

Guided Autobiography: Writing and Telling the Stories of Lives

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Introduction

There is increasing public interest in writing and telling the stories of life. There may be several reasons for the rise in interest, one of them that we are living much longer than previous generations. The transition into late life is in a cultural era in which there are few models of how to use the gift of long life. This gives rise to questions such as: Where have I been? Where am I? Where am I going? Writing an autobiography provides the opportunity to discover, clarify, and deepen the meaning of a lifetime of experiences. Adding to the interest is the fact that parents and grandparents want to leave their life stories for their children, grandchildren and friends as a legacy. Another factor that may be influencing the desire to write about the personal side of life is that the current era appears to be increasingly *impersonal*. Societies are becoming more efficient but in doing so, the personal factor in many services all but disappears. In the past, local shops had owners who knew their customer's and children's names. Small shops are disappearing and are being replaced by large shopping centers. Selection of items to be purchased can be done without the need or opportunity to speak to anyone. Then checkout of purchases is completed by scanning the items and paying with a credit card; one can enter and leave a store without speaking to anyone or knowing anyone. Businesses and societies have become increasingly efficient with email but with a loss of personal contacts that encourages face to face exchanges about our families, work, and health. These are elements of our life stories waiting to be expressed in our autobiographies.

In response to the growing interest in autobiography, a number of approaches have developed to assist individuals in telling their life stories. Since Robert Butler first wrote about life review in 1963, many different professions have encouraged and helped individuals write

and tell their life stories. Social workers, nurses, psychologists, educators, clergy, and others have published accounts of their methods of assisting individuals in telling their life stories (see Bornat, 1994; Burnside & Schmidt, 1994; Fivush & Hayden, 2003; Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Webster & Haight, 2003). The International Association of Reminiscence and Life Review has been formed which provides professionals with opportunities for presenting their methods and findings about autobiographical processes. In this paper we describe the Guided Autobiography method that assists adults to tell and organize their memories about growing up and growing older into autobiographies. The direct and indirect benefits of participation are also described.

Guided Autobiography

The Guided Autobiography (GAB) method was developed by James Birren more than thirty years ago. In the past years he has conducted hundreds of Guided Autobiography groups not only in the United States, but in other countries where interest in autobiography is growing; Brazil, Canada, Japan, Singapore, and in several European countries. Two books describing Guided Autobiography have been published (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, and Birren & Cochran, 2001) as well as numerous articles. Guided Autobiography has become widely recognized as an effective method to enable participants to understand and appreciate their life stories and move ahead with renewed optimism and increased self-esteem. It also results in benefits for institutions that conduct GAB groups by increasing the personal relationships among participants who may be new to a community or institution.

Description of the Guided Autobiography Method

Guided by a trained instructor, participants are led through ten sessions of two hours or more in length, meeting once a week. Each session has an opening segment that lasts about an hour, followed by a short break. Then the participants reassemble into small groups in which the members read what they have written during the week. Each weekly session is organized around

a life theme: Branching Points; Family; Money; Work and Career; Health and Body; Philosophical or Spiritual Journey; Death and Dying; and Goals and Aspirations.

During the opening segment of each session, the participants meet as a large group for discussion and instruction. They are given a single sheet handout that describes the theme of the week including ten or more priming with priming or sensitizing questions to help participants recall relevant memories. The leader reads some of the sensitizing questions and evokes group discussion to get the participants thinking about the theme. The participants are told to write approximately two pages on the theme before the next meeting. All writing is done outside of the class. If the theme is particularly productive for them, they are told not to stop writing, but in the small groups the allotted time for sharing allows only reading of two pages.

Following the theme presentation for the entire class, the class breaks up into small groups of five to eight members, each under the direction of a group leader. Each participant reads aloud the two pages he or she has written about their life according to the theme for that session. It is in the telling and listening to life stories that the group process has an important influence on eliciting the richness of memories of the participants. Often spontaneous comments are made that show the priming effect of the group. Writing and sharing one's life story with others in a group is a productive and rich way to achieve meaning in life as the uncertainties of the past, and the contradictions, paradoxes, and the impact of the recalled events of life are put into perspective.

Concepts of Guided Autobiography

The Guided Autobiography (GAB) method is based upon three concepts: a.) priming autobiographical memories; b.) using common themes of life; c.) engaging in a group process to tell one's life story.

Priming memories in a group facilitates recall among the participants. For example, "Oh, that reminds me of the time I started school." When topics are discussed in a group, the memories of

other group members are stimulated and they begin to remember events long forgotten. The priming questions are organized around life themes and are designed to provoke recollections. It has been known for some time that older adults are better performers when presented with material that stimulates recognition rather than recall. Earlier research indicated that for healthy person the vocabulary size doubles between graduation from college and age 60. Thus a great deal of information is stored in the older nervous system that is elicited by external stimulation. For this reason, the reading of autobiographical material in small groups stimulates the mature mind and old memories, thought to be forgotten.

Common themes of life underscore both the universality of our lives as well as the uniqueness of our experiences with life events and their interpretation. The autobiographical themes have evolved through experience with groups and with the intent to identify themes that are common to most lives. The themes are chosen to elicit both positive and negative experiences. In a sense, the themes are designed to evoke thinking about the strong threads that bind together the fabrics of lives. Each autobiographical theme is interpreted, absorbed, and written about in a personal or idiosyncratic way, just as each of our lives differ from one another. No two lives are the same. For example, the first theme is Branching Points. Everyone has experienced branching points in their lives but the age at which they occur, their timing, expression, and impact varies tremendously. A move early in childhood from one state to another may be life enhancing for one person while for another person a difficult event that changed the direction of his or her life. A war or natural disaster can be a catastrophic event for one person and by contrast for another lead to an expansion of life. The life themes help the participants to focus and offer a way for them to begin to organize the massive amounts of information accumulated in life.

The group process as used in GAB provides a number of beneficial outcomes. First and foremost, listening to the accounts of the lives of others stimulates recall by similarity, contrast, and novelty. For example, in one group two members discussed the 'Depression' and the impact

it had on their lives. One person lived in the city and recalled with horror the food shortages, long bread lines, rationing and constant hunger. In contrast, the other person had lived on a farm during that period and life when on as usual; food was plentiful and the bartering for goods that was typical of those times continued. One person was unaffected by the Depression while the other one learned the hard lessons of little food, no work and no money.

A feeling of bonding and camaraderie develops in the groups as the members become intimately involved in listening to the life stories of fellow members, while sharing their own stories. Friendships grow that extend beyond the time together in the autobiography group. New behaviors, new activities, and practices develop. The group encourages and supports one another in self-development. After participation in an autobiography group, motivation for new activities appears to be released. It seems to release latent interests to try new things.

Benefits and Outcomes of GAB

There are multiple benefits obtained from participation in a GAB class. The goal most people have foremost in mind when they sign up for a class is to write their life story for family or friends. This goal is met in GAB since all members will have at least twenty pages written of their life story by the end of the sessions. This is the overt, observable reward from taking the class, but there are other intangible benefits.

Firstly, GAB participants come to know – understand – and appreciate their live as lived in ways they may never have known before. They come to realize how much they have lived through and moved on. In their daily lives, rather than concentrating solely on the demands of the day, they come to appreciate that they are survivors of many events.

The life themes provide the opportunity to look closely at the important areas of our lives rather than just repeating the same ‘stories’ we have told ourselves and others for so long. The oft repeated story about “walking miles in snow and freezing temperatures to go to school” may be true...but what lies beneath it? Was the family warm, supportive or cold, critical and

unflinching in demands? GAB participants go deeper into the story and reach new depths of self-understanding.

GAB participants also get to know others in the group at a profound level. A deep connection is forged when we listen and respond to one another while sharing our own life stories. The differences as well as similarities surface among people and tolerance – acceptance – and appreciation are the result. In one of the first studies on GAB it was found that while there were changes in attitudes toward the self, the largest change after participation was in “attitude towards others.” The *others* became more like they were. This implies a greater acceptance of others as a result of the group experience of sharing life stories (see Birren & Schroots, 2006). Another aspect of the improved self-confidence is that early life memories become more positive. The internal changes in the way we view ourselves appears to be shift positively, a shift towards decreasing the distance between our ideal selves, or the selves we aspire to be, and the actual selves we believe we are. Sharing our life stories also contributes to our view of our social image. The way we think other people view us.

Self-confidence grows in GAB participants as their writing proves to them, “I can do it, I can write.” Many have wanted to write their story for years, but never knew how to begin. The structure, themes, and group support in GAB gives them the confidence they need to begin writing. The writing always improves with time as participants learn from one another and find the courage to write from the heart as well as the mind.

As old memories are confronted and reassessed in the supportive atmosphere of the GAB group, self-esteem and self-worth increase. Often members learn to let go of past hurts and move forward into new ventures with renewed strength and vigor. They may use their time in volunteer activities or new creative endeavors.

Finally, and possibly most importantly, GAB members have fun! They have fun learning about themselves and others and learn to laugh at our all too human foibles, and share in the

sheer joy of growing beyond one's past. Humor has come to be regarded as a positive trait in adapting to life. It is often expressed in laughing at one's self in an autobiography group. However, tears may also be shed in some small groups as painful events of an individual's life are touched upon. Positive and negative feelings are evoked in GAB, and are fitted into the life stories with greater acceptance.

Responses from GAB participants

Over the years, evaluations and comments have been collected from former GAB participants. Former GAB participants provide examples of the benefits and strength of the process. One Guided Autobiography class has continued to meet for the past five years on their *own*...calling themselves the "Un-guided Autobiography" group. Another community GAB group that was organized in an AARP chapter, has been having reunion meetings for nine years. It meets every few month to share their written accounts of a new theme of life. The desire to remain in contact is a value in the community and institutions.

Comments from GAB participants

The following are comments from former GAB participants that speak to the specific benefits of GAB.

A Written Legacy

- "I gained a product I can polish and complete as is – or add more as desired."
- "My goal was to write an autobiography and this class has really pushed me into doing just that. Former classes got me thinking...this one got me doing!"

Appreciation of one's life as lived

- "I came to terms with some sad events in my life and feel more at peace about those events. This was a great experience."
- "Writing all these stories has helped me to integrate many difficult experiences and use them for a springboard to go forward."

Friendship and Understanding

- “I learned insight into other’s lives. After listening to my classmates, I was not alone with life’s problems; many had problems much more devastating than mine.”
- “I really enjoyed the interaction of the other class members, hearing their life stories and opinions.”
- “A feeling of connectedness with others in the group, and *especially* in our small group.”

Self-confidence

- “I have enjoyed this course tremendously. It has made a difference in my outlook. I have found solace in looking back and courage to go forward.”
- "I gained self-respect. I gained understanding about my life from childhood to now and it helped me be more at ease with myself and others.”

Self-worth

- “I feel more like a whole person.
- “Further insights into that most important of persons, “me” but I must confess, I’m beginning to find this wealth of self-knowledge a bit dull. I must be ready for a reincarnation.”

A colleague and Guided Autobiography facilitator from British Columbia, Dr. James Thornton, recently asked participants who completed a GAB class what they had learned. The following quote sums up the power of the GAB process succinctly.

1. I am learning to trust.
2. I am leaning not to judge others.
3. I am learning to have faith in myself.
4. I am learning to forgive myself.
5. I am leaning to have better self-esteem.
6. I am leaning to love myself.
7. I am leaning to love others.
8. I am leaning to let the small stuff go.
9. I am healing the past.
10. I am looking forward to the future.

Epilogue

There is a growing interest in autobiography... the writing and sharing of our life stories. The interest may be motivated by an impersonal era of increasingly efficient societies and businesses. In the past there has been more interest to developing cemeteries for our bones than for help in passing on our life stories and developing archives for them. Guided Autobiography is a group method of priming memories in important themes that contribute to the fabric of lives. Significant new areas of research are opening up as analyses are revealing the structure of lives as revealed from the inside, the self-perceptions. The personal attributions of causality in lives can vary widely with differences in culture, life events, and gender. Studies of such issues await an expanded era of autobiographical studies in which the richness of life-time memories are stimulated for personal and institutional benefits.

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