

PLANNING PARADES: MY STUDENTS AND ME

Cynthia L. Garthwait, MSSW, University of Montana

The process by which the author became a gerontologist is described through the metaphorical use of parades. The narrative suggests that a similar experience can be provided to students by helping them notice the parade of elders in their lives, enter the parade they see, recognize the sociohistorical context of the parade, make meaning of their observations, and commit to the welfare of elders. The narrative account of the shift from gerontological social worker to professor of gerontological social work proposes suggested ways in which students can be exposed to the field of gerontology in ways that will encourage them to consider entering this field.

“Oh honey, you don’t know nothin’.” Spoken by a 98-year-old woman whose age was double mine, these words reverberate embarrassingly in my memory today, even though they were spoken six years ago when I remarked during a visit to her nursing home that, at 49, I was only half her age. Rapidly approaching the 50-year mark myself, I believed that I was finally a credible social work practitioner with people much older than me. In my effort to acknowledge her extremely full life and to appear appropriately modest, I confidently commented that she had experienced an entire lifetime more than I had. Her response reminded me of the first time a client pointed out how much I had to learn. My gerontological social work career had just begun at age 22, and I was told by an 80-year-old male nursing home resident that I looked 12. Even at age 22, I realized that I was being invited to openly and respectfully join a parade of characters who would ultimately shape my views of life, myself, my profession, and the aging process. I was becoming a gerontologist.

After each of these two incidents, which took place 27 years apart, I contemplated the meaning of these elders’ comments and accepted the fact that my recently acquired degree meant little to those whose lives I was entering. Neither person actually said that I had no knowledge of what it meant to be old, but had they said so, they would have been accurate. Still, I interpreted the elders’ comments as an invitation rather than a

criticism. Had I not been exposed as a young girl to the possibilities of aging well, had I not been professionally trained to work toward self-awareness, and had the elders I was working with not pointed out my need to learn from them, I might not have *NOTICED THE PARADE* in full view before me.

Since that time, having worked with older adults my entire career, even as a social work educator, I have labored diligently to acquire knowledge and skills that would enhance my ability to work well with elders. Even now, as a professor of social work with a specialty in gerontology, I count those two significant experiences as valuable lessons. Both stuck firmly with me, as many others have done, as lessons in humility and genuineness. Was it not a foolish, even reckless, move for my employer to include in the social work job description for a tender new social worker the social well-being of the residents of a nursing home, all of whom had experienced so much more in life than I had? What did I know that could help them in any meaningful way?

At age 49, I remembered those questions because of the blunt reminder that my client had lived her life in places and times I could only speculate about. Even as I drew near to the 50-year mark myself, I acknowledged, both to myself and my 98-year-old client, that I still did not know how it felt to lose a spouse, to experience unwanted dependency at the hands of an unwelcome interplay of chronic illnesses, or to replay my life script internally

in search of meaning and purpose. That experience waits for me, and even though I *ENTERED THE PARADE* long ago, I know there is still much to learn. My hope is that I will learn my lessons graciously and will be able to effectively and wisely bring my students into the parade that I now see has no beginning and no end.

Calling myself a gerontologist now is a matter of pride, but being a gerontologist when I began my career in social work was seen by some of my professional colleagues as a lowly calling. Having just completed a federal training program in aging that supported my graduate education, and having eagerly accepted a position as the director of social services in a large nursing home, I was asked an unforgettable question by a colleague. She asked why I had chosen to pursue gerontology as a career, and even suggested that it was because I could not find another job. Offended, both for myself and my future clients, I quickly realized that this chosen field of mine carried with it little respect within my profession, although I knew even then it would ultimately allow me to march in a remarkable parade of meaningful moments and memorable characters, experience a maturing of perspective, develop comfort with paradox, and catch a glimpse of the possibility of aging well. That realization and numerous meaningful moments with my elders have been my best teachers. Because of them and the ways in which they have enriched my life, it has been my mission in social work education to *ORCHESTRATE A SIMILAR PARADE* for my students, offering access to the spectacles, songs, sounds, and sadness that often mark the time spent with older adults.

I wish I could point to one elder, one exquisite experience with a person facing life's end, or one unique and life-changing moment that led me to know that gerontology was my calling, but none in and of themselves changed my life sufficiently to lead me into gerontology. Such a personal account would perhaps be

inspiring, but it would not accurately describe the real ways in which most of us find our life paths by being touched, nudged, and led by others. My experience resembles more a patchwork than a sudden revelation. Each member of the cast has added to my understanding.

The Parade Before Me

The patchwork nature of my path to gerontology contained snapshots of lives well lived, gifts of insight from those I have served, and challenges born of the mistakes I have made. Each of these pieces, experienced individually in time, brought partial understanding to my eyes and heart and provided individual clues to follow. Passion for working with elders was inspired early in the ongoing parade of my life. This passion became solidified as I learned, was challenged, grew, recognized and opened gifts of wisdom presented to me, and became grateful for the opportunity to march in this sometimes somber, sometimes celebratory, parade alongside those ahead of me in terms of years.

Always evident to me was the fact that others did not see in older people the same charm or attraction that I saw, and I can only speculate about some of the reasons for what I consider to be their inability to take a strengths perspective on aging. To be fair, I am not attracted to working with other populations about which my colleagues care passionately. However, I have come to see that my personal parade to this point, both personally and professionally, has been orchestrated, facilitated, supported, and chronicled by those whose lives have touched me in ways that have influenced how I see the world and its inhabitants. My colleagues have not been so lucky, I conclude. It has always been my belief that people without this passion for gerontology just do not yet know the rewards of this work.



Unintentionally Taught Lessons

Many people I have known, when in the presence of older adults, especially the frail elderly, see only the dependency and decline associated with age. Although I, too, clearly see those aspects of aging, they do not and never have constituted the entirety of what comes into view for me. I also learned about personal accomplishments in the sagging of shoulders, a hardy work ethic in gnarled fingers, compassion in a tender touch, and spiritual and mental toughness in the setting of a jaw. Some of my ability to take this perspective is a debt I owe to my parents. My father spoke compassionately and respectfully about the group of octogenarians who waited for him to unlock the men's clothing store where he was a retail clerk in the small Midwestern town where I grew up because he genuinely appreciated their daily stories and their seasoned outlook on life. My mother took me as a matter of course to the local nursing home to serve communion and play piano for residents wishing to continue their connection with the church. I learned well their unintentionally taught lessons about positive aging and about service to elders as not only giving, but receiving. Grateful for having been given the eyes to see what elders have to offer as well as the heart to care for them, I have admiration for my parents' everyday acceptance of aging, which also included careful attention to the needs of my grandparents who lived with us. Their lessons to me, not intentionally, were given in action more than in words.

College work as a nurse's aide in a nursing home helped me confront fully the challenge elders face to live with dignity in the midst of declining health and intrusive daily care and procedures. My failure to fully protect my clients' dignity because of my immature frustration with providing intimate physical care was sometimes more apparent to those I served than was my compassion and willingness to serve in the most menial

and yet most loving ways. The patronizing words I spoke to a man embarrassed by his incontinence when what I really wanted to do was connect with him in a truly genuine manner afforded me important lessons in being real. My parents' nurturing of my critical thinking skills and their lived-out compassion for those about whom others did not care, combined with my concurrently taken college courses teaching me to inquire, challenge, and create, brought critically reflective questions to my work. Why do nursing homes exist, and how is it that they have become the norm for elder care? What is it that makes us so reluctant to speak about death with those who thirst for an empathetic ear? Why do we seek after youth and avoid growing old at all costs? Why do some cultures value those who have aged, while others cast them aside? How have we come to a place where monetary rewards for working with youth exceed that given to those who work with elders? Who gets to decide what it means to age well? What is my responsibility to challenge the injustices I see, and how can I work to empower elders? What knowledge, skills, and values will stand me in good stead in this work?

Learner and Teacher Both

The recipient of a Federal Training Grant from the Administration on Aging while in pursuit of my MSW, I found myself being encouraged to be a part of answering those questions, to pose many more like them, and to gain not only high level interpersonal skills with elders, but social policy and program development expertise. A practicum seminar focused entirely on aging, an extremely good opportunity for those of us planning a career in aging, afforded me the chance to delve deeply into the issues of aging, both challenged and supported by other students also learning about aging at their respective sites.

People whose lives brushed mine as we paraded together through the aging process,

they as sojourners and I as support, return to me as memories and at times as indictments of my lack of skills, but always as examples to be used in teaching. The 88-year-old woman whose lifelong bitterness over the deaths of her husband and sons tainted her view of life only strengthened my resolve to choose acceptance over anger should I face similar losses. The 94-year-old Alaskan Native woman whose oral history I had taken taught me about standing strong in the face of racism. A remarkable 80-year-old man taught me that love and passion never cease, and a 95-year-old woman showed me how profoundly the hurts suffered as a child at the hands of a cruel parent can color one's experience of the world for over 90 years. A 75-year-old man learning to transcend a painful disability inspired me with his ability to make sunshine, laugh at adversity, and see opportunities rather than obstacles. Others whose names and faces I remember taught me about gratitude, endurance, perseverance, forgiveness, tenderness, resolve, and the power of spiritual maturity. The 88-year-old woman I call a friend showed me the traits I now associate with vitality in old age, including sassiness, good humor, flexibility, commitment, orneryness, faith, independence, interdependence, and the will to accept life as it comes, most recently facing with faith and grace the suicide of a grandson. Eighty-nine years into his life, another man showed me the importance of staying true to one's values by rejecting material goods as a measure of wealth.

Families of nursing home residents I have served modeled love and patience, adult children played out the dramas of their families before me, impoverished elders showed me the disparity between those who have resources and those who do not, and my attempts to secure services taught me about societal attitudes toward aging, as well as how social policies are often more influenced by politics than by need.

Each of these experiences taught me to *NOTICE THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT* of the lives I was impacting, as well as to recognize that the meaning assigned to their experiences and mine were colored by history, culture, and power. I soon understood that it was impossible to understand a person unless I could begin to place them in time. My teachers, both in the field and in the classroom, taught me to *MAKE MEANING* of my observations and my associations with elders. My family had taught me that meaning comes from service, and as a gerontologist I recognized my calling. My sometimes helpful efforts to assist them in finding meaning in aging reinforced my growth.

Twenty-six years of professional work with elders in a variety of roles and capacities – including nursing home social work, a private psychotherapy practice with older adults, social services consultation to nursing homes, and currently social work education – have combined and congealed in a way that confirms my choice of gerontology as a career. Teaching every single gerontology course with a service learning format that involves my students with elders in a meaningful, personal, and up-close manner has allowed me to see older people through their fresh eyes. My students learn about life by asking elders about dying, and they learn about autonomy by seeing dependence. When my students reflect on their fears, their misconceptions, and their appreciation of the chance to engage in a significant and meaningful interpersonal encounter with an elder, I sometimes am lucky enough to catch a glimpse of the parade in which they are being invited to march. I hear them say that learning about aging, combined with precious time spent with an elder, changed their lives, and I smile. I read their journals and witness them gaining insight into the strengths of the frail old person they thought had nothing left to contribute, and I smile. I watch them develop strengths-based

and empowering communication skills with elders, such as life review and reminiscence, and I smile. I hear them question societal attitudes, discriminatory social policies, and the status quo, and I cry. I remember doing the same. The parade continues, and my students are invited.

Parade Planning Strategy

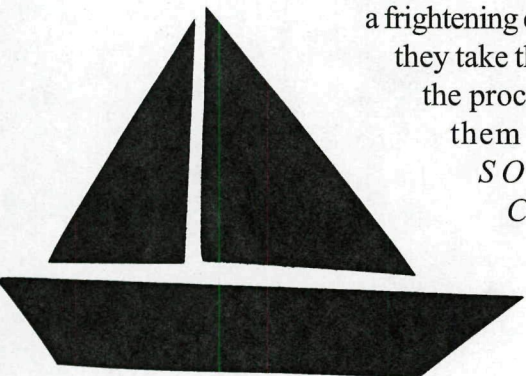
If I thought, as a social worker turned professor, that I would need to provide inspiring experiences to my students, I would be unable to do so. In fact, intimidated by the prospect of shouldering such a responsibility, I would not be able to engineer a spectacular, life-changing experience for my students in order to help them explore the possibilities of gerontology as a career. In fact, I want them to find the parade themselves. Toward that end, what I could do, and what would be more meaningful, is to create similar yet unique spaces of possibility for my students. Then, if I have taught them the skills of appreciation, of perspective, of openness, of insight, and of seeing with the eyes of one who wishes to understand, a parade unique to each student could commence. That I can do. That I have done.

My hope is that my contributions to my students' education, combined with personal experiences they may have had or relationships that may have enabled them to see broadly, will allow them first of all to *NOTICE THE PARADE*. Not everyone does notice, I know, but surely my students will be different. They must take the risk of *ENTERING THE PARADE*, perhaps at first a frightening experience for some. Should they take this step, I can begin to trust the process which I know can lead them to *RECOGNIZE THE SOCIO-HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF THE PARADE*, whereby my students see how the stages of human life are

intricately connected, and how attitudes, politics, culture, and economics impact the life parade. I can lead them into oral history taking and life review with the help of the *Century in Review Socio-Historical Timeline* I have developed, which helps guide students' interviews of elders, place them in time, and compare their own lives with those of their clients, reflecting all the while on the delightful possibilities of connecting with someone who has lived through times that previously were only lifeless history lessons.

Given their openness and my willingness to guide their thinking, students who recognize this context will *MAKE MEANING* of their observations and their work. This involves a clarification of their own values about aging, appreciating a life well lived, and coming to a new understanding of their own role in the parade. When students arrive at this point, I am confident that they will *COMMIT* to the welfare of elders, which means challenging the injustices of social policy and negative attitudes toward aging, and living their own lives in such a manner that aging will be a meaningful experience. Cognizant of the cycles of learning and experience, I know that students will cycle back to the noticing stage at surprising points in their learning, this time reminding themselves to see with fresh eyes. They will now have learned to see, engage, recognize, understand, and resolve to be a part of what they see. I will have done my job.

Because literature and film can eloquently portray life in ways that are deadened and limited to partial understanding when relegated to a class lecture, students become passionate, outraged, emboldened, enlightened, and at times even radicalized when given access to learning through such means. Readings such as *Tuesdays with Morrie* by Mitch Albom and *Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence both give voice to elders facing aging and death, but in very different ways. Movies such as *Surfing for Life*,



Camilla, Trip to Bountiful, Whale Rider, and Strangers in Good Company draw students into the social, spiritual, cultural, emotional, physical and sexual lives of older people in ways that none of my lectures, however academic or passionate, could ever do. Panels of elders brought to the classroom setting who have been asked to give their views on almost anything can inspire, engage, madden, and sometimes mystify my students. I provide my students a standard of excellence in intergenerational social work by sharing with them *Best Practices in Intergenerational Social Work*, developed by a community-based intergenerational advisory board made possible by a John A. Hartford Foundation grant to my institution.

Grateful for my students' openness to such learning opportunities, I reinforce their questions, challenge their assumptions, provide alternative ways of perceiving, offer additional resources, clarify the sociohistorical context of aging, and sit back. If I have done my work well as parade organizer, I will have created an environment in which my students now prize their experience with elders. They see themselves as part of the community in which both students and elders often live in isolation from each other, identifying the possibilities for changes in attitudes, services, and social policies that are more equitable and just, and relish the challenges inherent in gerontology of which they are now aware. They now notice the parade of characters provided to them through both life and academic experience. Hopefully they will avail themselves of this opportunity, even joining the parade as well.

Lessons Learned and Shared

Reflecting on my journey into gerontology, I know that I recognized and joined in the parade of characters and experiences as most people join a parade—tentatively, on a surface level, lacking in confidence, out of step, and somewhat self-consciously. Aware that I was

being observed by onlookers, I hesitantly began to participate as those who see parades as entertainment often do. I recognized the community building and celebratory nature of parades early on, appreciating each person who provided music, and I was grateful to be a part of their lives.

Only over time did I understand the deeper, shared, and collective cultural meaning of parades, both literal and figurative. People I met shared their lives with me, but also illustrated larger social issues. The African American man who had triumphed over discrimination taught me through life review that social justice is achieved one person and one policy at a time. The 95-year-old Alaskan Native great-grandmother who returned home to her village to die showed me the universality of mothering. The 75-year-old woman who devoted her life to her family and who passed on her understanding of precious family ties showed me the importance of carrying history forward for the sake of her grandchildren and mine. The 80-year-old woman debilitated by rheumatoid arthritis who unfailingly inquired about my well-being illustrated the ways in which suffering brings awareness of the needs of others. They all taught me what I already knew from loving parades, which is that sometimes we need to publicly, in spectacle fashion, display our lives together.

My learned lessons include the natural and desirable balance between a well-rehearsed and yet unscripted parade performance, which I recognize as the interplay between formal education and the art and spontaneity of good social work practice. Elements of parades resemble the building blocks of our shared lives. For example, I see the universality of life passing by, yet do not lose sight of the uniqueness of each individual life lived. Patriotism, central to most parades, is for me a reminder that loyalty and coming together are vital to living life well communally. Often a part of parades, diverse political movements

are necessary to gradually and sometimes dramatically shape social policy that is representative of our shared values. Onlookers sitting on the sidelines and cheering the rest of us on remind me of myself as an innocent. They motivate me to invite them, some of whom are my students, to find their place in the parade.

Currently bolstered and emboldened by a Geriatric Enrichment in Social Work grant provided by a partnership between the John A. Hartford Foundation and the Council on Social Work Education, I find myself in the midst of a faculty education and curriculum transformation project. Although I do not expect my teaching colleagues to transform themselves into gerontologists, I am encouraged and delighted by their interest in aging and intergenerational practice and by their willingness to learn and to incorporate aging content and experiences into every one of their social work courses. Now that intergenerational content is integrated, sustainable, and pervasive in the curriculum, it has become clear to me that again I can be a catalyst for the learning of others, and as a result my colleagues no longer watch me teach about gerontology from the sidelines. They too see the possibilities for teaching about life by including content on older adulthood in an authentic manner; they too utilize elders as examples of social change agents and empowered individuals; they too teach about social justice by pointing out social policies which discriminate against the elderly; and, as a result, they too add to the possible experiences that will populate the internal landscape of our students long after they have vacated our classrooms.

Moving Toward Paradox

It has long been apparent to me that older people can understand and live comfortably with paradox. They know from experience that seemingly antithetical concepts can co-exist. They know that surrender can bring

victory, that pain can bring joy, that being lost can help you find your way, and that accepting the greyness of the world can bring richness and freedom rather than confusion and compromise. Watching the older masters of paradox negotiate the uncertainties of life, and then seeing them come to terms with these uncertainties as not only inevitable but precious, I learn to anticipate my own personal challenges. Would that I could communicate this to my students. I will try, but I know that their world view may still be colored and limited by a need for definition and certainty, not by an appreciation of paradox. When they reach the stage that will allow for a greater acceptance of diversity, a celebration of confusion, and a move toward genuine understanding that transcends science, they will recognize what I see and what my elder friends know. Perhaps I will be lucky enough to be told that an elder they met or an insight I shared helped them appreciate the paradoxes of life. They will see that they too are a part of the parade, that there is more to be learned from joining it than from watching it, and that their gerontologist professor cared more about their personal and professional growth than about their classroom performance, and for good reason. I hope that I will have taught them more about the meaning of life than about theories of human development. Perhaps a new gerontologist or two will play in the band, decorate a float, carry a flag, or someday serve as grand marshal.

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Cynthia L. Garthwait, MSSW is a Professor/Chair at the University of Montana Department of Social Work. Questions or comments regarding this article can be addressed to: ggart@bigsky.net.

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