

Spoken Life Review and Healing

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This article explores how spoken narrative, one person talking to another about his or her life, can help the speaker gain emotional healing. Based on the author's facilitation of 30 Structured Life Reviews over the past five years, it also describes how the out-loud processing of adversity leads to increased well-being and the adoption of prosocial values. One life review case study is presented in suggesting how the essence of spoken narrative can benefit society at large.

Narrative psychology has demonstrated that our identities are partly—and at times decisively—shaped by the stories we tell about ourselves. Research in narrative studies has also shown that narrative processing can influence how we react to and integrate events into our lives, particularly those that are adverse, painful, or identity-challenging. The effective integration of such experiences and circumstances can support personal growth, characterized by enhanced well-being and mature humane values.

Dan McAdams and other narrative psychologists such as Jennifer Pals Lilgendahl and Jefferson Singer, propose that human identity gathers up our past, shapes our present, and reconfigures the future. As McAdams (2011) explains:

Narrative identity is the internalized and evolving story of the self that a person constructs to make sense and meaning out of his or her life. The story is a selective reconstruction of the autobiographical past and a narrative anticipation of the imagined future that serves to explain, for the self and others, how the person came to be and where his or her life may be going. (McAdams, 2011, p. 99).

One of the mechanisms for constructing a narrative identity was first identified by Habermas and Bluck (2000) as autobiographical reasoning (AR). Autobiographical reasoning involves making connections between past events and the present, and between these events and the self. Narrative psychologist Jennifer Pals Lilgendahl has been particularly interested in how the constructive use of AR can help people navigate adversity in a healthy manner

that promotes personal growth and well-being. She refers to this form of AR as exploratory reasoning. She also calls it transformational processing because people often emerge from it dramatically changed. Pals (2006) describes transformational processing as occurring in three steps.

In the first step, the autobiographical reasoner needs to fully absorb the pain and negativity of the adverse event. This requires moving past common psychological defenses such as denial, which can shield us from discomfort and pain. In the second step, the person makes an explicit connection between the event and the self, embracing the causality between them. In the third and final step, the individual brings their processing of the difficult event to a satisfactory conclusion or resolution. Completing this series of steps moves the reasoner toward psychological growth and well-being. This does not mean that the adversity with which a person is wrestling is negated, annulled, or resolved with a sense of closure. Rather, the person emerges different and more mature for the experience. Apropos of the matter at hand, movement through these three steps can often take place during the course of a Structured Life Review.

The Structured Life Review typically follows the model articulated by Barbara and Barrett Haight in their *Handbook of Structured Life Review*, published in 2007 (Haight & Haight, 2007). For the purposes of this paper, I will refer principally to life reviews or just reviews. A complete review consists of eight one-hour sessions spaced one week apart. The Hights suggest sequencing the sessions around Erik Erikson's eight stages of development, but I found it more helpful to focus flexibly on one decade at a time. Many of the reviewers I spoke with recounted their past at length in order to make sense of their present life. This sometimes required more than eight sessions.

Of the 30 reviews I have conducted since my training five years ago, 25 have been in person, three on Zoom, and two by phone. I did not recruit reviewers; they came to me by word of mouth. Most lived in the same area as I did, though several resided in other states. About nine of the

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reviews were what I will call consequential, in that they led the reviewers to extended transformational change. Other reviewers did not need to change or were not interested in doing so. The remaining reviewers gained insight into features of their lives, which led them to make modest to substantive changes, particularly in healing fraught and damaged relationships. Only one reviewer dropped out; she found exploring her childhood too painful. Happily, a year later she embarked on a fruitful course of psychotherapy.

The primary role of the listener, naturally, is to listen closely to the reviewer. Just as important, however, is for the listener to ask relevant questions. I asked my reviewers three kinds of questions. First-level questions are generic and typically come at the beginning of a session. One reviewer dubbed them ‘starter questions.’ Examples include, ‘How did you get along with your parents?’ and ‘What did you major in at college?’

Second-level questions are more specific and critical to the success of a life review. These inquiries probe for details about the events and circumstances the reviewer describes. During my facilitation of life reviews, I found that in the course of their regular lives many people talk about their difficulties and encounters with adversity only in general terms, even when interacting with family members and friends. While this can suffice for daily life, generalities do not help people face and process adversity. Therefore, in conducting life reviews I repeatedly asked people to enumerate and describe the details of important events and situations, even when they were painful or embarrassing for the reviewer to recall. Thus, reviewers heard questions like, ‘Describe exactly what happened,’ I know this goes back a ways, but can you tell me just who said what?’ and ‘Describe the setting of the room.’

Third-level questions ask reviewers to talk about their feelings both at the time the events occurred and as they are recounting them. Interestingly, reviewers frequently did not recognize their feelings until they began to describe the details of their lives, at which point they discovered them in the process of speaking. It was not uncommon for reviewers to be surprised by their emotions. The reviewers’ integration of details and feelings constitutes a significant part of Lilgendahl’s three-step processing and, while healing in and of itself, also opens the door to extended development into well-being. Speaking out loud about their encounters with adversity is itself an act of transformational AR that begins to reconfigure identity.

Nancy’s Story

As was the case with most reviewers, Nancy (as I will call her) came to me by word of mouth, having heard from a friend about what I was doing. We met for eleven sessions.

Nancy is an intelligent, capable, and gregarious woman in her late 50s who had recently retired from twenty years in a high-level corporate position. Nancy’s professional success was not enough to extinguish—or even diminish—the constant, debilitating voice in her head that told her she

was of no value as a person, was unlovable, and did not truly belong anywhere in the world.

In the early review sessions, Nancy shrugged off her difficult childhood and assumed that this degrading voice expressed an accurate self-appraisal. As a result, she questioned the value of nearly everything she did. She was daily preoccupied with whether she had recently insulted a person or been insulted by them. She constantly wondered whether people liked and respected her. Did she even like and respect herself?

Living every day with this self-questioning and self-castigation, obviously made Nancy’s life unpleasant and sometimes tormented. She knew her mother had been critical of her when she was a child but assumed that she had merited her opprobrium. She once referred to her mother as a woman who had ‘a few rough edges.’

In the middle of the fourth session, Nancy talked about how her mother did not understand her professional goals. This suddenly triggered earlier memories, and Nancy began to describe encounters and conversations between the two of them. The more she talked, the more questions I asked, and the more she remembered.

Though a tolerant and forgiving person, Nancy painted a harrowing portrait of her mother. As a parent, she was beyond hypercritical. With relentless fury, she was mean and vicious and, so far as Nancy could remember, never kind or nourishing—never a compliment or an affectionate hug.

Nancy’s reaction to her life review was surprise, exhaustion, and relief. For the first time, she fully grasped that her self-denigration came from her mother and was not intrinsic to herself. The days of ‘rough edges’ were gone, and halfway through the review Nancy began to occasionally refer to her mother as ‘that horrible woman.’ Nancy realized that she had internalized her mother’s voice and made it the foundation of her identity. After she dislodged her mother during the life review, she was able to consider who she was and to grow a new identity.

Reflections on Nancy’s Story

I stay in touch with many of the reviewers, particularly those I have dubbed consequential reviewers. When I spoke with Nancy several months after our meetings, she said that telling me the nitty-gritty, granular details of her interactions with her mother was critical to awakening and giving expression to her sadness and sense of violation. The specificity of her recollections broke the spell. This was also the case with other consequential reviewers, even when the adversity they were struggling with was only a year behind them. When I asked Nancy what had taken her so long to speak directly about the relationship between her and her mother, her response was, ‘Nobody asked.’

Once Nancy made her way through the adversity of the past, she was in a position to change how she thought of herself and translate this into new behaviors that continued the emotional healing initiated at the beginning of her life review. This was also the pattern with other consequential reviewers who were trapped in past adversities, including

those of more recent vintage. As with Nancy, their construction of a fresh identity was, ironically, almost a public event. Soon after her review, Nancy talked volubly with friends and family members about her new journey of self-discovery and auditioned with them what she called ‘my new self.’

It was not all smooth sailing. At times the old, shaming voice piped up, leaving her uncertain and confused. But with the support of nearly everybody who knew her and six months of help from an effective therapist, her personal life gained peace and even periods of joy. She finally accepted that her sometimes annoying but doting husband was unlikely to change his ingrained habits, and that if she could accept this, they could focus on all that was good about their marriage. She still weathered mild bouts of depression and anxiety, but over time learned they would pass--provided she didn’t pay them too much attention.

Nancy and I lived in the same town and served together on the advisory board of a local not-for-profit organization. During the year after her review, Nancy developed greater comfort in her relationships and kept an eye out for people who were on the margins and appeared lonely. As the second year after her review approached, Nancy advocated more explicitly and assuredly for the values central to what she called her ‘recovery of my genuine self,’ including forgiveness, compassion, and the acceptance of others. When I asked her what had changed most in her life, she responded, ‘I talk more.’ Indeed, she did--and this was also true of the other consequential reviewers. Once they broke through the initial barrier, they felt newly comfortable sharing more of themselves with others and asking for help.

At the same time, she kept close the memories of what her life had been like for so many years. She used these as a fulcrum for moving forward and for communicating her hard-won well-being and values. The other consequential reviewers faced adversities that included the deaths of loved ones, fractured family relationships, divorce, abusive treatment, alcoholism, and the inability to realize important life goals. Each of these individuals had their own ‘journey,’ to use the popular term. Through creative and positive autobiographical reasoning—narrated aloud in real time—they transformed their adversities into changed identities that were gradually constructed through their interactions with others.

It is worth asking, at this point, what gives the spoken word and the spoken life review the power to change lives. In fact, as illustrated by a recent article in *The New York Times* (Laber-Warren, August 29, 2024), written solitary life review, in the form of journaling and legacy writing by older adults, has gained more attention and is more widely practiced than spoken review. One advantage of the written word is that its effectiveness can be measured (Pennebaker). In addition, journaling and life story writing are accessible to anybody with a pen and paper or a computer. Every year brings a flood of books and articles encouraging people to record their lives and showing them how to do it. In contrast, there is currently no formal program in North America that trains people to conduct

Structured Life Reviews. And with the widespread use of social media, the value of the spoken word seems to be losing ground every year.

In this light, it is worth underscoring several points:

- **The spoken word is foundational.** It is closely intertwined with human evolution, structuring and embodying human interaction and development for at least four millennia before the appearance of writing. *Homo Sapiens* evolved into communal existence with the glue of the spoken word. Our identities are as beings-with-others. Our adversities are experienced with and among others, so it makes sense that this is where healing occurs—one person interacting with another. The written word can bear the heavy weight of intense human emotion, but it cannot match the transformational healing potency of direct human encounter.
- **Communication transforms identity.** Acts of communication between listener and reviewer are profound because the reviewer is not merely recording events of the past but, in the action of speaking, is reinterpreting those events and changing oneself through the presence of an interested and nonjudging person. The new identity of the reviewer is co-constructed and, as noted, continues to be shaped even after the review process ends. I was struck by this when one reviewer remarked in his last session, “This has been incredible. You are right here, right here with me.” For this man, the transformational element of life review had been the human encounter.
- **Listener questions open hidden doors.** When I asked one consequential reviewer what had been most important in our conversations, she replied, “You ask me all these questions. I could never have asked them by myself.” She went on to explain that the listener’s questions had opened up new vistas of self-exploration that would otherwise have remained hidden from her.

Healing, Well-Being, and Values

Narrative psychologists often shy away from the term *happiness* because of its association with hedonic pleasure. Narrative researchers and theorists prefer to identify the rewards of positive narrative processing in terms of psychological growth and well-being. Thousands of books and articles testify to the many ways that well-being and happiness can be discovered and lived. The genre of happiness studies is thriving and can take us in a seemingly infinite number of directions. In their handbook, Barbara and Barrett Haight (2007) present the reader with the benefits of a successful life review:

- Clarity about life meaning and purpose
- Compassion for others
- Acceptance of self and others

- Improved relationships and connections with others
- Life satisfaction
- Relief of anxious and depressive feelings.

These outcomes are consistent with the work of contemporary happiness and well-being scholars like Martin Seligman, whose five marks of *flourishing* are positive emotion, engagement, relationships, meaning, and accomplishment.

For life reviewers with whom I have worked, the willingness, desire, and commitment to help others usually marked the culminating stage and expression of their healing. This arrival point signified the maturation of their agentic and communal selves and was conceptualized by them as an event of redemption—though they did not use this word. Dan McAdams has written extensively about the ‘redemptive self.’ He does not use the term in its traditional religious sense, but it retains the meaning of leaving behind the old and taking up a new life that represents a decisive break from previous existence.

The acquisition of a new identity characterized by previously unknown well-being and by newly defined, actualized values is best defined as humane and prosocial. These values center around the dignity and worth of every person and a readiness to engage each person in dialogue. When I presented this conceptualization to one completed reviewer, he thought for a moment and then said, “Yeah, I am much more friendly than I used to be.”

The phenomenon of identity and personality change is too complex for systematic analysis in this essay, but we cannot leave unremarked the utility of adversity and pain. Reviewers did not suddenly shift into lives of unblemished joy, but the nature of emotional pain changed. The pain of the past was self-immolating, but new pain could be integrated as one part of life and accepted as a means of continuing growth. ‘No pain, no gain,’ one reviewer recalled reading in an article, to which he responded to me, ‘Ok, but it is still pain. Right?’ ‘That’s right,’ I responded with a grin, ‘No pain, no authenticity.’

When I first began conducting life reviews, I did not expect to find such strong connections among new identity, well-being, and newly grown values. Nor did I anticipate that the results of the reviews would point to wider implications. But then I remembered the work of Sherry Turkle, which I first encountered several years ago. Turkle, Professor of Social Science and Technology at MIT, writes about the destructive effects of our burgeoning communicative technologies on ordinary, life enhancing conversation between people. In her book *Reclaiming Conversation: The Power of Talk in a Digital Age* (2015), Turkle worries about the debilitating effects of technology on human connection. Writing a decade ago, she particularly targeted the impersonality of texting. Today, ten years later, the further evolution of social media and the rise of artificial intelligence make texting seem relatively benign. AI alarms people not just because it might destroy us, but also because of its rapidly evolving substitution for what keeps us connected with one another.

The integration of AI into everyday life may bring us benefits, but through the computerization and mechanization of daily routines it increasingly separates us from one another—all in the cause of convenience, speed, and increased financial rewards for a few people. Already, I can shop and check out at my local grocery store without encountering another person, order take-out food from a computer, and even worry about an acquaintance who has just begun therapy with a chat box. One does not need to be a Luddite to wonder how the gradual erosion of human connections will affect our personal and collective lives.

Sociologists and psychologists are already documenting the deterioration of collective life: the hostilities that invade our political and public square, and the unraveling of individual emotional and psychological well-being. Ironically, we often turn to technology to fix the very problems that technology has created.

Conclusion

Notwithstanding the popularity of journaling and other forms of written life review, the core essence of spoken Structured Life Review has been adapted for a number of settings and specific populations. I have used a compressed form of life review, usually comprising one to four sessions, with people going through career changes, entering retirement, preparing for death, or mourning the loss of a loved one. My experience suggests that such adaptations can also be effective with alcoholics working to get sober or grappling with the difficult problems they encounter in the early and middle stages of recovery. Brief life review ‘interventions’ can also be used to explore everyday problems such as excessive anger, jealousy, or conflicted family relationships. In all of these adaptations, the model remains simple: ask questions, listen, and ask more questions. In keeping with the Structured Life Review model discussed in this paper, no counseling, diagnoses, or advice is offered.

These adaptations provide persuasive evidence that the spirit and substance of life review can be integrated into our everyday conversations, tailored to the situations in which we find ourselves. The main requirement is that we show genuine interest in and attentiveness to our fellow human beings. Our willingness to engage in meaningful conversations with friends, acquaintances, and even strangers is one of the most powerful ways to support autobiographical reasoning and to help others transcend the dehumanizing influences that come at us from every direction. Such conversations can serve as a partial antidote to the social fragmentation driven by political hostilities and the increasingly distracted and unfocused allotment of our attention. None of this requires elaborate training, though a few workshops in our churches and public libraries might help raise awareness of our predicament and encourage us to push through the barriers that keep us in our own silos.

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