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Telling the Stories of God's Glorious Deeds to the Next Generation

How a Spiritual Legacy Workshop Impacts Christian Older Adults

By
Elizabeth Reynolds Turnage

A Dissertation Submitted to
the Faculty of Covenant Theological Seminary
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Ministry.

Saint Louis, Missouri

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. While life story work has been studied among older adults, little study has been done with Christian older adults (COAs) on spiritual legacy work (SLW) based on the metanarrative of Scripture.

This study utilized a qualitative design using semi-structured interviews with seven COAs who participated in a SLW structured on the metanarrative of Scripture. The interviews focused on gaining data using four research questions: 1. What motivates Christian older adults to participate in a spiritual legacy workshop? 2. How do COAs tell the stories of difficult life events? 3. How do COAs describe changes in how they think about difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop? And 4. To what extent are COAs motivated to tell the stories of their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation?

The literature review focused on three areas key to understanding the developmental challenges COAs face and the impact of life story work on those challenges: 1) what developmental psychology teaches about the challenges older adults face and the tasks they must complete to age successfully; 2) what narrative gerontology teaches about the challenges older adults face and how storytelling affects older adults' sense of life purpose; and 3) what Psalm 78 says about the lifelong calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

This study concluded that the SLW helped COAs recognize God's faithfulness in difficult events. Interviewees reported a change in thinking about difficult events and a

renewed sense of meaning and purpose in those events. Some planned to use the technique of writing difficult stories when they encountered challenges in the future, while others felt hope for future difficulties because of God's faithfulness in the past. All participants expressed a desire to share stories of God's goodness to the next generation. This study concluded that churches should consider offering a SLW to COAs as a method of spiritual care as well as a tool for equipping COAs for ministry.

To Kip and all of our children and grandchildren: May you ever remember and share the stories of the glorious deeds of our Lord.

We will not hide them from our children, but tell to the coming generation the glorious deeds of the Lord, and his might, and the wonders that he has done.

— Psalm 78:4

Contents

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Abbreviations

COA	Christian Older Adult
SLW	Spiritual Legacy Workshop

Chapter 1

Introduction

Congregations throughout the United States are aging. According to a 2019 report by Census.gov, 10,000 Baby Boomers turn 65 each day, and by 2030, "All baby boomers will be at least 65."[1] A Faith Communities Today study reveals that across multiple denominations, 33 percent of participants are 65 or older.[2] According to a Pew Research study, in evangelical churches in 2024, 29 percent of members are age 50-64, and 20 percent are age 65 or over.[3] As congregations age, ministry leaders need to shepherd an increasing number of older adults through multiple practical and spiritual challenges.

Tasks of Aging

Aging people face a myriad of new challenges and tasks. Accordingly, psychologists, sociologists, geriatricians, gerontologists, and theologians have offered many opinions on how to age successfully.

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[1] America Counts Staff Bureau, "2020 Census Will Help Policymakers Prepare for the Incoming Wave of Aging Boomers," Census.gov, December 10, 2019, https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2019/12/by-2030-all-baby-boomers-will-be-age-65-or-older.html.

[2] Faith Communities Today, "FACT 2020 Survey Results | Faith Communities Today," *FACT 2020 Results* (blog), October 25, 2019, https://faithcommunitiestoday.org/fact-2020-survey/.

[3] Pew Research Center, "Religious Landscape Study," *Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project* (blog), accessed October 24, 2024, https://www.pewresearch.org/religious-landscape-study/database/.

Erik Erikson's Psychosocial Theory

Over half a century ago, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson proposed his psychosocial theory of development. According to Erikson, adults aged forty to sixty-five years old face the crisis of "generativity vs. stagnation," that is, the challenge of focusing on helping the next generation versus becoming stagnant. In the eighth and final stage of aging, people aged sixty-five and older face the crisis of "ego integrity vs. despair." They can accept their lives as they are, finding "coherence" and "wholeness." The alternative is feeling despair.[4] Erikson points out that older people need a "grand-generative function." After the geographical dislocation of families in the late 1900s, he writes, older people experienced "the lack in old age of that minimum involvement that is necessary for staying really alive."[5] In other words, they lacked the sense of life purpose crucial to an older adult's ongoing psychosocial health.

Tasks of Emerging Elderhood

According to Karen Skerrett, psychologist at the Family Institute Center for Applied Psychological Studies at Northwestern University, Marcia Spira, professor emeritus at the School of Social Work at Loyola, and Jasmine Chandy, program coordinator of Health Promotion and Disease Prevention at Rush University Medical Center, Erik Erikson's well-known theory of psychosocial development fails to account

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[4] Erik H. Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed. Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development by Joan M. Erikson* (New York: Norton, 1997), 32-33.

[5] Erikson, 63.

fully for the long lives people live today.[6] For this reason, psychologists and sociologists are now searching for ways to define the tasks elders face.

Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy propose a new life stage for people aged fifty-five to seventy-five, which they call "emerging elderhood." Emerging elders must navigate six key developmental tasks:

> acknowledgment and acceptance of the realities of aging; normalization of associated angst about the future; active reminiscence and possible longing for the past; accommodation to physical, cognitive, and social changes; search for new emotionally meaningful goals; and the expansion of the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and complexity of life circumstances.[7]

When emerging elders navigate these mental, physical, psychological, and emotional tasks well, according to Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, they look to the future realistically and hopefully.

Elderhood: Redefining Aging

Geriatrician Louise Aronson urges readers to add a third category defining the human lifespan: to childhood and adulthood, she says, one should add "elderhood," which begins "at sixty or seventy and lasts for decades."[8] To Aronson, the primary challenge for older adults is to overcome society's denigration of them: "to look at old age and see only bodily decline, forgetting that inside the body is a fellow human

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[6] sharma*Clinical Social Work Journal* 50, no. 4 (December 1, 2022): 379, https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00791-2.

[7] Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, 378.

[8] Louise Aronson, *Elderhood: Redefining Aging, Transforming Medicine, Reimagining Life* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2019), 8.

being."[9] For older adults to overcome these challenges, they must foster a "worldview that [says]: We still see you, and we still like, love, respect, admire, and are inspired by you, both for who you were and who you are…."[10] In other words, older adults need to know that they are seen, known, and loved.

Spiritual Tasks of Aging toward Death

Dr. Dawn DeVries, professor of systematic theology at Union Presbyterian Seminary, describes the "chief spiritual challenges of aging toward death—escalating losses, growing dependence, struggle to find meaning, and seeking purpose while gradually accepting death and letting go of life."[11] As she notes, these tasks are countercultural in the twenty-first century, and yet, negotiating them successfully allows a person to move toward the end of life with dignity and peace.

Many psychologists, sociologists, geriatricians, and theologians agree—older adults face numerous, diverse challenges; navigating them successfully leads to an improved quality of life.

Biblical Call to Lifelong Discipleship

The Bible also speaks into the tasks of aging. While it names the many losses that come with aging, it also offers a lifelong calling full of life purpose.

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[9] Aronson, 398.

[10] Aronson, 400.

[11] Dawn DeVries, "The Spiritual Tasks of Aging towards Death," *Interpretation* 75, no. 3 (July 2021): 228, https://doi.org/10.1177/00209643211003734.

Ecclesiastes and the Many Losses of Aging

In Ecclesiastes 12:1-7, Qohelet, the preacher and narrator, shares a comprehensive list of the losses of aging. Addressing the young, he cautions them to remember their creator in the days of their youth, "before the evil days come and the years draw near of which you will say, 'I have no pleasure in them.'"[12] He goes on to portray the losses of aging, graphically, even dismally. This sad litany touches on the relational, existential, and physical: teeth falling out, eyesight dimming, fears increasing, and mourning and grief multiplying. Eventually physical decline leads to failure of desire, landing the aged in the very dust: a grasshopper who formerly hopped happily now drags along the ground.[13] The final string of images speaks of the loss of living water, symbolizing death: the "silver cord is snapped," the "golden bowl is broken," the "pitcher is shattered," "the wheel broken at the cistern." Indeed, the "dust returns to the earth as it was, and the spirit returns to the God who gave it."[14] Old Testament theologian Tremper Longman III argues that verses 6 and 7 portray a "reversal of creation, the dissolution of human creation."[15] Clearly, the Bible speaks frankly about the challenges of aging.

Loss of Self and Sense of Purpose in Aging

Many other passages note the losses of aging. In Psalm 71, an aged preacher grieves the existential loss of self. He cries out, "Do not cast me off in the time of old

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[12] Eccl. 12:1 (English Standard Version).

[13] Eccl. 12: 3-5 (ESV).

[14] Eccl. 12: 6-7 (ESV).

[15] Tremper Longman and Robert L. Hubbard, *The Book of Ecclesiastes*, electronic resource, New International Commentary on the Old Testament (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998), 273.

age; forsake me not when my strength is spent. For my enemies speak concerning me, those who watch for my life consult together…."[16] In Psalm 90, Moses states the limitations of life: "The years of our life are seventy, or even by reason of strength eighty; yet their span is but toil and trouble; they are soon gone, and we fly away."[17] In 2 Samuel 19:35, Barzillai turns down David's invitation to join him in Jerusalem, speaking honestly, "I am this day eighty years old. Can I discern what is pleasant and what is not? Can your servant taste what he eats or what he drinks? Can I still listen to the voice of singing men and singing women?" Barzillai accepts the limitations of his age, yet all three men struggle with the loss of purpose in life.

Biblical Calling and Purpose

While the Bible names the losses of aging bluntly, it also offers all people, including older adults, lifelong hope, meaning, and purpose. While Moses states the limitations of life in Psalm 90, his perspective shifts to meaning-making despite the shortness of life: "So teach us to number our days, that we may get a heart of wisdom."[18] Because wisdom deepens with age, aging neither disqualifies nor releases older adults from their calling as disciples. Psalm 92 asserts, "The righteous still bear fruit in old age; they are ever full of sap and green."[19] According to women's ministry leaders and authors Sharon Betters and Susan Hunt, "This fruit does not depend on human achievement; it is

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[16] Ps. 71:9-10 (ESV).

[17] Ps. 90:10 (ESV).

[18] Ps. 90:12 (ESV).

[19] Ps. 92:14 (ESV).

other-worldly, spiritual, abundant, and eternal…."[20] In Titus 2, older men and women are called to lead by example, passing on their wisdom to the next generation:

> Older men are to be sober-minded, dignified, self-controlled, sound in faith, in love, and in steadfastness. Older women likewise are to be reverent in behavior, not slanderers or slaves to much wine. They are to teach what is good, and so train the young women to love their husbands and children….[21]

As pastor and theologian Bryan Chappell explains, "The older women are not to hoard their knowledge but rather should pass it on to younger women who need the advice of those with greater experience."[22] Psalm 78 calls all adults, especially the older ones, to tell the "stories we have heard and known," stories "about the glorious deeds of the Lord."[23] Doing so will help the next generation to "set its hope anew on God…."[24] As theologians Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger explain, "in the recital of memory there is hope for the future."[25]

According to the Bible, the elderly will experience challenges. And yet, they may still find life purpose in their calling to share the hope of the gospel. Sadly, some churches fail to equip older adults to fulfill the calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds. Renowned theologian J. I. Packer writes, "Modern Western churches…behave as

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[20] Sharon W. Betters and Susan Hunt, *Aging with Grace: Flourishing in an Anti-Aging Culture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 98.

[21] Titus 2:2-4 (ESV).

[22] R. Kent Hughes and Bryan Chapell, *1-2 Timothy and Titus: To Guard the Deposit*, Preaching the Word (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 499.

[23] Ps. 78:3 (New Living Translation).

[24] Ps. 78:7 (NLT).

[25] Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger (Jr.), *Psalms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 340.

though spiritual gifts and ministry skills wither with age. But they don't; what happens, rather, is that they atrophy with disuse."[26] As Packer exhorts, these years are the "last lap," and they should be spent in "learning" and "leading," because "the final sprint, so I urge, should be a sprint indeed."[27]

Purpose Statement

In America, many congregations are aging. Psychologists, geriatricians, theologians, and the Bible agree: aging presents numerous and diverse challenges. One significant challenge to older adults is maintaining a life purpose that gives life meaning. The Church could do more to equip older adults with a life purpose which will help them to enjoy and glorify God all of their days. Research shows that one key aspect of maintaining a positive life purpose involves exploring difficult life events and finding meaning in those difficult events.[28]

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to explore how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. Three main areas are central to this study: 1) understanding what developmental psychology teaches about the challenges older adults face and the tasks they must complete to age successfully; 2) understanding what narrative gerontology teaches about the challenges older adults face and how storytelling affects older adults' sense of life

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[26] J. I. Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy: Guidance from God for Engaging with Our Aging* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2014), 64.

[27] Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy*, 22.

[28] Dan P. McAdams, *The Art and Science of Personality Development*. (New York: The Guilford Press, 2015), 301.

purpose; and 3) exploring what Psalm 78 says about the lifelong calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What motivates Christian older adults (COAs) to participate in a spiritual legacy workshop?
2. How do COAs tell the stories of difficult life events?
    a. How do they include their Christian faith?
    b. How do they include life purpose?
    c. How do they relate their difficult life events to the biblical redemptive narrative?
3. How do COAs describe changes in how they think about difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop?
    a. How do they describe changes in their thinking about past difficult life events?
    b. How do they describe changes in their thinking about current difficult life events?
    c. How do they describe changes in their thinking about possible future difficult life events?
4. To what extent are COAs motivated to tell the stories of their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation?

Significance of the Study

This study has significance for churches with a growing percentage of older adults, intergenerational ministries, older adult ministries, and older adults themselves.

With the growing number of older adults in many congregations, churches must avoid two major pitfalls regarding older adults: coddling condescension and mindless marginalization. Avoiding these pitfalls means emphasizing discipleship as a lifelong calling and urging older adults to "live for God one day at a time."[29] This study may provide a way for churches to help Christian older adults remember their lifelong, indeed, eternal calling, to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation. When older adults tell such stories, the entire church may benefit.

For those seeking to grow intergenerational ministries, this study may suggest a way to help older adults engage younger adults and vice-versa. The sharing of spiritual legacy might encourage both the older and younger generations. As older adults tell their stories of God's redemptive work to the next generation, both generations may "set their hope anew on God."[30]

In response to the silver tsunami,[31] many churches are starting older adult ministries. The leaders of such ministries encounter the losses older adults face and need strategies for encouraging them to live purposeful lives in the face of such loss. Since these losses include physical limitations, loneliness, and a loss of life purpose, this

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[29] Packer, *Finishing Our Course with Joy,* 23.

[30] Ps. 78:7 (NLT).

[31] Many professionals, including sociologists, psychologists, and gerontologists refer to the wave of aging baby boomers as the "silver tsunami."

study's findings could provide strategies for older adult ministries to engage elderhood successfully.

Finally, older adults themselves may benefit from this study. Even older adults with physical limitations can share their spiritual legacy; as they do, they may remember how God has worked in their lives and ponder how he may do so again. As they remember how God has redeemed, they may regain hope for the future. As Skerrett asserts, hope for the future profoundly improves the older adult's quality of life.[32]

Definition of Terms

In this study, key terms are defined as follows:

COAs: Christian Older Adults, defined for this study as men and women between the ages of sixty and eighty-five years old.

Spiritual legacy: "the unique complex of values, beliefs, insights, passions, and actions that are embedded in each person's life experiences and can be conveyed to others."[33]

SLW: "Spiritual Legacy Workshop." The six-week course taken by the participants in the study. The SLW was based on the foundational call of Psalm 78 to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation. The SLW guided participants in writing two stories for each part of the redemptive-historical narrative: creation

[32] See Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, "Emerging Elderhood," 383.

[33] Daniel Taylor, *Creating a Spiritual Legacy: How to Share Your Stories, Values, and Wisdom* (Grand Rapids, MI: Brazos Press, 2011), 4.

(shalom), fall (wrecked shalom), redemption (partially restored shalom), and restoration (fully restored shalom).

Life purpose: "an externally oriented quest for an individual to fulfill inner motivations that are one's 'why' for living and being in the world."[34]

Meaning in suffering: "If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering."[35] Viktor Frankl observed that despair results from failure to see meaning in suffering.[36] Older adults who can find meaning in difficult events seem to navigate the challenges of older adulthood more successfully.

Narrative gerontology: a multidisciplinary, narrative approach to the study of aging. "A basic assumption of narrative gerontology is that the biographical side of human life is as complicated and critical to fathom as, for instance, the biological side." Such an approach creates a more balanced approach to the study of aging and honors "the dignity, humanity, and uniqueness of the lives of older persons."[37]

Story Feast: An activity developed by Elizabeth Turnage as an intentional time of gathering to tell stories related to God's "glorious deeds" for the purposes of growing faith, hope, and love.

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[34] Shubam Sharma and Susan Bluck, "Older Adults Recall Memories of Life Challenges: The Role of Sense of Purpose in the Life Story," *Current Psychology* 42, no. 27 (September 30, 2023): 23464.

[35] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 67.

[36] Viktor Frankl, "Facing the Transitoriness of Human Existence," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 14, no. 4 (October 1, 1990): 7–10, 9.

[37] Gary Kenyon, Ernst Bohlmeijer, and William L. Randall, *Storying Later Life: Issues, Investigations, and Interventions in Narrative Gerontology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), xiii.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. Three main areas are central to this study: 1) understanding what developmental psychology teaches about the challenges older adults face and the tasks they must complete to age successfully; 2) understanding what narrative gerontology teaches about the challenges older adults face and how storytelling affects older adults' sense of life purpose; and 3) exploring what Psalm 78 says about the lifelong calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

The literature review begins with a study of how developmental psychology understands the existential challenges faced by older adults and the tasks they must complete. Various theories are reviewed to determine challenges and tasks of elderhood and what they reveal about the impact of meaning and life purpose on an older adult's wellbeing. Next, the literature of narrative gerontology provides a foundation for the qualitative research on the impact of life story work on older adults. The literature review explores lifespan development psychology, logotherapy, purpose in life, meaning in life, spiritual dimensions of aging, narrative gerontology, narrative identity theory, and reminiscence and life review. Finally, the literature concerning the calling in Psalm 78 to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation is reviewed.

Developmental Psychology and the Tasks Facing Older Adults

Developmental psychologists offer a variety of opinions about the challenges facing older adults and the tasks they must complete to age successfully. Erik Erikson, American psychoanalyst renowned for his theory of psychosocial development, laid the groundwork with his thinking on adult stages of development requiring particular tasks. Later psychologists expanded and revised Erikson's thinking. They also added research on gerotranscendence, finding life purpose, meaning in suffering, and spiritual dimensions of aging.

Old Age: The Seventh, Eighth, and Ninth Stages

American child psychologist, Erik Erikson and wife and collaborator Joan Erikson, renowned for their theory of psychosocial development, claimed that older adults must achieve generativity in the seventh stage of life and integrity in the eighth stage. Joan Erikson later added a ninth stage for people in their eighties and nineties, which she called "ego integrity vs. despair (revisited)."[38] Developmental psychologists McAdams, Skerrett, Helson, and Tornstam engaged with, critiqued, and added to the Eriksons' thinking.

The Eriksons' Theory of Adult Psychosocial Development

According to the Eriksons, human development occurs in stages, each of which involves a struggle between a "syntonic" and "dystonic" element: generativity vs. stagnation or self-absorption in the stage of "adulthood" and integrity vs. despair in the

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[38] Erik Erikson, *The Life Cycle Completed: Extended Version with New Chapters on the Ninth Stage of Development by Joan M. Erikson,* 115.

stage of "older adulthood." When this struggle is navigated successfully, the strengths of care (adulthood) and wisdom (older adulthood) result.[39] While Erik Erikson recognizes the impossibility of assigning ages to the struggles and strengths, he does see development occurring in a series of stages. To describe this development, Erikson borrows a word from embryology: "epigenetic." In epigenesis, "growth and development follow analogous patterns," with each stage building on the previous one.[40]

Later psychologists critique the linear nature of the stage chart. Even Joan Erikson, writing at the age of 93, notes a drawback to the linear nature: "I have always contended that the life cycle chart becomes really meaningful only when you have observed it as a weaving…."[41] Despite this critique, the Eriksons' theory of development laid the foundation for other developmental psychologists' thinking on older adult development.

After Erik Erikson's death at age 91, Joan Erikson added a new stage to the life cycle, the ninth stage, in which the oldest old adults revisit the crises of earlier stages.

The Eriksons' Seventh Stage: Generativity vs. Stagnation

Adulthood, the seventh stage, is characterized by the conflict of "generativity vs. stagnation." Erik Erikson believed that a "grand-generative function" in older adults is "necessary for staying alive" and that generativity "encompasses procreativity,

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[39] Erikson, *Life Cycle*, 64.

[40] Erikson, 27-28.

[41] Erikson, 4.

productivity, and creativity."[42] Stagnation is the "core pathology" of this stage.[43] The "basic strength" of adulthood is "care," by which Erikson means "to be careful," "to take care of," and "to care for."[44] To be careful is to show some measure of restraint and selectivity. To take care of is to devote energy to the "persons, products, and ideas" one cares for. To care for is to show compassion for the next generation.[45] As the Eriksons see it, the primary task of adulthood is to become generative people who care about and care for passing on a legacy to the next generation.

The Eriksons' Eighth Stage: Ego Integrity vs. Despair

Old age, the eighth stage in the Eriksons' model, is characterized by the conflict of integrity vs. despair, with the strength of wisdom resulting. Erik Erikson describes integrity as "a shared proclivity for understanding or for 'hearing' those who do understand, the integrative ways of human life." In other words, the older adult who achieves integrity is capable of integrating all of the earlier stages of life. Erikson defines wisdom as "an informed and detached concern with life itself in the face of death itself."[46] Despair results from a continuing sense of stagnation, the loss of autonomy, and the loss of a sense of coherence and meaning.[47] The older adult who achieves ego

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[42] Erikson, *Life Cycle,* 64, 66.

[43] Erikson, 69.

[44] Erikson, 64.

[45] Erikson, 69.

[46] Erikson, 64, 66.

[47] Erikson, 64.

integrity is marked by wisdom and a balanced understanding of life and death and all of its complexities.

In the revised and expanded edition of *The Life Cycle Completed*, Joan Erikson writes with the wisdom gained from passing through each of the stages. At the time of writing, she was 93 years old, and Erik had died. With her newfound experience, she redefines wisdom and integrity, bringing them down to earth, making them less "exalted and undefinable." Seeking out their roots, she discovers that wisdom is related to the words for "sight" and "hearing." Joan Erikson explains wisdom's role: "to guide our investment in sight and sound and to focus our capacities on what is relevant, enduring, and nourishing."[48] Integrity, she writes, "brought people into contact with the real world," leading people to "touch" other people, both metaphorically and physically. Joan Erikson believes these revised definitions of wisdom and integrity remove the burden from older adults they previously imposed. Redefined, they require only "the aliveness and awareness it takes to live with tact and vision in all relationships."[49]

Joan Erikson: The Ninth Stage: Ego Integrity vs. Despair (Revisited)

In the revised and expanded *The Life Cycle Completed*, Joan Erikson explains her reason for assigning a ninth stage. Erik had lived a generative life until he was 91 years old, but after a fall, he required hip surgery; after the surgery, he became withdrawn. He died soon after. At age 93, the widow Joan Erikson had newfound insight into old age: "old age in one's eighties and nineties brings with it new demands, reevaluations, and

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[48] Erikson, in *Life Cycle,* 6.

[49] Erikson, 7-8.

daily difficulties."[50] She notes that despair continues to haunt the person in the ninth stage as the body weakens and "independence and control are challenged." Because "hope and trust, which once provided firm support," no longer fully serve, she argues that "faith and appropriate humility" are "the wisest course" for battling despair.[51] Influenced by her own experience of aging and becoming a widow, Joan Erikson offers a new understanding of the wisdom and integrity required in the last stage of life.

In the ninth stage, Joan Erikson argues, all of the previous stages are revisited, but with the "dystonic" element coming before the "syntonic" element, e.g., "stagnation vs. generativity: care," "despair and disgust vs. integrity: wisdom." She concludes, "Should you be living and coping with all these hurdles and losses at ninety or more, you have one firm foothold to depend on…basic trust." With this basic trust, she believes "elders can come to terms with the dystonic elements in their life experiences in the ninth stage" and achieve "gerotranscendence."[5253]

Psychologists Interact with the Eriksons' Adult Development Theory

While the Eriksons laid the groundwork for the crisis of generativity vs. stagnation and integrity vs. despair in older adults, other psychologists later found applications to the essential challenges and tasks of older adulthood.

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[50] Erikson, *Life Cycle*, 107.

[51] Erikson, 108.

[52] Erikson, 113-115, 126-127.

[53] The term "gerotranscendence" belongs to a theory of aging developed by Lars Tornstam, which will be reviewed in the following section.

Redemptive Life Stories Promote Generativity

Dan P. McAdams, professor of human development at Northwestern University and highly acclaimed researcher in the field of narrative psychology, has researched generativity in adults and older adults through life story interviews. McAdams explains generativity: "The task has always been, and always will be, to pass it on. To pass *life* on."[54] While McAdams agrees with the Eriksons that adults in middle adulthood become "more concerned with generativity," he notes a slight decrease in generativity in older adults. Additionally, McAdams found that at every age and stage, people vary in their generativity.[55]

As McAdams studied highly generative adults, he discovered that their families of origin were "especially religious," and that they themselves show a high degree of "psychological maturity, self-control, and life purpose."[56] Highly generative adults in America, McAdams notes, "…tend to narrate their lives as stories of redemption, wherein suffering gives way, again and again, to personal enhancement." He concludes, "Redemptive life stories help to promote generativity in the adult years."[57] In other words, older adults who see redemption in their life stories are more likely to be inspired to pass their hope for redemption on to the next generation.

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[54] Dan P. McAdams, *The Redemptive Self: Stories Americans Live By—Revised and Expanded Edition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 28.

[55] McAdams, *Redemptive Self*, 35.

[56] McAdams, 38.

[57] Dan P. McAdams, *The Art and Science of Personality Development* (New York: Guilford, 2015), 300.

Generativity and Purpose in Life

In the 1980s, Carol Ryff, psychologist and former Director of the Institute on Aging at the University of Madison-Wisconsin, proposed a scale of "well-being." She notes six key characteristics of a person who has a sense of well-being: purpose in life, autonomy, personal growth, environmental mastery, positive relationships, and self-acceptance.[58] Crucial to Ryff's understanding of well-being is "purpose in life," "the extent to which respondents felt their lives had meaning, purpose and direction…."[59] Ryff observes that high levels of well-being correlate with higher levels of generativity and ego integrity.[60] Despite this positive correlation, Ryff finds that aging is often "accompanied by declines in purpose in life and personal growth."[61]

Ravenna Helson, psychologist, and Valory Mitchell, professor emeritus at California School of Professional Psychology, authors of the fifty-year Mills College study of women beginning in 1958, examined the relationship of generativity and integrity to Ryff's "purpose in life." The oldest women in their study were age 72. Helson and Mitchell's findings on generativity differ slightly from the Eriksons' and McAdams'. The Eriksons proposed that past middle adulthood people shifted from prioritizing generativity to prioritizing integrity. McAdams found some decrease in generativity in older adulthood. Helson and Mitchell describe a purposive, future-oriented generativity, a

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[58] Carol D. Ryff, "Psychological Well-Being Revisited: Advances in the Science and Practice of Eudaimonia," *Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* 83, no. 1 (December 4, 2013): 11.

[59] Ryff, "Psychological Well-Being Revisited," 11.

[60] Ryff, 13.

[61] Ryff, 14.

desire "to establish and guide the generations to come," which lasts throughout women's lives. "Today we know that many people remain generative all their lives."[62]

Whereas Ryff notes that purpose in life and personal growth decline in older adults, Helson and Mitchell suggest that older adults have "accomplished the personal growth and purposes of their lifetime, and that other values—an intense engagement with the present, a graceful letting go, and a deep sense of appreciation—should become more central concerns."[63] In this finding, they echo the Eriksons' concept of "a deeply involved, disinvolvement," "a consciously chosen withdrawal" from engagement with some daily activities in a peaceful acceptance of limitations of body, mind, and soul.[64]

Helson and Mitchell's findings regarding "positive aging" correlate with McAdams'. According to Helson and Mitchell, "positive aging" is defined by each woman, how she rates her life as satisfying: "…. aging is positive when there is psychological growth, a sense of completion or redemption." Further, they note that positive aging is characterized by "the ability to face difficulties and losses with courage and steadfastness."[65] This task of positive aging sounds similar to McAdams' "redemptive self." As he explains, "If an autobiographical author believes that bad things in life often give way to positive outcomes, he or she may be especially well prepared, psychologically speaking, to endure the difficulties that invariably accompany

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[62] Ravenna M. Helson and Valory Mitchell, *Women on the River of Life: A Fifty-Year Study of Adult Development* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2020), 317.

[63] Ravenna M. Helson and Valory Mitchell, *Women on the River*, 319.

[64] Erikson, *Life Cycle,* 126.

[65] Helson and Mitchell, 315.

generativity."[66] McAdams could be describing the women in the Helson and Mitchell study who retained life purpose and meaning in suffering as they aged. As Helson and Mitchell explain, "Purpose in life can invigorate, transform regrets into challenges, help us navigate our limitations, even accept our losses by honoring the depth of their importance."[67]

Gerotranscendence and the Eighth and Ninth Stages

In 1997, Lars Tornstam, pioneer of social gerontology, published the results of interviews with fifty Swedish men and women aged 52 to 97. Tornstam found that living into old age "is characterized by a general potential towards gerotranscendence…a shift in meta-perspective, from a materialistic and pragmatic view of the world to a more cosmic and transcendent one."[68] Those who achieve gerotranscendence generally experience increased satisfaction in life.

Tornstam describes two female interviewees, Eva, a former nurse, 69 years old, and Greta, a former schoolteacher, 72 years old. Eva demonstrated gerotranscendence. She had experienced crisis when she was divorced but explained that she had learned from the crisis. (Her statement is reminiscent of McAdam's redemptive self and the Mills study findings on difficult events.) Eva saw death as a "natural part of life" and learned to accept the changes in her body. She also became more "open" with other people while becoming more selective in her choice of friends. Eva described her "best times: when I

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[66] McAdams, *Personality Development*, 300.

[67] Helson and Mitchell, *Women on the River*, 315.

[68] Lars Tornstam, "Gerotranscendence: The Contemplative Dimension of Aging," *Journal of Aging Studies* 11, no. 2 (Summer 1997): 143.

sit on the kitchen porch and simply exist, the swallows flying about my head like arrows."[69]

Greta on the other hand was dissatisfied with life and stuck. She had experienced many difficulties in life: her mother died when she was 13; her husband died when her children were young; and her daughter died at age 15. Greta found life meaningless after retirement, observing, "I quickly fell into a life as a senior that is rather pointless for me…I miss the satisfaction of working."[70] Greta also described herself as "disengaged and disinterested" in her social life. Tornstam wondered whether Greta might be "stuck in the patterns of middle-age life."[71]

In his study, he observes that it would be easy to assume that the differences between Eva and Greta result from Eva's achievement of Erikson's ego integrity in the face of despair and Greta's failure to achieve ego integrity. Yet, Tornstam suggests there is more to it, that Eva has transcended Erikson's opposites: "She is not just balancing the possible despair of being even more powerless in old age; she transcends it."[72] To Tornstam, gerotranscendence goes beyond Erikson's theory. As he sees it, "In Erikson's theory, the ego-integrity primarily refers to an integration of the elements in the life that has passed." Tornstam argues that Erikson's theory focuses more on the past, as the

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[69] Tornstam, "Gerotranscendence, 143."

[70] Tornstam, 143.

[71] Tornstam, 143.

[72] Tornstam, 143.

individual achieves "acceptance of the life lived." Tornstam asserts that gerotranscendence is more forward focused and includes a "redefinition of reality."[73]

In her final chapter in *The Life Cycle Completed*, Joan Erikson refers to Tornstam's description of gerotranscendence, tweaking it to make it fit her experience of the final stages of life. Seeking to define gerotranscendence more accurately, she alters the word to "gerotranscen-*dance*," saying this alteration "speaks to soul and body and challenges it to rise above the dystonic, clinging aspects of our worldly existence."[74] Joan Erikson claims that transcen-dance involves "a regaining of lost skills, including play, activity, joy, and song, and, above all, a major leap above and beyond the fear of death."[75] In having a forward focus, Joan Erikson's definition appears similar to what Tornstam describes in his "gerotranscendence." For both Tornstam and Erikson, gerotranscendence (or -*dance*) is a key task of older adulthood.

Selective Optimization and Compensation and Socioemotional Selectivity

Paul Baltes, former director of the Center for Lifespan Psychology at the Max Planck Institute for Human Development, and Margret M. Baltes, professor of psychological gerontology and head of the research unit for psychological gerontology in the Department of Gerontopsychiatry at the Free University, Berlin, approach the tasks of aging from a different angle than the Eriksons, focusing on what they describe as "selective optimization and compensation." Laura Carstensen, professor of psychology

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[73] Tornstam, 143.

[74] Erikson, *Life Cycle*, 126.

[75] Erikson, 126.

and director of the Stanford Center on Longevity, complements the Baltes' work with her theory of socioemotional selectivity.

Selective Optimization and Compensation

The Balteses and Carstensen note that early research in gerontology focused on loss and decline. They argue that equal focus should be placed on "growth, vitality, striving, and contentment."[76] They also observe heterogeneity in aging adults and suggest that instead of asking, "What is successful aging?" one must ask, "What are the processes that allow for mastery of goals in old age?"[77]

To the Balteses and Carstensen, one theory that describes strategies or tasks of successful aging is "selective optimization and compensation."[78] Selection is defined as "an increasing restriction of one's life world to fewer domains of functioning."[79] Examples of selection are downsizing or moving to an assisted living facility as the older adult faces limitations in health or strength. Even when limitations are forced on older adults, they still have the opportunity to select. For example, older adults who suffer strokes may still choose where to complete rehabilitation work and which activities to pursue. Optimization is defined as people engaging "in behaviors to enrich and augment

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[76] Margret M. Baltes and Laura L. Carstensen, "The Process of Successful Ageing," *Ageing & Society* 16, no. 4 (July 1996): 398.

[77] Baltes and Carstensen, "Process of Successful Ageing," 399.

[78] Paul B. Baltes and Margret M. Baltes, "Psychological Perspectives on Successful Aging: The Model of Selective Optimization with Compensation," in *Successful Aging: Perspectives from the Behavioral Sciences*, ed. Margret M. Baltes and Paul B. Baltes, European Network on Longitudinal Studies on Individual Development (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 21.

[79] Baltes and Baltes, "Psychological Perspectives," 21.

their general reserves and to maximize their chosen life courses…."[80] For example, older adults who move to an assisted living facility have meals served so they can devote the energy they would spend in cooking to participating in exercise classes. Compensation happens when "specific behavior capacities or skills are lost…."[81] Older adults maintain the same goal but use new strategies to compensate for the inability to function at the previous level. Examples include using medical devices like hearing aids, walkers, and oxygen as well as strategies like driving more slowly or hiring a housecleaner. The Balteses and Carstensen point out that goals vary for each older adult, but no matter the goal, successful aging involves "minimization of losses and maximization of gains."[82]

Socioemotional Selectivity

Carstensen's theory of socioemotional selectivity fits well with the Baltes' theory of selective optimization and compensation. According to Carstensen, as emotional goals take increasing priority, older adults "restructure their social worlds such that they maximize emotionally meaningful experiences."[83] To maximize meaningful experiences, older adults often limit their social contact; although they maintain fewer relationships, the ones they keep are emotionally close. Carstensen's theory fits well with selective optimization and compensation: older adults "select" long term friends to "compensate

[80] Baltes and Baltes, 22.

[81] Baltes and Carstensen, 410.

[82] Baltes and Carstensen, "Process of Successful Ageing," 405.

[83] Baltes and Carstensen, 408.

for losses in areas such as sensory function or memory impairment."[84] In this way, older adults "optimize" meaningful experiences, a crucial task of older adulthood.

Together, the Balteses and Carstensen suggest that successful aging involves a variety of goals, "ranging from the maintenance of physical functioning and good health to generativity, ego-integrity, self-actualization and social connectedness." These various goals are all "intricately interwoven with a sense of meaning and purpose in life."[85] In this way, the Balteses and Carstensen join with voices of other developmental psychologists who see a primary task of aging to be adapting to and handling difficult events while finding life purpose.

Meaning in Suffering, Logotherapy, and Spiritual Tasks of Aging

Viktor Frankl, Austrian neurologist, psychiatrist, holocaust survivor, and founder of logotherapy, believed that healing from suffering comes when people find meaning in suffering.[86] As Frankl aged, he observed that finding meaning in life is crucial to successful aging. Paul Wong, psychology professor at Trent University and Center for Studies on Aging, University of Toronto, agrees with Frankl, asserting, "having a positive meaning and purpose in life will not only add years to one's life, but also life to one's years."[87] Joanna Walker, post-graduate researcher and Associate Editor of International Journal of Education and Ageing, and Albert Jewell, retired minister with a doctorate of

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[84] Baltes and Carstensen, 411.

[85] Baltes and Carstensen, 400.

[86] Viktor Frankl, *Man's Search for Meaning* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2006), 67.

[87] Paul T. P. Wong, "Meaning of Life and Meaning of Death in Successful Aging," in *Death Attitudes and the Older Adult*, ed. Adrian Tomer (Routledge, 2018), 24.

well-being in older adults, observe that the spiritual dimension has often been neglected in the study of successful aging. Walker and Jewell assert that finding meaning in life is an essential spiritual task of aging.[88]

Meaning in Suffering

Frankl, after surviving a German concentration camp, developed the psychiatric technique, "logotherapy" (Greek for "healing through meaning"). He asserts, "If there is meaning in life at all, then there must be meaning in suffering."[89] Matthew Scully, writer and former literary editor for the *National Review*, interviewed Frankl when he was 90. Scully observes, "[Frankl] views suffering not as an obstacle to happiness but often the necessary means to it, less a pathology than a path."[90] Having observed people who suffered torment, Frankl recognized that suffering presented a person with a choice: to become "subject to mental and physical decay," or to hold onto hope for the future and to seek life purpose and meaning in suffering.[91] To Frankl, even if everything is taken away, humans still retain the opportunity "to choose one's attitude in a given set of circumstances."[92] Frankl applied his therapeutic beliefs to aging, claiming that life has meaning whether it is long or short. Frankl urges older adults to "attack the problems of life actively," rather than seeing each passing day as a loss. He doesn't envy the young,

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[88] Joanna Walker, in "Introduction," and Albert Jewell, in "Finding Meaning and Purpose in Later Life," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing,* ed. Malcolm Johnson and Joanna Walker (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 2, 11.

[89] Frankl, *Man's Search,* 74.

[90] Matthew Scully, "Viktor Frankl at Ninety: An Interview," *First Things* 52 (April 1995), 40.

[91] Frankl, *Man's Search,* 74.

[92] Scully, 39.

and he argues that older adults should not be pitied. He claims that while they may have fewer possibilities in the future, they have something better: "Instead of possibilities, I have realities in my past, not only the reality of work done and of love loved, but of sufferings bravely suffered. These sufferings are even the things of which I am most proud, though these are things which cannot inspire envy."[93] Past suffering, Frankl asserts, can give the older adult courage in the face of current losses. Asked by Scully about his suffering in the concentration camp, Frankl replies that he thinks of it every day: "Even today, as I lose my sight, or with any severe problem or adverse situation…. I have only to think for a fraction of a second…. What would I have given then if I could have had no greater problem than I face today?"[94] Frankl found that his theory of logotherapy proved true in his own life as he aged.

The Spiritual Dimension: Finding Meaning in Suffering and Meaning in Life

Wong, Walker, and Jewell assert that older adults must find life purpose and meaning in suffering to age successfully.

As Wong explains, when older adults face the loss of meaning in many areas of their lives, such as "work, social status, and activity," they must be able to answer the question, "Why survive?" He asserts that "discovery/creation of meaning through inner and spiritual resources is a promising way of transcending personal losses and despair in

[93] Viktor Frankl, "Facing the Transitoriness of Human Existence," *Generations: Journal of the American Society on Aging* 14, no. 4 (October 1, 1990): 122.

[94] Scully, "Frankl at Ninety," 43.

old age."[95] Wong notes that Frankl finds meaning in death: "The prospect of death motivates individuals to assume responsibilities and respond to the opportunities life has to offer." He observes that many of the individuals in the Ontario Project on Successful Aging expressed faith in Christ. Such faith allows "death anxiety and death avoidance" to be replaced by "neutral acceptance and approach acceptance." Wong notes that those who express faith in Christ "look forward to returning to their Heavenly Home, not on the merit of their own accomplishment, but on the basis of their faith in Christ." He explains that their "approach acceptance" is both more "attainable" and "satisfying" than "self-actualization" for those who believe in the afterlife.[96] For Wong, meaning in life and meaning in death are essential spiritual tasks of aging.

Like Wong, Walker and Jewell see spirituality as vital to helping older adults discover their life purpose: "If spirituality can influence the social construction of late life towards it being seen as a time of possibility for growth, service, and fulfillment," it will help older adults attach a higher value to the fourth age of life.[97] Jewell was a pastor when he began to notice resilience in women in their 70s, 80s, and 90s. These had often lived through both World Wars, worked in wool mills in West Yorkshire (Canada), and brought up families in times of adversity. He notes, "Most were sustained by a lively faith and by continued participation in the life of their church and community."[98] For

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[95] Paul T. Wong, "Personal Meaning and Successful Aging," *Canadian Psychology / Psychologie Canadienne* 30, no. 3 (1989), 516.

[96] Wong, "Meaning of Life," 10.

[97] Malcolm Johnson and Joanna Walker, *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing,* 2.

[98] Albert Jewell, "Finding Meaning and Sustaining Purpose in Later Life," in Malcolm Johnson and Joanna Walker, 179.

both Walker and Jewell, spirituality equips older adults to find meaning in the suffering of old age.

Jack Balswick, senior professor of sociology and family development at Fuller Theological Seminary, Pamela E. King, the Peter L. Benson Professor of Applied Developmental Science at Fuller Theological Seminary, and Kevin S. Reimer, program administrator and faculty member in the School of Education, University of California, Irvine, when looking at adult development through the lens of Christianity, also find spirituality and meaning in life as key tasks of successful aging. Coining the phrase, "reciprocating spirituality," they observe, "Experiencing a reality beyond the self leads to the discovery of meaning, informs one's identity and commitments, and influences how one lives in the world."[99] Balswick, King, and Reimer believe that aging brings "psychosocial conditions" that make Erikson's ego integration more possible. They redefine ego integration for Christians as "self-identity…centered in the person of Jesus Christ." Like Wong, they assert that older adults centered in Christ are prepared to face death, knowing that death brings them into the presence of Christ. Reciprocating spirituality gives meaning to suffering and life purpose and is "the goal of all of human development."[100] For Christian older adults, according to Balswick, King, and Reimer, this goal will be attained fully when Christ returns.

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[99] Jack O. Balswick, Pamela Ebstyne King, and Kevin S. Reimer, *The Reciprocating Self: Human Development in Theological Perspective*, Second (Colorado Springs: IVP Academic, 2016), 308.

[100] Balswick, King, and Reimer, 331.

Summary of Developmental Psychology and the Tasks Facing Older Adults

Developmental psychologists have sought to answer the question, "In the face of challenges presented by aging, how can older adults flourish?" The Eriksons presented a stage theory of adult development, noting two essential crises: generativity vs. stagnation and ego integrity vs. despair. Other research shows heterogeneity in ages and strategies of older adults facing challenges.

Various tasks presented as essential to flourishing in older adults include gerotranscendence, selective optimization and compensation, and socioemotional selectivity, life purpose, meaning in suffering, and spirituality. Christian developmental psychologists studied Christian older adults and found faith in Jesus Christ and the hope of an afterlife to provide hope in the face of challenges.

As the aging population has increased, psychologists began to study aging in new ways. Literature on narrative gerontology will be reviewed next.

Narrative Gerontology, Tasks Facing Older Adults, and Care of Older Adults

In the previous section, various developmental psychology theories of the tasks facing older adults were reviewed. As the aging population has increased, a new field of study, narrative gerontology, has focused on what the stories of older adults reveal about the challenges they face and how doing life story work can help older adults face those challenges.

History and Definition of Narrative Gerontology

> "We age biographically as much as we age biologically, psychologically, and socially."[101]

Gary Kenyon, founding chair and professor of the Gerontology Department at St. Thomas University, Phillip G. Clark, professor and director of the Program in Gerontology, and Brian Devries, PhD, researcher at the Goldsen Institute, University of Washington and fellow of the Gerontological Society of America, provide the foundational principle of narrative gerontology quoted above. The field of gerontology historically focused on biological and cognitive aspects of aging. Narrative gerontologists have sought to discover what the stories of older adults revealed. Narrative gerontology finds its roots in "life review," a therapeutic intervention first proposed by renowned psychiatrist and pioneer in the field of gerontology, Robert Butler. After Butler, many other gerontologists began to see that narrative offered deep insight to the experience of older adults.

Life Review and Guided Autobiography

Butler's life review is often seen as the predecessor of narrative gerontology and is still used by many today. In the early 1960s, Butler observed the tendency to "identify reminiscence in the aged with psychological dysfunction."[102] Probing further, Butler discovered that the process of reviewing one's life was a "universal occurrence." Butler notes that while life review can contribute to depression, it can also lead to positive

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[101] Gary Kenyon, Phillip Clark, and Brian DeVries, in *Narrative Gerontology: Theory, Research, and Practice,* ed. Kenyon, Clark, and DeVries (New York: Springer, 2001), xi.

[102] Robert N. Butler, "The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged," *Psychiatry* 26, no. 1 (February 1, 1963): 65.

characteristics such as "candor, serenity, and wisdom."[103] Following Butler, James Birren, psychologist and founding dean of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology, developed "guided autobiography," in which older adults participate in a class which guides them in the writing of their autobiographies. Birren and Cheryl Svensson, gerontologist and director of the Birren Center for Autobiographical Studies, observe, "Writing an autobiography provides the opportunity to discover, clarify, and deepen the meaning of a lifetime of experiences."[104] Life review and guided autobiography provided a solid foundation for narrative gerontologists as they sought to learn more about the process of aging.

Narrative Gerontology Defined

Kate de Medeiros, professor of gerontology at Concordia University, Montreal, separates the two terms, exploring first what qualifies as "narrative." She concludes, "Narrative at its most basic level is a telling of some aspect of self through ordered symbols."[105] According to this definition, narrative may include autobiography, biography, diary, interviews, life history, life review, reminiscence, and many other forms of storytelling. Dan P. McAdams, founder of narrative identity theory, adds that "a

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[103] Butler, 65.

[104] James E. Birren and Cheryl M. Svensson, "Guided Autobiography: Writing and Telling the Stories of Lives," *LLI Review* 1 (Fall 2006): 113.

[105] Kate de Medeiros, *Narrative Gerontology in Research and Practice* (New York: Springer, 2014), 2.

story should express something true about life…."[106] To McAdams, stories explain why something happened, show something about human nature, or describe how people live.

Gerontology, defined by geriatrician Louise Aronson as the "multidisciplinary study of aging and older adults by people with master's degrees and PhD's,"[107] is, as a field, fraught with questions. Is it a "formal discipline" or an "interdisciplinary area of study?"[108] What should the people studied be called: aging, elderly, seniors, old, older?[109] Historically, gerontologists focused on the biological process of aging.[110] De Medeiros, like Aronson, sees gerontology as a multi-disciplinary field in which "psychology, sociology, anthropology, nursing, social work, literature, and others" contribute to the study of older adults.[111] Many narrative gerontologists critique the field of gerontology as falling short by focusing primarily on the biology of aging and neglecting the study of the internal process of aging.

Taken together, the two terms, narrative and gerontology, become the multidisciplinary field of "narrative gerontology." Kenyon, Clark, and Devries define narrative gerontology simply: "the study of the stories of aging as told by those who

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[106] Dan P. McAdams, "Life Narrative," in Karen L. Fingerman et al., *Handbook of Life-Span Development* (New York: Springer, 2010), 591.

[107] Aronson, *Elderhood,* 44.

[108] de Medeiros, *Narrative Gerontology,* 20.

[109] See Kate de Medeiros, "Elderly and Senior Citizen: Contested Terms," *Age, Culture, Humanities: An Interdisciplinary Journal* 6 (September 1, 2022).

[110] Bruce A. Stevens, *The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged* (London: Lexington Books, 2018), 9.

[111] de Medeiros, 20.

experience life and growing older."[112] They note a key assumption of narrative gerontology, that people are "storytellers" and "story listeners" who create "lifestories." The authors argue that it is appropriate to make "lifestory" a compound word because people "story" their lives.[113] According to de Medeiros, because narrative gerontology is "about comprehension, explanation, and prediction through the narratives of older adults,"[114] it qualifies as a science. Even better, she adds, narrative gerontology adds "meaning" to the scientific trinity of comprehension, explanation, and prediction. Bruce Stevens, clinical psychologist and Wicking Chair of Aging and Practical Theology, Charles Sturt University, Canberra, Australia, explains the importance of a narrative approach to understanding and helping older adults: stories provide a "corrective" to the external perspective approach which sees only "biological decline." As Stevens point out, even those with cognitive decline "can remain biographically active."[115] With their approach, narrative gerontologists are able to deepen understanding of the aging process.

Narrative Identity Theory and the Challenges and Tasks Facing Older Adults

By listening to the stories of older adults, narrative gerontologists have been able to learn more about the internal process of aging. Through narrative identity theory,

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[112] Kenyon, Clark, and DeVries, *Narrative Gerontology,* vii.

[113] Kenyon, Clark, and DeVries, 4.

[114] de Medeiros, *Narrative Gerontology*, 21.

[115] Bruce A. Stevens, *The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged* (London: Lexington Books, 2018), 9.

McAdams, Skerrett, and others have discovered more about the identity and development of older adults.

Narrative Identity Theory and Erikson's Stages of Development

Dan P. McAdams, clinical psychologist and personality theorist, developed his concept of "narrative identity theory" after studying Erikson's theories of "identity vs. confusion." A person's "narrative identity" is "the idea of the person's own internalized and changing story about who he or she was, is, and may become. For our purposes, then, narrative identity is the person's life story."[116] A person's narrative identity continues to grow across the lifespan; for this reason, Skerett, Spira, and Chandy believe that McAdams' theory better accounts for the heterogeneous changes seen in older adults than Erikson's epigenetic theory.[117] As mentioned earlier, McAdams finds that highly generative adults focus on redemptive stories, in which "the protagonist is delivered from suffering to an enhanced status or state."[118] McAdams' narrative identity theory has led to a deeper understanding of how older adults navigate challenges successfully.

Narrative Identity Theory and Tasks Facing Older Adults

Various narrative gerontologists have noted the heterogeneity of older adults, observing that older adults face different tasks at different ages. Narrative identity theory adds insight into this heterogeneity. Further, narrative identity theory reveals the positive

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[116] McAdams*, Personality Development,* 259.

[117] Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, "Emerging Elderhood," 379.

[118] McAdams, in Karen L. Fingerman et al., *Handbook of Life-Span Development,* 599.

impact of life story work on older adults' ability to complete developmental tasks successfully.

Heterogeneity in Older Adults

Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy observe the heterogeneity of older adults: for example, Judith is a 62-year-old widow and recent retiree with an uncertain future; Rico is a 64-year-old semi-retired father of four caring for his parents who live in Mexico, and Francine is a 75-year-old widow who recently sold her beloved home and moved in with her daughter and son-in-law. Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy note that the heterogeneity of older adults can make them feel "rudderless" and isolated.[119] Peter Coleman, emeritus professor of psychogerontology at the University of Southampton, et al., observing this same heterogeneity, question whether Erikson's stage theory is relevant in a diverse population who have the potential for an "expanded period at the end of the lifespan."[120]

Developmental Challenges and Life Story Work as Therapeutic Intervention

Both Coleman et al. and Skerrett et al., propose a new set of developmental tasks more fitting to the vastly different individuals occupying this terrain. Calling them "emerging elders" and noting that it is the "individual's perception of reaching the threshold to old age" that characterizes these elders, Skerrett et al. propose a set of six challenges and opportunities:

> acknowledgment and acceptance of the realities of aging; normalization of associated angst about the future; active reminiscence and possible

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[119] Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, "Emerging Elderhood," 383.

[120] Peter G. Coleman, Christine Ivani-Chalian, and Maureen Robinson, "The Story Continues: Persistence of Life Themes in Old Age," *Ageing and Society* 18, (July 1998): 392.

> longing for the past; accommodation to physical, cognitive, and social changes; search for new emotionally meaningful goals; and the expansion of the capacity to tolerate ambiguity and complexity of life circumstances.[121]

Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy note that older adults must navigate these tasks at different ages in the last part of the lifespan. For example, one 65-year-old may be struggling with angst about the future because of a diagnosis of chronic illness where a different 65-year-old is searching for meaningful goals after retirement.

One therapeutic intervention offered those in Skerrett's case study was some type of life story work.[122] Judith, the recent widow and retiree, was helped by participation in a guided autobiography group, and Francine flourished in a reminiscence group which renewed her hope. According to Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, life story work may help older adults navigate developmental tasks successfully; those who engage in such work emerge with a more hopeful and realistic outlook on aging.

Coleman et al., following McAdams' narrative identity theory, present their tasks as seven "identity themes." The seven themes include: "family relationships; other interpersonal involvements; interest activities; health and independence; inner self-beliefs and values; environmental factors; work and other formal roles."[123] In Coleman's study, forty-three people aged 80 to 98 years old were interviewed. The majority saw common themes connecting their life course. They saw their life course as "a 'story' worth telling

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[121] Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, "Emerging Elderhood," 378.

[122] "Life story work" is a phrase used to refer to a variety of narrative therapeutic methods such as life review, guided autobiography, reminiscence, and other methods. See Faith Gibson, *International Perspectives on Reminiscence, Life Review and Life Story Work* (London: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2019).

[123] Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson, "The Story Continues," 397.

or writing about, which had ongoing 'value,' which made up a 'whole,' and which engendered a sense of 'contentment.'"[124] Coleman et al. conclude that McAdams' "story model of identity" is helpful for understanding "adaptation to aging."[125] They also discovered that while many older adults wanted to write their story, few had accomplished the task. They recommend guided autobiography as a helpful tool for life story work.[126]

While Skerrett's study occurred nearly thirty years after Coleman's, both conclude that story not only gives insight into the key aspects of aging but also can be a tool to help older adults navigate the challenges they face.

Benefits of Life Story Work in Facing Tasks of Older Adulthood

Not only do the stories of older adults reveal how they age successfully, but also, the act of telling and writing stories using a variety of methods (life story work) has been shown to help older adults navigate the challenges of aging. Narrative gerontologists have observed many benefits of life story work; among them are a deeper bond with community and a renewed sense of life purpose. Because they are able to view the internal processes of aging, narrative gerontologists also recognize spiritual benefits in life story work, which will be discussed in the next section.

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[124] Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson, 399.

[125] Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson, 411.

[126] Coleman, Ivani-Chalian, and Robinson, "The Story Continues," 411.

Communion and Community

Although Skerrett et al. do not name "community" as one of their key developmental tasks of emerging elders, they do note that emerging elders often experience isolation. In fact, key to "normalization of associated angst about the future" is finding others who share the elder's experience. For that reason, they recommend life story work to many of their clients.[127] Birren and Svensson find that Guided Autobiography promotes community in the participants: "A deep connection is forged when we listen and respond to one another while sharing our own life stories."[128] McAdams observes that one of the prevailing themes in the stories of highly generative adults is community and connection: "having a strong impact on others *and* seeking to connect with them in warm, caring, and egalitarian relationships."[129] Referring to a Roger Angels' essay in which the 93-year-old author, despite many losses to illness, advocates for social connection, McAdams emphasizes the necessity of communion. As "actors, agents, and authors… [we must] bind ourselves to other people in the social groups that give our lives meaning…. Artfully render our lives into life-affirming narratives of interpersonal communion."[130] Older adults aging successfully tell stories with themes of community and connection; doing life story work with others promotes this community and connection.

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[127] Skerrett, Spira, and Chandy, "Emerging Elderhood," 378.

[128] Birren and Svensson, "Guided Autobiography," 116.

[129] McAdams, *Redemptive Self,* 49.

[130] McAdams, *Personality Development,* 320.

Life Story Work and Life Purpose

Life story work can also strengthen older adults' sense of life purpose. Clive Baldwin, director of the Centre for Interdisciplinary Research on Narrative at St. Thomas University, and Jennifer Estey, sociologist, note that facing loss is a key task of successful aging. They observe, "Focusing on narrative and narrativity (the capacity to narrativize one's life) is important at an existential level for it is the means by which we make meaning, achieve purpose, and realize our truths and values."[131] Kenyon, Clark, and Devries use the term "restorying" to describe "the process by which we enhance our sense of possibility through telling, reading, and retelling our stories."[132] In interviews with Holocaust survivors, they found that many of the survivors' stories focused on the theme "sense of purpose." The survivors believed that they were saved for a purpose that their later life revealed.[133] Sharma and Bluck, in a study of eighteen men and women aged 60 to 100, looking at the theme of sense of purpose in their life stories, discovered that life purpose is both a "resource for adapting to challenges," and a "necessary thread" that helps older adults adapt to new chapters. They note, "In cases where older adults are at risk of losing that thread, support may be gained through therapeutic reminiscence."[134] Narrative gerontologists observe that life story work helps older adults recognize and renew their sense of life purpose.

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[131] Clive Baldwin and Jennifer Estey, "The Self and Spirituality: Overcoming Narrative Loss in Aging," *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work* 34, no. 2 (April 2015): 208.

[132] Kenyon, Clark, and DeVries, *Narrative Gerontology,* 5.

[133] Kenyon, Clark, and DeVries, 120-123.

[134] Sharma and Bluck, "Older Adults Recall Memories of Life Challenges," loc. 23477.

Life Story Work and Meaning in Suffering

In addition to helping the older adult find life purpose, life story work also helps the older adult find meaning in suffering. Kenyon asserts, "Lifestories provide a picture of the self, including a person's main goals in life, their self-concept, the factors that give meaning to their life, and whether they have attained wisdom."[135] Narrative gerontology offers an internal perspective on suffering and loss and how loss can be "restoried" toward "acceptance and meaning…toward the awareness of a story that is larger than that of their individual selves."[136] Kenyon argues that suffering can only be understood in the context of one's life story. That story, he says, "influences the meaning we assign to suffering."[137] Like the developmental psychologists discussed earlier, narrative gerontologists see finding meaning in suffering as essential to successful aging.

In a study on older adults and the pandemic, Lind, Bluck, and McAdams discovered the power of life story work to help older adults find meaning in suffering. They observe, "Many older adults, having lived through both personal challenges and difficult historical periods, have crafted a life story that reflects them as persevering and thriving even in the face of adversity."[138] They quote an 85-year-old woman, who said, "I've seen just about everything that can happen on this planet. If you haven't lived as long as I have, you might think this was the worst thing that ever happened. But people

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[135] Gary M. Kenyon et al., "Biography in Adult Development and Aging," in *Aging and Biography: Explorations in Adult Development* (New York: Springer Publishing Company, 1996): 3.

[136] Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall, *Storying Later Life,* 238-239.

[137] Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall, 242.

[138] Majse Lind, Susan Bluck, and Dan P McAdams, "More Vulnerable? The Life Story Approach Highlights Older People's Potential for Strength During the Pandemic," *The Journals of Gerontology: Series B* 76, no. 2 (February 1, 2021): e47.

who know history know the difference."[139] This older woman's remark recalls Kenyon's description of the way life story work helps people to age well: "From a narrative perspective, while we cannot make ourselves up, it is possible for us to become better travelers through reading and restorying our lives."[140] Indeed, this woman had become a "better traveler."

Life story work offers many benefits for older adults; among them are communion and community, life purpose, and meaning in suffering. These themes will be seen more clearly as the review focuses on what narrative gerontology reveals about the spiritual tasks of aging and spiritual care of older adults.

Narrative Gerontology and Spiritual Tasks of Aging

As the literature on developmental psychology revealed, finding meaning in suffering as well as life purpose may be considered "spiritual" tasks of aging. Because narrative gerontologists study the stories of older adults, they gain an internal perspective which allows them to learn more about the spiritual dimension of aging. In fact, many narrative gerontologists believe that the stories of older adults serve a dual purpose: first, the stories reveal spiritual tasks of aging, and second, life story work may prove essential to the spiritual care of older adults. The review will consider what narrative gerontologists have found about the spiritual tasks of finding life purpose, discovering meaning in suffering, and achieving self-transcendence.

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[139] Lind, Bluck, and McAdams, e45.

[140] Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, and Randall, *Storying Later Life,* 245.

Spiritual Tasks of Aging: Life Purpose

In their study of older adults' life stories and sense of life purpose, Sharma and Bluck discovered that faith supported many of the older adults in their life purpose: "Some said that they used their purpose, found through their faith, to navigate challenging events." Other older adults asserted that their life purpose included passing on their faith to future generations.[141] The Reverend Dr. Albert Jewell, a retired minister who returned to graduate school to study well-being in older adults, observes, "The sustaining of a sense of purpose in life appears to be one of the most significant factors in ensuring the mental, emotional and spiritual well-being and even, in some extreme circumstances, the physical survival of human beings throughout their lives."[142] Like developmental psychologists, narrative gerontologists and other researchers find life purpose to be a significant spiritual task of aging.

Spiritual Tasks of Aging: Meaning in Suffering

Similarly, meaning in suffering proves to be a significant spiritual task of aging. The Reverend Dr. Elizabeth MacKinlay, fellow at the Centre for Public and Contextual Theology Research, Charles Sturt University, studied how "spiritual reminiscence…a particular way of communication that acknowledges the person as a spiritual being and seeks to engage the person in a more meaningful and personal way," affects older adults' sense of meaning and life purpose.[143] MacKinlay distinguishes between reminiscence and

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[141] Sharma and Bluck, "Older Adults Recall Memories of Life Challenges," 23471-23472.

[142] Albert Jewell, in Malcolm Johnson and Joanna Walker, *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing,* 179.

[143] Elizabeth MacKinlay, "Spiritual Reminiscence in Later Life," in Faith Gibson, *International Perspectives on Reminiscence, Life Review and Life Story Work,* 145.

"spiritual reminiscence," saying that spiritual reminiscence focuses more on why an event occurred, the meaning it carried, and how to bring closure. She found that many of the participants in the spiritual reminiscence program learned more about their identity, purpose, and meaning. MacKinlay notes that while people may seek meaning at every stage of life, awareness of mortality increases the urgency to find deeper meaning. She concludes, "spiritual reminiscence through applying the spiritual tasks of aging can assist the person to come to a state of peace, joy, and hope at the end of life."[144] Like others, MacKinlay learned more about older adults' spiritual tasks through their stories; she also found that life story work helped the older adults accomplish these spiritual tasks.

McAdams also notes that older adults who achieve the task of finding meaning in suffering age more successfully. As mentioned earlier, in his Life Story interviews, McAdams discovered a strong connection between generativity and what he calls the "redemptive self." Older adults, "autobiographical authors," as he calls them, who work to find meaning and purpose in the "disappointments, defeats, losses, and trauma they have endured," show higher "psychological maturity," and "high levels of happiness and well-being."[145] McAdams also notes that older adults who experience Erikson's ego-integrity tend to "accept one's life as a worthwhile endeavor." He goes on to point out, "The sentiment has religious overtones, reminiscent of the Christian concept of *grace*." Older adults who achieve ego integrity seem to be able to assert with St. Paul, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished my course, I have kept the faith."[146] For McAdams,

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[144] MacKinlay, in Faith Gibson, 160.

[145] McAdams, *Personality Development,* 301.

[146] McAdams, *Personality Development*, 304-305.

achieving ego integrity means having a "redemptive self," which comes from the ability to see meaning in the suffering of one's story.

Spiritual Tasks of Aging: Self-transcendence

McAdams joined with Hollen Reischer, assistant professor of psychology at the University of Buffalo, Laura Roth, clinical psychologist, and Jorge Villarreal, research assistant, in a study of self-transcendence in adults in their late fifties to mid-sixties. They define self-transcendence as "the phenomenon of experiencing one's self as expanding both backward and forward in time; a feeling of connectedness to all humanity, the earth, and the cosmos; and a turn toward existential concerns such as the meaning of life and future death."[147] The authors point out the similarity of their concept of self-transcendence to Tornstam's ego-transcendence and Erikson's ego-integrity. In their study, they found that those with a "self-transcendent story" were highly generative and that those with high self-transcendence often saw their stories as spiritual quests: "the protagonist of the humanistic growth story seems focused on evolving, exploring, expanding, fulfilling, and ultimately transcending the self."[148] From their narrative research, Reischer et al.. conclude that generative adults who have a self-transcendent story often enjoy many benefits, "such as strong support networks, involvement in religious, spiritual, and political activities, volunteerism, and subjective mental health and life satisfaction."[149] Self-transcendence, then, is a significant spiritual task of aging.

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[147] Hollen N. Reischer et al., "Self-transcendence and Life Stories of Humanistic Growth among Late-midlife Adults," *Journal of Personality* 89, no. 2 (April 2021): 305.

[148] Reischer et al., 319.

[149] Reischer et al., 319.

> "Spiritual caregivers often encounter older people in need. The stories of their lives can be under-told and under-read."[150]

Psychologist Bruce Stevens, among many others, has found that life story work can be invaluable in the spiritual care of older adults. As he says, the life stories of older adults are often under-told and under-read. Malcolm Johnson, professor emeritus of health and social policy at the University of Bristol, describes "biographical pain" in older adults. Following Cicely Saunders, the founder of hospice, who sought to address "spiritual pain," Johnson seeks to care for older adults experiencing "biographical pain," defined as "the irremediable anguish which results from profoundly painful recollection of experienced wrongs which can now never be righted."[151] Johnson, Stevens, and others propose various types of life story work in spiritual care of older adults.

Addressing Biographical Pain

Stevens observes that older adults' stories often go untold because they lack narrative templates. He seeks to help older adults tell a number of types of stories, including "the lazy story, the trauma story, the messy story, the avoided story, the body story, the problem story…the dark story…and the God story."[152] Helping older adults tell the dark story can facilitate relief of the biographical pain Johnson describes. Similarly, Johnson proposes "non-judgmental biographical listening" to address biographical pain.

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[150] Stevens, *The Storied Self,* 14.

[151] Malcolm Johnson, "Spirituality, Biographical Review and Biographical Pain at the End of Life in Old Age," in *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing*, ed. Johnson and Walker, 207.

[152] Bruce Stevens, "The Dark Story: Does It Have a Place in a Life Review?," *Journal of Religion, Spirituality & Aging* 31, no. 4 (2019): 369.

He describes this process: "the listener is trustworthy, and the teller is in charge of the process," saying it might result in "a new spiritual release."[153] Stevens and Johnson agree that those in helping professions must learn to help older adults share their stories.

Narrative Foreclosure, Narrative Loss, and Narrative Repair

Other narrative gerontologists see narrative foreclosure and narrative loss as a threat to older adults. Freeman, Randall, Baldwin, and Estey propose various methods of life story work to overcome these challenges.

Combating Narrative Foreclosure

Mark Freeman, professor of psychology at the College of the Holy Cross, observes that "narrative foreclosure," defined as "the premature conviction that one's life story has effectively ended," is a serious threat to older adults.[154] Narrative foreclosure is accompanied by the "unshakable conviction that it is simply too late to live meaningfully."[155]

Randall observes that narrative foreclosure occurs when the story remembered is seen in a "thin and limiting manner, with a more or less rigidified reading."[156] To avoid narrative foreclosure, he proposes a four-phase process. First, older adults need help

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[153] Malcolm Johnson, in Malcolm Johnson and Joanna Walker, ed., *Spiritual Dimensions of Ageing,* 212.

[154] Mark Freeman, "When the Story's Over: Narrative Foreclosure and the Possibility of Self-Renewal," in Shelley Sclater, *The Uses of Narrative: Explorations in Sociology, Psychology and Cultural Studies* (New York: Routledge, 2017), 83.

[155] Freeman, in Sclater, 83.

[156] William L. Randall, "Transcending Our Stories: A Narrative Perspective on Spirituality in Later Life," *Critical Social Work* 10, no. 1 (2009): 33.

expanding their stories. Too many older adults live a small story as their world shrinks. This smaller story, he says, "curtails their curiosity…their will to live." To expand the story, older adults need people to listen to them—they need "compassionate listening, careful listening, empowering listening."[157] Second, they need to examine their stories, to "read" their lives. To do so, he proposes using one of the many means of life story work: "life review therapy, reminiscence therapy, dynamic reminiscence, and creative reminiscence."[158] Third, older adults must transform their stories. Doing so takes wisdom, which he describes as "a searching and a savouring of the stories that we are, a journey of 'autobiographical learning.'"[159] Finally, older adults must transcend their stories by "link[ing]" or "merg[ing] their stories with the world at large.[160] Through "autobiographical activities such as life review and reminiscence," Randall says, older adults can "recontextualize" or "redeem" their pasts while finding meaning in their present. He advises helpers to help older adults tell their stories because it helps them to see the "larger stories beyond the story of the self."[161]

Narrative Loss and Narrative Repair

Clive Baldwin and Jennifer Estey see not only narrative foreclosure but also narrative loss in older adults and propose narrative repair to counteract this loss. One

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[157] Randall, "Transcending Our Stories," 36.

[158] Randall, 37.

[159] Randall, 38.

[160] Randall, 39.

[161] Randall, 39.

source of narrative loss is the "vulnerable body," because "we are embodied selves, that is, we experience our Self, others, and the world through our bodies."[162] In other words, as older adults' physical abilities change, the stories they tell (and hear) about themselves may change their sense of identity and purpose. Dementia may affect an older adult's "ability to tell a coherent, consistent, linear story."[163] Additionally, loss of family members and friends may "impoverish" an older adult's "narrative environment." For example, when Baldwin's father died, he could no longer hear and learn from stories his father previously told about him.[164] Further, narrative loss occurs when the stories a society tells about older adults disparage them. According to Baldwin and Estey, when older adults experience narrative loss, they suffer threats to their identity and spirituality.

To counteract narrative loss, Baldwin and Estey propose "narrative repair."[165] Narrative repair includes three key features: narrative literacy, narrative connections, and autobiographical reasoning.

Narrative literacy involves helping older adults learn how to tell their stories and connect their stories to larger contexts. "Structured life stories and reminiscence" may help with narrative literacy because they offer a helpful template.[166]

Regarding narrative connection, they suggest that social workers and therapists could benefit from techniques borrowed from spiritual direction, which help a person

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[162] Baldwin and Estey, "Self and Spirituality," 210.

[163] Baldwin and Estey, 211.

[164] Baldwin and Estey, 211.

[165] They co-op the phrase "narrative repair" from H. L. Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001).

[166] Baldwin and Estey, "Self and Spirituality," 215-216.

experience and examine a story more fully. They explain, "Narrative connections can thus both strengthen our personal narratives and generate the space in which to author counterstories to challenge those wider stories that may limit us."[167] In other words, narrative connections battle against the narrative loss and foreclosure older adults might experience as they face new limitations.

A third way to help older adults avoid narrative loss is "autobiographical reasoning," a strategy they borrow from Tilmann Habermas, professor of psychoanalysis in the Department of Psychology at Goethe University. Habermas describes "autobiographical reasoning" as "the activity of creating relations between different parts of one's past, present, and future life and one's personality and development."[168] Baldwin and Estey explain that autobiographical reasoning helps older adults develop a "coherent life story, and thus identity, by linking together the past, present, and future through (a) establishing a coherent sequence of temporal events, (b) connecting overarching themes, and (c) developing causal coherence."[169] By establishing coherence, connection of themes, and causation, autobiographical reasoning helps older adults to "develop a sense of identity and a source of continuity and a sense of becoming or transcendence in which the story links us with others, the world, and perhaps a sense of mystery."[170] Baldwin and Estey conclude that story-telling and story-listening are essential ways to combat narrative loss, to help older adults see the spiritual import, the "meaning, truth, values,

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[167] Baldwin and Estey, 216.

[168] Tilmann Habermas, "Autobiographical Reasoning: Arguing and Narrating from a Biographical Perspective," *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development* 2011, no. 131 (2011): 1.

[169] Baldwin and Estey, "Self and Spirituality," 216.

[170] Baldwin and Estey, 216.

and purpose," of their lives.[171] In this way, storytelling and story-listening support the older adult in remembering their life purpose and finding meaning in suffering.

Spiritual Care and the Christian Older Adults' Story

Earlier, MacKinlay's study on spiritual reminiscence was reviewed. She found that "the process of spiritual reminiscence supports and facilitates the finding of life meaning, and hence, transformation that explores matters of relationship and the discovery of hope."[172] As an octogenarian, MacKinlay shared her beliefs about offering spiritual care along with health care for older adults. An essential part of this spiritual care, she asserts, is story work: "The stories are, in essence, the carriers of meaning, which are being reviewed at the personal and communal level all the time."[173] She notes that for Christians, the Christian story gives all lives meaning; conversely, each person's story helps them know their life's meaning:

> Our story, if it is authentic, is the conveyor of meaning and is deeply connected to meaning in our lives. However, meaning is not only personal. For Christians our stories are also connected to our families, our faith community, and ultimately to God. Meaning lies at the very core of our being, and as Christians, meaning is encapsulated in our growing into Christ, as we increasingly come to see with God's eyes, rather than solely through human eyes.[174]

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[171] Baldwin and Estey, 217.

[172] MacKinlay, in Gibson, *International Perspectives on Reminiscence, Life Review and Life Story Work,* 148.

[173] Elizabeth MacKinlay, "A Narrative of Spirituality and Ageing: Reflections on the Ageing Journey and the Spiritual Dimension," *Religions* 13, no. 5 (May 2022): 10.

[174] MacKinlay, 13.

According to MacKinlay, because the stories of Christian older adults are inextricably connected to the Christian story, knowing their stories is essential to finding life purpose and meaning in suffering.

Summary of Narrative Gerontology and the Tasks Facing Older Adults

Narrative gerontology studies the stories older adults tell to learn more about the process of growing older. Through studying the stories of older adults, narrative gerontologists have identified key tasks of aging. Among them are community and connection, finding life purpose and meaning in suffering, and adapting to change and loss. Many narrative gerontologists propose some form of life story work, reminiscence, guided autobiography, or life review as helpful in engaging the tasks older adults face. A growing number of narrative gerontologists observe the spiritual dimension of aging and propose spiritual care for older adults. They too see life story work as a powerful way to help older adults find life purpose and meaning in suffering.

Psalm 78: Telling the Stories to the Next Generation

Psalm 78, a psalm of Asaph, calls the people to remember the history, the specific stories, of the Israelite's unfaithfulness and God's faithfulness. As the literature review will show, in addition to being a historical psalm, it is also often classified as a wisdom psalm, a psalm that instructs. The literature review will also show that the psalm has application to God's people today, calling them to remember their own stories of God's faithfulness and to pass these stories on to the next generation of believers.

The Genre of Psalm 78

Understanding the nature of the genre of psalms in general and the specific genre of Psalm 78 informs the understanding of the content of the psalm.

The Genre of the Psalms

The Psalms are Hebrew poetry, and they were written for worship.[175] As such, the Psalms are a "prayer book that gives us a language adequate for responding to the God who speaks to us."[176] Theologian John Calvin describes the Psalms as, "An Anatomy of all the Parts of the Soul" for their richness in revealing emotions and truths about the people reading them. Calvin also writes that psalms act as a "mirror" which helps readers see themselves more clearly.[177] Old Testament theologian Tremper Longman III expounds on Calvin's thought: "The Psalms inform our intellect, arouse our emotions, direct our wills, and stimulate our imaginations. When we read the Psalms with faith, we come away changed and not simply informed."[178] Within the Psalms, there are many genres, including "hymns, laments, psalms of remembrance and psalms of trust…thanksgiving, wisdom, and kingship."[179] Walter Brueggemann, professor emeritus of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary, classifies psalms as "psalms of

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[175] Tremper Longman III, *How to Read the Psalms* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1988), 14.

[176] Eugene H. Peterson, *Conversations: The Message with Its Translator* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2007), 773.

[177] John Calvin, *Commentary on Psalms—Volume 1, "*Christian Classics Ethereal Library," accessed October 15, 2024, https://www.ccel.org/ccel/calvin/calcom08.vi.html.

[178] Longman, *How to Read*, 13.

[179] Longman, 20.

orientation, disorientation, and new orientation."[180] The Psalms give readers words for prayer and praise and lament, the Psalms instruct, and the Psalms point readers to Christ.[181] As such, they provide essential insight for all generations of believers.

The Genre and Background of Psalm 78

Maskil of Asaph

The title to Psalm 78 indicates it is a maskil, which may be a poem or song giving insight. Some even note that it is a didactic poem, that is, a poem that instructs.[182] It is "of Asaph," which can mean composed by Asaph, a descendant of the Levitical family, the sons of Korah. He was either a singer or a choir director. In some instances, a "maskil of Asaph" refers to the choir singing it, not the person, because the dates of the events don't match the lifetime of Asaph.[183]

Genre: History

A number of biblical scholars categorize Psalm 78 as a historical psalm, since it recounts key events in Israel's history. And yet, as they explain, it has a larger purpose. As Longman observes, history in the Bible is not merely a recounting of the past but "is

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[180] Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms: A Theological Commentary*, Augsburg Old Testament Studies (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 19.

[181] Longman, *How to Read,* 64.

[182] R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke, eds., *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 877.

[183] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 1-72*, Kidner Classic Commentaries (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 50.

geared to the present and the future."[184] In Psalm 78, the history is told to demonstrate the "glorious deeds of the Lord."[185]

Mashal and Hidot

This purpose is explained by the Hebrew words *mashal* and *hidot*. The psalmist opens his mouth in a parable (Hebrew: *mashal*).[186] As the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* explains, "The word *māšāl* may be synonymous with an extended parable."[187] Marion Ann Taylor, professor of Old Testament at Wycliffe College, University of Toronto, observes, "This *mashal* is not designed to entertain but rather to teach, to instruct, and to help us remember the past so that we can pass this information on to the next generation."[188] *Mashal* is paired with *hidot*, translated "dark sayings" by the English Standard Version and "hidden things" in the New International Version. Reverend Stan Mast, retired minister of preaching at LaGrave Avenue Christian Reformed Church, observes that *hidot* is "often used in wisdom literature. Only those instructed by the older generation will be wise enough to infer the lessons hidden in the history of their people."[189] Alec Motyer, biblical scholar, notes that for Asaph, "that

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[184] Tremper Longman III, *Reading the Bible with Heart & Mind* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1997), 99.

[185] Ps. 78:4 (ESV).

[186] Ps. 78:2 (ESV).

[187] Victor P. Hamilton, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 533.

[188] Marion Ann Taylor, "Remembering and Passing on the Unabridged Story of God," in *Strange Land: Meditations on the Psalms in a Time of Pandemic,* ed. Caris Kim (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2021), 110.

[189] Stan Mast, "Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16," Center for Excellence in Preaching, accessed October 14, 2024, https://cepreaching.org/commentary/2017-09-25/psalm-781-4-12-16/.

history as such is an *enigma*—why have things happened as they have?"[190] As the literature will show, many scholars believe these two words provide a key to understanding Psalm 78.

Genre: Wisdom and History

Because *mashal and hidot* are words often used (and occasionally paired)[191] in wisdom literature, and because of the emphasis on instruction in the introduction in Psalm 78:1-8, many scholars also categorize Psalm 78 as wisdom literature. Phillip McMillion, former professor of Old Testament at Harding University, calls it a "didactic" psalm, but "without any school overtones," because its instruction comes through "story, history."[192] He notes three words repeated in the introductory verses: fathers, children, and generation. "Fathers," used three times in the introduction, often refers to "ancestors in general or even of previous generations." "Children," used four times, can be figurative, and "does not always refer to those young in years." "Generation," used four times, "strengthens the emphasis on teaching those to follow."[193] Similarly, Longman sees it as a "redemptive-historical/remembrance" psalm influenced by wisdom literature,

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[190] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day: A Working Translation with Analysis and Explanatory Notes, and a "Pause for Thought" Based on the Passage Read* (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2016), 216.

[191] Edwin Yamauchi, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 267.

[192] Phillip. McMillion, "Psalm 78: Teaching the Next Generation," *Restoration Quarterly* 43 (2001), 221.

[193] McMillion, 222-223.

noting that "the psalmist is a sage imparting wisdom that he learned from his ancestors (v. 3) and passing it on to the next generation."[194]

Rebecca W. Poe Hays, assistant professor of Christian Scriptures at the George W. Truett Theological Seminary of Baylor University, notes that while wisdom and history "generally stand divorced," Psalm 78 unites the genres. She believes the relationship between the two is essential: "In Psalm 78, wisdom elements establish a sense of safety while historical review prompts the audience to remember its past trauma and reconnect with reality."[195]

To these scholars, the combination of the wisdom and historical genres emphasizes the message of the psalm.

The Message of the Psalm: Remember and Tell the Story of God's Faithfulness to Future Generations

The wisdom the psalmist imparts is to remember and tell the story of God's faithfulness to future generations so they too will put their hope in God. The review will consider the various parts of Psalm 78 to see how it conveys this message.

Introduction: Verses 1-4: Remember and Tell

Asaph implores the Israelites to remember and tell of God's redemptive work. When they recite his "glorious deeds" and "the wonders that he has done," the next

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[194] Tremper Longman, *Psalms: An Introduction and Commentary*, Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries, Volumes 15-16 (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 289.

[195] Rebecca Whitten Poe Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing: The Meeting of Wisdom and History in Psalm 78," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 41, no. 2 (December 2016): 183.

generation will "set their hope in God…[and] keep his commandments."[196] When the Israelites remember their stories of redemption, they won't follow in the fleeing footsteps of their "stubborn, rebellious" ancestors."[197]

As Longman points out, the passage begins with a technique typical to Proverbs, with the psalmist exhorting his audience to listen to his teaching.[198] As mentioned, the psalmist tells his audience he will share parables and dark sayings. Longman explains, "The psalmist can refer to the history of Israel as a parable, not because he denies the events happened, but because he is emphasizing the theological and ethical significance of the events of Israel's past."[199] Regarding the "dark sayings," or "enigma," as he calls it, Motyer notes, "Asaph believes he is in a position to explain its hidden meaning."[200]

The psalmist will pass on lessons learned from the previous generation to the next generation.[201] As renowned preacher Charles Spurgeon proclaims, "Our fathers told us, we heard them, and we know personally what they taught; it remains for us in our turn to hand it on."[202] What must be passed on? The *těhillâ*, the "praiseworthy" or "glorious deeds of the Lord."[203] These deeds are "the results of *hālal* as well as divine acts which

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[196] Ps. 78:4, 7 (ESV).

[197] Ps. 78:8 (ESV).

[198] Longman, *Psalms,* 289.

[199] Longman, 290.

[200] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day,* 216.

[201] See Ps. 78:4 (ESV).

[202] C. H. Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: An Expository and Devotional Commentary on the Psalms*, vol. 2, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1983), 331.

[203] Ps. 78:4 (ESV).

merit that activity."[204] The psalmist offers a parallel to praiseworthy deeds in "wonderful works," "*miplāʾâ*," which "refer to the acts of God, designating either cosmic wonders or historical achievements on behalf of Israel."[205] Again, Spurgeon eloquently states the psalmist's exhortation, "Children are to be taught to magnify the Lord; they ought to be well informed as to his wonderful doings in ages past, and should be made to know his strength, and his wonderful works that he hath done."[206] The call of the first four verses of Psalm 78 is clear: remember God's marvelous works and share them with the next generation.

Psalm 78:5-8: The Purpose of Remembering and Sharing

The second section of the introduction explains the purpose of sharing the history of God's wonderful works to the next generation. Hays notes that verses 5-8 bridge the genres of wisdom and history "by relating the 'instruction' to God's commandments to Israel and recalling the attendant responsibility to instruct the subsequent generations (vv. 5-8)."[207] It states a positive purpose: "so that they should set their hope in God" and a negative purpose: "that they should not be like their fathers, a stubborn and rebellious generation."[208] As Longman explains, "The purpose of sharing the story of Israel's past is

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[204] Leonard J. Coppes, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 218.

[205] Victor P. Hamilton, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 723.

[206] Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David*, 331.

[207] Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing," 188.

[208] Ps. 78:7, 8 (ESV).

to encourage loyalty and obedience toward God."[209] Pastor and theologian Walter Brueggemann suggests that this remembering accomplishes two purposes: first, it reminds Israel that it is not "self-made," "cannot be self-sufficient," and "cannot secure its own existence." Second, Brueggemann argues, "the recital of the memory" helps the Israelites to set their hope in God. Brueggemann says, "our capacity to hope is precisely correlated with our ability to remember."[210] This theme of memory and hope and forgetting and disobedience continues through the next sixty-four verses of the psalm.

Psalm 78:9-39: The Israelites' Forgetfulness and God's Remembering

Hays describes the remainder of Psalm 78 as presenting "scenes from Israel's history that move from disaster to hope (vv. 9-72)."[211] The review will trace this movement. Motyer divides the sections into two: "the first survey of the acts of God (9-39)," and "the second survey of the acts of God (40-72)."[212]

Psalm 78: 9-16: Israel's Forgetfulness; God's Wonders

Motyer describes verses 9-11 as a preface that points to the "deadly sin of forgetting God's wonders." The Ephraimites forgot God's wonders and turned and ran in the day of battle. What is God's response to their forgetfulness? Motyer describes it as "redemption completed" and "care and provision."[213] In this section, Asaph points to the

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[209] Longman, *Psalms,* 290.

[210] Walter Brueggemann, "The Family as World-Maker," *Journal for Preachers* 8, no. 3 (1985), 11.

[211] Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing," 189.

[212] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day,* 217.

[213] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day,* 217.

great redemption story of the Exodus, "He divided the sea and let them pass through it," "In the daytime he led them with a cloud," and "He split rocks in the wilderness and gave them drink abundantly as from the deep."[214] As pastor Stan Mast notes, the subject in verses 12-16 is God: "Even when his people forget his covenant (verse 10), God does not. And his remembering always leads to action."[215]

Psalm 78:17-39: Israel's Rebellion; God's Wrath and Mercy

Despite God's miraculous provision, the Israelites "sinned still more against him…demanding the food they craved."[216] Doubting God's ability to provide, they "spoke against God, saying, 'Can God spread a table in the wilderness?'"[217] Hearing their doubt, the Lord "was full of wrath…because they did not believe in his saving power."[218] As Calvin explains, "From this we learn not only how hateful unbelief is in the sight of God, but also, what is the true nature of faith, and what are the fruits which it produces."[219] The Lord's response to the Israelites is part of the enigma, though, for he rains down manna for them to eat. Longman explains the wonder of this gift, "The psalmist highlights the divine origin of this gift by calling it the *grain of heaven* and the

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[214] Ps. 78:13, 14, 15 (ESV).

[215] Mast, "Psalm 78."

[216] Ps. 78:17-18 (ESV).

[217] Ps. 78:19 (ESV).

[218] Ps. 78:21-22 (ESV).

[219] John Calvin and James Anderson, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, vol. 3 (Bellingham, WA: Logos Bible Software, 2010), 245.

bread of angels (24-25)."[220] It is this provision which failed to satisfy Israel; they demanded more.

The Lord's punishment comes in the form of quail, "he rained meat on them like dust."[221] Calvin explains, "God, in giving the manna, performed the office of a father; but by the flesh, he satisfied their gluttonous desires, that their very greediness in devouring it might choke them."[222] The Israelites persist in their sin, even after experiencing the anger of God. And then a shift occurs. The Israelites "repented and sought God earnestly."[223] Even this repentance appears to be false and fleeting: "But they flattered him with their mouths; they lied to him with their tongues."[224] How will God respond? Herein lies the enigma of the psalm: "Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity and did not destroy them; he restrained his anger often and did not stir up all his wrath."[225] The Israelites continued to sin; God continued to show mercy.

As Longman observes, the Israelites were in a destructive cycle. They continued sinning and being punished by God. They obeyed for a period of time but then sinned again. Ultimately, they could not stop sinning on their own. In Psalm 78:38, the key to their forgiveness comes: "Yet he, being compassionate, atoned for their iniquity…he restrained his anger."[226] Longman explains, "If God had released his full *wrath*, no-one

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[220] Longman, *Psalms,* 290.

[221] Ps. 78:27 (ESV).

[222] Calvin, *Psalms*, 248.

[223] Ps. 78:34 (ESV).

[224] Ps. 78:36 (ESV).

[225] Ps. 78:38 (ESV).

[226] Ps. 78:38 (ESV).

would have entered the Promised Land, but the forty years in the wilderness allowed them to live out their lifespan. God's compassion emanates from his awareness of human fragility (they were but flesh) and temporality (a passing breeze that does not return) (v. 39)."[227] As Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, professor of biblical theology at Wesley Theological Seminary observes, "The word describing God comes from the noun for a female body part: *raḥûm* ("womb").[228] Like Longman, she sees God's compassion as the key to his restraining his anger. Both Longman and Hopkins also note the importance of memory in restraining his anger: "He remembered that they were but flesh…"[229] Hopkins explains, "Memory is essential to the covenant relationship for both sides. God's memory is motherly, rooted in the womb."[230]

The Lord's compassion led him to do for the Israelites what they could not do for themselves: atone for their iniquity. The *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* notes that the word "atone" comes from the Hebrew *kāpar*, which means "to cover over sin." As the authors explain, "The Old Testament ritual symbolized a covering over of sin until it was dealt with in fact by the atonement of Christ."[231] Spurgeon makes the connection between Psalm 78:38 and Christ: "We know from the history that a mediator

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[227] Longman, *Psalms,* 292.

[228] Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Psalms: Books 2-3*, Wisdom Commentary: Volume 21 (Collegeville, MN: A Michael Glazier Book, Liturgical Press, 2016), 279.

[229] Ps. 78:39 (ESV).

[230] Hopkins, *Psalms,* 279.

[231] R. Laird Harris, in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1999), 452.

interposed, the man Moses stood in the gap; even so at this hour the Lord Jesus pleads for sinners, and averts the divine wrath."[232]

Psalm 78:40-72: The Israelite's Forgetfulness and God's Mercy

In what Alec Motyer calls the "second survey of the acts of God," the psalmist now reaches farther back into Israelite history to the plagues which took place before the Exodus and then skips forward to the establishment of Israel in the promised land. As Edward Greenstein, professor emeritus of Bible at Bar-Ilan University, explains, "As a remedy of their chronic forgetfulness, the psalmist takes special pains to recall the remoter past for them."[233] In this section of the psalm, the theme of remembering and forgetting continues.

Psalm 78:40-55: Not Remembering God's Power in the Plagues and the Promised Land

Again, the psalmist is shocked by the ongoing rebellion of the Israelites: "How often they rebelled against him in the wilderness."[234] Motyer names their problem as "the deadly sin of not remembering."[235] Longman notes, "As in verse 11, he identifies their problem as a lack of memory. To *remember* means more than a conscious awareness of an event. To *remember* an event like the exodus implies living in trust and obedience to

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[232] Spurgeon, "Psalm 78 by C. H. Spurgeon." Blue Letter Bible. Last Modified 5 Dec 2016. https://www.blueletterbible.org/Comm/spurgeon_charles/tod/ps078.cfm.

[233] Edward L. Greenstein, "Mixing Memory and Design: Reading Psalm 78," *Prooftexts* 10, no. 2 (May 1, 1990), 209.

[234] Ps. 78:40 (ESV).

[235] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day,* 216.

the One who saved them."[236] As Greenstein points out, even as the psalmist emphasizes the importance of remembering in Psalm 78:42, he models its importance by remembering God's power in the plagues.[237]

Psalm 78:56-64: Provoking God's Anger in the Promised Land

Even though God "drove out nations before them… and settled the tribes of Israel in their tents," the Israelites still forgot the Lord's goodness.[238] "Yet they tested and rebelled against the Most High God…but turned away and acted treacherously."[239] Kidner notes, "The characteristic sin is no longer discontent but idolatry."[240] Longman points out that it is the next generation, the generation who entered the land that committed the sin: "They are like their *ancestors* in their rebellion and unfaithfulness, like a *faulty bow*, one whose very construction does not allow it to hit the target."[241] In their idolatry, the Israelites "provoked [God] to anger" and "moved him to jealousy."[242]

The rebellion continues in verses 59-64, causing the Lord's presence to depart from the temple: "He forsook his dwelling at Shiloh."[243] As Longman explains, these verses seem to refer to "the abandonment of the *tabernacle* and the loss of the *ark*, an

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[236] Longman, *Psalms*, 292.

[237] Greenstein, "Mixing Memory and Design."

[238] Ps. 78:55 (ESV).

[239] Ps. 78:56-57 (ESV).

[240] Derek Kidner, *Psalms 73-150*, 315.

[241] Longman, *Psalms,* 293.

[242] Ps. 78:58-59 (ESV).

[243] Ps. 78:60 (ESV).

event that occurred at the very end of the period of the Judges."[244] About the abandonment of the temple, Calvin comments, "It is a very emphatic manner of speaking to represent God as so incensed by the continual wickedness of his people, that he was constrained to forsake this place, the only one which he had chosen for himself upon the earth."[245] According to Psalm 78:59, God "utterly rejected Israel."

Psalm 78:65-72: God's Mercy Has the Last Word

Despite what verse 59 says, the Lord cannot utterly reject Israel. In a provocative image, verse 65 describes the Lord as awaking from sleep, "like a strong man shouting because of wine." Longman says he is likened to a "drunken warrior," observing, "God is the Warrior who beats back the enemy, something that was not accomplished by the northern kingdom."[246] The note in the ESV Study Bible explains, "God stirs himself from apparent inactivity to take action on behalf of his suffering people, even when, as here, they are suffering for their own unbelief (cf. 35:23; 44:23; 59:5)."[247] The Lord shows his sovereignty, rejecting Ephraim, choosing Judah instead, as the tribe who will produce the king. In contrast to verse 60, where he forsakes his dwelling place at Shiloh, he chooses

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[244] Longman, *Psalms,* 293.

[245] Calvin, *Psalms*, 270–271.

[246] Longman, *Psalms,* 294.

[247] Crossway Bibles, ed., *ESV Study Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, Ill: Crossway Bibles, 2008), 1037.

Mount Zion as his new dwelling place.[248] He chooses David, a shepherd, to shepherd his people, and David leads them skillfully.[249]

The Meaning and Application of Psalm 78

Psalm 78 historical and wisdom psalm have application for believers today. Various interpretations and applications are reviewed.

The Gospel in Psalm 78

Although the psalm ends with David leading his people skillfully, as Longman points out, David and his descendants did not continue in obedience. A greater Shepherd was needed; "The New Testament understands Jesus to be the fulfillment of that expectation: the Messiah or anointed King."[250] Motyer sees the entire psalm as pointing to the perseverance of a merciful God: "At Passover (verses 12, 43), he put his hand to the plough of our redemption, and he refused to turn back." He continues, "[God] has determined on our salvation with eternal security, and he will see to it, amid all the fluctuations and riddles of daily experience…. We await the revelation of our Lord Jesus Christ, and he will confirm us to the end so that we are blameless in that day."[251] Pastor Stan Mast claims that a sermon on Psalm 78 must "emphasize and end with grace and,

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[248] See Ps. 78:67-68 (ESV).

[249] Ps. 78:72 (ESV).

[250] Longman, *Psalms,* 294.

[251] Alec Motyer, *Psalms by the Day,* 217.

particularly, Jesus."[252] For many scholars who see Christ in every part of Scripture, Psalm 78 points forward to salvation in Christ.

Remember God's Faithfulness and Share It with the Next Generation

Because Psalm 78 points to eternal salvation, it also reminds today's believers, especially older ones, to tell the story of redemption to the next generation. Mast asserts that the church must follow the psalmist's lead in sharing the story that "gives meaning and hope to people in a fragmented and God-forgetting culture."[253] Marion Taylor exhorts, "We are called to remember and pass on a thorough and unabridged account of the story of God to our children, who will then pass it on to their children, who are yet unborn, so that they, too, will place their hope in God, remembering his saving acts, and keep his commandments."[254] Reverend Joe Novenson, pastor of senior adults at Lookout Mountain Presbyterian Church, argues that the Israelites' problems resulted from the older believers' failure to share the story of God's wonderful deeds with the next generation. As he explains, "The proactive, preventative, preparative step commanded by God himself to reverse this kingdom-wide catastrophic gospel-amnesia is for the 'fathers' to teach the next generation of their God."[255] Many biblical scholars agree that Psalm 78

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[252] Mast, "Psalm 78."

[253] Mast, "Psalm 78."

[254] Marion Ann Taylor, "Remembering," 117.

[255] Joe Novenson, "Aging and the Unfinished Calling: The Older Disciple's Ministry to the Younger Follower of Jesus," (sermon, October 20, 2023) Ridgehaven.org, https://static1.squarespace.com/static/55d3678fe4b0bdc8a9465faa/t/66d89f2501a2c03034905feb/1725472549799/Aging+and+The+Unfinished+Calling.pdf.

calls people, especially older ones, to share the story of God's faithfulness and redemption in Christ to the next generation.

Share Your Stories of God's Rescue and Redemption

Dr. Ligon Duncan, chancellor of Reformed Theological Seminary, Jackson, proposes that Psalm 78 calls people to tell not just the biblical story of God's faithfulness to the next generation but their own stories: "May we remind that generation not only of God's works which He has revealed to us in His word, but may we remind them of God's works for us in our lives, tell our children and their children what the Lord has done for us….."[256] Pastor and biblical scholar Dane Ortlund also sees the psalmist calling people to tell their stories of God's redemption in their lives: "What events from your own life are evidence of God's abundant grace, in spite of your own sinfulness?"[257] Longman would agree, for he believes that the Bible calls people to bring "our own story to its story. It compels us to understand our story in the light of the great story of God's dealings in the world."[258] In Psalm 78, the psalmist brings Israel's story to God's story, modeling this practice for future generations of believers.

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[256] Ligon Duncan, "We Will Tell the Next Generation," (sermon, November 8, 2005) LigonDuncan.com, https://ligonduncan.com/we-will-tell-the-next-generation-400/.

[257] Dane Ortlund, *In the Lord I Take Refuge: 150 Daily Devotions through the Psalms* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2021), 221.

[258] Longman, *Reading the Bible,* 34.

Share Stories of Sin and Sorrow

The psalmist tells a story of Israel's sin and sorrow to the next generation to highlight God's faithfulness through all generations. In doing so, he provides an example of the types of stories to tell, stories of redemption in which the people fail to follow God, but God perseveres in forgiveness and mercy (the wilderness wanderings, the plagues, the misuse of the ark).

Hays sees Psalm 78 as a model for trauma therapy. As she explains, even when the trauma is the result of a person's own sin or failure (as it is in Psalm 78), it still must be processed. She sees the psalm in terms of Brueggemann's orientation, disorientation, and re-orientation. According to Poe, the wisdom at the beginning reflects the "orientation" in its stability of God's ongoing commitment. The historical review reflects the "disorientation" in Israel's repeated rebellion and punishment for their sins. The conclusion returns to stability after remembering, mourning, and processing the traumatic events, thus ending in "new orientation."[259] Hays sees this structure as applicable to trauma therapy: "Articulating a traumatic memory in a context of safety allows the traumatized to gain a clearer understanding of the past and therefore to mourn it fully."[260]

Hays is not alone in seeing this model in Psalm 78. Tiffany Houck-Loomis, pastoral counselor and therapist, sees Psalm 78 as a "healing fiction or soul history." She asserts, "His art of story making and storytelling provides individuals and communities alike a place to hang their experiences, hurts, and trauma suffered and survived."[261] In

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[259] Hays, "Trauma, Remembrance, and Healing," 204.

[260] Hays, 200.

[261] Tiffany Houck-Loomis, in Hopkins, *Psalms,* 274.

this way, both Hays and Houck-Loomis echo McAdams and others who observed the importance of finding meaning in difficult life events.

Summary of Psalm 78: Telling the Stories to the Next Generation

The literature review showed that Psalm 78, a historical and wisdom psalm, instructs its audience through all generations to tell the story of God's faithfulness to the next generation of believers. The Psalm teaches that remembering stories of God's faithfulness is essential to a life of worship and obedience. The psalmist narrates stories of Israel's failures to highlight God's redemption. Many biblical scholars and preachers observe that Christians can apply Psalm 78 by seeking the hope of God's redemption in the midst of sinful and sorrowful stories of their lives. In this way, the application of Psalm 78 correlates to finding meaning and, thus hope, in difficult events for Christian older adults.

Summary of Literature Review

The literature review examined three key areas: the developmental tasks older adults must navigate to age successfully; what narrative gerontology reveals about developmental tasks older adults face and how life story work can help them navigate these tasks, and the call of Psalm 78 to tell stories of God's faithfulness to the next generation.

Developmental psychologists have sought to answer the question, "In the face of challenges presented by aging, how can older adults flourish?" The Eriksons' stage theory of adult development was foundational for future study. Many psychologists followed their lead in considering what helped older adults achieve generativity and ego-

integrity. In recent years, the heterogeneity of tasks and challenges was noted; older adults faced different challenges at different ages.

A key finding of developmental psychologists was that a strong sense of life purpose as well as the ability to find meaning in suffering helped older adults flourish. Some developmental psychologists observed the necessity of accomplishing spiritual tasks of aging, like finding meaning in death. Christian developmental psychologists observed that faith in Jesus Christ and the hope of an afterlife helped older adults to flourish.

Narrative gerontologists recognized that the stories of older adults revealed key tasks of aging. Key tasks they observed are having community and connection, finding life purpose and meaning in suffering, and adapting to change and loss. Many narrative gerontologists propose some form of life story work, reminiscence, guided autobiography, or life review as helpful in engaging the tasks older adults face. A growing number of narrative gerontologists observe the spiritual dimension of aging and suggest spiritual care for older adults. They also see life story work as a powerful way to help older adults find life purpose and meaning in suffering.

The review of literature on Psalm 78 revealed the importance of telling stories of God's faithfulness to his people in their sinfulness and sorrow to the next generation. Some biblical scholars also saw a model for processing difficult events of life in the psalm. It clearly calls older generations to pass on the stories of God's mercy and redemption to the next generation.

The literature reveals key tasks of aging, the importance of some type of life story work in aging successfully, and the need to find life purpose and meaning in difficult

events. One question not addressed is how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe life purpose and the meaning of difficult life events.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Therefore, the purpose of this study was to explore how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. Three main areas are central to this study: 1) understanding what developmental psychology teaches about the challenges older adults face and the tasks they must complete to age successfully; 2) understanding what narrative gerontology teaches about the challenges older adults face and how storytelling affects older adults' sense of life purpose; and 3) exploring what Psalm 78 says about the lifelong calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

Research Questions

The following questions guided the qualitative research:

1. What motivates Christian older adults (COAs) to participate in a spiritual legacy workshop?
2. How do COAs tell the stories of difficult life events?
    a. How do they include their Christian faith?
    b. How do they include life purposes?
    c. How do they relate their difficult life events to the biblical redemptive narrative?
3. How do COAs describe changes in how they think about difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop?

a. How do they describe changes in their thinking about past difficult life events?
b. How do they describe changes in their thinking about current difficult life events?
c. How do they describe changes in their thinking about possible future difficult life events?

4. To what extent are COAs motivated to tell the stories of their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation?

Design of the Study

This study followed the basic qualitative research design for a case study, as described by Sharan B. Merriam, Professor Emerita of Adult Education at the University of Georgia, and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, Professor of Adult Education at Penn State University Harrisburg. In this design, "data are collected through interviews, observations, or document analysis."[262] Merriam and Tisdale note four key characteristics of qualitative research: "The focus is on process, understanding, and meaning; the researcher is the primary instrument of data collection and analysis; the process is inductive; and the product is richly descriptive."[263] A basic qualitative research study was suitable because it is interested in "how meaning is constructed, how people make sense of their lives and their worlds," and because its primary goal is "to uncover and interpret

[262] Sharan B. Merriam and Elizabeth J. Tisdell, *Qualitative Research : A Guide to Design and Implementation*, Fourth edition., The Jossey-Bass Higher and Adult Education Series (Jossey-Bass, 2016), 24.

[263] Merriam and Tisdell, 15.

these meanings."[264] Through such a research study, the researcher gathered meaningful data about COAs' understanding the meaning of difficult life events that could not be obtained through other forms of research.

Case Study Setting

This study employed a qualitative research design in a case study setting and conducted semi-structured interviews as the primary source of data gathering. This methodology allowed the researcher to gain an understanding of COA's behavior, feelings, and interpretation of their world.[265]

Merriam and Tisdale define a case study as "an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system."[266] R. E. Stake, Professor Emeritus of Education at the University of Illinois, explains, "Much qualitative research aims at understanding one thing well: one playground, one band, one Weight Watchers group,"[267] and this study aimed at understanding how participants in one particular spiritual legacy workshop described their growth in life purpose. According to Lesley E. Tomaszewski, Associate Professor of Business at Lipscomb University College of Business, Jill Zarestky, Associate Professor of Education, Colorado State University, and Elsa Gonzalez, Associate Professor of Higher Education, University of Houston, "The case study method is particularly useful for researching educational interventions because it provides a rich description of all the

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[264] Merriam and Tisdell, 25.

[265] Merriam and Tisdell, 108.

[266] Merriam and Tisdell, 37.

[267] Robert E. Stake, *Qualitative Research: Studying How Things Work* (New York: Guilford Press, 2010), 27.

interrelated factors."[268] This study explored how COAs described their life purpose after the educational intervention of a spiritual legacy workshop.

The case study method utilized minimized variables for this in-depth research, requiring all participants to have participated in the same spiritual legacy workshop. Because the variables involved in the data analysis were more focused, the case study enhanced the research into this topic. As an additional advantage, the case study analysis work provided a fuller understanding of the context. Thus, the case study enabled the researcher to gain emic perspective of the COAs who participated in the spiritual legacy workshop.[269]

Participant Sample Selection

This research required participants who were able to communicate in depth about changes in their description of the meaning of difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop. To gain data towards best practices, the participants self-reported to the researcher that they had experienced changes in their description of the meaning of difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop. The researcher sought to gain an information-rich case. Michael Q. Patton, evaluation consultant and former President of the American Evaluation Association, defines an information-rich case as one "from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the inquiry, thus the term

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[268] Lesley Eleanor Tomaszewski, Jill Zarestky, and Elsa Gonzalez, "Planning Qualitative Research: Design and Decision Making for New Researchers," *International Journal of Qualitative Methods* 19 (December 9, 2020): 1–7, https://doi.org/10.1177/1609406920967174, 3.

[269] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 256.

purposeful sampling."[270] Therefore, the purposeful study sample consisted of a selection of men and women from the population of COAs between the ages of sixty and eighty-five years old who participated in a spiritual legacy workshop. They were also purposefully chosen to provide variation in ethnicity, age, and gender within the typical sample.[271] This variation provided a criterion-based selection of diversity for the study.[272]

The final study was conducted through personal interviews with six COAs who participated in the spiritual legacy workshop and reported changes in their description of the meaning of difficult life events. They were invited to participate via an introductory email, followed by a personal phone call. All expressed interest and gave written informed consent to participate. Each also self-reported to be of sound mind, physically and psychologically safe, and fully capable of protecting their own interests. In addition, to respect and to protect the human rights of the participants, each participant signed a "Research Participant Consent Form." The Human Rights Risk Level Assessment is "minimal" to "no risk" according to the Seminary IRB Guidelines. The following is a sample of this consent form.

RESEARCH PARTICIPANT INFORMED CONSENT FORM
FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN RIGHTS

I agree to participate in the research which is being conducted by Elizabeth Reynolds Turnage to investigate the impact of a spiritual legacy workshop on Christian Older Adults' life purpose for the Doctor of Ministry degree program at Covenant Theological Seminary. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can withdraw my consent at any time without penalty and have the results of the participation, to the extent that they can be identified as mine, returned to me, removed from the research records, and/or destroyed.

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[270] Michael Quinn Patton, *Qualitative Research & Evaluation Methods: Integrating Theory and Practice*, Fourth edition (Thousand Oaks, California: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2015), 53.

[271] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

[272] Merriam and Tisdell, *Qualitative Research*, 97.

The following points have been explained to me:

1) The purpose of the research is to investigate the impact of a spiritual legacy workshop on Christian Older Adults' life purpose.
2) Potential benefits of the research may include discovering a way to help Christian Older Adults maintain and renew a sense of life purpose and calling as they age, to improve a spiritual legacy workshop so that it is more helpful to Christian Older Adults, and to encourage the sharing of the stories of "God's glorious deeds" to future generations. Though there are no direct benefits for participants, the researcher hopes they will be encouraged by the experience of sharing their experiences with an eager listener and learner.
3) The research process will include six participants who are interviewed separately by video recorded interview.
4) Participants in this research will be interviewed for 60-90 minutes about their experiences relevant to the research topic.
5) Potential discomforts or stresses: recalling challenges related to the research topic may cause minimal discomfort or stress.
6) Potential risks: minimal risks due to the age of the participants.
7) Any information that I provide will be held in strict confidence. At no time will my name be reported along with my responses. The data gathered for this research is confidential and will not be released in any individually identifiable form without my prior consent, unless otherwise required by law. Audiotapes or videotapes of interviews will be erased following the completion of the dissertation. By my signature, I am giving informed consent for the use of my responses in this research project.
8) Limits of Privacy: I understand that, by law, the researcher cannot keep information confidential if it involves abuse of a child or vulnerable adult or plans for a person to harm themselves or to hurt someone else.
9) The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the study.

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Researcher Date

_____

Printed Name and Signature of Participant Date

Please sign both copies. Keep one. Return the other to the researcher. Thank you.

Research at Covenant Theological Seminary which involves human participants is overseen by the Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding your rights as a participant should be addressed to: Director, Doctor of Ministry; Covenant Theological Seminary; 12330 Conway Road; St. Louis, MO 63141; Phone (314) 434-4044.

Having completed the IRB requirements for human rights in research and the risk assessment in the Covenant Theological Seminary's "Dissertation Notebook," the Human

Rights Risk Level Assessment is "minimal risk" according to the Seminary's IRB guidelines.

Each participant completed a one-page demographic questionnaire before the interview. The questionnaire asked for information concerning the selection criteria above. It also requested information of particular interest in this study. Possible participant variables of interest included (1) age, (2) ethnicity, and (3) gender. The analysis in Chapter 4 describes the relevance of the demographic data.

Data Collection

This study utilized semi-structured interviews for primary data gathering. The open-ended nature of interview questions facilitated the ability to build upon participant responses to complex issues in order to explore them more thoroughly.[273] Ultimately, these methods enabled this study to look for common themes, patterns, concerns, and contrasting views across the variation of participants.[274]

The researcher performed a pilot test of the interview protocol to evaluate the questions for clarity and usefulness in eliciting relevant data. Initial interview protocol categories were derived from the literature but evolved around the explanations and descriptions that emerged from doing constant comparison work during the interviewing process. Coding and categorizing the data while continuing the process of interviewing also allowed for the emergence of new sources of data.[275]

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[273] Merriam and Tisdell, 124-125.

[274] Merriam and Tisdell, 297.

[275] Merriam and Tisdell, 197.

The researcher interviewed seven COAs aged sixty to eighty-five years old for sixty to ninety minutes each. Prior to the interview, the participants were given a few sample questions to consider. To accommodate participant schedules, the participants were given several options for meeting times. The researcher videotaped and audiotaped the interviews with Zoom software. By conducting three to four interviews in a week, the researcher completed the data gathering in the course of two weeks. Directly after each interview, the researcher wrote field notes with descriptive and reflective observations on the interview time.

The interview protocol contained the following questions.

1. Tell me about your reasons for wanting to participate in the spiritual legacy workshop (abbreviated SLW for the rest of the questions).
    a. What did you hope you would get out of it?
    b. What were some highlights of the workshop for you?
    c. Did you take something away that you didn't expect going in?
2. Tell about writing a story of "wrecked shalom."
    a. What were some ways your perspective on this story changed, compared to how you usually thought about it?
    b. Would you be comfortable sharing or summarizing the story for me?
    c. How do you interpret or find meaning in your story?
    d. What do you or did you see about your faith through writing that story?
    e. What connections did you see between your story and God's story of redemption?
3. Tell about the SLW's impact on your understanding of difficult life events.

a. How did the SLW impact how you think about past challenging experiences?
b. How has the SLW shaped your approach to current difficult life events?
c. How has the SLW affected how you think about potential future challenges?
d. How has the SLW affected how you think about telling the stories of difficult life events to the next generation?

4. What are some ways you see the SLW applied in your life today?
    a. What are some ways you see lessons from the SLW showing up in your life today?
    b. What are some ways you see the SLW affecting your faith?
    c. What are some ways you see the SLW affecting your connection or involvement in your church?

Data Analysis

As soon as possible and always within one week of each meeting, the researcher used Zoom software to transcribe each interview. The researcher also played back the video recording and made notes on the transcript, increasing her familiarity with the data.[276] This study utilized the constant comparison method of routinely analyzing the data throughout the interview process. This method "produced categories, themes, or findings robust enough to cover what emerge[d] in later data findings."[277]

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[276] Merriam and Tisdell, 132.

[277] Merriam and Tisdell, 199.

When the interviews and observation notes were fully transcribed into computer files, they were coded and analyzed using the constant-comparative method. The analysis focused on discovering and identifying (1) common themes, patterns, and properties across the variation of participants; and (2) congruence or discrepancy between the different groups of participants.[278]

Researcher Position

The researcher served as the "primary instrument for data collection and analysis"[279] in this qualitative research study. Because the researcher brings preferences, experiences, and potential bias to the research, it was important to "identify them in relation to the theoretical framework and in light of the researcher's own interests, to make clear how they may be shaping the collection and interpretation of the data."[280]

The researcher has been an evangelical Christian for forty-five years. She believes God has given every human being meaning and dignity as image-bearers of God, thus she has an inherent bias regarding aging and life purpose.[281] She has worked in ministry leading Bible studies, writing Christian books, and coaching clients for over thirty years, always seeking to help people be transformed by the gospel. The researcher sought to guard against her own bias and frequently asked, "What might you be projecting onto the

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[278] Merriam and Tisdell, 216.

[279] Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

[280] Merriam and Tisdell, 16.

[281] See Genesis 1:26-27.

data based on your own beliefs and life experience?" as she conducted interviews and analyzed data.[282]

The researcher authored the curriculum used for the spiritual legacy workshop and led the participants through the workshop. Although observations were not recorded, the researcher recognized that her status as author and leader of the workshop might "bring about changes in both parties' behaviors." For this reason, the researcher sought to "identify those effects and account for them in interpreting the data."[283]

Study Limitations

Due to limited resources and time, this study was limited to seven self-identifying Christian men and women of diverse gender, age, and ethnicity who participated in two different online sessions of the same spiritual legacy workshop. Further research is needed to broaden the participant selection to include more diverse participants. Readers who wish to generalize the study's findings to non-Christian older adults should run the spiritual legacy workshop with a group self-reporting as non-Christian. Additionally, they may wish to run a different spiritual legacy workshop not based in Christian belief. Some of the study's findings may be generalized to other similar COAs in an in-person spiritually legacy workshop context not led by the author. Readers who desire to generalize some of the particular aspects of these conclusions on the COAs in their context should test those aspects in their particular context. As with all qualitative studies, readers bear the responsibility to determine what can be appropriately applied to

[282] Merriam and Tisdell, 208.

[283] Merriam and Tisdell, 148.

their context. The results of this study may also have implications for younger Christian adults or people with terminal illness struggling with their sense of life purpose.

Chapter 4

Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christian older adults who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. This chapter provides the findings of the interviews with seven COAs and reports on common themes and relevant insights pertaining to the research questions. In order to address the purpose of this study, the following research questions guided the qualitative research.

1. What motivates Christian older adults (COAs) to participate in a spiritual legacy workshop?
2. How do COAs tell the stories of difficult life events?
    a. How do they include their Christian faith?
    b. How do they include life purpose?
    c. How do they relate their difficult life events to the biblical redemptive narrative?
3. How do COAs describe changes in how they think about difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop?
    a. How do they describe changes in their thinking about past difficult life events?
    b. How do they describe changes in their thinking about current difficult life events?
    c. How do they describe changes in their thinking about possible future difficult life events?

4. To what extent are COAs motivated to tell the stories their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation?

Introductions to Participants and Context

The researcher selected seven Christian older adults to participate in this study. All names and identifiable participant information have been changed to protect identity. Six of the participants were female; one was male. One participant was African American; the other six were Caucasian. The ages of the participants ranged from 65 to 84. Listed below are the participants.

Gabe, white male, age 84, from the southeastern United States.

Isa, white female, age 77, from the southeastern United States.

Annie, white female, age 74, from the midwestern United States.

Abby, black female, age 71, from the northeastern United States.

Sara, white female, age 71, from the southeastern United States.

Josie, white female, age 65, from the northeastern United States.

Kristi, white female, age 65, from the southeastern United States.

Participants were asked to share a story written during the workshop related to difficult events. Events shared included miscarriage, infant death, betrayal, cancer, alcoholism, and complicated grief.

Motivations and Highlights

The first research question sought to determine the motivations and highlights of participating in the spiritual legacy workshop (SLW). The participants answered that primarily, they wanted to leave a legacy. Several also mentioned wanting a community

connection and help with writing. Other highlights and benefits included finding a scriptural framework, meaning in suffering, and life purpose.

An Eternal Legacy

Isa, 77, a former Creative Memories consultant, described herself as "obsessed" with storytelling. She said that as a consultant, she often got on her "soapbox," insisting that people needed to tell their stories as they gathered their memories. Kristi noted that spiritual legacy is far more important than financial or material legacy, saying, "It's something that has meaning throughout eternity." After hearing a friend talk about the Storyworth program, Sara was motivated to "keep memories and shared experiences" to share with family members. Gabe had already completed the Storyworth program and had been interviewed by a grandson about his life; he was encouraged that his grandchildren wanted to hear his life stories. He signed up for the SLW because he wanted to continue the work he had begun.

Several participants also spoke of the biblical importance of sharing legacy. Isa writes for her children and grandchildren, because "it's so important for them to understand how God has moved in our family," and so that they can "find their place" in the family. Annie stated that she signed up for the workshop because she already had stories in mind that she wanted to share for a purpose. She recalled, "I really wanted to do it…to thank God for a wonderful life and to share how he had worked in my life and then to leave a legacy of his amazing, creative, surprising ways." Sara believed that sharing legacy is important because God instructs his people to remember. She added, "[I've] been impressed with the number of times the Israelites were told to remember and the importance of that command…. God wanted them to remember how He had delivered

them, especially coming out of Egypt through the Red Sea." Josie believed that God might want to take her legacy sharing beyond the SLW, to "take that and make it go broader," to use it for other purposes.

Community Connection

Most participants mentioned community connection as either a motivator or a benefit of the workshop.

Both Gabe and Josie named group accountability as a reason for participating in the SLW. Isa enjoyed discovering likeminded people interested in passing on stories. She described the experience as "finding her tribe." Annie was even more motivated to write her stories after the first session, in which she heard other participants' excitement about telling their stories. Community proved highly motivating for these participants.

In addition to motivating the participants, community connection also encouraged many in their faith and in their ability to find meaning in difficult circumstances. As Abby explained, "It's always encouraging to hear people's stories, 'the glorious deeds of the Lord,' to hear how his grace just intervenes in people's lives." Abby was particularly encouraged by the Story Feast, where she heard another woman's hopeful story about a situation that resembled a struggle in Abby's life. Gabe, Kristi, and Annie enjoyed hearing the variety of stories and experiences. As Kristi put it, "It was really interesting to hear their stories and to see how they were working through things." Gabe was encouraged as he heard others' approaches to difficult experiences, "[how they] used their experience to either strengthen their faith or how their faith had helped them deal with adverse circumstances, because that's exactly what I was looking for, what I was dealing with, and trying to manage a little better." Community connection benefited

many of the participants, and several, including Annie, mentioned the desire for more opportunities to hear others' stories.

Help in the Process of Writing

Several participants mentioned practical help in the process of writing either as motivation for taking the workshop or as a benefit they discovered. Abby found the accountability as well as the suggestion to set a timer for twenty minutes to be key strategies for reaching her goals. Unlike Abby, Kristi found the suggestion to use a timer restrictive; she allowed herself to write for as long as she wanted. To her, freedom from a time limit proved key to discovering previously unseen themes in her stories. Gabe had wanted to write and process the story of a difficult event; he found the structure and accountability to be beneficial. Josie found that the practical encouragement to "write in the cracks and crevices" helped her get her stories written. Josie also benefited from the instruction to expect resistance. She noted, "There's an enemy, trying to impede the sharing of the beautiful stories of what God has done in your life." Many observed that the SLW gave them practical and theoretical help to accomplish their goals.

Scriptural Framework

Several participants mentioned the "scriptural framework," as Kristi called it, as a benefit of the workshop. Kristi and Abby both appreciated the structure of creation, fall, redemption, and restoration. Annie observed that the four-part structure helped her to see how God had worked in her life. She explained, "Seeing how he worked in these fantastic ways in my life that weren't always easy…. but it was *his* work." Sara had never thought

to look at her life story through the lens of "God's redemptive plan." She also appreciated "the emphasis on faith, hope, and love…. incorporating that into our stories, our legacy." Josie was familiar with the four-part framework of redemptive history but had never thought to apply it to writing her life stories.

Meaning in Suffering

For at least three of the participants, finding meaning in difficult events was a key takeaway from the workshop. Gabe went into the workshop with that hope:

> I'm always alert to an opportunity to learn something that might help me deal with that [the painful event] more effectively and make better use of it, learn something from it, instead of just suffering from it. When you get your heart broken, sometimes the grief is all that's left, and I didn't want to stay in that position. I wanted to move on and learn something from it that would help me do things better if I had other opportunities.

Sara was surprised to discover that remembering a painful story helped her to see God's redemption more clearly:

> Some of the things that we, my brothers and I, of course my mother as well, went through with my dad being an alcoholic. It's like I haven't thought about that in a long time, because by the end of his life he was a changed man. Thankfully. He really got on top of that, straightened out, and I think with the Lord was the big part.

Kristi also found new meaning in a tragic event of her life. She said, "When you do suffer some of those big and small losses in this life, you [still] have that eternal perspective and eternal foundation." Gaining perspective on stories of difficult events was a highlight of the workshop for these three participants.

Life Purpose and Meaning

Three participants spoke about discovering a larger purpose through the workshop. Isa found a larger purpose for her life in the process of storytelling. Now, as she listens to others who are living a painful story, she encourages them to write their stories and offers to help them in that process. Kristi also gained new insight into the Lord's purpose for her life through reading a book on the recommended resources list. According to Kristi, the Lord orchestrated events in her life to make her "the person I am…a person who wants to be a safe place for other people, and not just other people, but for the birds that are out at my bird feeders." She said reading the book and doing the workshop "brought a lot of smaller pieces or a lot of big pieces together into one big puzzle." Kristi also noted that the workshop and book helped her to see the "process of growing…until the Lord calls us home. I mean, that's sanctification." Similarly, Annie saw more clearly how the Lord brings glory to himself through his redemptive work:

> how God in creation wanted us to be whole and then seeing how things in this world are broken, and yet God redeems that. And then, you know he gives us the power of transformation that we can use those things for his glory, but also that we see his hand at work. But also, we are transformed to his image, and we have a hope—hope and glory.

Seeing God's transforming work in their lives brought these participants a greater sense of purpose and meaning.

Summary of Motivations and Highlights

While most participants took the workshop to share their legacy, one wanted to gain clarity and resolution about a particular story. Most mentioned the community connection as a key reason or benefit of taking the workshop. Many mentioned the

scriptural framework, following the redemptive-historical outline, as a highlight. Three participants spoke of gaining a sense of meaning in their suffering. Three participants found a deeper sense of life purpose through their participation. Each of the participants experienced benefits from taking the workshop.

Themes in Stories of Difficult Life Events

The second research question sought to determine how COAs tell stories of difficult life events. Participants were asked to share a "wrecked shalom" story from the workshop. They were then asked questions related to faith, life purpose, and the connection between their story and God's redemptive-historical story in Scripture.

All participants mentioned their faith as they told their story. Several had discovered more about their life purpose through writing the story. Six participants observed a connection between their story and the story of Scripture.

God's Faithfulness

Each of the seven participants mentioned God or their faith in their stories. Two major themes emerged: gratitude for God's grace and seeing truths about God more deeply.

Gratitude for God's Grace

The theme of gratitude for God's grace emerged frequently among participants. Isa observed:

> I do think that anytime you revisit a situation, a story…when you want to see it from God's perspective, that it can increase your faith…. And so, when I wrote the title, "God Keeps What Is Lost," I was like, oh, wow! I

> mean, I knew that he does, but it was putting it on paper that made it more real. This is a loss, but God has kept it for me for eternity.

After recalling her multiple miscarriages, she said that she had finally given birth to two healthy children, who have been "the biggest blessing of my life." She concluded, "I can testify that we worship a loving God."

Like Isa, Kristi thanked God for giving her children, specifically, two daughters. Her story revolved around the death of her 8-month-old baby sister when Kristi was only 2 years old. She felt that the Lord had "graciously" given her two daughters so she could experience what life might have been like if her sister had lived.

Sara too saw God's grace in her story. After relating a story about her father's alcoholism, she said, "I really think it was helpful to revisit it and to see where the Lord took us all, where we've ended, how we've ended up. It's a gift." Sara added to her story of wrecked shalom, describing a mentor who had helped her name her father's alcoholism. As she finished, she said, "I just can't get over the grace of God."

Josie told a story about being mistreated by a teacher. The teacher humiliated her and kept her after school because Josie had not understood some math problems. When she was finally able to leave, Josie dreaded walking home alone without her friends. Coming out of school, she found her friends waiting for her. She remarked, "I'm astounded. These were 6-, 7-, and 8-year-olds, pouring out care and compassion to their friend. *Thank you, Lord* [author's italics]. The memory of their kindness outweighs the sting of the reprimand and humiliation I received from that mean teacher."

Abby also mentioned her gratitude for God's grace. She told how her beloved mother, who would always listen to her stories, was diagnosed with an incurable cancer when Abby was 14 years old. Abby's mother lived for another twenty-six years. Abby

remarked, “I can look back and see God's grace in allowing my mother to live and see me grow into a woman and see my children. That's a big grace, because they didn't know how long she was going to live.”

Gratitude, awe, and wonder at God’s grace rose to the surface as these participants told their stories.

Remembering Truths about God and Their Faith

In addition to marveling at God’s grace, several participants also saw or remembered truths about God or their faith.

Sara mentioned learning new truths about God in her story about her mentor. The mentor had asked Sara to describe her view of God. Sara told her, “I don't feel like he always hears me. I don't always feel I can trust him. He's kind of absent.” Sara explained that her father had been a traveling salesman, and when he was home, he was working in his study. She observed, “I had never considered how important a proper relationship with your earthly father was…. to trust God as you would your earthly father, because I had not experienced that.” Through the difficult story about her own father’s absence, Sara ultimately saw God’s presence for the gift it was.

Both Gabe and Abby learned truths about God that they applied to their lives. While Gabe did not talk much about his faith while telling his story of betrayal by a young mentee, he did observe that God had provided financially for him in difficult times. Because of God’s provision, Gabe felt he should provide financially for the person he helped. Abby, in telling the story about her mother’s cancer, mentioned that her mother suffered facial scarring from the surgery to remove the tumor. Abby said, “This experience helped me to learn to look beyond appearances and other superficial traits.

“What is important is to know the true character of a person as much as a finite human being can, since only God can look on the heart and discern who we really are.”

Josie also learned a deeper truth about God through another wrecked shalom story. This one also occurred when she was in the fourth grade, and she called it, “Valentines in the Snow.” At her mom’s instruction, she had signed her cards, “Love, Josie.” When she was walking home, she saw valentines scattered in the snow. When she looked more closely, she saw that the valentines were the ones she had given. The boys in her class had tossed them aside because they didn’t want to be connected to her signature, “Love, Josie.” She observed, “I don't know that there's any resolution to the particular pain I felt at the time, but I do know that God loves me, and if I tell him I love him, he's not going to throw my valentine in the snow. My heart is safe in his.”

Both Kristi and Annie saw the hope of resurrection in their stories. Kristi described her hope as she grieved her parents’ recent deaths. She said, “At that point, I was comforted to know she and [my baby sister] were reunited. Dad is now with them, too, and one day, I’ll join them. I’m sure of it.”

Annie also saw the hope of resurrection in her story. Annie’s beloved grandmother had died when Annie was only 9 years old. As a child, she realized what was happening only when her grandmother’s body was being buried. In her anger and grief, Annie ran and stood by a nearby tree. Many years later, when Annie’s mother was buried in the same burial plot, she was able to grieve with hope. She described her faith using a beautiful picture of the resurrection, which she saw at her mother’s grave:

> I was sad because I would miss my mother, but I knew God's plan and that she would be with Christ. The minister began to pray and then stopped mid-sentence. We all looked up. and there we saw a rare, beautiful blue butterfly on the casket. The pastor immediately recognized the beauty of

> this moment, and the significance of the resurrection of Christ in our bodies to come. As we took it all in, another beautiful butterfly came, and they both flew off into the bright blue sky.

Annie concluded, "Only God could put that together!" Both Kristi and Annie benefited from remembering resurrection hope in their stories.

Life Purpose

While participants did not specifically name "life purpose" in their responses, patterns related to life purpose emerged. Two participants became purposeful about caring for others in their grief; four discussed redemption and/or transformation; three expressed a desire to change family patterns; and two were focused on mentoring the next generation.

Helping Other Grieving People

Two participants were motivated by their experiences of grief and loss to minister to others in their grief and loss.

Isa told the story of suffering multiple miscarriages and peoples' insensitivity to her grief. She shared that people had "dismissed" her grief, saying "It's no big deal." She mentioned some of the tactless remarks people made. "Some people told me it was for the best. Maybe there was something wrong, and it was God's way of taking care of it. 'After all, it wasn't really a baby yet. It's not like you lost a real baby, so don't worry. There's time to have a baby.'" While admitting that she did feel some anger toward people's insensitivity as she revisited this story, she observed that she had turned the negative experience into a question she asks herself, "Have I done that to somebody…not in the situation of miscarriages, because I think I would have a lot more empathy in that

situation. But have I dismissed something in someone else's story that I thought was no big deal." She continued that she wants to sit with a suffering person face to face and to listen carefully because "this person is hurting." Not long after writing the story, she met for three hours with a woman who had suffered miscarriages, and they shared their stories. Now Isa tells people, "It's grief…it's okay to grieve. But remember, we worship an amazing God, a Creator who keeps what we think is lost." Isa's experience has given her a passion and a purpose—to minister to other grieving people.

Like Isa, Annie was compelled to minister to others by her experience with grief. She observed that adults in her life did not attempt to help her in her grief. "The parents went back to work. After looking at that, I knew I wanted to help." As an adult, Annie committed to supporting suffering children and became a grief counselor for children.

Transformation and Redemption

Four participants indicated that their lives were transformed by the difficult event. As already mentioned, Isa's experience of her grief being minimized led her to ask whether she had ever minimized another's grief. Similarly, Sara said that she would never wish to hurt someone the way her father had hurt her by his rejection.

Both Abby and Annie named God's redemptive work in their lives as the cause of transformation. Abby spoke of the anger she had felt toward her father and brother for making her do the laundry every Saturday while her mother was hospitalized. In her story, she wrote, "The Lord has been at work in my heart on this, giving me the grace to repent. He is faithfully humbling me as he gives me a deeper understanding of his forgiveness of me through his Son Jesus Christ, who suffered far more than I did or ever will." She then quoted from Ephesians 4:26 and 31. Annie shared that her grandmother's

death led her to have panic attacks that lasted well into adulthood. Annie remembered the day God healed her of the attacks. She recalled, “I would get these panic attacks if my husband wouldn't come home. I was able to function. But I clearly remember standing in the driveway one time before we had cell phones, and God spoke to me and said, ‘Cast your cares on me.’” Annie also observed that God had brought meaning to her life through the difficult event. “The meaning of broken shalom, of seeing things as a child sees them to having to, you know, look and say, this is not a perfect place. My life will change, my life has changed. And then, being able to look back and see how it did, but how God was able to work through it and in it.”

Changing Family Patterns

Several participants expressed a desire to change their family patterns. As mentioned earlier, Annie saw how adults in her life failed to address her grief as a child and changed that pattern by becoming a grief counselor. Abby observed that she was not invited to talk about “feelings” when her mother was diagnosed with cancer. She said she regretted not allowing her daughters to express their feelings when her husband left. Sara spoke about how her mother told them to say “everything is fine” when asked how things were at home. But, as she said, “Everything was *not* fine.” Sara benefited from a mentor and a church family who encouraged her to deal with her emotions honestly. Kristi, whose mother was grieving the death of her baby sister, realized that she felt a lifelong responsibility for her mother’s happiness. As a result, Kristi, who was widowed at a young age, worked hard to keep her daughters from feeling responsible for her happiness. For each of these participants, the previous generation’s failure to deal well with painful emotions led them to desire more authenticity in their approach to such emotions.

Encouraging Future Generations

Two participants spoke emphatically about their desire to mentor future generations. Gabe, who had experienced profound betrayal by a young mentee, said, “To some extent she appears to be doing well, and I succeeded in making it possible for her to survive the trauma and get on with her life.” He still saw mentoring and encouraging college students and young adults as a key purpose of his life. “So, you know, the one bad outcome with all the dozens of good outcomes, great outcomes that I've experienced…. This certainly has not discouraged me from keeping this up.”

Josie hoped that sharing her stories of difficult events would have a positive impact on her grandchildren. She spoke of telling her story about the mean teacher to her 8-year-old granddaughter. “It was fresh in my mind because I'd recently written about it. Because I'd thought through and written about the redemption aspect of the story, I was able to end with the kids showing care and compassion.” She went on to describe the effect she hoped the stories would have on her grandchildren:

> She heard that her grammy in first grade had something hard happen to her. She heard about me crying and not knowing what things mean. She heard that I had caring friends. She asked questions about them which led to another short story.
>
> I hope my stories stick in her memory and that they encourage her in the future or that she feels like she can come to me with problems, because hard things happened to me too.

Both Gabe and Josie strongly felt the call to impact future generations.

Seeing Redemption in Brokenness

Because the SLW was structured according to the redemptive-historical narrative (creation, fall, redemption, and restoration), the researcher sought to discover how

participants connected their story of a difficult event to this metanarrative. Most mentioned some type of connection. All noted how God redeems brokenness for their good and his glory.

While Sara did not speak specifically of the redemptive-historical structure, she did share how God's word had changed her, recalling "how he took me and through knowledge of his word, understanding it, leaning upon it, he transformed me. I mean he made me…. I was already a new creature, but a better creature, if that makes any sense." For Sara, Scripture was a key element in her transformation.

Annie also focused on God's mercy in redeeming brokenness and transforming people. She connected the story of Scripture to her story:

> God had a perfect plan. And yet because of the fall and because of the world, we're not living that perfect plan. But it's just amazing, his grace and mercy that we see him, and that our eyes are opened and our ears unstopped, that we can see and find his ways…As I'm looking back on my stories that I'm sharing, and just, you know, being amazed by his grace and transformation in my life and just around me…. and I feel sorry for people who can't see that.

Annie was amazed at God's grace and longs for others to know that grace.

Similarly, Isa spoke of the whole story, calling it the "metanarrative." Despite having suffered multiple miscarriages and a painful divorce, she did not see herself as one who had many "wrecked shalom" stories. She added, "…. not that everything was perfect. but I don't have those tragedies that I hear people talk about, you know, and the real traumas that some people have gone through. So, I'm very blessed in that regard." She sees her story as a gift from God that she must pass on to others. "He has blessed me with a story that I then need to pass on …. So, my story is part of his story. His story is

part of my story. It melds and is passed on." Like Annie, Isa longs for other people to know God's goodness.

Josie felt that the workshop helped her to mine deeper theological truths from her stories, to think about the "redemption and the restoration, whereas maybe in the past I just would have told her my story." About the story, "Running out of School," she asked, "What's the restoration element of this story? Maybe one thing is that the care of friends I experienced is a taste of the perfection of friendship we'll experience in heaven. And better yet, that Jesus is our faithful, loyal friend, lover, Savior, and the Holy Spirit is a friend who sticks closer than a brother." She said she now looked at her stories through the lens of the metanarrative, asking, "How does this reflect creation fall, redemption, restoration?" Josie asserted, "Wrecked shalom is not the end of the story—not for the believer."

Kristi agreed that wrecked shalom is not the end of the story for the believer, asserting that faith is the key to seeing beauty in tragedy. She explained, "Apart from my faith, there would be no beauty, no goodness, no redemption, nothing in that story. You would only look at it and go, 'Why? Why in the world was this little baby born with so many difficulties that caused so many problems, so much hurt?'" She saw redemption in her 2-year-old self's kindness to her baby sister. Kristi looked forward to the "ultimate redemption," when she would see her family reunited in heaven. She also rested in God's sovereignty over the story, saying, "Nothing's by accident. Nothing's by chance." Kristi's faith helped her see redemption in tragedy.

Abby connected her mother's cancer, as well as the failure of care in her grief, as "part of the fall." And yet, she saw redemption in "the Lord's great mercy in opening my

eyes to see his goodness." She concluded by quoting Psalm 27:13: "I would have fainted if I had not seen the goodness of the Lord in the land of the living."

For many of the participants, seeing their stories through the biblical redemptive narrative allowed them to see redemption and find hope in the brokenness of their stories.

Summary of Themes in Stories of Difficult Life Events

For all of the participants, seeing God working in their difficult stories helped them find hope. Grief was a prevalent theme, and in several cases, the participant's grief compelled them to care for others' grief. As they reflected on their stories, many expressed gratitude for God's grace, and others saw truths about God or their faith. Several focused on the importance of encouraging future generations whether through mentoring or through passing on their stories. Finally, almost all mentioned a connection between their story and the biblical redemptive-historical narrative.

Changed Thinking about Difficult Life Events

The third research question addressed how participation in the spiritual legacy workshop changed participants' thinking about past, present, and future difficulties in life. Participants mentioned permission, motivation, and the redemptive-historical structure as ways the workshop helped them think about difficult events. Others focused on the meaning and purpose they saw in past, present, and future difficulties. While some identified changed thinking specific to past, present, or future difficult events, others saw changes across the spectrum of time. Several described an intensified understanding of their meaning and purpose, and one spoke of being encouraged in her faith by hearing others' stories.

Help in Sharing Difficult Stories

Several participants mentioned that the workshop helped them to share past difficult events. Permission, motivation, and structure were all named as ways the workshop assisted different participants.

Isa observed that the workshop gave her permission and motivation to share about difficult events from the past. According to Isa, in the past she might have procrastinated writing about difficult events, but the workshop motivated her to record these events. While Isa felt she had not experienced significant trauma in her life, she said that the workshop helped her realize she should not "just put things in the past and say it's over with." On the contrary, the workshop helped her "prayerfully revisit [past difficult events] and see if there's something God wants you to understand in the situation[s]."

Both Isa and Sara found new motivation for sharing difficult stories from the past. Isa mentioned that she had previously wondered about whether or not to write about her divorce and had been unsure what place such a story would have in her legacy. She explained, "Now I can write about it from a legacy perspective… [looking at it] with the perspective of how God provided for us when we literally were going to be thrown out of the house and had nothing." Sara was also motivated to tell difficult stories from the past, because they "can hopefully not only help me, but anybody I might share them with, just to be reminded of God's faithfulness, and that nothing goes to waste in his economy. He can use sad things, tragic things to bring about the intended good and glory for himself."

Three participants mentioned the structure of the biblical narrative as key to sharing stories of past difficult events. Josie appreciated "looking for the redemption and restoration elements specifically," as opposed to thinking more generally about how

"God uses all things, works all things together for good for those who love him." In thinking about past difficult events, Kristi found it encouraging to see "God's big story" connected to hers. She explained, "The Bible is one big story. But my life is one big story too." Sara found that using the lens of God's story helped her understand her family's trauma. "My family was God's creation. And the fall…was a family pattern of sin, and how we talked about the sin or didn't talk about it." For all three, seeing redemption and restoration in their stories gave them hope as they remembered and shared about past difficult events.

Viewing Current Difficulties

The workshop affected participants' thinking about current difficulties in different ways. Two mentioned that it helped them have a way to process current challenges. Four spoke of changes in perspective and focus, and three discussed an increased sense of meaning and purpose.

Both Isa and Josie spoke of a newfound recognition of the impact of writing about difficult events. Isa believed the workshop gave her a tool for processing current difficulties. She noted, "When there are difficult times, I need to slow down and put words on them," even if they don't become legacy stories. Josie also recognized the benefit of writing out her stories when facing challenges. She said, "Let me hear from you, Lord, a little bit about the redemption and the restoration, and just see what he might speak into my heart and mind about that." Both Isa and Josie discovered a tool for weathering difficulties.

Four participants spoke of a shift in perspective. Gabe said that the workshop made him want to make the most of his days. "[It] has helped me to appreciate how

important it is to take advantage of what time I do have." Abby experienced a shift in understanding God's grace through hearing others' stories. She recalled one woman's story of a traumatic event shared at the Story Feast, saying she seemed so "gentle, trusting." Listening to the other woman's story made Abby think, "In these difficult times, you know that his grace really is sufficient. It's not just some words written, you know, in the Bible. He really does sustain us."

Two participants noticed a change in focus in their daily lives. Where previously Annie had focused on gratitude, she began looking for moments of shalom each day. She explained, "I have been cognizant and thought of a shalom time each day. I will say God, 'You know I see your wholeness; I see your creation. The way you would like it, or the beauty of something. And I'm really much more sensitive to that.'" Similarly, Sara observed that the workshop increased her awareness of God's work in the world, and specifically, enhanced her love of Scripture. "It all goes together…seeing his faithfulness, and how he's used his word in my life. I just kind of want to pray it back to him."

Three of the participants spoke of how the workshop impacted their desire to come alongside others in difficult events. Isa said that she has been bolder about interacting with others regarding their hard stories and has begun urging them to write about it. As mentioned earlier, Sara felt that sharing her difficult stories could help others.

Kristi's work led her to see the bigger picture of her life and God's purpose in it. She explained first what she learned about herself, "That is part of the way God has put me together and written my story so that I can have a certain place in his big story." Kristi described that place and purpose, "Any interaction, any sphere of influence that he gives me is intentional, and it needs to be for his glory." She went on to explain the

meaning and purpose she recognized for her life. “My little circle is my responsibility. That's where God has given me to be faithful and to tell his story, and to bring glory to him.” Isa’s and Sara’s workshop experience compelled them to help others; Kristi’s sense of her life purpose deepened. All three experienced a tug toward ministering to others as a result of their participation.

Hope for Future Difficulties

The workshop helped each participant find hope for facing future difficulties. Two spoke of their hope for facing the inevitable decline of aging. Three spoke of how remembering God’s faithfulness in past difficulties leads them to hope for the future.

Hope for Decline

Both Kristi and Abby expressed hope in facing physical and cognitive decline. Kristi said, “I think the workshop, but also looking back on all my life, as God has been so faithful to me. and so, I know he's going to be faithful till the end of my life until he calls me home.” She described how painful it was to watch her parents’ decline and death. “It is unsettling in some respects, because, like I said a minute ago, that for all of us death is the final note in this life. And I don't know what it's going to look like for me to get from where I am now to when the Lord calls me home.” Laughing, she expressed hope that she would just “keel over” in her garden. Kristi also said that she did not want her kids to suffer watching her decline the way she suffered watching her parents. She concluded on a hopeful note, “But here's the thing, having gone through it, I know that whatever the scenario is… God is going to give me the grace, and he is going to give them the grace.”

Abby too expressed hope for "dying grace." She recognized the fear of decline: "getting older…and certainly facing death, but facing being disabled, or ill, or whatever…." In the face of that fear, knowing her own stories and those of others encourages Abby, who concluded, "I think it's good to know these stories and to know what God has done, because he doesn't change. And he really does have like our Sunday School teacher said, 'dying grace and sickbed grace.'"

Past Provision Gives Future Hope

For Abby, Josie, and Sara, remembering how God has provided in the past gives hope for the future. Abby said, "Looking back, and seeing God's hand…is encouraging…for today and down the line." Sara noted that remembering how God had used tragic events in the past to shape her for her good and his glory gives her hope for the future. She found hope in "seeing his faithfulness and how he's used his Word in my life." Josie's adopted practice of looking for redemption and restoration encouraged her as she thought of future challenges. She described how she planned to face an upcoming challenge by writing about it and asking the Lord to speak to her about what redemption and restoration might look like in this story.

Summary of Changed Thinking about Difficult Life Events

All of the participants experienced a change in thinking about difficult life events through their participation in the workshop. Some noticed the change more clearly in their thinking about past events, while others saw it more broadly across the spectrum of past, present, and future difficult events. The workshop's structure of following the

biblical narrative gave permission and motivation for writing stories of difficult events. Several mentioned seeing how God had worked in difficult events gave them purpose.

Sharing Stories of Difficult Life Events with the Next Generation

The final research question sought to determine to what extent COAs are motivated to tell the stories of their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation. Participants were asked about their desire to share stories of difficult life events with the next generation. They were also asked about any connections they saw between the SLW and their faith or their involvement in church.

While five participants expressed concern about disparaging someone who had done them harm, they still felt it was important to find a way to tell stories of difficult events to show God's glorious deeds to the next generation. Several mentioned that their faith was deepened by participation in the workshop; this deepened faith motivated them to tell their stories or to help others tell their stories of God's glorious deeds. Several cited Story Feasts and the structure of the metanarrative of Scripture as tools they would use to help others tell their stories.

Concern and Commitment

While five of the participants admitted to confusion or concern about telling stories of difficult events that might disparage another, each felt that it was important to find a way to tell stories of difficult events. Three of the participants expressed their commitment to tell stories of difficult events to the next generation.

Concern about Disparaging Another

While several struggled with confusion about knowing which stories to tell and how to tell them when they might disparage someone else, they also saw ways and reasons to share the stories.

For example, Isa began by asking whether it was appropriate to tell the story of her divorce, especially since it happened long ago, and since her ex-husband was the offending party. She said she wished for more guidance on how to tell that story. And yet, as she spoke, she discovered a way to tell the story, "In talking to you just now, I realized that where I need to start is how God worked through that, how he provided for not only us but how God worked through me to stabilize me as a single mom with two young children who didn't have a job." As she thought about it, she recognized that remembering God's provision could strengthen her and others in trials to come; she could tell "how God provided for us, and if in the future you find yourself in a situation that you don't think you have any control over, God's still there. God will still provide for you, and it will be in small ways. It will be in miraculous ways, in ways that you may not see except with hindsight."

Like Isa, Kristi wanted more guidance on how to share difficult stories with the next generation, especially stories of harm done by another. "This is still where I'm a little torn, and still kind of working through this part of it, for all the reasons we've talked about before, not wanting to besmirch somebody's memory, especially if they're not here to tell their side of it." And yet, she wanted to find a way to tell these stories in an appropriate manner, because she feels that sometimes her adult children don't understand her struggles. She senses that if they understood the context, they would realize "what a mess I could have been…. It's like I want to figure out a way to tell the story so that [they

can] understand more of it so that they can understand the depth of it, and the depth of the heart and the depth of the grace….” Like Isa, Kristi sensed that finding a way to tell the stories of difficult events could help the next generation see God’s mighty and redeeming work in her life.

Abby also struggled with the idea of telling stories of difficult events that might damage the reputation of an offending party to future generations. While she felt the workshop gave her tools for telling difficult stories, she still struggled to decide which stories to tell. She was committed to not leaving a legacy of bitterness. “I like what you wrote about that because yes, it will change what I put in. Specifically, I have a lot of wrecked shalom, revolving around my husband leaving, but that's not helpful to them.” As she pondered this question, Abby, like Isa, focused on how God provided, recalling, “I'm just amazed at what the Lord did. I'm amazed that I'm even here, I mean, I feel like I'm one of those people that God described in Deuteronomy, ‘You're living in a house you did not build. You're eating food you did not grow.’ I’m a beneficiary.” She continued, shaking her head in awe, “What kind of God does those things? I know you know…. it just astounds me.”

While Abby did not want to disparage her now deceased ex-husband, she did want to tell her daughters some of their rescue stories. She explained, “I want to pick out some things from their lives from when they were growing up…so they can see God's grace. But not as pertaining to the divorce, or anything like that.” She proceeded to share two stories about how God had rescued her daughters. One was about one of her daughters who was ill with pneumonia and not allowed by the HMO to go to the hospital.

The other was about her other daughter who was not carefully watched by her aunt and fell in a creek. About both, she concluded, “The Lord spared that child's life.”

Like Isa, Kristi, and Abby, Sara also resisted telling a story that might speak ill of the dead. She shared, “They never knew him. And I don't want to make this memory too difficult, because the Lord really did use when he left after that night in my wrecked shalom story. He was gone for several weeks and came back a different man, and I would hope that's what I would focus on…. [I]t was a Christian camp. And he did come back changed.” Sara wanted to focus on the positive change in the offending party.

Like Isa, Kristi, and Abby, Annie had questions about which stories of difficult events to share when they might disparage another, “It's a struggle. I wish the workshop had been longer so that we could have actually discussed [how to tell difficult stories involving others]. I would have liked to have heard what other people say.” Annie wondered how to tell the story without negatively tainting the reputation of a family member who struggled with addiction and failed to be a good father.

For each of these participants, their concern about telling stories of difficult events related to not wanting to disparage another person.

Committed to Telling the Stories

Three participants expressed clear conviction about telling stories of difficult events to the next generation so they could see God’s glorious deeds.

Josie felt strongly that she must tell stories of difficult events to her grandchildren. She asserted, “They need to hear the stories of wrecked shalom. They need to hear the creation and the wrecked shalom, and they need to hear the whole story, creation, fall, redemption, restoration…. It might be super simple for a four-year-old, and it might be

more involved for a nine-year-old…. [T]hey do need to hear it. Because they're going to have difficult life events, too." Josie also felt that telling stories of God's work in her life would strengthen her own "faith, hope, and love, as I remember and recount stories."

Like Josie, Kristi was intentional about sharing her faith and God's goodness through hard times with her grandchildren. She said, "My grandchildren are getting older, obviously older now, and I'm able to share different things with them. And I'm not talking about the dark stuff… [I want] to tie things back to faith and present day and past like how God has been so good…so faithful to our family through…yeah, there's been a lot of hard things, but God has been so faithful."

Sara felt the workshop impacted her desire and ability to share her stories with other people to encourage them:

> But to have those in my mind, memory, having revisited them, and be able to use them when talking to somebody that might be experiencing something similar, just to encourage or to even share your faith using a story. I just think it would be really, really helpful to say, this is how the Lord worked through that in my life, and you know, point people to him.

Sara hoped that her hard stories could remind her and anyone she shared them with that "nothing goes to waste in his economy. Basically, he can use sad things, tragic things to bring about the intended good and glory for himself." She thought such stories "could be really what somebody needs to hear, just to build their own faith or encourage them to trust the Lord to get into His word and see what he says."

Josie, Kristi, and Sara felt strongly about telling their stories of difficult events to the next generation as a way of showing God's glorious deeds.

Impact on Storytelling and Mentoring

Many participants mentioned that the workshop had an impact on their faith. This deepened faith compelled them to encourage the next generation or to help others tell their stories. Several mentioned plans to use tools from the workshop, specifically the story structure of Scripture and Story Feasts, to help others tell their stories.

Strengthened Faith

Isa remarked that her faith was deeper. She sees now "how God is so personally involved in your story. in my story and in every part of it. And maybe that's from the stepping back and looking at the overall big picture…. There are all these things that you know that you know, and yet, at the same time you can start to sense them on a deeper level." Josie said that the workshop affirmed her faith, what she already knew. Kristi mentioned wanting to "tie things back to faith and present day and past like how God has been so good …so faithful to our family" as she told stories of difficult events to future generations. Abby felt awe at God's faithful provision as she recalled her divorce, "But God. But you did this, Lord…. [Y]ou know the Lord had so much grace reserved." Gabe said the workshop helped him see "the things my faith has allowed me to survive." Annie's faith increased "because of hearing and seeing God's fingerprints all over everything." Sara included hope as she discussed the workshop's impact on her faith. She concluded, "The Lord can redeem a bad situation. And that word *hope*. I think we talked about hope in the workshop, too."

Desire to Encourage the Next Generation

At least five of the participants believed the workshop compelled them to encourage the next generation. As mentioned, Josie, Kristi, and Sara all felt strongly about sharing their stories to strengthen others' faith. Gabe said the workshop "convinced me that encouraging these young people is a good thing that I ought to keep up." He focuses on mentoring and encouraging students and faculty members in the music department of a local college. He said, "I enjoy doing it, and the workshop helped me focus on that as a means to an end rather than just a side effect of doing something I enjoy." Abby felt a sense of urgency about sharing her faith and hope with the next generation. She reflected, "Our time is limited, so we do need to use that time, you know, to declare the wonderful works of the Lord to the next generation through when we share these stories of God's grace in our lives."

Helping others share stories

The workshop compelled at least five of the participants to help others tell their stories. In Gabe's case, the workshop inspired him to encourage others, while Isa, Kristi, Josie, and Annie found tools used in the workshop to be useful as they helped others.

Inspiration

Gabe said, "It has caused me to encourage the other old folks that I hang out with in my Sunday school class to develop a refined perspective on some of these issues." He explained that he wrote up some information about insurance benefits in a newsletter. When that article led people to seek him out with questions, Gabe took the opportunity to talk to them about writing something for their children and grandchildren. Although he

did not specifically encourage others to write about difficult stories, he said he did encourage them to pass on the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

Metanarrative of Scripture

Isa found the story structure to be useful for herself and others as she encouraged them to write "not only the metanarrative, the big 30,000-foot picture, [then] seeing that through those four sections, then stepping closer into one of those sections and really going deeper." Like Isa, Annie noted that the four-part structure helped her as she helped others, saying that "when they're telling me their story I can understand where they're at and be [better] able to communicate with them maybe what God is up to." She celebrated her ability to help non-Christian friends see redemption in their stories, "giving them a glimpse of what it's like to have redemption and to know that God is at work doing something for their good." Annie also mentioned that she had interviewed two people and helped them write their testimony.

Story Feasts

Three participants mentioned Story Feasts as a tool they would use with others; Isa had already begun having Story Feasts at her church.

Isa had implemented a program for hosting Story Feasts at her church before the workshop began. The group had met several times before her interview. She described the outcome: "…the point of it is community. So, in this first meeting, it was great. And what was interesting is that it involves every generation. You know, it's not just us old people. But it involves multiple generations." Isa was struck by the way Story Feasts strengthened intergenerational relationships.

Josie thought Story Feasts would be helpful to deepen community in her small group. She observed that testimony time or prayer request time is not enough time for hearing one another's stories. "I think we all need to be telling our stories more. Our God-stories, or how God has worked in our lives…. But it's always limited where you're just kind of sharing things you're thankful for in a couple of prayer requests, but I would love to have more intentional times [to] gather and share the stories. Maybe things we don't know about each other, something that you would love to tell." Likewise, Kristi thought it would be "fun to do a Story Feast with women at church." All three felt Story Feasts could be a valuable tool for strengthening community.

Summary of Sharing Stories of Difficult Events

When it came to sharing stories of difficult life events to the next generation, many participants were concerned about dishonoring a person who had caused harm. Still, they felt that either finding a way to tell a story related to that person or telling different stories of difficult events was crucial to show how God had provided for them in difficult times. While they did not focus specifically on telling the stories of difficult events, five of the participants were compelled to help others tell their stories, and one was convicted of his purpose of encouraging the next generation.

Summary of Findings

This chapter sought to understand how COAs who participated in an SLW described the meaning of difficult life events. Seven participants were asked about their reasons for participating in the SLW, the way they shared stories of difficult life events, how their thinking about difficult life events changed as a result of their participation in

the SLW, and the extent to which they were motivated to share stories of difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

Participants were motivated to take part in the SLW by their desire to leave an eternal legacy and by their need to have accountability and instruction on creating a spiritual legacy. Highlights of the workshop included community connection, the four-part metanarrative of Scripture framework used, and practical instruction for writing their stories. Finding meaning in difficult life events was mentioned both as a motivator and a highlight of the workshop. Additionally, several participants saw greater purpose and meaning in their lives as a result of their participation in the SLW.

The researcher sought to understand what themes emerged as participants shared a story of a difficult life event. All seven participants spoke of God's faithfulness in difficult times. Four mentioned gratitude for God's grace, and six shared remembered truths about God or their faith. While they did not speak the words "life purpose," most mentioned a newfound purpose or calling as a result of their difficult event. Two of them were compelled to help others who were grieving, several saw transformation, others wanted to change family patterns, and several wanted to impact future generations. Each connected their difficult story to God's redemption of brokenness.

Each of the participants experienced some change in their thinking about past, present, or future difficult life events as a result of the workshop. Several mentioned that they would use the writing process in the future when life presented difficulties. Several saw a change in the way they thought about the past event described in their story. Others saw hope for future difficulties, specifically the decline of aging, in God's past faithfulness to them.

When asked about sharing stories of difficult events to show God's glorious deeds to the next generation, many were concerned about dishonoring someone who had harmed them. Even so, all felt it was important to find some way to show God's glorious deeds to the next generation of believers. Some sought to do this by helping others tell their stories or by mentoring the next generation.

Chapter 5

Discussion and Recommendations

The purpose of this study was to explore how Christian older adults (COAs) who have participated in a spiritual legacy workshop describe the meaning of difficult life events. This chapter summarizes the findings of the literature review in Chapter 2 and the interviews in Chapter 4 and analyzes them with reference to each other. It discusses implications, limitations, and recommendations about the impact of SLWs on COAs.

In Chapter 2, the review of literature shed insight on 1) what developmental psychology teaches about the challenges older adults face and the tasks they must complete to age successfully; 2) what narrative gerontology teaches about the challenges older adults face and how storytelling affects older adults' sense of life purpose; and 3) what Psalm 78 says about the lifelong calling to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

The following research questions guided the research:

1. What motivates Christian older adults (COAs) to participate in a spiritual legacy workshop?
2. How do COAs tell the stories of difficult life events?
    a. How do they include their Christian faith?
    b. How do they include life purpose?
    c. How do they relate their difficult life events to the biblical redemptive narrative?
3. How do COAs describe changes in how they think about difficult life events as a result of participation in a spiritual legacy workshop?

a. How do they describe changes in their thinking about past difficult life events?
b. How do they describe changes in their thinking about current difficult life events?
c. How do they describe changes in their thinking about possible future difficult life events?

4. To what extent are COAs motivated to tell the stories of their difficult life events to show God's glorious deeds in their lives to the next generation?

Summary of the Study and Findings

This study reviewed relevant literature in three areas and analyzed interview data from seven COAs who participated in a SLW.

The review of Psalm 78 showed that as a historical and wisdom psalm, it calls older adults to tell stories of God's redemptive work in his people to the next generation of believers. The psalm teaches the dire outcomes when these stories are not passed down—God's people run and hide in the day of battle. The psalm also teaches that remembering stories of past difficulties leads God's people to "set their hope in God."[284]

The literature also showed that Psalm 78 serves as a model for healing by emphasizing the importance of sharing stories of difficult life events. By sharing stories of God's rescue and redemption in sinful and sorrowful stories, Christians may find healing. Additionally, sharing such stories encourages the growth of faith, hope, and love

[284] Psalm 78:7 (ESV).

in the next generation. In sharing these stories, COAs find meaning and purpose in the difficult events of their lives.

Developmental psychologists have studied aging to determine what helps older adults flourish as they face the challenges of aging. Early theories of psychosocial development showed that older adults who maintained a sense of generativity vs. stagnation and ego-integrity vs. despair navigated the challenges of aging more successfully. Research also showed that adults who could find meaning in difficult life events and tell redemptive stories were more likely to flourish. The ability to find meaning in suffering and meaning in life helped older adults maintain a greater sense of well-being. A strong spirituality also allowed older adults to age more successfully. Finally, Christian older adults with strong faith in Jesus Christ and the hope of an afterlife proved to maintain greater hope in the face of the challenges of aging.

Narrative gerontology, a field of study based on the therapeutic intervention of life review, seeks to learn about the lives of older adults through their stories. Narratives may include autobiography, biography, diary, interviews, life history, life review, reminiscence, and other storytelling. Narrative identity theory looks at the stories people tell about who they are and who they will be. Such a story is called their "life story."

Narrative gerontologists observed heterogeneity in the struggles of older adults; they found that older adults will face different struggles at different times of their lives. Further, they found that life story work helps older adults navigate the challenges of aging, giving deepened community and connection, a renewed sense of life purpose, and spiritual benefits. Life story work has been shown to help older adults find meaning in suffering. Further, narrative gerontologists also found that life story work and spiritual

reminiscence can provide spiritual care to those with "biographical pain."[285] Older adults need careful and compassionate listeners who will help them to "read" their lives. When they have access to such listeners, older adults avoid "narrative foreclosure," the sense that their story has ended before their death. Narrative repair, which includes teaching older adults how to tell their stories and connect these stories to larger contexts, also helps older adults avoid such foreclosure. Additionally, autobiographical reasoning enables older adults to find coherence in their life stories by connecting past, present, and future while uncovering overarching themes.

For the Christian older adult, spiritual reminiscence is also recommended. In spiritual reminiscence, the COA's life story is connected to the Christian story. When COAs know their stories and see the connection to the Christian story, they can find life purpose and meaning in suffering.

The interviews revealed that the SLW helped participants recognize God's faithfulness in difficult events. Many were motivated to take the workshop by their desire to leave an eternal legacy and to receive instruction for doing so. Interviewees named highlights of the SLW as community connection, the redemptive-historical structure of the content, and finding meaning and purpose in their stories. Regarding difficult events, some participants expressed their gratitude for God's grace, while others remembered truths about God or their faith. Many participants also mentioned newfound purposes that resulted from their difficult event: helping grieving people and improved family patterns. All reported a change in thinking about difficult events. Some planned to use the

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[285] Malcolm Johnson, "Spirituality, Biographical Review and Biographical Pain at the End of Life in Old Age," 207.

technique of writing difficult stories when they encountered challenges in the future, while others found hope for anticipated future difficulties because of God's faithfulness in the past. All participants expressed a desire to share stories of God's goodness to the next generation. Some did so by mentoring and others by helping others tell their stories.

Discussion of Findings

In this section, literature and interview research are compared to identify the impact of an SLW on COAs. Additionally, the researcher will integrate her experience as a Bible teacher, author, and gospel coach whose work for the past twenty-eight years has helped people see the intersection of their stories with the metanarrative of Scripture.

This discussion first considers how an SLW based on the metanarrative of Scripture helps COAs navigate specific developmental tasks in response to the call of Psalm 78 to tell stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation. Next, the focus shifts to how this SLW can offer spiritual care to COAs. Finally, the discussion explores how such an SLW fosters continued growth in Christlikeness, a clear sense of purpose, and an acceptance of death as COAs move closer to heaven.

Navigating Developmental Tasks

The literature reviewed showed that older adults face numerous and diverse developmental tasks; navigating these successfully can lead to "well-being." The discussion focuses on how a SLW whose structure follows the metanarrative of Scripture might help older adults navigate developmental tasks like generativity, ego integrity, purpose in life, and meaning in suffering, even as it helps them obey the call of Psalm 78 to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds to the next generation.

Generativity vs. Stagnation

The literature identified generativity, that is, a focus on passing wisdom to the next generation and caring for the next generation, as a key developmental task that begins in middle adulthood and continues into elderhood. Psalm 78 models generativity in calling older adults to pass on their stories of God's rescue to the next generation. As Pastor Joe Novenson observed, the entire nation of Israel suffered because the older generation failed to tell the stories of how God rescued them amid their failures of faith.[286] Participants in the SLW all revealed a level of generativity in their desire to pass the stories of God's redemptive work in difficult life events on to the next generation. Because the workshop focused on passing the stories of God's redemptive work to future generations, it led COAs to lean into generativity in their story sharing. Because the SLW taught COAs how to share stories that followed the story of Scripture, it facilitated generative storytelling. As Psalm 78 demonstrates, this type of story sharing is important not just for the COAs but for the generations of believers who will hear their stories.

Ego integrity vs. Despair

The older adult who achieves ego integrity is marked by wisdom and a balanced understanding of life and death and all its complexities. Psalm 78 invites older adults to become people who achieve ego integrity by remembering how God rescued the Israelites from difficulties, even those they brought on themselves. The COAs who participated in the workshop showed many signs of ego integrity. They demonstrated

[286] Joe Novenson, "Aging and the Unfinished Calling: The Older Disciple's Ministry to the Younger Follower of Jesus," (sermon, October 20, 2023) Ridgehaven.org.

wisdom gained through suffering as they shared how they had seen God work in difficult events. Every interviewee had experienced significant suffering in their lives (e.g., multiple miscarriages, family member with alcoholism, young widowhood, recent battle with cancer); some were experiencing that suffering while they participated in the workshop (chemotherapy for cancer; a debilitating disease). Despite their deep suffering, these COAs demonstrated the hope in God described in Psalm 78, the belief that he had worked in the past and would work again. Some did not even mention their current suffering, suggesting that they did not see themselves as victims. Several participants mentioned that they would use skills learned in the workshop to face future difficulties. Two specifically mentioned the awareness that decline and death were on the near horizon; they felt equipped to face this suffering because they had seen how God had rescued them from past difficulties.

Variety and Heterogeneity of Tasks

Skerrett et al. moved past the structures of generativity and ego integrity, believing these stages became less relevant as adults began living longer. They found that older adults or "emerging elders," as they described them, face a wider variety of developmental tasks. Not all emerging elders will face each of these tasks at the same time, but they will likely face them at some point. They discovered that some sort of story work helped emerging elders navigate these tasks.

The participants in the SLW were grappling with many of these tasks: two spoke of how the workshop might help them when they faced the harder realities of aging both now and in the future. Several had found emotionally meaningful goals in helping others tell their stories; writing and processing their stories helped them learn to tolerate

ambiguity. All saw their calling to tell their stories as something they could do even with physical, cognitive, and social changes that accompany aging. The community connection of the SLW normalized their angst about the future. Because it involved story work that looked at how God had rescued and redeemed throughout the participants' lives and because it provided community connection, the SLW helped COAs with the wide variety of developmental tasks older adults face.

Well-being

Two key factors in the physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual well-being of older adults were purpose in life and meaning in suffering. Older adults, as mentioned above, face challenges that offer the opportunity to redefine their sense of purpose. Doing so can enhance mental and physical health. As mentioned earlier, Psalm 78 also provides a compelling purpose for the older adult, and its story gives hope for meaning in suffering. The participants in the SLW all lived with a strong sense of purpose and were adept at finding meaning in suffering.

Purpose in Life

The SLW began with a focus on Psalm 78, as participants were reminded of their calling to tell the stories of God's wonderful deeds. They learned that remembering and sharing these stories could foster growth in faith, hope, in love—both in themselves and in the recipients of their legacies.

After the workshop, all the participants indicated a strong desire to mentor or encourage the next generation. Some believed they could strengthen others' faith by sharing their stories. Others were convinced that mentoring was an important purpose

God had given them in this season of life. Several mentioned their sense of urgency about sharing their faith and hope with future generations. Several also felt compelled to help others share their stories with the knowledge and tools they had gained.

Narrative gerontologists have observed that many older adults, even or especially Christian older adults, wrestle with the question, "Why am I still here?" Each of the SLW participants demonstrated a strong sense of purpose, a clarity about what God had called them to do in this season of life. To that crucial question about why God was keeping them here, these older adults had a powerful response, to encourage and mentor the next generation by passing on their stories and by helping others share their stories.

Meaning in Suffering

As mentioned earlier, Viktor Frankl, the inventor of logo therapy, believed that those who could find meaning in suffering and could remain hopeful for the future and seek purpose in life even amid suffering would flourish. Frankl observed that the aging should not focus on the losses of aging but instead on the rich history they had experienced, and this observation also applied to the participants in the SLW. The participants came with a readiness to remember their stories, a belief that these stories mattered, and the desire to pass them on to the next generation. While they were realistic about the losses they would face as they aged, they were not focused on these losses. Many were currently dealing with severe losses or had recently dealt with them (widowhood, caregiving to a spouse with dementia, cancer). Despite their current or recent losses, these participants were focused not on their own trials and trauma but on helping others and looking for redemption, even in other difficult stories of their lives.

Narrative gerontologists also noted the ability to tell redemptive stories as a feature that helped older adults face the losses of aging. In Psalm 78, Asaph tells the stories of how God redeemed and rescued the Israelites repeatedly and calls older adults to do the same. The participants in the SLW were given the opportunity to tell stories of wrecked shalom and restored shalom. Even as they wrote or narrated their stories of wrecked shalom, they found it difficult to narrate that story without sharing how God had redeemed it. Several participants echoed the theme of Psalm 78 when they mentioned how seeing God's faithfulness in past difficult stories led them to hope that he would redeem in future challenges, including the physical decline that leads to death. In this way, participants also demonstrated the ability to find meaning in suffering which leads to "positive aging."

Spiritual Care

The research on spiritual care of older adults revealed that sadly, the stories of older adults are often "undertold and underread." Narrative gerontologists and ministry leaders strongly recommended guided autobiography, spiritual reminiscence, life review, or some other type of story work as highly beneficial in the spiritual care of older adults. The SLW provided story work rooted in Scripture, which proved valuable in addressing both biographical pain and the dark story.

A Template and an Audience

Stories of older adults were undertold and underread because they lacked a "narrative template" for telling their stories and because they lacked careful and compassionate listeners to hear them. The SLW provided a narrative template in the

structure of creation (shalom), fall (wrecked shalom), redemption (partially restored shalom), and restoration (fully restored shalom). Such a structure corresponds to Psalm 78, which includes elements of creation such as when God divided the sea and made streams come out of the rock (vv. 13-16); elements of the fall, in the rebellion and stubbornness of the Israelites (v. 8); elements of redemption through atonement for iniquity (v. 38); and elements of the restoration, seen in references the new Jerusalem and the faithful shepherd (vv. 68-72). Many participants mentioned that the structure provided helpful guidance for which stories to tell. Additionally, they mentioned that hearing others' stories inspired and encouraged them to share their own. The Story Feast in the last session of the workshop provided at least one avenue for stories to be "read" by compassionate listeners.

Biographical pain

While the researcher who observed biographical pain in older adults recommended that they have non-religious spiritual care for this pain, the SLW, with its grounding in the Christian story, provided a type of care the COAs needed. One participant, Gabe, came specifically because he was seeking resolution to a story that had caused him great pain. At 84 years old, he wanted to find a coherence that brought him peace. And while he never did fully understand why the event happened, he seemed to find a measure of peace. He felt affirmed in his calling to mentor others, even if he risked being hurt again. Like the trauma victims who were helped by Psalm 78 to move forward in their lives, Gabe too seemed to reconnect and continue in his calling.

Dark Story

Psychologist Bruce Stevens observed that a crucial piece of spiritual care for older adults is giving them the opportunity to tell the "dark story." He recommended life review as a helpful way to do this because "Everything belongs: the ugliness of sin, personal flaws, mistakes of life, regret, and what cannot be repaired."[287] By providing the opportunity to tell stories of wrecked shalom in the context of Psalm 78, and looking for God's redemptive work in this wrecked shalom, the SLW afforded COAs a unique way to tell the "dark story." While the COAs did not primarily share dark stories that concerned their own failings, they presumably could have written such stories and yet not shared them in our interview. It would be interesting to learn more about what dark stories participants wrote but kept private.

Many of the participants were left with questions about how to tell dark stories related to people who had harmed them. While they were given some guidelines about telling such stories, many seemed concerned about damaging the reputation of another. Still, they expressed the desire to tell the stories in a way that would reveal God's glorious deeds in their lives. In future workshops, I will spend more time teaching on this topic. I will also invite questions and discussion about telling such stories so participants can help one another think about the best way to share these stories.

Christians and Spiritual Legacy

The literature revealed some developmental tasks specific to Christians. Among them, reciprocating spirituality, that is, becoming more Christlike and more invested in

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[287] Stevens, "The Dark Story," 374.

mutual relationships with God and others, is central. Another important developmental task observed by narrative gerontologists is the journey of discovering one's unique legacy. The third developmental task that Christians are more adept at is acceptance of death. The SLW participants demonstrated skill at each of these tasks.

Reciprocating spirituality

Unlike spiritual reminiscence, which is "spiritual" but not necessarily Christian, and life review, which is not necessarily spiritual, this SLW is tailored to the developmental needs of COAs. Its foundation is the call of Psalm 78 to tell God's glorious deeds to the next generation to grow more like Christ and to help others grow more like Christ. The SLW participants demonstrated their Christlikeness as well as their desire to help others grow in their faith. Several mentioned transformation and sanctification as something they had seen in the stories they shared. All demonstrated the desire to come alongside others to show them God's faithfulness and to help them grow faith, hope, and love. In this way, the SLW helped COAs reciprocate spirituality.

Unique Legacy

Narrative gerontologists observed that aging nudges Christians to ask about the particular "texts" of their lives and to search to understand the unique legacy God has called them to leave. Doing so helps them understand how God has shown them grace throughout their lives. Again, this theory corresponds to the call of Psalm 78 to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds. Many of the SLW participants noted their discovery of how God had uniquely shaped them as they remembered their stories. Kristi saw that God had shaped her to be a "safe place for others." Isa recognized that God had given her a

love of storytelling for a purpose and sought to help others tell their stories. Annie saw that adults' failure to help her grieve as a child compelled her to train in grief counseling to help others in their grief. Gabe saw his calling to mentor young singers and their professors as his unique legacy.

Acceptance of Death

Another developmental task of aging is accepting mortality or "death acceptance." One researcher found that Christians who believed that death would lead them to go to heaven aged more successfully. Several of the SLW participants also spoke of their anticipation of heaven. While they did not look forward to the physical and cognitive decline they would likely face, they did believe that God would faithfully help them endure this decline. Because the SLW led them to anticipate the final chapter of the story when Jesus returned, they expressed hope even in the face of their mortality.

Recommendations for Practice

Considering the findings described above, the church should offer opportunities for older adults to share their spiritual legacy. With all Baby Boomers turning 65 by 2030, the church must prepare for ministry by and for older adults. To do so effectively, we must consider the crucial developmental and spiritual tasks associated with aging. What does a mature COA look like? What leads to well-being or positive aging for a COA? This study has revealed that the ability to tell redemptive stories contributes to generativity, life purpose, and meaning in suffering. Additionally, Psalm 78 urges the older generation to share stories of God's glorious deeds with the next generation. For these reasons, churches should strongly consider offering some type of spiritual legacy

curriculum to their older adults. Doing so will benefit both older adults and the many adults in the sandwich generation seeking guidance on how to care well for their aging parents.

The Benefits of Offering a Spiritual Legacy Curriculum

Caring for COAs

As mentioned, older adults, even or especially COAs, require spiritual care as they enter the final chapter of their lives. Part of caring for COAs well is to help them remember their purpose. Many older saints suffer from chronic illness or pain and look forward to meeting Jesus face to face. As they anticipate relief from their suffering, they cry out, "Why am I still here?" Sharing their spiritual legacy reminds them that God still has a purpose for them. Because this SLW reminded COAs of the purposes God has for them, and because it reminded them that God is the author of their stories, it offered beneficial spiritual care. Churches should provide opportunities for spiritual legacy work to remind older saints of their lifelong purpose of enjoying and glorifying God.

Additionally, the SLW provided crucial care for COAs by helping them navigate three key developmental tasks associated with positive aging: the ability to find meaning in difficult events, the desire to care for the next generation by sharing their wisdom, and the desire to come alongside others in difficult stories. When COAs can find meaning in difficult life events, they adjust more easily to the many challenges that come with aging, such as physical disabilities, cognitive decline, and loss of beloved friends and family members. The SLW's use of Psalm 78 as the basis for our storytelling strengthened the COAs' desire to share their stories with the next generation. Such storytelling fulfills

another developmental task by providing meaning and purpose. Because the SLW provided a narrative template structured in the redemptive-historical narrative, it helped the COAs recall redemptive stories, a facility associated with well-being in older adults. For this reason, churches should consider offering a SLW like the one described.

Benefits to the Next Generation

The generation caring for the Baby Boomers is crying out for help. Many in the church want to care well for their aging parents, but they face numerous challenges to providing this care. To navigate this journey well, both generations need to have empathy for one another and communicate their struggles well. Inviting older and younger adults to share spiritual legacy stories will bridge the gap. Engaging in story sharing—whether through a series of Story Feasts or a SLW offered across generations—cultivates compassionate listening among younger participants. As they learn to listen with care and empathy, they begin to honor and deeply respect the older generation, while also gaining essential wisdom for navigating their own life challenges. In turn, older adults experience renewed purpose, meaning in suffering, and the generativity associated with positive aging. Through this mutual exchange, both generations are strengthened: the younger through the insight of those who've gone before, and the older through the joy of purposeful storytelling. Whether through Story Feasts or an SLW, spiritual legacy work offers a powerful means for both generations to navigate their respective challenges with grace.

Intergenerational Ministry

Churches often seek to expand their intergenerational ministries. Doing so will be even more important as the aging population increases. An SLW provides an excellent opportunity for the different generations to come together, hear one another's stories, struggles, and successes, and learn from one another. With the right instruction on careful and compassionate listening, the younger generation (not to mention pastors and ministry leaders) could offer COAs much-needed spiritual care. At the same time, the younger generation would grow in their faith, hope, and love as they gain needed perspective about the struggles they are facing. As one of the SLW participants mentioned, her church offered a series of Story Feast opportunities for intergenerational participants. She expressed her delight and awe in seeing the various generations interact in this way.

How to Offer Spiritual Legacy Opportunities

Spiritual Legacy Workshop

A spiritual legacy workshop like the one described could be offered in several formats. First, I currently offer my workshop at least twice a year in an online format, with six sessions corresponding to the workbook I developed. Second, a church may choose to host a spiritual legacy workshop, which I have adapted to fit into a Friday evening and Saturday event or even a longer retreat.

If neither of these options is feasible, a church could host a SLW of their own using the following suggested structure:

- **Group size:** A group of six to twelve allows for rich story sharing and meaningful discussion.

- **Format:** The leader should offer brief instruction on the metanarrative of Scripture, describing the four-parts: creation (shalom), fall (wrecked shalom), redemption (partially restored shalom), and consummation (fully restored shalom). The theological framework provides participants context for understanding the connection of their stories to God's story of grace. The leader should also emphasize the exhortation in Psalm 78 to tell the stories of God's glorious deeds.
- **Writing:** The leader offers a suggested list of topics corresponding to the parts of the biblical metanarrative. In each session, the participants are instructed to choose a prompt and brainstorm and write for twenty minutes.
- **Sharing:** Participants are encouraged to share one of their stories with the group, either in each session or in the final culminating event known as a Story Feast. Story Feast is described in more detail below.
- **Reflection:** Reflection questions are offered for each session. Participants are encouraged to spend time after the session reflecting on their experience of writing, sharing, and hearing stories.

Story Feast

The Story Feast is a concept I first developed over thirty years ago. I have since guided numerous individuals and groups in hosting their own. These feasts provide a space for storytelling rooted in God's redemptive work, fostering both community and individual spiritual reflection. To host a Story Feast, a leader should consider the following structure:

- **Group size:** Limit the gathering to six to ten participants (or break larger numbers into groups) to foster connection and to ensure everyone has time to share.
- **Food for the feast:** Instruct each participant to bring a favorite food — homemade or storebought. The shared meal creates a welcoming atmosphere that helps participants feel at ease.
- **Preparation and Writing:** Provide a handout with suggested topics drawn from themes of the metanarrative of Scripture or a recent Bible study. Instruct participants to select a topic and write a brief story. Emphasize that grammar and stylistic perfection are not required. Suggest using a fifteen-minute timer to help them with their writing. Let them know they will have five to seven minutes to share their story. Encourage them to come to the feast even if they feel unsure about sharing their story.
- **The feast:** Begin with 20-30 minutes for feasting and informal conversation. Then begin the sharing time. Remind participants of the five-to-seven-minute time limit. Encourage them to listen carefully and compassionately and to pay attention to themes of hope or hardship, redemption or wrestling. Remind listeners to refrain from "fixing" in their response to the story.
- **After the feast:** Provide a set of reflection questions for participants to take home. Encourage them to journal and continue discussion of the experience of writing, sharing, and hearing stories.

Adjustments to the Spiritual Legacy Curriculum

While a spiritual legacy curriculum based on the metanarrative of Scripture proved valuable, several adjustments to the curriculum might offer additional benefits or allow more people to participate.

As mentioned earlier, many participants were confused about how to tell dark stories about harm caused by others. Additional guidance on how to tell such stories would benefit participants. Inviting group discussion about how different participants handled this challenge would also provide valuable insight.

Two adjustments in the format could benefit participants. First, the curriculum could be offered in a one- or two-day workshop format to allow participation by people who could not commit to six weekly meetings. Second, increasing the session time from one hour to one and a half hours would allow for more discussion and connection among group members. Several of the participants mentioned wishing for more time to hear from the others.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study focused on the extent to which COAs who participated in a particular type of spiritual legacy workshop told stories of difficult life events to share God's glorious deeds with the next generation. As with any study, there are limitations as to how extensive the research can be. Therefore, pursuit of the following areas of study could be highly valuable for those seeking to understand the impact of spiritual legacy work on older adults: spiritual legacy work with dementia patients, spiritual legacy work as an outreach to unbelieving people, and different types of spiritual legacy work.

Dementia

The scope of this research did not allow me to examine how a spiritual legacy workshop might affect COAs diagnosed with dementia. Several scholars noted that some dementia patients benefit from some type of reminiscence therapy. Would one-on-one reminiscence therapy using a curriculum like the one used for this workshop be a helpful way to provide spiritual care for COAs with dementia?

Spiritual Legacy as Outreach

For the purposes of this study, participants were limited to professing Christians. Offering an SLW based on the metanarrative of Scripture to those who do not profess Christian belief could provide valuable insights into how spiritual legacy work might function as a tool for outreach.

Various Types of Spiritual Legacy Work

This study focused only on one spiritual legacy workshop. As the research revealed, many other types of life story work have proven valuable to older adults. This SLW guided participants in writing their stories, but researching various methods of sharing stories, such as audio or video recording, digital or printed scrapbook, visual representation, etc. would help us understand how different types of story work could help COAs navigate developmental tasks.

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