



BELONGING

An Increasingly Lost Reality

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“If we have no peace, it is because we have forgotten that we belong to each other.” — Mother Teresa

Mother Teresa’s words about peace and belonging are profound. Yet feeling “belonged” is becoming increasingly difficult in modern cultures. Family members no longer live in the same city. Social media is replacing personal interactions, often deleting soulful connections in the process. Aging often increases isolation as health and energy wane. Loneliness is sometimes a problem, even in nursing homes filled with other people and activities.

Too often loneliness develops because relationships and activities are superficial, devoid of meaning, meaning that is lost because we miss out on each other’s stories. We can combat this arid existence when we create communities where our stories are welcome to come to life.

Stories, shared in a small community of trustworthy people, remind us that we belong to one another and that we are there to help each other. Stories connect us to each other and to ourselves. Sharing our own story opens our hearts and teaches us how to encounter our pain, including the pain of aging with its numerous losses. Telling our story renders meaning out of chaos so that our suffering is not wasted.

Those stories, when shared, preserve our memories and help us define who we are. They help us sort out what is significant from what is not. They expand our imagination and stimulate creativity so that new vistas are opened. Stories shared among others restore hope as possibilities for new passageways are created.

The Life Review

In senior living communities, a “Life Review” group is a powerful way to bring people together in a meaningful setting that fosters storytelling and a sense of belonging. Reminiscence groups share memories; Life Review

groups are much more than this. A life review includes a deeper process of self-evaluation about the *meaning* of the events in our lives, encouraging us to reflect on our lives, draw meaning from life experiences, and cultivate a sense of fulfillment by completing unfinished emotional business. Weekly or monthly gatherings for the purpose of life review, meaning-making and storytelling foster healthy personal growth and community relationships.

There are many ways to begin the process of a life review. A profoundly worthwhile exercise is to have each participant answer the question: “If I died today, what would be left unsaid or undone?” Answers to this question can be elicited several times, even over several weeks. Each time, answers become more informed as stories emerge from the depths.

Another simple process that facilitates healthy life review involves examining your past around four distinct themes: Forgive me, I forgive you, I love you and Thank you.

Forgive me: All of us have done things to hurt each other — none of us are saints. Reflect on people you may have hurt and consider asking for forgiveness.

I forgive you: Think about those who have hurt you, especially any hurts you may be holding onto. Consider letting them go, offering forgiveness.

I love you: Think about whom in your circle of friends and family may benefit from an expression of your love.

Thank you: Think about those people who have impacted your life who might benefit from an expression of gratitude for the specific ways they have touched your life.

These four steps offer a good recipe for healing our lives. Sharing the outcomes of this process with others in the community inspires them to heal their lives also.

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Wisdom comes from embracing the now and sharing our stories; it is in this sharing that we find a common unity.



We All Have a Place in Others' Stories

"We comfort others not from the foundation of our superior faith, but from the commonality of our mutual struggles," writes Jack Hayford (Hayford, 2001).

A good story almost always has a "mutual struggle" that connects each of us in the "common-unity" of the community. Thus, a "counsel council" might be the basis for developing a community. This type of council resists giving advice. Rather, stories are simply shared. Some of the counsel councils I have attended include a person who spoke of a family death, and the rest of us responded with our own stories of recovering from a death or loss. Another time, a person said she was feeling "lost," which elicited stories of times when others felt lost and uncertain.

At another gathering, someone identified having difficulties with a family member's alcohol usage, and the rest of us responded with our own stories of how alcohol had wounded our families or other people we loved. An adult son moving back into a parent's home prompted storytelling of lifestyle changes and boundary setting with older children. One session centered on a person whose young, adult son had stopped contact with her; participants responded with stories of children rebelling against parents.

Aging difficulties often precipitate meaningful stories as people share their grief surrounding the losses of health and quality of life. I will never forget the aging and illness topic that helped Clara, a woman with cancer. She told the group: "My family doesn't want to hear anything except that things are getting better."

Members of Clara's church community made her feel as if she had no faith when she voiced feelings of fear, anger or pain. As she spoke to

us, her voice was dull and lifeless. As the group of elderly residents simply listened to her story without giving advice, more emotions she had been hiding kept surfacing. The other residents then shared their own struggles with health issues.

By the time Clara left, she exclaimed, "I need to come back here every week so I can *experience* what I'm feeling." She said it with a laugh and a lilt in her voice that reflected the vitality that had surfaced with her tears. She no longer felt alone. In fact, she felt belonged.

Embracing the Present Now

Too often, we find ourselves competing with younger versions of ourselves as we age. Instead of lovingly serving the present moment with compassion, we cling to the past while criticizing ourselves for not being able to do things we used to be able to do.

Wisdom comes not from clinging to the past but from embracing the ever-present "now." Stories help us do this because they have value beyond facts or biographical information. Stories are healing; they restore wholeness to who we are. They help us find ourselves, even inside someone else's story. There is communion, common union, with one another as this community of sharing and storytelling is developed.

I will long remember one man living in a skilled nursing facility. After attending a few sessions of "Life Review" community meetings, he said to the group, "You all make me feel like a human being again."

His words took me by surprise; the other residents simply nodded their heads in agreement. ♦

Source:

Hayford, Jack. (2001). *How to Live Through a Bad Day*. Thomas Nelson Inc: Nashville. pp 21-22.

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10 QUESTIONS TO BEGIN A LIFE REVIEW

We can all foster a heightened sense of belonging by sharing answers to these questions in a Life Review group:

1. One of the most difficult things for me to deal with in my lifetime has been:
The reason this was so difficult was because:
2. What I have learned because of the burdens I have endured is:
3. One of the things I am most proud of is:
Because:
4. One way in which my military service impacted my life is:
5. If I were to live my life over again, something I would change is:
6. If I were to live my life over again, something I would not change is:
7. One of the ways I think I have touched other peoples' lives is:
Because:
8. One of the things I most want to be remembered for is:
Because:
9. If I could give one piece of advice to someone it would be:
Because:
10. Something that would bring me more peace right now is:
Because: