*Invited Essay*

# A Life Story from the Perspectives of Personality and Theology

## Mary Ligon
### York College of Pennsylvania

## Introduction

As a gerontologist interested in adult development, reminiscence, and life review, I find that my background has followed me into, or perhaps prepared me for, my work as a healthcare chaplain. Last year, while on sabbatical from my teaching position, I completed a year-long training in Clinical Pastoral Education as a Chaplain Resident at a local hospital. Clinical Pastoral Education combines class-room and experiential learning as Chaplain Residents seek to meet the needs of patients, family members, and staff experiencing spiritual or emotional distress while in the hospital setting.

A classroom assignment involved presenting a paper to my chaplain peers and educators on how personality theories inform my spiritual encounters. After reflecting on what I learned in my training for the chaplaincy thus far and from my work in the field of adult development, reminiscence, and life review, I concluded that to understand people in the context of spiritual encounters, I observe personality on three levels: personality traits, personal concerns, and identity (McAdams, 1995). On the most superficial level, I observe basic traits using the Five-Factor Model (McCrae & Costa, 1987). Then, on a deeper level, I explore personal concerns from a lifespan perspective using Erikson's psychosocial developmental model (Erikson & Erikson, 1997). Finally, to gain the deepest understanding of a person, I turn to narrative identity theory, which suggests that core understanding of self is revealed in and shaped by the stories we tell (McAdams, 2001). The chaplain's work is diverse, and having a framework to use in understanding peoples' emotional and spiritual needs is vital.

In preparing to share this framework with other chaplain residents and educators, I provided a short description of each theory. Additionally, I created a case study, a fictional life story based loosely on personal experiences, to serve as a way to see the theories in action. I followed the life story with an application section. Since completing the Chaplain Residency, I have returned to my teaching position, and in teaching a course titled 'Psychological Aspects of Aging' I find that this life story is useful in the classroom setting as well. Students use this 'case study' to interpret personality on the levels of traits, personal concerns, and identity. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate how using the three levels of personality can help students and practitioners gain a fuller understanding of who a person is.

## Level I: Five-Factor Model of Personality Traits (McCrae and Costa, 1987)

Personality traits can be thought of as basic tendencies, rooted in biology, which are relatively stable from adulthood forward and guide one's behavior (Löckenhoff, Ironson, O'Cleirigh, and Costa, 2009). Gordon Allport (1897-1967) was the first to explore personality psychology using traits, and he identified more than 4,000 meaningful traits (Costa and McCrae. 2006). From this start, McCrae and Costa (1987) proposed the Five-Factor Model, a theory of personality which boils the many possible traits down to five broad factors: 1) openness to experience (adventurous and creative), 2) conscientiousness (goal-directed and disciplined), 3) extraversion (socially focused and gregarious), 4) agreeableness (warm-hearted with a tendency to cooperate), and 5) neuroticism (emotionality often associated with anxiety and depression). Each factor is described on a continuum of low to high. Through careful observation, a chaplain can often get a feel for a person's traits. For example, in an encounter with a patient, I noticed that he focused not on his illness or even the social isolation he was experiencing, but on the fact that this was his *first* hospitalization. He stressed again and again that this was the most stressful part of his experience, which, using the lens of the Five-Factor Model, would suggest low openness to new experiences. Being aware of basic traits, accepting them, and working with them, helps me connect with people and support them as they face health challenges.

## Level II: Personal Concerns Across the Lifespan, Erikson's Psychosocial Model

The level of personal concerns in shaping a person's personality can be defined as what individuals want from

*Author Information:*

Mary Ligon, Behavioral Sciences Department, York College of Pennsylvania, York, PA, USA

Correspondence concerning this article may be addressed to Mary Ligon (mligon@ycp.edu).

life and the techniques, strategies, and plans they use to achieve those wants. Whereas traits tend to be stable over the lifespan, personal concerns change significantly. Erikson (1997) identifies eight stages of development, each with a developmental task or primary concern: (trust, autonomy, initiative, industry, identity, intimacy, generativity, ego-integrity). Each task is situated as a dichotomy such as trust vs. mistrust, and each is at least loosely associated with chronological age.

As individuals go through the life cycle they gain the capacity to address developmental tasks, and society expects this development. For growth to occur, one must struggle back and forth with the positive and negative elements of the task, and hopefully, a positive resolution occurs leaving one with a new ego strength. For example, the primary concern of young adulthood is intimacy vs. isolation, and the ego strength is love. That is the internal process. Externally, society will press one to address this concern; they will ask about and promote those intimate relationships. Accordingly, a young adult will test out engaging in deep relationships while also retreating at times as they work to resolve this task. Loved ones are often very interested and will ask about how this process is going. "Have you met anyone special? Are you all getting serious?" For the one who successfully resolves the task of intimacy, the capacity to truly love another is acquired. An important feature of Erikson's theory is that development is a life-long process and people continue to address, build on, and in some cases return to, prior tasks. If someone does not favorably resolve a developmental task, it is a stumbling block going forward. As a chaplain, it is helpful for me to understand the stage that a person may be in, to hear their strivings to develop, to listen for tension and stumbling blocks, and to consider reactions to social pressure to address developmental tasks. I can begin to know an individual more fully by exploring their personal concerns using Erikson's developmental model.

## Level III: Narrative Identity Theory (McAdams, 2013)

Narrative identity is not separate from traits and personal concerns; rather, while considering these, it is the way that we make sense of ourselves and our lives through story. McAdams suggests that narrative identity is "a person's internalized and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose" (McAdams and McLean, 2013, p. 233). In other words, identity is created and communicated through the life story. "Identity itself takes the form of a story, complete with setting, scenes, character, plot, and theme" (McAdams, 2001 p. 101). Life stories are more truth than fiction but include imaginative ways of tying together past, present, and the anticipated future in a way that makes sense to the narrator. Stories reflect cultural and social expectations. Common themes that may emerge include agency (the protagonist effects change in their own lives), communion (the story

emphasizes interpersonal connections), and either redemption (events or circumstances go from bad to good) or its opposite, contamination, where the bad overshadows the good. Meaning-making may be an important theme where the protagonist learns something from an event, and there can be a coherent positive resolution—the story has a good ending. Not surprisingly, those whose stories illustrate redemption have higher levels of well-being. Story listening and storytelling are important parts of my life and cross over my understanding of both psychology and theology. The following life story provides an opportunity to understand a person using the lenses of levels of personality: traits, personal concerns, and narrative identity.

## A Life Story

*Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born I set you apart; I appointed you as a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah 1:5*

One joyful evening, a baby came into the world. She grew day by day, and, surrounded by her loving family, her trust strengthened and grew. Her world was a place of hope. From an early time in this little girl's life, she was imaginative and creative. The summer of her fourth year was all kinds of fun with her older siblings around to play with. When the older children started back to school in the fall, the girl missed them and was lonely, but she found her way even without them. She took the initiative to find a friend, who, though imaginary, was delightful and provided hours of company. Before too long, a new girl moved into the neighborhood and the imaginary friend went away; she was no longer needed.

The next summer came with many changes, a move to a new house, her own room, a loss of a grandparent, and a trip abroad. But no change could top the strange event that happened one day. It seemed that someone had come into the girl's room, unbeknownst to her and without her permission, and moved her belongings around. She studied her room, and much was the same, but someone had surely been there. Things were different. The girl noticed it right away, but others did not. She quietly observed to see if the others would see it too, but no one seemed to notice that anything was out of order. The girl began to wonder if it was real. The days and years ticked by, but she was now different. Her foundation of trust was shaken, and what once was independence began to look more like defiance as she moved forward. The disruption followed her as she developed a disdain for herself that was acutely evident in the coming years. As others around her explored who they were, she engaged in self-defeating behaviors. She began to go down, yet her Creator did not let her drown. He placed in her life people who would keep her afloat and threw her a life ring when she needed it most. She drew on the independence developed early in life and reached out for the ring. As she relaxed back into it for a time, feeling the waves beneath her, her wounds, now reopened and

exposed, began to heal. The salt stung, but when she emerged from the water, she was stronger.

Although late in finding who she was, once she got started the young lady jumped in with both feet. She discovered her love for learning, her desire to help others, and her love of the outdoors, nature, and art. She set and achieved lofty goals and began to trust the world again. She welcomed home the independent nature which gave her the courage to travel alone, far from home, and to explore and discover the beautiful world before her.

With these discoveries of self, the woman began to search for the special one, the one who was made for her. It went in fits and starts, and then he was there. The heat was consuming as he became her all. In her heart she heard, "He is for you." The woman listened, and they became one. They grew and created a life and a family of their own. Raising little ones was a precious time, yet she struggled between her desire to care for those she loved and her desire to pursue her own goals, goals beyond her family. The unspoken question was, 'What about me?' She found that to care for those she loved so much she also had to care for herself and pursue the plan for her life. The spirit of adventure rose again in the middle years. Doors opened in magnificent ways, and she passed through them. She became more and more of herself. Rarely was she reminded of the little splinter of betrayal. Mostly it was gone.

As the old woman came to the end of her life, her Creator asked, "Are you satisfied? Are you thankful for your life?" "Yes," she answered. "My life has been full, wonderful, oh, the people I have loved, beautiful scenes…my life has been a grand adventure, save that invasion in my youth." "No," replied the Creator. "I didn't ask if you were thankful for most of your life. Are you thankful for it all?" "No!" she hissed with the attitude of defiance that she knew so well. "I cannot be thankful for what was taken from me." "Are you sure? Your life could only be what it is if nothing changed." She went away and sulked and lamented, as she considered the Creator's question. She sank beneath the water and held her breath. Could she be thankful for it all? Even what was taken?

What a funny scene as she emerged from the water this time. An old lady dancing in the waves, celebrating her life, the one unique life that was and had to be. Onlookers laughed at her, but she did not care. To the world, the old woman was far from perfect, but to God, she was just what the world needed. She was free.

## Application

In reading this life story, one may begin to understand the main character by observing her personality on three levels: personality traits, developmental concerns, and identity expressed through the telling of her life story. First and foremost, it is a cohesive story that shines a light on the character's sense of identity. Traits and developmental concerns are part of the story that influence behavior throughout. When traits are put under the microscope, they

show that she is toward the middle-upper side of two traits: conscientiousness (goal-directed but not always disciplined) and neuroticism (feels her emotions strongly but is not overcome by depression or anxiety). She is toward the middle-lower side of extraversion (enjoys social engagement but more reflective and internally focused). She is highly open to new experiences (themes of creativity, travel, and change). She is low on the trait of agreeableness (theme of independence, stubborn and competitive). She might wish some of her traits were different, but they are part of her. A chaplain would accept these traits and try to help her work with them rather than against them.

Psychosocial development is evident in this story, with the stages of trust, initiative, identity, intimacy, generativity, and integrity being most prominent. As Erikson indicated, growth requires struggle. There were many examples of this: as an infant, her family surrounded her with love, and she developed trust in her environment. As a wife and mother, she struggled between generativity (concern for others) and stagnation (what about me?) in pursuit of the ego-strength of caring. Trust, although well-established in infancy, became a stumbling block in childhood and continued to interfere until the end. Only when that piece was put to rest, could she accept life fully. The ego strength of wisdom (acceptance of life in the face of death) was alluded to as the woman emerged from the water one final time, presumably at the end of life.

This life story conveys important themes. First, it shows agency; the main character affects her life. As an example, God threw the ring in her direction, but she is the one who chose to reach for it. She came out of the water by herself not once but twice. It is a story of redemption; the negative event that took place early in life caused her to struggle, but the struggle led to the strength she needed later. It is a story of meaning-making. She learned to care for others and to care for herself. Finally, it is a story of resolution. Dancing in the waves, she shows her hope for a positive future, a good ending.

## Conclusion

This paper illustrates the three levels of personality, personality traits, personal concerns, and identity. First, personality traits can be understood using the Five-Factor Model. Second, Erikson's theory of psychosocial development is helpful in understanding personal concerns from a developmental perspective. Finally, McAdam's narrative identity theory provides a guide to understanding how the telling of a life story reveals one's understanding of self. Using three levels of personality can be helpful to chaplains and gerontology students alike as they apply personality theories to gain a fuller understanding of who a person is. The telling of a life story illuminates this framework, and it can be used by those seeking to understand and apply these theories.

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