Theology and Ministry 5 (2018): 5.1-16
ISSN 2049-4513

'Now I become myself': Narrative Psychology and Issues of Loss and Identity in the Third Age

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Losses in the Third Age; Who am I?

May Sarton told stories.[1] Born to émigré parents fleeing the devastation of Belgium by WWI, her early ambition to write was strengthened by meeting Virginia Woolf and the Bloomsbury group on a visit to Europe. Sarton flirted with acting and directing, and taught for extra income; but she wrote throughout her long life. Sarton wrote – fiction, poetry, memoir and journals. Drawing heavily on her own experiences, she wrote. She wrote about teachers overlooked for promotion,[2] the experience of writers' block,[3]the powerlessness of the old and the rage it can bring,[4]about coming out in one's seventies.[5]

Sarton's fiction did not garner critical acclaim, but after great struggles her journals finally cemented her reputation as a writer. Starting at fifty-nine, she wrote six volumes in which she explored the consequences of ageing and reflected on love, friendship, self-knowledge, fulfilment, generativity and integrity. Her writing exposes 'the shifting horizons of self-understanding,'[6] and Sarton herself was conscious that she was gaining insight as she wrote. In her novel 'Kinds of Love,'[7] she observes: 'What is interesting, after all, is the making of a self, an act of creation, like any other, that does imply a certain amount of conscious work.'[8]

Sarton's oevre neatly illustrates the impact on the self of ageing, often viewed as a negative experience. De Beauvoir writes: 'The vast majority […] looks upon the coming of old age with sorrow or rebellion. It fills them with more aversion than death itself.'[9] Perspective is, of course, affected by culture and

[1] I have long been fascinated by the cumulative work of May Sarton (1912-1995), but particularly by her diaries, which form a renowned contribution to the literary genre of journals of later life. Read together, they document Sarton's struggle to 'become herself,' a work she felt was vital for each of us. They very neatly illustrate how one stories oneself over time, and as such they are perfect reference material for this article.
[2] May Sarton, The Small Room, New York, Norton, 1976.
[3] May Sarton, The Poet and the Donkey, New York, Norton, 1996.
[4] May Sarton, As We Are Now, New York, Norton, 1992.
[5] May Sarton, Mrs Stevens Hears the Mermaids Singing, Women's Press, 1993.
[6] Harry J Berman, Interpreting the Aging Self, New York, Springer, 1994, p. 176.
[7] May Sarton, Kinds of Love, New York, Norton, 1970.
[8] Sarton, Kinds of Love, p. 32.
[9] Simone de Beauvoir, The Coming of Age, CP Putnam's Sons, New York, 1972, p.539.

context; age has not always and everywhere been regarded as a curse. Cultures rooted in the principle of filial piety – such as Confucian China and Korea – mark age with reverence. In Taoism, longevity is proof of sainthood.[10]Age is still celebrated in India, where elders act as heads of the extended household; youth is not always fetishised, as it is in the West.

Neither has the marking of age by retirement always been a cultural phenomenon. Although the Roman Empire ran gerocomeia, retirement homes for the military, retirement only became a realistic possibility for the masses with the advent of industrialisation and early notions of state provision of welfare. In 1881 von Bismarck proposed a rudimentary system of retirement to the Prussian Reichstag, arguing 'those who are disabled from work by age and invalidity have a well-grounded claim to care by the state.' As industrialisation spread in the west and populations grew, economies became more able to support state pension provision and retirement became regarded as 'an effective tool for getting rid of worn out workers.'[11]At the same time, advances in medicine and public health began to mean that the median age of death rose.

But extended lifespan was accompanied by cultural disenfranchisement. Age was viewed as a burden; life lost meaning. In 1949 AL Vischer asked if 'there is any sense, any vital meaning in old age?'[12] and in 1964 Erik Erikson wrote: 'lacking a culturally viable ideal of old age, our civilization does not really harbour a concept of the whole of life.'[13]

It is therefore no surprise that, for those reaching the Third Age of life[14] like Sarton, cumulative physical and emotional losses and consequent loss of meaning are often part of their story. Sarton's father died when she was forty-six, leaving her 'orphaned'; she came out at 60, but her partner Judith Matlack developed dementia and had to move into a nursing home. After Matlack died, Sarton grappled with loneliness, the longing for love and for critical success. She suffered from breast cancer, undergoing a mastectomy which provoked a re-assessment of body image. At seventy she had a stroke, followed by a long period of rehabilitation.

Sarton's experience of ageing and loss is not unusual. Extended families, expanding as children are born and new relationships are established, contract as children leave home and elderly relatives and parents die. Marriages cease or are radically renegotiated. Roles change as parents become grandparents, spouses become divorcees or widows, workers retire. Friends, homes, health, income, independence, all may be lost. We embark on 'growing down,'[15] instead of

[10] Kimble, Melvin A, et al, eds, Aging, Spirituality and Religion, a Handbook, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 1995, p.22.
[11] Handbook on Age and Ageing.
[12] AL Vischer, On Growing Old, trans G Onn, Boston, Houghton Miflin, 1967, p.23.
[13] Erik Erikson, 'Human Strength and the Cycle of Generations,' in Insight and Responsibility, New York, Norton, 1964, p.132.
[14] 'The period in life of active retirement following middle age,' www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/third-age.
[15] J E Loder, Logic of the Spirit, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 1998, p.282.

'growing up,' as mind and spirit are affected by physiological changes.[16] Loss acquires an eschatological dimension. We become more and more conscious of our own finitude, our own lack of time. And with the purely physical losses comes loss of meaning.[17] 'Ageing' says Loder, 'goes from one form of emptiness to another as time passes,'[18]bringing with it 'an erosion of self-worth […] loss of esteem due to being a non-productive person in an achievement-oriented society.'[19]

Tillich, defining faith as the 'state of being ultimately concerned,'[20] suggests that faith in western culture finds its centre in ego and its extensions – work, wealth, power, prestige.[21] When our 'ultimate concern' is lost, 'faith' is lost; and we begin to ask 'Who am I? How do I tell my story?'

The question 'Who am I?' occupied the psychologist Erik Erikson.[22] Erikson's work is grounded in Freud's theories of psychosexual development, but in one seminal chapter of 'Childhood and Society' Erikson delineates a novel developmental analysis of the human lifecycle. His conception is of a lifecycle in which a 'normative sequence of psychosocial gains'[23] is made, proceeding in a series of critical steps; '"critical" being a characteristic of turning points, of moments of decision between progress and regression, integration and retardation.'[24] In each stage there is a 'task', which must be completed before the next stage begins. Five stages occur in childhood and adolescence, when, according to Erikson, identity coalesces. Only three take place in adulthood.

Erikson frames the task of middle adulthood as 'generativity […] the concern in establishing and guiding the next generation […] productivity and creativity.'[25] It is not simply procreation, but comprises the capacity to give of oneself, to use power responsibly in the service of others, to be concerned with the wellbeing of the world.[26] In the absence of generativity, stagnation sets in, bringing an unhealthy obsession with self, a growing self-absorption, and the possibility of an 'early invalidism [which] becomes the vehicle of self-concern.'[27] Each crisis cannot be approached without resolution of the one preceding it, but Erikson acknowledges that each issue may also be present in preceding and later

[16] F B Kelcourse, ed, Human Development and Faith, Chalice Press, 2004, pp.252-255.
[17] L Messine, 'The Search for the Meaning of Life in Older Age,' in A Jewel, ed, Spirituality and Well-Being, London, Jessica Kingsley, 2003, pp.113-123.
[18] Loder, Spirit, p.318.
[19] Ibid., p.322.
[20] Paul Tillich, Dynamics of Faith, New York, Harper&Rowe, 1957, p.1.
[21] See also Fowler, Stages of Faith, San Francisco, Harper, 1995, p.4.
[22] Erik Erikson, Childhood and Society, New York, Norton, 1950, Identity and the Life Cycle, 1959, Vital Involvement in Old Age, 1986.
[23] Erikson, Childhood, p.261.
[24] Ibid., p.262
[25] Ibid., p.259.
[26] Whitehead, Evelyn Eaton, James D Whitehead, Christian Life Patterns Crossroad, New York, 2014, p.122.
[27] Erikson, Childhood, p.259.

stages.[28] The issues of identity may be the overriding consideration in adolescence, but remains a factor in middle adulthood and old age.

Generativity is shaped in the interface between the individual and their social context; it begins to fade in importance as one moves from the Third age into old age. There, the task is to ripen into 'ego integrity' by making sense of life and one's part in it, to become rooted in 'spiritual depth,' not to succumb to fear and despair. The common denominator of both generativity and ego-integrity is self-esteem, often claimed as a 'basic human need;'[29] it is important for healthy psychological functioning. It is formed by the story we tell ourselves about ourselves. Self- esteem has narrative roots.

The importance of narrative

Reflection - both psychological and theological - on the question 'Who am I?' is enriched by the growing interest in narrative theory over the last century. Stories are not just vehicles for pleasure, or for instruction; stories are integrative. Aristotle contends that stories are cathartic, enabling the release of emotion as an 'affective purgation,'[30] bringing about transformation and enlightenment. Fairytales, Bettelheim[31] argues, concern existential dilemmas, conflicts and fears, power and love, the need for affirmation of self-worth and the fear of death; and the reading and telling of fairytales promotes psychosocial growth and integration as the hearer, prompted by the story, aligns 'unconnected segments of information into more cohesive representations.'[32] Stories are hermeneutical aids, enabling one to make sense of the world, finding meaning in the face of loss, and fairytales in particular are redemptive, as the central figure struggles against the odds, masters all obstacles, and emerges victorious.[33]

It is not a great leap from understanding the integrative power of stories for the human self to beginning to understand the self in terms of story. Erikson's theory of stages, a theory in which the story of each individual's development unfolds gradually over time, lends itself to the idea that each individual is a story. Jerome Bruner contends that we are built to story ourselves throughout life; that 'world-making is the principal function of the mind…..We seem to have no other way of describing "lived time" save in the form of a narrative.'[34] This is surely familiar; when being introduced to someone new, inevitably we recount, however briefly, our story. We see it in Sarton's journals,[35] in Joan Didion's contention that

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[28] Erik Erikson, 'Generativity and Ego Integrity,' in Middle Age and Aging, ed Bernice L Neugarten, Chicago, UCP, 1968, pp.85-86.
[29] Bryan, Human Being, p.206.
[30] DP McAdams, Power, Intimacy and the Life Story, New York, Guilford Press, 1988, p.52.
[31] Bruno Bettelheim, The Uses of Enchantment, London, Penguin, 1976.
[32] McAdams, Life Story, p.53.
[33] Bettelheim, Enchantment, p.8.
[34] Jerome Bruner, 'Life as Narrative,' Social Research Vol 71: No 3, Fall, 2004, p.691.
[35] Sarton's whole oeuvre, both fiction and non-fiction, drew on elements of her own story, and she told it again and again, often re-storying herself as she did so.

'We tell ourselves stories in order to live,'[36]in Sartre's observation that 'a man is always a teller of stories, he lives surrounded by his own stories and those of other people, he sees everything that happens to him in terms of these stories, and he tries to live his life as if he were recounting it.'[37]And so it is natural for TR Sarbin to assert that 'narrative is potentially a useful root metaphor[38] for psychology and other human sciences.'[39] 'Human beings think, perceive, imagine and make moral choices according to narrative structures.'[40]

The psychologist Daniel McAdams seizes on the root metaphor of narrative to answer the question 'Who am I?' For McAdams, identity centres on the notion of lifestory. Identity, he says is 'a sense of sameness and continuity which ties together our days anew.'[41] We achieve a sense of continuity by the integrative action of story, becoming a biographer of self in adolescence. Personal fables eventually make way for more realistic self-storying, as 'past experiences and future goals are better integrated.'[42]Identity may be achieved, but storytelling continues throughout life, as both triumph and disaster are woven into the storied self in the quest for meaning.

Whilst Erikson firmly separates identity and generativity as different tasks for different stages, McAdams disagrees. For him 'identity is too big an issue to be confined to a discreet psychosocial stage,'[43] particularly since McAdams characterises generativity as one of four major components of identity.[44] 'In order to know who I am,' says McAdams, 'I should also have a sense of what I am going to do as an adult in order to fulfil the developmental mandate of generating a legacy.'[45] Echoing the dialectical tensions of Christianity, McAdams observes; 'Generativity as adults may challenge us to be both powerful and intimate, agentic and communal, expanding the self and surrendering it to others in the same self-defining act.'[46]

McAdams' later research suggests that highly generative people have qualitatively different stories. Their story – again in an echo of Christianity - tends to be redemptive, telling of 'a deliverance from suffering to a better world.'[47] McAdams' account of the plot of such a story is redolent of scripture; the protagonist is 'favoured' when young, sees that others are not so fortunate, survives encounters with adversity and loss to rise once more, and works to

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[36] Quoted in McAdams, Lifestory, P.ix.
[37] JP Sartre, The Words, New York, Braziller, 1964.
[38] That is, an underlying worldview shaping perception and understanding.
[39] TR Sarbin, 'Narrative as a Root Metaphor for Psychology,' in Narrative Psychology: the Storied Nature of Human Conduct, ed TR Sarbin, Westport, Praeger, 1986, P.4.
[40] Sarbin, Narrative, p.8.
[41] McAdams, Lifestory, p.28.
[42] Ibid.
[43] Ibid., p.253.
[44] Together with privileged autobiographical turning points(nuclear episodes), personifications of the individual (imagoes), and the idealogical setting of the individual. See McAdams, Lifestory, p.65.
[45] McAdams, Lifestory, p.65.
[46] Ibid., p.278.
[47] DP McAdams, The Redemptive Self, Oxford, OUP, 201, p.xiv.

promote the wellbeing of future generations. Over time, loss leads to gain as the redemptive self tells a new story of meaning and self-worth.
aumeister and Wilson propose four basic elements for any healthy narrative structure of self[48]. We need a goal, and with it value and justification, reliable criteria for the making of moral choices. We need efficacy, the assurance that one can make a difference. And we need self-worth, inevitably returning to generativity. Self-worth is intimately bound up in the legacy we leave for future generations. How will we be remembered? Will we be remembered at all?

McAdams is clear that identity is not fixed. Since it is a hermeneutical process rooted in narrative and depending upon the selectivity of individual memory, identity can be revisited, and is revisited over the course of a life.
May Sarton's work is illustrative of this constant restorying, the creative making of self which she astutely recognised in 'Kinds of Love.'[49]The creation of a 'true' self became the central purpose of her life.[50]Work was always at the forefront for Sarton; her concern to leave a body of work as a legacy and to strive for authenticity at all times led to the intentional breaking off of romantic relationships. Her writing examined the consequences of such decisions as she envisioned a different narrative for herself, moving from the picture of the sage, spiritually contented solitary painted in 'Plant Dreaming Deep'[51]to the frustrated, angry, conflicted loner of 'The House by the Sea.'[52]Berman writes;
'The journals exemplify the way in which people make meaning out of their lives and weave such meanings together to create the story of their lives, a story that is subject to constant revision.'[53] At sixty Sarton wrote:

> 'Now I become myself. It's taken
> Time, many years and places;
> I have been dissolved and shaken,
> Worn other people's faces….'[54]

And although she was badly affected by a stroke when she was seventy, she nevertheless wrote in positive terms of her life: 'because I am more myself than I have ever been.'[55] By then the journals had been widely well-received, and Sarton's generativity was assured. All her many losses had been restored into a life of meaning, with her body of work an enduring testament to the redemptive features of her own story.

The cumulative losses often experienced in the Third Age have an impact on the storied self. With each loss the plot thins, rather than thickens. Possibilities

[48] Roy F Baumeister, Brenda Wilson, 'Life Stories and the Four Needs For Meaning,' Psychological Enquiry,1996 Vol 7 No 4, pp.322-327.
[49] May Sarton, Kinds of Love.
[50] Berman, Self, p.75.
[51] May Sarton, Plant Dreaming Deep, New York, Norton, 1968.
[52] May Sarton, The House by The Sea, New York, Norton, 1977.
[53] Berman, Self, p.77.
[54] 'Now I become Myself,' May Sarton, Collected Poems 1930-1993, Norton, 1993.
[55] May Sarton, At Seventy, New York, Norton, 1984, p.10.

for lifestory begin to close in.[56] Some experience a 'narrative foreclosure,'[57]living as though the lifestory has ended. It might be argued that such foreclosure springs from the very stagnation Erikson identifies as the consequence of a lack of generativity.

But the flexibility of the lifestory, the essentially unfinished nature of the narrative self, offers hope. Stories can be told anew, recast; events can be accorded a different meaning. So Randall and McKim assert; 'the same life-changes that can leave us feeling lost harbour the potential to enliven us as well […] to claim at last our rightful authority for storying our lives.'[58]

White and Epston have evolved an approach to restorying which they term 'narrative therapy,'[59] springing directly from the work of McAdams. It is a way of comprehending selfhood and personal identity, and it offers new vistas of story for those who have lost self, foreclosed on their own narratives, subsided into stagnation or despair. Their methodology seeks to identify or generate alternative stories with new meanings, using aspects of lived experience 'that fall outside of the dominant story [to] provide a rich and fertile source for the generation or regeneration of alternative stories.'[60] Using 'therapeutic conversations' as their medium, they advocate a process of re-imagining, re-authoring, re-describing the self and speculating about new possibilities.

White and Epston's narrative therapy dovetails neatly into the 'life review' proposed by psychologist Robert Butler and supported by Erikson[61] as a prerequisite to the integrative wisdom of the last stage of development. Butler noted that reminiscence was a common feature of ageing.[62] Older people sift through their memories, re-examining past triumphs and conflicts. The life review has a moral dimension with its emphasis on reconciliation, atonement, integration and serenity; it is cathartic, formative, and a means of opening the self to growth, a 're-genre-ation,'[63]a process characteristic of McAdams conception of the redemptive self. Reminiscing is correlated with self-esteem, high morale and ego-integrity[64]and is linked by Sherman and Webb to the view of the changing self (the storied self) as a spiritual process. They dub this process as anamnesis, Socrates' argument from recollection –but also that part of the Eucharistic prayer in which God's saving deeds are recalled, and through which the Christian enters into the Paschal mystery, re-collecting and re-forming corporate identity and understanding of self. God re-stories us in the Eucharist; and we are re-storied individually and as a body by and in God's economy of salvation.

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[56] WL Randall, AE McKim, Reading our Lives, Oxford, OUP, 2008, pp.60-61.
[57] M Freeman, 'Narrative Foreclosure in Later Life,' in Storying Later Life, ed G Kenyon et al, Oxford, OUP, 2011.
[58] Randall, McKim, Poetics, p.120.
[59] Michael White, David Epston, Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends, New York, Norton, 1990.
[60] White& Epston, Narrative Means, p.15.
[61] See particularly Erik Erikson, The Life Cycle Completed, New York, Norton, 1997.
[62] R Butler, 'The Life Review,' Psychiatry 26: pp.65-76.
[63] Randall&McKim, Poetics, p.234.
[64] Edmund Sherman, Theodore A Webb, 'The Self as Process in Late-life Reminiscence; Spiritual Attributes,' in Ageing and Society, vol 14, Issue 02,June 1995, pp.255-267.

Theological reflection

CS Lewis was aware of the power of myth to facilitate fresh experience of reality.[65]In 'The Voyage of The Dawn Treader,'[66]Lewis' heroine Lucy is on a quest for Aslan's country – heaven – when she agrees to brave the unknown dangers of a magician's house to use his book of spells. As she reads she becomes absorbed in one particular spell which is 'more like a story [...] she was living in the story as if it were real.'[67] She finds that she cannot re-read the story, to her great regret; but when, inevitably, she meets Aslan[68] and asks if he will tell her the story, he assures her; 'Indeed, yes. I will tell it to you for years and years.'[69]

Lewis captures what Stephen Crites calls 'the narrative quality of experience.'[70]Human existence is best understood within narrative and Christian experience is located firmly in the master-story which God tells us 'for years and years.' It is the story of God's redemptive love, in creation, fall, exodus, covenant, incarnation, passion, resurrection and ascension. The spell brings Lucy 'refreshment of the spirit,'[71] promised afresh by Aslan; likewise the story of God in Christ refreshes, restores and re-members those who listen to God's narrative. By it the God-who-is-Love calls us into the future. As Moltmann observes, 'God is the one who accompanies us and beckons us to set out. And it is God who [...] waits for us around the next corner [...] even on the false paths we take in life God continually opens up surprisingly new possibilities to us.'[72]

The power of God to transform both individual and community lies at the heart of scripture. Christianity has always been the agent of 'conversion and radical transformation'[73] with Jesus' proclamation that 'the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news'(Mark 1:15). The central metaphor of Christianity is of rebirth; 'if anyone is in Christ, there is a new creation: everything old has passed away; see, everything has become new!' (2 Corinthians 5:17). The invitation to rebirth extended by Jesus in John 3 and in baptism is an invitation to die with Christ, to rise to new life as a beloved child of God, and to the eternal life promised in John 3:16.

If the root metaphor of Christianity is rebirth, then a great component of that rebirth is identity. Christian identity, rooted in Christ and hidden with Christ in God (Colossians 3:1-4), is radically different from secular conceptions of identity which conflate self with possessions and achievements and so colour the experience of growing older. The new self-envisaged in Colossians 3:1-4, is a self

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[65] CS Lewis, On Stories; Orlando, Harvest, 1982.
[66] CS Lewis, The Voyage of the Dawn Treader, Glasgow, Collins, 1984.
[67] Lewis, Dawn Treader, p.121.
[68] Lewis' Christ-figure.
[69] Lewis, Dawn Treader, p.124.
[70] Stephen Crites, 'The Narrative Quality of Experience,' in Why Narrative? Readings in Narrative Theology, ed Stanley Hauerwas, L Gregory Jones, Eugene, Wipf&Stock, 1997, pp.65-88.
[71] Lewis, Dawn Treader, p.121.
[72] Moltmann's introduction to M Douglas Meeks, The Origins of the Theology of Hope, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1974, p.x.
[73] Whitehead, Patterns, p.33.

who seeks the things that are above and sets the mind on things that are above. 'every person has unique worth and value because God is concerned with each of us…' says Janet Ruffing.[74] This self recognises that personal value 'rests on the rock of God's love.'[75] 'Christianity proclaims that the real basis of one's worth lies beyond one's accomplishments, even beyond good works. Ultimately it is God's love that grounds human dignity and the mature sense of self-worth.'[76]

A paradoxical uselessness lies at the heart of Christian life. 'I do not have to do anything to be loved by God'[77];indeed, I cannot secure God's love by the works beloved by secular society. Only God's grace is enough.

With God's grace come the other paradoxical tensions of Christian faith. The last will be first; God's strength is made perfect in human weakness; a king dies the brutal death of a criminal for our redemption. The oppositions are 'realizations of psychological maturity,'[78] and carry with them an 'invitation to authenticity,'[79] the dying to self and the things of this world so that we might rise and live to the things of God.

Scripture is shot through with stories of dying to self, of transcendence and new life. It is noticeable that Jesus uses story in ministry, prodding his hearers into new insights by the use of parable. But he goes further; as Bryan points out; 'Throughout his ministry, Jesus challenged people to adopt a different interpretation of who they were and offered them a place in his kingdom.'[80] Indeed, it is arguable that Jesus' ministry is one of re-storying, carrying on the work of re-storying which God begins after the fall. God tells the barren Abram and Sarai the story of themselves as progenitors of a great nation (Genesis 22:17); and the renamed Abraham and Sarah set out on a seemingly impossible journey in which the couple sinking into stagnation and despair become exemplars of generativity. Moses is re-storied in his encounter with God in the burning bush. The nation of Israel is re-storied in the Exodus. As McAdams observes, 'Many of the greatest stories in the Judeo-Christian heritage are tales of generativity.'[81]

Jesus often tells those he meets a new story about themselves. Simon the fisherman becomes Peter, the Rock; when Peter the Rock falters in his discipleship Jesus cooks him breakfast, asks him questions which bring to mind Peter's betrayal of Christ, and re-stories Peter again as shepherd of Christ's sheep. Paul is re-storied in similar terms in the encounter on the Damascus road. The man at the pool in Bethsaida (John 5:2-18) is re-storied by Jesus' challenge, 'Do you want to be made well?' The question is essentially 'What do you want your story to be?' As Taylor remarks, 'If your present life story is broken or diseased it can be made

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[74] Janet K Ruffing RSM, To tell the Sacred Tale, Spiritual Direction and Narrative, New York, Paulist Press, 2011, p.51.
[75] Evelyn Eaton Whitehead, James D Whitehead, 'Retirement,' in Ministry with the Aging, ed WM Clements, New York, Haworth Press, 1989, p.133.
[76] Whitehead, Patterns, p.179.
[77] Whitehead, in Ministry, p.134.
[78] Whitehead, Patterns, p.175.
[79] Whitehead, Patterns, p.177.
[80] Jocelyn Bryan, Human Being, London, SCM, 2016, p.99.
[81] McAdams, Lifestory, pp.258-259.

well […] it can be replaced by a story that has a plot worth living.'[82] The man takes up his mat, and walks away whole. Stroup speaks of Christian narrative emerging 'from the collision between an individual's identity narrative and the narratives of the Christian community […] revelation takes place significant disorientation and reorientation takes place.'[83]

Disorientation and re-orientation is built into the liturgy of the Eucharist. Jesus' command to repentance, to metanoia, is not just a command to turn away from all that separates us from God, but a command to turn towards all that restores us. Confession and absolution encompass a process of becoming. Turning towards Christ is the beginning of a new story, in which individual and community 'look to the narrative history of Jesus…. in order to discover the true meaning of their respective identities.'[84]

Metanoia involves a piece of psychological work, 'a re-ordering of goals and purpose which is driven by a different motivation.'[85] Such a re-ordering may not be consistent through time; and this is why the confession and absolution is repeated in each mass, as the cumulative effect of forgiveness and love re-stories us again and again.

Repeated re-storying is also encountered in the anamnesis, the function of re-membering all that Jesus did which is contained in the Eucharistic prayer.[86] 'To "remember" [Christ in the Eucharist] is not simply to bring…. Jesus to mind, but to "actualise" those narratives in which he has his identity, to engage in that form of confession which fuses the narrative identity of the self to the narrative history of Jesus Christ.'[87]

The uses of narrative in pastoral practice

Crites would recognise the story of God in Christ as mythopoeic, a dwelling place 'which inform[s] people's sense of the story of which their own lives are a part, of the moving course of their own action and experience.'[88] It is a 'sacred story,'[89]because it is the ground for creating one's sense of self and world, and because it orients the life of the hearer through time.

Narrative psychology suggests that those suffering from the effects of losses in the third age of life, those who may be tempted to descend into stagnation, those whose horizons are so narrowed that despair awaits, must be assisted to re-story themselves. The Christian perspective urges a re-storying within God's sacred and redemptive story, just as Jesus re-storied those in need.

It is no surprise that Christian pastoral practices are firmly rooted in narrative. Christians are charged with telling the story of God's love, in scripture,

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[82] Daniel Taylor, Tell Me a Story, Minneapolis, Bog Walk Press, 2001, p.1.
[83] GW Stroup, The Promise of Narrative Theology, London, SCM, 1984, p.95.
[84] Stroup, Promise, p.168.
[85] Bryan, Human Being, p.98.
[86] See Whitehead, Patterns, pp.185-186.
[87] Stroup, Promise, p.254.
[88] Crites, Narrative, p.70.
[89] Ibid.

in liturgy, in songs and hymns, in prayer and preaching. The very form of the Eucharistic prayer is the story of redemptive love. Christian tradition, from the early church to the desert fathers and mothers and monastic orders, has understood that the Christian life fully lived becomes a restorying of self in line with the story of Christ. The Benedictine novice vowing to 'conversatio morum'[90] vows the self to a dynamic process of transformation by conformation to Christ in prayer, lectio divina and immersion in the Divine Office. On entering community for the first time the novice sings; 'sustain me, O Lord, as you have promised and I shall live; do not disappoint me in my hope,' (Psalm 119:116), so that 'the love and acceptance of God becomes the bedrock of their self-esteem.'[91]And the lifelong re-storying of the Benedictine is paralleled by the daily re-storying of the Ignatian examen, in which the events of the day are re-collected, bringing the story of each day into consonance with God's sacred story.

The contemporary challenge is to evolve a 'theologically integrated narrative methodology'[92] for ministry to those in middle and later life which acknowledges the tacit narrative underpinnings of tradition. One might start, following monastic practice, with prayer. Prayer is not immediately identifiable with narrative, particularly intercessory prayer; but Daniel Taylor speaks of small group prayer framed in narrative form. 'They would tell stories,' Taylor says, 'of suffering relieved, needs met, comfort offered, direction provided and failures forgiven…sometimes they wept. And everyone in the room helped them tell the story.'[93] In a small group setting, it may be possible to utilise the principles of White and Epston's narrative therapeutic approach, privileging each person's lived experience, encouraging the sense of joint authorship of one's life with God, and establishing conditions in which prayer becomes a re-storying conversation with God.

It is a small step from conversational prayer to spiritual direction. Ruffing points out that spiritual direction is 'fundamentally a narrative activity,'[94] in which directees reflect upon the meaning and implications of lived experience, re-storying as they do so. The hermeneutical process of making meaning becomes collaborative as the responses of director and directee integrate past, present and future narratives in the light of 'the Christian conviction that every person has unique worth'[95] in God's eyes. The experiences of directees become more 'specific, coherent, personal and concrete'[96]as the director teases out stories reflecting the interaction between God and directee. With the appreciation of the ways in which God's story intersects with the personal story, directees 'often discover more intensely the religious dimension of reality permeating ordinary experience.'[97]

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[90] Conversion of life, the putting on of Christ and dying to self –one of the three vows taken by Benedictines, see Rule of St Benedict, 57.7, p.80.
[91] Bryan, Human Being, p.226.
[92] Suzanne M Coyle, Uncovering Spiritual Narratives, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2014, p.ix.
[93] Taylor, Tell Me A Story, p.95.
[94] Ruffing, Sacred Tale, p.2.
[95] Ibid., p.51.
[96] Ibid., p.81.
[97] Ibid.

Ruffing observes that spiritual direction is 'deeply shaped by the narrative practices of Christianity embodied in its scriptures, rituals and catechesis, as well as by the Western literary tradition […] of autobiography'[98]. Anderson and Foley describe the use of 'mighty stories' to 'weave together the human and the divine…..[in] a narrative that has the power to transform.'[99] They advocate the use of narrative in pastoral ministry as a catalyst to reframing life, linking narrative to the human imperative to ritual. Ritualizing individual stories in new liturgies connects the individual with the over-arching redemptive narrative of God in Christ, enabling new meaning to be found in the face of loss.

The use of narrative in liturgy is a communal outworking of Lester's narrative methodology in pastoral care.[100] Emphasising human temporality, Lester contends that human brokenness resides in a future without story – again reflecting Erikson. When hope has gone it can be restored in pastoral conversations using reminiscence, open questions, guided imagery and free association to replace finite goals – or a yawning emptiness - with the assurance of the 'progressive, hopeful sacred story'[101]

Using narrative methodology, preaching is pastoral conversation writ large. With the move to a definition of the sermon as an emplotted event in time,[102] it is easy to see preaching as a 'transforming event,'[103]designed to shape experience.[104] Brown Taylor speaks of the sermon as a collaborative creation of God, preacher and congregation,[105] and if it is to be so an understanding of the individual and communal stories of the congregation is a necessity.[106] Anderson and Foley urge a departure from the generic and an engagement with individual stories to weave together human and divine narratives. Lose goes further, suggesting a conscious shift from a performative homiletic to an integrated homiletic using interaction between hearer and text as well as interaction between preacher and hearers.[107]Then we will participate in God's story; and 'our own experience and our own histories are deepened and enlarged […] the story functions as a prism through which we find fresh meaning in other moments.'[108]

98 Ruffing, Sacred Tale, p.49.
99 Herbert Anderson, Edward Foley, Mighty Stories, Dangerous Rituals, San Francisco, Jossey-Bass, 2001,p.7.
100 Andrew D Lester, Hope in Pastoral Care and Counseling Louisville, WJKP, 1995.
101 Lester, Hope, p.152.
102 See Eugene Lowry, The Homiletical Beat, Why All Sermons are Narrative, Nashville, Abingdon, 2012.
103 Jana Childers, Performing the Word, Nashville, Abingdon, 1998, p.21.
104 Lowry,The Sermon, Nashville, Abingdon, 1997, p.20.
105 Quoted in Lowry,The Sermon, p.29.
106 See Leonora Tubbs Tisdale, Preaching as Local Theology and Folk Art, Minneapolis, Fortress, 1997.
107 David Lose, Preaching at the Crossroads Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2013.
108 Susanne Langer, in Don M Wardlow, ed, Preaching Biblically, Philadelphia, Westminster Press, 1983, p.39.

Ageing; 'the fulfilment of life'

Henri Nouwen wrote a slim but profound meditation on ageing.[109] He masterfully sketches the pains of old age, physical, emotional and spiritual. Those who have given way to stagnation and despair feel that they are

> '…. forgotten, as good as dead…..
> something discarded…'(Psalm 31:12)

Nouwen observes that despair leads to the old in church clinging on to what is considered outmoded as a form of self-identification; but he passionately argues that scripture – such as the Song of Simeon – can break through and open the hearer to new visions.[110]The redemptive gospel story becomes the foundation for new meaning. As Joan Chittister writes, 'we must choose to begin a new kind of life […] we must find it life-giving […] we must be a gift to the world.'[111]

Generativity is rediscovered, not in secular achievements, but in becoming 'channels of grace and truth for all those about [us]'[112] and ageing together becomes 'the fulfilment of the promise of him who by his ageing and death brought new life to the world.'[113]Affirmation and self-esteem are found in the unique ministry of each person, as gifts are received by others in the mutual sharing of human and divine love. Church becomes a source of affirmation, and contingencies of self-worth can be 'changed or new ones adopted, in the light of the knowledge of being loved by God.'[114] In a sacramental transition, the dry bones of a stagnant and desperate self have life breathed into them (Ezekiel 37:1-14), so that we can at last say with Sarton: 'Now I become myself.'

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[109] Henri Nouwen, Walter Gaffney, Ageing; the fulfilment of life, New York, Doubleday, 1976.
[110] Nouwen, Ageing, p.54.
[111] Joan Chittister, The Gift of Years, London, DLT, 2015, p.48.
[112] Kathleen Fischer, Winter Grace, Nashville, Upper Room, 1998, p.19.
[113] Nouwen, Ageing, p.157.
[114] Bryan, Human Being, p.218.

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