Wisdom-Bearers and Story-Tellers: Older Adults as Guides and Friends

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This narrative recounts the author's discovery that her primary pathway to service was in working with older adults. Embedded in this process were separate but related journeys of coming to terms with a spiritual call and learning how her affinity for languages and cultures could support a contribution in aging.

Gerontology as a profession chose me; I did not first choose it. Through a series of synchronistic events whose roots lay below my early consciousness, geriatric social work began to thread through the core of my life. This central focus remained largely invisible to me until it thumped me on the head in a forceful way in my mid-thirties, declaring itself in a way I could not ignore. Later, when I came to fully recognize my place in the aging studies field, I began to understand how this vocation had always called to my soul and how the digressions from this path had only made the way more clear. Because of childhood relationships with older adults who treasured me, I formed friendships that have spanned four decades of my life; these friendships have been a continuing source of inspiration and nurture and a key to my undiminished trust in a benevolent future. I also sensed a transcendent force with me on this journey. At times, because of busyness or fear, like the Biblical Jonah, of what I might be asked to do, I have limited its access to my heart. But when I have allowed it to enter, this companion has challenged me to live my life in a searching, mindful, and compassionate way.

Looking back now, I can see how the many strands of my youthful interests have come together in a tapestry of time, making aging the dominant color. I will relate this process of discovery through description of my family guides, guides I met during college, emerging guides in my career, and what I learned from each of them.

Family Guides: Early Memories

Both sets of my grandparents raised their children on farms in Iowa. I remember the rich experiences of visits to grandparents' houses that included setting foot in rooms redolent of time and earth, slightly musty but pleasant fragrances. The houses were filled with objects that must have represented well the *objets du jour*, but which to me were strange and wonderful: a Seth Thomas mantel clock; a library replete with Arthur Conan Doyle classics and Iowa law books; pie chests and Rococo rocking chairs; a beautiful rosemaul-painted wood chest from Norway inscribed "Anna Rorvig-1883"; embroidered linen tablecloths; light streaming through a stained-glass staircase window; ten foot ceilings; patterned wallpaper that I memorized over the years; and homemade, special recipe, raisin spice cookies. Outside were barns in need of paint, Holstein cattle, cackling chickens, vineyards, vegetable gardens, and large expanses of land and light. This was the context of the life of my grandparents: these objects and locations spoke of what they valued. As I loved my grandparents, I also learned to value the context of their lives. This context brought me a love of books and of learning, an appreciation of old things, and an understanding that the beauty of an environment had the power to nourish me at times when I felt despair or loneliness.

My grandparents' rural life included a deep concern for friends and neighbors. For example, as a farmer, lawyer, and insurance

agent, my paternal grandfather was well-respected because of his thoughtful care for people in the community. During the Depression of 1932, when mortgaged farms were brought to auction to pay debts the farmers could no longer cover, my grandfather would regularly appear at these auctions with a pitchfork in hand. No one ever bid at the auctions he attended; thus, a number of threatened farm sales were thwarted and some of the farmers negotiated more generous payment schedules. In her late 80s, my paternal grandmother was photographed for the *Des Moines Register* along a roadside campaigning for George McGovern in the presidential election of 1972. She remained concerned about the political world and its consequences for the poor until the end of her life. My grandmother's example taught me that even at older ages, one could and should make a difference. These models of advocacy later led me to see the power of social work to promote both my passion for aging and my concern for the voiceless.

My maternal grandparents had retired to Arkansas by the time I began to form memories of them. As with my paternal grandparents, I knew I was loved and welcomed on their small farm. My grandmother developed cancer and I watched in brief segments across time as my grandfather gently tended her through an initial recovery and then a relapse. He modeled a sensitive, uncomplaining style that I hope I will use if I am ever in a caregiving circumstance. After her death, he cycled between my family home and the home of an aunt and uncle. He was a quiet man who didn't have a lot of outside activities. I was quiet too, and I remember feeling awkward with him at times, wanting to talk with him, but not knowing how to begin the conversation. Now I view it as an opportunity forever lost. I believe he would have welcomed those conversations as much as I would have enjoyed sharing in them. In our active suburban household, I think there were times when he felt bored and lonely. Our world was not his world of choice and he never made it his own. But in his quiet way, he taught me that love could be communicated even in wordless ways.

Emotional Supports

My grandparents must have looked forward to yearly visits as much as I did. I remember racing into the living room after an eight-hour car ride to see them sitting in favorite rockers, rising to greet each one of us with a kiss and a hug, answering the excitement in our voices with excitement in their own. My grandparents loved me and told me so. I was my paternal grandmother's "little lamb," though I often didn't feel like one, if I even knew exactly what she meant by that term. This endearment bestowed on me a sense that she cared deeply about me. Even though small, I was not insignificant to her. Like facing on a hand-sewn dress, this was a powerful and largely invisible stabilizer in my life.

As the youngest child in a traditional family with two older brothers and a mother who suffered from undiagnosed depression, I learned to melt into the background to avoid being the object of angry outbursts as my brothers often were. I learned to be quiet and to suppress the sound of my voice. One of my struggles since has been to value my own voice and to let it speak its truth. Perhaps this is why it took me three decades of my life to discover that gerontology was the field to which I was called. Had I listened harder, had I listened sooner, this truth may have been available to me earlier. Still, the first life path I followed in languages led me to find an alternative voice and to value diversity in aging because of the friends I made and kept in foreign lands. Perhaps there are really no diversions from one's true vocation, since vocation contains all the lessons that have come before.

Emotional caring from my grandparents was something I could count on. My paternal grandparents especially were able to support me in a way my mother was not because of her own struggles. My grandmother, a grandmother to many grandchildren, wrote me letters. When my grandparents phoned (rare in those days because of the expense of long distance calls) they always asked to speak with me. That was affirming for a somewhat shy child—to know that I was that important. When I was young I thought the scenario of greetings and good-byes would replay itself in an unending and welcome loop. Later with their deaths, I felt the pain of irreparable loss. There was a tear in the fabric that could not be mended.

Later Influence

Three of my grandparents died when I was young, but my paternal grandmother lived until I was in my 20's. She represented the now common demographic of older women surviving their spouses: she lived about twenty-one years beyond my grandfather. During that time she continued to live in the same farmhouse just outside of town, but extended her commitment to the well-being of the marginalized rural poor. She was active in local societies that collected and distributed goods, and she maintained her political advocacy by being a frequent letter writer/commentator to the local newspaper. The wisdom she showed me was that one can make a difference through all ages of life. If one chooses that pathway, the pathway of activism and altruism, one's sense of self-efficacy will remain intact even as health problems appear. I remember her presence at my wedding, older then and in pain, but radiant in a beauty that comes from finding an internal source of resilience.

Another source of wisdom that also became a personal resource to me was the religious affiliation of both sets of grandparents. My paternal grandparents lived in a town with only two churches: both from the same Norwegian mainline Protestant denomination. They were active in the church and, though my father had joined my mother's church, we always enjoyed attending with them when we visited on Sundays. My other grandparents were members of a small church organization, and some of their relations had been missionaries. All of my grandparents enjoyed the social relationships formed with church friends, but valued more the deeper connection to Spirit which the church invited. As I watched them pray at meals and other times, I began to appreciate the value of trust in the transcendent.

Extended Family Guides

Cast into this family mix was an array of distinctive unmarried great-aunts and a great-uncle. Three chose to live together and run the family farm with a house that still sported an outhouse well into the 1960s. Because my paternal grandfather was the only one who left the homestead to marry and start his own family, they retained some bitterness at that decision. My grandmother would refer to the yearly visit with these good-hearted but myopic relatives as the "duty call" and sometimes would send us without her. My brothers, parents, and I sat in the parlor as these great-aunts and a great-uncle scurried to make us feel welcome. The parlor had a faded green and white linoleum floor and a sagging sofa. Though poor, these relatives were always interested in us and asked many questions about school and our lives. Behind closed doors was a second, more formal parlor with a light oak Victorian pump organ. I only saw it once. We

were family, but it seemed as if there were also boundaries between us that were symbolized by the pump-organ-in-the-parlor we never saw.

My grandmother's twin sister, a schoolteacher, lived with a woman who graduated with a law degree from and who was a trustee of Drake University. This woman's grandfather had been a ship captain. She had come from wealth on both sides and this well-appointed house, by contrast to the farmhouse of the great-aunts and great-uncle, had plastered walls, silver coffeepots, and magnificent 18th century paintings. Though not related to me by blood, she took as much interest in me as great-aunt Mary, encouraging my early interest in horses by giving me armfuls of magazines about show horses. I have a photo of me at age four standing between these two great-aunts, one real and one adopted, looking up with an expression of joy on my face. These early encounters with my extended family shaped my understanding that while the worlds of adults and children were kept quite separate at that time, the lines could melt into each other in ways that helped me feel safe and that encouraged me to do whatever I dreamed.

Experiences with family elders laid a foundation for my career choice of gerontology. Along with Remen (2000), I was blessed by being born into loving family relationships with my grandmothers and my grandfathers. These relationships taught me to begin to trust my inner feelings and to rely on the wisdom that these elders so graciously lived and gave. In a spiritual sense, these connections and the love I learned from them continue on, golden threads woven through the rest.

Guides in College and Beyond

I had been fortunate to have French classes from fifth grade onward. My growing interest in many foreign languages and cultures was fostered and given support by all of the older adults in my life who were not surprised or puzzled when I chose modern foreign languages as my major and to study and work overseas in my junior year of college. Through my college years, I remember bringing my friends from other countries to my paternal grandmother's house in Roland, Iowa, for weekend visits. Even though they were from distant places like Hong Kong, Kuwait, and France, they were always welcomed by my grandmother, living alone by then, who treated them as she did any of her grandchildren. Even in rural Iowa, diversity was valued.

During my first year, I took a one-month, winter-term course in rural poverty. I had the opportunity to shadow a social worker extensively. I assumed that many of the homes we would visit would be those of young families with children who had difficulty meeting expenses of running a small family farm in the beginnings of the corporate farm age. To my surprise, most of the homes we visited were those of older adults who lived in houses very similar to that of my great-aunts and great-uncle. They told of not being able to save money when they were young and of depleted resources that now impeded any cultivation of produce from their land. The stories and settings were familiar but sadder than anything I knew. Many of the rural dwellers we visited had been adversely affected by events far beyond their capacity to control. My heart was touched by their plights. I was a witness to a time that should have been happy for them as it had been for the older adults in my family, but was marred by insufficiency and unwanted dependence on limited government largess. This experience served as a guidepost along the way, whispering to me from the future I did not yet know, that with new awareness comes responsibility to help.

The winter month that I spent in the Amana Colonies of Iowa further engaged my interest in language and in learning from older adults. Formerly known as the Community of True Inspiration, the Colonies were settled

in the early 19th century by a religious community from Germany with ties to Lutheranism. This community sought divine inspiration and nurture of the inner life through male and female prophetic voices. They lived a communal lifestyle until circumstances in 1932 caused them to disband their way of life but to maintain separate business and religious societies. In the mid-70s, they recognized that they were in danger of losing connection with many of their youth who had not learned German and thus could neither read, nor understand, the inspired historical writings, which were read by elders in the church. Concern over this impending cultural loss led them to agree to house six college students and a German instructor who would assist in translation.

All six students wanted to be housed with families who had children so we could have many opportunities to practice our nascent German. As fate would have it, I was assigned to an older, childless couple. The wife had been a librarian and appeared distant at first meeting. Gradually, through living life in that space together, Henrietta (Heinchen to her friends) began to talk to me about the important things in her life: her church, her community, her love of books. Indeed she loaned me several favorite books over that month. Later when I had a daughter, she sent us *Emily of the New Moon* series by Lucy Maud Montgomery. This led to many happy moments snuggled together with my daughter, reading on the couch, and to a family trip to Prince Edward Island. Those times with my daughter are, in a way, a debt I owe Heinchen.

That relationship continues to this day. I was given a guestroom in their solid brick house that had once been part of the kitchen and dining building in South Amana. My Amana friend shared stories about the early days of the community and what tasks she had been expected to do as a child. She worked in the kitchen but also developed a love of literature and writing. She spoke of donning long-sleeved dress, black shawl, cap, and apron and walking to church with Psalter spiel and Bible three times on Sundays. I had worked patiently to break through her first reserve and gained a friend for life.

Now in assisted living, Heinchen continues to maintain an independent and fulfilling life. She is an example to me of someone who is aging successfully by continuing to engage in activities that have always made her happy. I have met no other student from that time who kept in touch with his/her host family. "Fate" had been kinder to me than I realized. This relationship I later recognized as a guide into the aging field.

My German instructor from that time also kept yearly contact with me until his death in June 2003. Like the ripple from a pebble skipped on water, he taught me how a passion, in his case for German language and culture, could enrich one's life in ever-expanding outward circles. Though I didn't know it at the time, gerontology would return and catch me in its widening ring. Language and culture guided me into work with older adults and provided me with a perpetual curiosity about how ethnicity and culture affect perspectives on aging.

In the summer of my third year in college, I lived in Frankfurt, Germany. While there, I traveled to the northern tip of Denmark to an international church youth retreat. Although we spoke many languages with only a few in common, there was a still a strong sense of community and acceptance among us. Walking alone to an abandoned World War II bunker by the sea, I recall sitting on the sandy ridge and contemplating the ocean. I felt the presence of a transcendent power and knew I was called to something larger than myself. Watching the waves lap the beach in hypnotic cadence, I felt a shared connection to all living things. This understanding opened me further to building relationships with older adults, even when I had to exert great effort.

I met a German couple, Eva and Walter, who were only in their early forties then. They spoke about large things, like the difficulty of living in Germany during World War II and being forced to participate in the Jugend corps (youth movement of the 40s). They also spoke about small things, such as their dislike of blackberries, which were plentiful on the roadsides and one of the few available food staples in postwar Germany. Most Germans did not discuss these things openly at that time, and I felt privileged that they shared their feelings with me. They taught me about *laufen gehen*, the value of seeking spiritual renewal by taking a walk in the woods. Even today, I find restoration in forest hikes. Over the years we have often visited together and that has always been renewing.

Unlike my older relatives who were always old when I knew them, I have witnessed the aging of these friends, as they have witnessed the aging of my own family. These are a few of the key intergenerational relationships that have formed the background, and sometimes the foreground, of my life. They have been gifts to me.

Emergence of Gerontological Interest

After college, having become fluent in two foreign languages with knowledge of a third, I worked for a major international airline for eight years. While I enjoyed the work, I recognized that my role was basically reactive, whether working with people who wanted to travel, locating missing luggage, or handing out food and beverages on flights. I began to sense a vague yearning to do something more. Though Spanish was not one of my languages, I found myself frequently on flights to Mexico or Venezuela. On one of the latter trips, I was housed in a magnificent resort on the northern coast near La Guaira. Rather than being assigned a coveted room by the sea, mine faced the mountain across the road. At night, while I sat on my balcony, my view was of the thousands of glittering lamps that lighted the tiny shacks on the mountainside less than a mile away. Sitting in one of the most costly pieces of real estate in the world, I contemplated the view of one of the least desirable locations. At that moment I could not resolve the incongruity between my life and the lives of the poor who lived in such desperate and unheralded circumstances. The stories of my grandparents, who lived meaningful lives of advocacy for the less fortunate, came to my mind. In response to this call, I returned to school and obtained a Master's degree in Social Work from Arizona State University. Though I volunteered in a telephone reassurance program for the elderly to confirm that choice, I did not yet know that gerontology would become my passion.

After several social work positions in mental health, I was thumped on the head by an accidental encounter that made me finally understand that gerontology was the place that would be a home for me, a motivation for me to help others and a way to make my unique contribution to the world. When my program changed auspices, I was left at a crossroads. A position was advertised for a psychiatric social worker on a long-term care mental health team. During the interview, I was asked why I thought I would be able to work with older adults, who could be bad tempered and belligerent. I answered that I had had many experiences with older adults, and I had loved my grandparents. I got the job. The separate strands of my life now began to come together in a very powerful way: older adults, social work, and multilingualism. I might not have sought out this position on my own, but the confluence of events lifted me up and set me gently down on this new, yet familiar, ground of work in aging.

This position doing clinical work with older adults tested me and also brought me triumphs. The work was the most satisfying of anything I had known, though I was not always successful in helping older adults regain a sense of meaning and purpose. Once I worked with

a depressed woman who had reverted to speaking only the French of her youth. I was one of the few professionals able to generate verbal responses. Though referred for mental health problems, many times the clients I worked with were troubled by questions of a spiritual nature. What type of legacy were they leaving when children no longer spoke with them? Why had God allowed them to develop cancer or Parkinson's disease? Because these questions were significant ones, I tried to meet these older clients in the places where they were as well as to involve clergy when a clear connection to religion had been made. One of my mentors, a Jewish psychologist and my supervisor, opened the door by giving me "permission" to follow this path in a public agency.

During this time in the early 90s, I was called to become a self-sustaining elder in a mainline Protestant faith tradition. In this tradition, priesthood calls are an externally initiated process but must, of course, also be an internal one. My life partner is Catholic. He is employed by the Catholic Church and had studied for the ministry himself, so this was a time of growth for both of us. The humor of working with elders and then becoming one in a ministerial office was not lost on me.

My search for answers to the questions I was asked by clients led me to obtain further education so I would be better prepared to help my older adult clients. Within a short time, my family and I were in Chicago and I was in a Ph.D. program in social service with a gerontological emphasis at the University of Chicago. Every class I took was an opportunity to delve into different aspects of aging. One of my instructors in the Divinity School suggested that each student had come to school with a central question, something that would shape our ongoing work; our task as his students was to reflect on and uncover that question. What had brought us here at this point in our lives? My question, as he helped me to discover it, was about religion and spirituality as mechanisms for managing life challenge in older adults. Indeed, much of my research to date related to this line of inquiry. I have learned that older adults draw on many different resources and adapt to new circumstances in impressive ways.

Conclusion

Reflecting back at my life now at what is probably about the midpoint, I wonder at the power that unexpected and unplanned encounters have had in my life to direct me into the field of gerontological social work. While at certain junctures, my life choices seemed to lack coherence, they now have moved into a more continuous path. I now see the people and experiences that entered my life as guides and friends who shaped my interest in aging. Time and perspective have evened out what in a shorter frame would have appeared to be wide arcs of a needle on paper, so that now I think of the digressions into language and culture as integral to my contributions to the aging field.

People enter and exit our lives as teachers: wisdom-bearers and story tellers. Extended family and friends have aroused my curiosity and fired my passion for gerontology. Some people teach us lessons we seek, and others teach us lessons we would never choose to learn on our own. But both kinds are of equal value. I have built relationships with some older adults because they have taught me about life through their actions and the nature of their being. Others were difficult to interact with because they were angry and directed their anger towards me, but the challenges they provided helped me to develop the skills I needed to do this work. What may appear to be loose threads may be what draws us back to the fabric of our lives.

Hanh (1991) suggests that it is in the present moment that we can find inner and outer peace. Being in the present moment with older adults is to hear their pain, sorrow, or joy. It is to acknowledge and validate their

uniqueness. In this simple yet profound act, we may transform their lives and our own.

Keeping a hopeful, watchful wait will bring you those things you need to learn in order to release your unique gift to the world. I know now that my best contribution is in aging, but as I have shown, I have not always known it. Being mindful of the power in the present moments of our lives to shape and direct us can help us glimpse the future person we will be. That vision, once we catch it, can be a strengthening force that leads us into our truest selves. May that vision be accessible for you.

Author Note

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