual import, for without it, life is just "one damned thing after another."

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