

## Invited Essay

# The Rewards of Oral Narration

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Through empirically-based quantitative research narrative psychologists have demonstrated that human identity is comprised in part by the stories people tell themselves and others about their lives. Our narrative identity is shaped by acts of autobiographical reasoning that digest and integrate the impact that events have on us, especially those that are difficult and painful. It has been established that certain kinds of autobiographical reasoning will more likely lead to both a more coherent life story and to psychological growth and well-being (McAdams & Cox, p. 196). While the outcomes of processing life events through story-telling have been well-examined, the mechanisms by which the healthy recounting of stories is accomplished have drawn less attention. This paper, based on qualitative research in the form of structured life reviews, argues that story-telling and autobiographical processing take place most constructively through oral narration.

### ***Autobiographical Reasoning and Narrative Identity***

This paper explores how narrative practice, and oral narration in particular, can help the average person make sense of difficulty and suffering in a way that promotes healing, meaning, and purpose. I will focus on the role of two key concepts in narrative studies—narrative identity and autobiographical reasoning. In a 2019 article, Dan McAdams articulated a version of his commonly accepted definition of a narrative identity: Narrative identities, he writes, construct, and sometimes reconstruct, a person's past, giving it thematic and chronological coherence. Narrative identity is not, of course, the only ingredient in the human personality. McAdams and Pals (2006) describe personality as "an individual's unique variation on the general evolutionary design for human nature expressed as a developing pattern of dispositional traits, characteristic adaptations, and

integrated life stories complexly and differentially situated in culture" (p. 204).

Ideally, we construct our narrative identity by acknowledging, interpreting, and incorporating the individual stories that comprise our lives. Beginning in mid-adolescence "the author-self continues to work on the story over the adult life course, revising, updating, and sometimes recomposing from scratch, ever attuned to opportunities for self-transformation" (McAdams, 2010, p. 201). The product of this composing and recomposing is a "a *meaningful sequence* of life events to *explain* how the person has developed into who he or she is now and may develop into who he or she may be in the future" (McAdams, 2010, p. 201). McLean (2017) underscores that narrative identity is a selective and interpretive story. "As individuals select autobiographical memories that are significant and meaningful to them, they are able to weave them into an extended story that defines the self. Such a story brings a person a sense of integration, purpose, and meaning" (McLean, 2017, p. 2).

As the individual selects memories for inclusion in a narrative identity, not all recollections have equal weight. For example, as a young boy of eight and nine the occasional trips I made with my mother to the local grocery no longer loom large in my adult memory. Such quotidian experiences fall away in favor of what Jefferson Singer calls "self-defining memories" (Singer, 2005). This category of memory might include the day when my father took his nine-year-old son into the big city of Boston to see *Lawrence of Arabia* on what was for those days an enormous screen. Even more likely it would include my family's move to the Midwest when I was 10 and our return to Massachusetts two years later. It would without question include my marriage at 28 and my wife's death from cancer 23 years later. The meaning of such self-defining memories is interpreted by autobiographical reasoning and woven into the ever-evolving, larger life story by autobiographical processing. The meaning of self-defining events and their role in a narrative identity often change over time as they are reinterpreted in the light of an evolving life.

Just as not all stories are equally represented in a narrative identity, not all narrative identities are equally useful in cultivating human growth and well-being. One of the achievements of narrative psychology has been to show that the way in which we process life

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events, particularly painful ones, can have a powerful impact on our well-being in the present and the future. As expressed by McAdams and Manczak (2015): “numerous studies have shown that deriving positive meanings from negative events is associated with life satisfaction and indicators of emotional well-being” (p. 435). This is not likely to happen, of course, when people do not think about or consciously assign meaning to the important events of their lives. We might think of these people as unstoried. Storiless people do not experience their lives as a series of autobiographically connected events that contribute to an overall coherent identity. They are unpracticed and often uninterested in looking at how their past has shaped their present and how their present can influence their future. Their motto, if they had one, might be that ‘life is just one damn thing after another.’ Their lives have little coherence and thus scant purpose beyond getting through things. (Pals, 2006). A toll of negative events often flattens them into psychic numbness or gives rise to an array of psychological defenses such as denial and delusion. Later in this article we will ask whether narrative practice has anything to offer the unstoried to help them make connections between the past, present, and future, and thus lead lives that are more self-aware and satisfying. This is to take a view different from those who see life as inherently narratively structured (Crossley, 2000). My research suggests that nearly everybody senses that the segments and chapters of their lives evolve sequentially over time. But this is different from a narrative coherence that weaves a meaningful identity out of events, even those that are painful and disruptive. The unstoried are not attuned to autobiographical reasoning, and a society habituated to getting through and moving on provides them little help. Can narrative psychology offer them something more than platitudes?

Autobiographical reasoning, which operates at the micro-level of crafting self-event connections and interpretive meanings, has been closely examined by Lilgendahl, who emphasizes that not all forms of event and memory processing are equal (Pals, 2006). I mention both events and memories because sometimes people process events as they are happening or shortly thereafter, while in other cases they are working on memories of events that occurred years or decades ago. In any event, whether we are interpreting an event that happened yesterday or ten years ago, several types of processing are more conducive to growth and well-being than others.

Growth and well-being are often mentioned in narrative literature as prime benefits of healthy autobiographical reasoning. Other terms used to describe such favorable outcomes include eudaimonic happiness (Bauer, McAdams, & Sedaeda, 2005), ego integrity (McLean, 2017), and authenticity (Wilt,

Thomas, & McAdams, 2019). Pals & McAdams, (2011) define growth “very broadly, as any interpretation of a past experience that in some way moves a person toward (as opposed to away from) experiences and mindsets that enhance positive self-development and quality of life, by increasing clarity of identity, sense of purpose, self-efficacy, self-insight, meaningful connections with others, well-being, etc.” (p.3). Optimal well-being combines “life satisfaction” and the “positive effect of subjective well-being with the deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life provided by psychological well-being” (Lilgendahl & McAdams, 2011, p. 4). There has been little conversation between narrative psychology and the school of positive psychology that has grown out of the work of Martin Seligman, but these definitions of growth and well-being—particularly when combined with the narrative notions of agency and communion—fit well with the ingredients of human flourishing, which includes positive emotions, engagement, relationships, meaning, and achievements.

The three kinds of autobiographical reasoning that are most likely to produce growth and well-being are usually identified by narrative writers as positive (or differential), exploratory, and transformational processing. Positive processing refers to a person’s tendency to make positive interpretations of past events in a way that supports psychological growth and well-being. Exploratory processing, which has been found to be aligned with the trait of openness, is marked by a person’s openness to exploring the significance of an event rather than allowing its negativity to dictate its ultimate meaning and impact on the self. Finally, the psychological flexibility that allows a person to fully absorb and explore the pain of a negative event creates “a narrative springboard” for positive self-transformation and growth (2006); thus the term “transformational processing.” These three kinds of processing are effective with difficulties ranging from common transitions like job loss to recovering from a traumatic event. (Pals & McAdams, 2004).

Lilgendahl and McAdams (2010) write that when these three kinds of positive processing are brought to bear on the interpretation of negative events the resulting growth involves a two-step process of 1) acknowledging the event and exploring its meaning and potential to change the self, and 2) coming to a sense of positive resolution. But in her closer examination of drawing positive results from negative events, Pals breaks these two steps out into three: acknowledgement, analysis, and transformation of self (Pals, 2006).

The first of these three steps acknowledges fully the emotional impact of the negative experience by bringing it directly into one’s life story” (Pals, 2006, p. 193). Pals emphasizes that feeling the full emotional

weight of painful events and circumstances “can fuel an upward trajectory of growth” (p.193). To transform pain into growth a person begins by drawing a causal relationship between a negative event and the effect of this event on their life. In the second step the suffering person analyzes the “impact and meaning of negative experience within” and “across causal connections to form new links and patterns within the self” (p. 194). This process may require a lengthy period of time, but once it takes hold, Pals writes, this “process of rewriting the self” is one of “remaining open to reinterpreting the meaning of a past experience over time with the result of forming new, transforming causal connections that enrich the present self and broaden possibilities for the future” (p. 194). In step three the acknowledgement and analysis of the first two steps bear fruit in a transformed self that can embrace the positive consequences of a difficult experience, “creating an integrative pattern of growth running through the life story” (Lilgendahl, 2006, p. 194). The third step is transformative in two ways: first, “it connects negative experience to positive impact on self” and second, it uses this “negative impact to inform meaning of positive experiences for self” (p. 193).

Lilgendahl (2006) comments that these three steps of autobiographical reasoning redeem the worst aspect of past experience not by producing a subsequent and corrective positive event but by producing an inner change in the person that opens one up to a new and more positive future. It is not just that a negative experience is offset by a positive one; rather, one’s suffering has been transformed, and the resulting self-awareness and openness welcome new and positive experiences. The pain of the event has not necessarily been erased, but it is “redeemed” by playing a constructive role in a person’s emotional growth and well-being.

Pals’ careful analysis of the “springboard effect” leaves us with three questions that perhaps cannot be answered by quantitative analysis. First, how does the mechanism of autobiographical reasoning actually work? What does a person do to move from one step to another? What are the recommended or necessary actions? What does all this processing look like in real time? Second, while narrative psychologists have carefully and successfully illuminated the ingredients in healthy autobiographical reasoning, is it possible to identify the reasons why so many people, such as the unstoried, get trapped and stymied by their pain? Can narrative psychology uncover ways in which such people can be helped to recast their suffering so that it can fuel psychological growth? Third, while identity integration is widely considered a characteristic of the psychologically mature and healthy person, what does the integration of painful events into a larger life require? It is certainly no fault of narrative research

that it has left these questions largely unexamined. Most quantitative work in narrative psychology is empirically grounded, retrospective, prompt responsive, and relatively short-term. Such studies have carried the field forward from where it was even at the turn of the century. But while these questions do not lend themselves to quantitative investigation, they can be illuminated through qualitative, in-depth explorations of individual human lives.

### ***Qualitative Research Through Structured Life Review***

After my retirement from a career in the ordained ministry, social services, and secular counseling I became interested in how qualitative work might shed light on these and similar issues that quantitative research does not focus on. During these several years I earned certificates in narrative practice, structured life review, and group autobiography. As I familiarized myself with the literature of narrative psychology, I encountered positive references to qualitative work. In their recent article about quantitative research (McLean, et al., 2020) twelve narrative psychologists recognize that “the field continues to need exploratory, qualitative, generative work.” The authors go on to say that these other approaches “may help to illuminate aspects of narrative that we have not adequately addressed” (McLean, et al., 2020). This echoed the affirmation in another multi-authored article that qualitative methods can make “an important contribution to the literature on narrative identity” (p. 19) as well as lay a “strong foundation” for subsequent quantitative efforts (Adler, et al., 2017).

Over the last two years I have conducted formal structured life reviews with 18 people. In addition, going back several years, I have conducted abbreviated reviews with more than a dozen people about issues such as fractured relationships, job loss and career immobility, the death of loved ones, troubling emotions, and traumatic experiences. Additionally, I have worked with my county’s hospice services and with people in recovery. This volunteer work forms a background for my recent research, though the examples I use come solely from the structured life reviews.

When I began my training in structured life review (based largely on Haight & Haight 2007), I didn’t know one kind of life review from another and found that there is still terminological inconsistency around terms like reminiscence, life review, structured life review, life story work, and therapeutic life review. Specialists in narrative psychology have written little about life review, but there are others in the social sciences who look at it from a narrative perspective and share several common assumptions. For example, while it was developed with older people in mind, it may be

used with adults of all ages. Life review adopts a question-and-answer format and can lead to the production of legacy products like journals and scrapbooks for the next generation. Life review for its own sake, however, is intended to help people to find meaning in life, move toward the integration and the resolution of past difficulties, and solidify a sense of identity that points them toward future goals.

Since my objective here is not to differentiate among all the types and uses of recollective storytelling we can take our bearings from an article by Westerhof, Bohlmeijer, and Webster (2010), who distinguish first between reminiscence and life review and then between life review and life review therapy. Westerhof et al. define “simple reminiscence” as “mainly unstructured autobiographical storytelling and the spontaneous recollection of happy memories that takes place within a relational, social context” (p. 555). By contrast, life review is more structured and purposeful. The concept originated in the work of Robert Butler with older people in mind (1963). This target population was reinforced by Butler’s successors who tied life story work to Erik Erickson’s eight stages of human development, stages that culminate, ideally, in generativity (e.g., Haight & Haight, 2007). While the structure of life review fits well with people in their 70’s and 80’s it can easily be adapted for younger people. According to the Hights, life reviews “have shown therapeutic benefits such as decreased depression, increased life satisfaction, increased self-esteem, and multiple other psychosocial benefits” (p. 8). Finally, life review *therapy* is highly structured and designed for people with severe depression or anxiety and for those with problem-saturated stories. It is usually conducted in a therapeutic setting, such as a psychologist’s office or an in-patient psychiatric clinic.

As mentioned, I was trained in structured life review, which falls into the second of the above categories and is based on the authoritative Haight & Haight text. They suggest that these reviews consist of eight one-hour sessions spaced one week apart, and that they follow the sequence of Erik Erickson’s eight stages of development. The person who conducts the life review is called the listener and the person who is reviewing their life, the reviewer. While life review is not therapy, it is characterized as therapeutic, so the person on the listening end is sometimes referred to as the therapeutic listener. This listener asks questions, listens attentively to the answers, and asks more questions. Listeners do not analyze, diagnose, or counsel reviewers, and ordinarily should avoid making statements other than affirmations of what the reviewer says. Listeners can use questions from the Hights’ Life Review Form in the back of their book, and there are numerous other resources available on the internet.

Most of the people I reviewed were acquaintances from the area in which I live, though two were friends and two were people I had not previously met. This cohort consisted of eight males and ten females. Seventeen were Caucasian and one Hispanic. The youngest reviewer was 53 and the oldest 83. I “recruited” through word of mouth. When a person expressed interest in doing a review, I sent them a one-page explanation and description of what they could expect and then spoke with them about any questions they had. I also sent them a confidentiality statement that mirrors APA policy. I emphasized both in writing and conversation that they would be in control of the review. They had the right to decline responding to any of my questions and to cut short the entire review at any point. About a month after completing a review I sent the reviewer a two-page document summarizing the themes that had seemed important to them. After this I followed up with them by phone at three, six, and twelve months after the last session. These follow-up contacts were valuable in revealing the longer-term results of the reviews. Most of the reviews were conducted in person. Due to Covid, five took place by telephone and one over Zoom.

Before I began conducting reviews, I was sceptical about using Erickson’s stages of development as a structural scaffolding. I tried them with the first reviewer, which confirmed my hesitations, and I did not use the stages again. Erickson’s stages are, of course, conjectural and have not been empirically validated. In addition, they are cumbersome to use in a life review because people may experience the polarities associated with the stages at different times of their lives. Trust vs mistrust, for example, is assigned to infancy but can arise as an important issue at any time in life. I replaced Erickson’s stages with a chronological structure that assigned one decade to each session. This worked well, though we needed to be flexible. Sometimes a single event took up an entire session, or even two sessions, and occasionally a theme emerged in a particular decade that needed to be followed into later periods of a person’s life. For reasons like these, I was flexible with the length and number of sessions. Some sessions lasted longer than one hour and an entire reviews more than eight sessions. The longest review was fourteen sessions. I did not record the conversations or take notes during them, but following each meeting I typed notes for myself on what we had talked about.

Here are the main themes that emerged from the reviews:

First, and most importantly, the reviews demonstrated that people perform autobiographical processing largely out loud, that is, through acts of oral narration. I emphasize this because it has not been a focus of narrative literature, and it points the way to how the insights of narrative psychology can be made

available to the unstoried. Quantitative research captures the results of narrative processing but not the process. In other words, for the most part, research participants are not doing narrative processing but rather reporting how they have done it in the past. During the life reviews I conducted it became evident that with one exception none of the reviewers had talked in any depth about the most painful episodes in their lives. Nobody had ever asked them the kind of specific and detailed questions that are part of a life review. Several reviewers commented to the effect that, "I have talked about this with people before," or "my friends know all about this," but upon inquiry it turned out that the talking and the knowledge were of only the most summary nature.

As people spoke about events that took place earlier in their lives, in several cases five or six decades earlier, they reexperienced the events along with emotions they had felt at the time or were perhaps feeling for the first time. Reviewers then continued their processing between sessions through reflection and sometimes by talking with others. Several returned the next week having made connections between events they had spoken about the previous week and patterns of thinking and behaving that characterized their present lives. These realizations would then be autobiographically processed. Follow-up calls made at three, six, and twelve months usually revealed longer term processing that resulted in salutary changes in both self-understanding and behaviors.

Second, and also of key importance, oral narration is most integratively effective when it includes a high level of detail and specificity. As suggested above, it is in this detail and specificity that an event from the past is recreated in the present and made available for processing. I should note that when I talk about autobiographical reasoning I am referring to steps described by McAdams and Pals. Most reviewers used such reasoning, but this was usually part of a larger and often messier undertaking for which I use the terms autobiographical or narrative processing. Particularly when it came to painful events, I asked reviewers to recreate specific scenes and conversations. For example, one reviewer was relieved of a heavy burden of shame stemming from an abortion she had three decades prior. I was not the first person with whom she had spoken about this event. But over the course of three conversations this reviewer recollected the event in granular detail. It was this level of detail, I believe, that promoted healing autobiographical processing.

Another reviewer I will call Tom spoke casually about the abusive home in which he had grown up. But in our conversation he recounted scenes in which his mother chased him around the house and sometimes out the front door with brooms and other household cleaning implements. When asked why he had not spoken with other people about such frightening

episodes, his response was simply that nobody had asked. But only after describing such events in detail was the reviewer able in subsequent sessions to reflect out loud about their impact on his life. As he processed such events over a series of sessions, he reexperienced the emotions he had felt as a child. He then worked through these feelings during further conversations and completed the life review with a sense of equanimity about his past.

As with other reviewers, this acceptance of past events and circumstances did not entail a recognition that life had unfolded just the way it was meant to, but instead that it had unfolded the way it had unfolded. In other words, to cite a common expression, it is what it is. Nothing is preordained. This acceptance cleared the way for interacting with past events from a new perspective. This combination of acceptance and awareness made past difficulties available for autobiographical processing, leading to acceptance and resolution. When Tom initially spoke about the painful events of his early years he worried that this would heighten his resentment toward his parents. But while his recollections stirred up troubling emotions, they also enabled him to accept his parents for who they were and to realize that they were themselves products of the environment in which they had been raised. This cleared the way for developing more positive feelings for his mother and father, both now in their 80's, and spending far more time with them, even though this required regular trips from New Jersey to Florida. The autobiographical processing that one-to-one conversation made possible brought Tom to a point of regarding his parents with compassion, even affection. This happened in the real time of the life review. As a longer-term result Tom developed more compassion for both himself and other people generally. This gave his life a new sense of meaning that engendered closer connections with others. I think this is a large part of what Pals means when she talks about the "positive resolution" that characterizes the third step of autobiographical reasoning. Among reviewers with whom I worked this positive resolution always included enhanced self-acceptance and closer connections with others.

### ***What Makes Oral Narration Effective***

Let's pause and ask why detailed oral narration is so key to autobiographical reasoning and the development of new narrative identities. What is it about speaking out loud that is so valuable? As discussed above, the focus of narrative research on quantitative studies has not given the field the opportunity to inquire into identity construction as it is actually happening. But we can gain some insight by looking at the work of psychologist James Pennebaker (1990). Pennebaker has studied extensively the effects

of writing about stress and stressful events and shown that when people (especially college students) write about their problems they experience beneficial increases in both physical and mental health. Pennebaker acknowledges that there is no single cause for a complex phenomenon (2007). But Pennebaker has a couple of ideas. First, he proposes that actively inhibiting thoughts and feelings about traumatic events requires effort and serves as a cumulative stressor on the body and mind that is relieved through written expression. Confronting a difficulty or trauma through writing about it releases pent-up emotions and anxieties and, in doing so, mitigates the strain on body and soul. Second, writing about stressful matters externalizes them onto paper and this facilitates a different kind of cognitive processing that leads to the uncovering of meaning. Third, meaning making is in itself emotionally calming, leading to a diminution of intrusive and distressing thoughts. When we translate our experiences into language, Pennebaker argues, we make it graspable. These insights into the value of autobiographical writing also apply to autobiographical narration. But Pennebaker has little to say about the spoken word, except that talking to people about painful experiences runs the risk of rejection, which is naturally not conducive to the baring of one's soul.

But then what are the unique and advantageous characteristics of oral narration? The first is simply that most people don't engage in detailed narrative processing unless they are asked probing questions about their experiences by a sympathetic listener who persistently prods for more information and the feelings that come with the memories. Brian Schiff, Professor of Psychology at the American University in Paris, believes that one function of oral narration is "making present" (Schiff, 2012). Elaborating on Schiff's insight we can say that when one person narrates a part of their life to another, especially when the remembrance is laden with emotion, this does not simply recount a memory, but recreates it as an interpersonal event, embodied in the connective humanity of the speaker and the listener. When the past is brought forward into a communal space it is processed between people in a way that can't be accomplished in the solitariness of writing. Speaking of pain with another person joins it with the pain of humanity, thereby transforming it into something over which one can exercise, to suggest a new term, *agentic processing*. This makes sense when we take into account the embodied (or embedded) quality of human experience. The presence of the other person, the listener, recreates the embodied quality of the original event, allowing a reengagement and processing in the present. This depends, of course, on the listener bringing an attentive, non-judging, and trustworthy presence to the encounter.

Schiff, like Singer, recognizes that not all stories are equal. Our narrative identity is shaped most decisively by a handful of stories that are vital to who we are. At the same time, he encourages us not to overlook the significance of everyday conversations. Narrative living ("living out loud" as some people call it) is constituted not only by conversations about significant subjects in formal or semi-formal settings but by the spontaneous exchanges with the people who populate our lives. We should not underestimate the value and impact of ordinary conversations that can bring healing to our relationships.

One 70-year reviewer, mentioned in his fourth session that he had always considered himself a curt, matter-of-fact person. "Preferably transactional" was the term he used to describe his encounters with others. Lately, however, he had gotten more sociable and taken to initiating exchanges with people he had been accustomed to ignoring and might not even see again—cashiers, receptionists, dog walkers in the park, and the Amazon delivery person. I asked him what effect this was having on him and, after a pause, he offered that it was making him more congenial and conversational in his more important and enduring relationships. In response to the question of what had taken him so long to develop this conversational facility he replied that he never thought strangers would be interested in talking to him. He surmised that these same strangers had probably thought similarly about him. He was surprised to learn that the exchanges had made him more cheerful, and that cheerfulness made him feel more conversational generally.

Third, seven of the reviewers were burdened by long-standing feelings of pervasive shame. Shame is a complex subject and though relevant to the development of narrative identity, it has attracted little attention in the literature. It has received more attention from the general public, particularly since the publication of John Bradshaw's bestselling book, *Healing the Shame that Binds You*, in 1988. He and others have offered numerous definitions of the phenomenon but perhaps the clearest has come from Brene Brown. Now a professor at the University of Houston, Brown began her graduate studies by focusing on the subject of human connection, but kept running into shame as an impediment to connection, so she shifted gears and made shame the subject of her first two books. In *The Gifts of Imperfection* Brown offers her readers a succinct definition of human connection: "I define connection as the energy that exists between people when they feel seen, heard, and valued; when they can give and receive without judgment; and when they derive sustenance and strength from the relationship" (Brown, 2010, p. 19). She follows this several pages later by saying, "A deep sense of love and belonging is an irreducible need of all women, men, and children" (p. 26). My reviewers

would agree. Nearly all of the autobiographical processing they did was toward the goal of increasing their capacity to love others and be loved by them. Shame, of course, obstructs the giving and receiving of love. Brown defines shame, as “the intensely painful feeling or experience of believing that we are flawed and therefore unworthy of love and belonging.” (Brown, 2010, p. 39). Brown thinks we’ve all got it, that shame is a universal phenomenon, but that some of us have more of it than others. Some people are emotionally immobilized by shame; their shame is toxic to their well-being.

So-called toxic shame is usually caused by childhood abuse or neglect, and it traps people in patterns of self-destructive thinking and behaving from which, even in adulthood, they have trouble extricating themselves. The consequences of shame among reviewers included an inability to form rewarding relationships, professional dysfunction, and a chronic, sometimes crippling, undervaluing of self. As a result, these reviewers struggled with an inability to remember the past and to engage in the autobiographical reasoning and identity construction we discussed in the first part of this article. Shame that is carried into adulthood is not quickly or easily resolved. In fact, Brene Brown believes that the complete elimination of shame is an unrealistic goal and that we should aim instead for shame resilience. Even this modest goal presents challenges for a life review. Shame is probably best addressed in a professional therapeutic relationship. Nonetheless, the process of life review helped reviewers talk about the early life events that had caused their shame and to connect the parental abuse or neglect from which they had suffered to their present-day problems. Since shame thrives in secrecy and on not being spoken of, these conversations were helpful and freeing, and opened new doors to changes in present day behavior. The life reviews enabled people to make clear autobiographical connections between early life experiences and the impact of these childhood events on their current lives. Identifying and talking about shame cleared the way for them to begin breaking free of it.

Fourth, the current problems reviewers talked most about were strained and fractured relationships, the inability to forgive others, and their own lack of self-acceptance and self-worth. The autobiographical processing of these problems began with detailed descriptions of past events and circumstances and then movement. But this was never a linear process propelled by rational analysis. It was messy and emotional and within this complex stew narrative processing and new identity formation took place. The emerging connecting of emotions with events patterned the first of Pals three steps. Although making these connections was important, so was the cleansing

of strong negative feelings of being personally wronged and violated.

For example, a 75-year-old man I will call Bill had not spoken to his sister for 16 years even though they lived in the same town. Brother and sister had fallen out around the will of their deceased brother. The will was vague in stipulating who would get what. Bill and his sister both believed that the other person had made off with more than their share of hard assets like furniture, house decorations, and other valuables. Of particular issue was their brother’s large brown couch, which had dominated his living room for decades. Bill spent three review sessions explaining the chaotic process by which the contents of his brother’s house had been claimed before he even got there. His sister, though, believed, at least Bill assumed, that she had been cheated out of what was rightfully hers. The recounting of these complexities took the better part of three hours, hours infused with indignation and resentment. And then Bill felt, as he put it, “worn out,” and in the wake of this emotional weariness he began wondering if he was remembering everything accurately and even, if so, whether it even much mattered in the larger scheme of things. Over two more conversations Bill’s anger dissipated, and he began to question whether he had conducted himself in such an exemplary fashion. Perhaps not, he began musing during our fourth and fifth conversations. Out of this welter of autobiographical processing Bill decided that the estrangement between him and his sister was “silly.” In response to the question of whether he wanted to do anything about it, he determined to call his sister and apologize for his behavior. He was flabbergasted to discover that his sister was glad to hear from him and wanted to meet for lunch. And so they did—the first of more to follow. Bill was not one for deep reflection, but during post-review follow up calls he delighted in his new relationship with his sister and confounded by how he could have hated her for so many years.

It is not always possible for relationships to be reconciled or for painful feelings to be erased. A man named George recounted that ten years ago his brother had died of a cocaine-induced heart attack. His brother had long abused drugs, and George was now tormented by the fact that he had never tried to help him. After recounting the fraught history of their relationship, George seized on the idea of writing his brother a letter and reading it to a selection of relatives and friends. The letter was a poignant expression of guilt and love. After reading it to several people George’s guilt softened into regret and coupled with an awareness that he never again wanted to turn his back on a person he could help.

These are only two examples of the changes that reviewers experienced by talking about their lives in the presence of a neutral but affirming person who kept

asking questions that took them further and deeper into their lives than they had ventured before. They found meaning in the past that they could bring into their ongoing lives. In post-review follow up conversations, reviewers said that the attentive and non-judging presence of the listener invited them to speak about themselves and their lives in a way they had not before. This opened the door to processing their past realities in a way that changed their present and, they anticipated, probably their future.

The lessons that can be drawn from these examples are that through oral narrative processing reviewers found both growth and well-being and that these changes were actuated in their relationships in the here and now. By narratively processing their past experiences in the present, they worked their way through negative emotions like anger and resentment and found on the other side a capacity for forgiveness and acceptance. Along with the discovery of meaning in connection, most reviewers found increased self-worth, decreased judgmentalism, and a new openness toward others. These rewards came, in part, simply from speaking freely and feeling heard and understood. These changes show how oral narrative processing is both grounded in and cultivates humanistic values.

All the more reason, then, to ask how narrative psychology can pass its ideas and practices along to people who never dive into academic journals. Let's first pause to summarize the themes that emerged through the structured life reviews followed by a couple of additional observations.

1. Autobiographical reasoning is most effectively accomplished through oral narration that makes the past present and available for processing in the company of another human being who is listening attentively.

2. Painful events from the past need to be talked about in detail in order for them to be available for autobiographical reasoning and integrated into a person's narrative identity.

3. Many people suffer from shame that impedes their ability to recall and make sense of the past. The narration of the events that have caused this shame are critical to both autobiographical reasoning and the construction of narrative identity.

4. The increases in well-being and meaning that flow from healthy autobiographical processing are gained particularly through the resolution or lessening of personal conflicts and the formation of closer connections with other people.

5. Autobiographical processing reduces anger, hostility, and resentment and fosters acceptance, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

6. The personal integration of pain and difficulty bears fruit in greater compassion for others and a desire to use one's difficulties and the lessons they have

taught one to help others struggling with their own pain. Thus, the autobiographical processing of painful events from the past and present is intrinsically prosocial.

7. Although this essay did not address significant themes in narrative literature such as synchronic and diachronic coherence and finding life satisfaction through both agency and communion, they were present throughout the life reviews. The reviews took a chronological approach, and possibly for this reason reviewers were most struck in their later sessions by a new sense of the coherence of their lives across time.

8. Finally, the literature of narrative psychology speaks of the importance of integrating suffering and difficulty into one's life. For most reviewers, integration happened through talking about their pain and then transforming it by using it to help other people. Even the highest levels of integration did not erase tragedy and its consequences, but they did produce love and meaning. Nearly all of the reviewers experienced gains in their capacity to plan and take action and in their ability to form close ties with people. These gains were sometimes evident during the later sessions of the life review, while in other cases they evolved over subsequent months. Reviewers were rewarded by increases in life satisfaction and a keener appreciation of life's ironies and imperfections. They emerged with less of a need to control every aspect of their own lives and the lives of others and instead allow events to unfold of their own accord.

Let's conclude by returning to the plight of the unstoried. It is probably unrealistic to hope we that we can train thousands of people to conduct life reviews before sending them out to the far corners of the world, but I hope researchers and teachers in the field of narrative psychology can be alert to opportunities for bringing its insights into the relationship between storytelling and human well-being to the general public. The methodologies of autobiographical reasoning and narrative processing embodied in meaningful human conversation are relevant to a wide range of human situations and experiences. I have used them with older adults, men and women bearing the wounds of childhood abuse, people who are dying and bereaved, those recovering from substance addictions, and people navigating common but often daunting transitions such as geographical relocation, marriage, and career change. The key principle of life review—listening, asking questions, and listening—again can both lessen and make meaningful much of the pain that weighs on so many of us. When encouraged and nurtured, this principle can be integrated into conversations that comprise the substance of interactional life among all of us.

One of the reasons so many people get stuck in states of pain and conflict is that there are few places in society where personal, deep conversation, even



among friends, is welcomed and cultivated. This predicament is partly a byproduct of human nature but also of a present-day society that is habituated to the superficialities of social media, curated virtual identities, fleeting attention spans, and a craving for constant, though ephemeral, stimulation. MIT professor Sherry Turkle writes eloquently about how even the presence of cell phones in our hands and on the tables in front of us discourages interpersonal conversation among family members having dinner together. (Turkle, 2015).

The prospect of addressing the larger conditions of our society is daunting but we can make changes in our own lives as simple as slowing down and taking time to listen to and converse with one another. We can bring the narrative-grounded principles of life review into our relationships with others, our friends, neighbors, and relatives. We can give them our full attention and ask them caring questions. If we do this, we might make beneficial changes in the world and at least in the lives of those we know and in ourselves. At the end of a recent life review a man remarked on how unexpectedly liberating he had found it: "Who would have known?" In response to the question of what about the life review had worked well for him, he first paused and then said, "You are right here, right here with me." This comment captures both the context and the substance of autobiographical work. Despite the discouraging trends we see in our society, most people have the capacity to be "right here" with each other.

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