

**Letting Our Stories Go:
A Narrative Perspective on Spirituality in Later Life**

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Abstract

This paper draws on insights from narrative gerontology, narrative psychology, and narrative therapy to discuss spirituality in relation to aging. Defining “spirituality” in terms of meaning-making, it considers the possibility of “narrative foreclosure” - i.e., one’s life continues on (beyond retirement, for instance) yet, in one’s mind, one’s story has all but ended. It argues that coping with the changes and challenges of later life requires countering such foreclosure by developing “a good, strong story”. A process of “story-work” is then elaborated whereby older adults can be assisted in expanding, examining, transforming, and eventually transcending the stories by which they live.

Biography

Bill Randall is currently Chair, Department of Gerontology, St. Thomas University, and is the author of several articles, book chapters, and four books that address the important role that narrative and “stories” have on our lives. His most recent book, *Reading our Lives: The Poetics of Growing Old* (with Elizabeth McKim) was published this year (Oxford University Press). In addition, Bill has presented at national and international conferences on diverse topics including biographical aging, religion and spirituality in later life, and the importance of “narrative” in rural life.

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*Every person is born into life as a blank page -
and every person leaves life a full book* (Baldwin, 2005, p. ix).

*Growing old is one of the ways the soul nudges itself
into attention to the spiritual aspect of life* (Moore, 1992, p. 214).

Social Work, Spirituality, and Aging: A Narrative Perspective

Let me confess straightaway that I am a gerontologist, not a social worker. That said, many of the people social workers work with are older adults, struggling with the changes and challenges that can accompany later life. Vital to effective practice, then, is an appreciation for the sorts of age-related issues - physical and emotional, financial and social - with which gerontologists are commonly concerned. Among these are spiritual issues. Indeed, the very process of aging, it can be claimed, is spiritual in nature: “a natural monastery”, as one source proposes (Moody, 1995, p. 96).

Happily, spirituality is of increasing interest to social workers, too (witness this conference!), even if, as a profession, social work has “historically had an approach-avoidance attitude” or “conflicted attitude” toward it (McInnis-Dittrich, 2005, p. 269). At the same time, a growing awareness of the central role of narrative in human life - in disciplines as varied as psychology, philosophy, medicine, and education, not to mention social work itself - is shedding light on the experience of spirituality by providing a framework for conceptualizing the “inside”

of human development - and, by extension, of aging (Ruth & Kenyon, 1996) - plus topics such as wisdom, with which aging has traditionally been linked (Randall & Kenyon, 2001). In addition to “literary gerontology” (Wyatt-Brown, 2000) and “qualitative gerontology” (Rowles & Schoenberg, 2002), a sub-field that focusses on these more internal dimensions of aging (dimensions that my own work focusses on as well) is thus narrative gerontology (Kenyon, Clark, & de Vries, 2001).

Drawing from musings with my colleague Beth McKim on “the poetics of aging” (Randall & McKim, 2008) - and drawing, too, from my experience some 20 years ago as a parish minister, where, conveniently, many of my parishioners were older adults - I want to suggest a perspective that social workers might find valuable to bear in mind when responding to the needs of the elderly and their families. I call it a narrative perspective (Randall, 2001), and I see it as having (alas!) four main phases, which I will outline later on. In suggesting it, though, I am working with the assumption that it is in many ways spiritual agendas that lie beneath the issues seniors may be wrestling with: especially emotional issues - such as stress and depression - and issues of “existential meaning” (Reker & Chamberlain, 2000). Fueling this assumption is my perception that, viewed in terms of narrative, the topics of social work, spirituality, and aging find a measure of convergence.

Social Work and Narrative

The practice of social work - at least in terms of its therapeutic side - involves practitioners in what are, essentially, narrative processes. “All therapies are narrative therapies,” insists psychologist John McLeod (1996, p. 2). “Whatever you are doing, or think you are doing, as therapist or client,” he says, “can be understood in terms of telling and re-telling stories” (p. x). As I like to put, all therapies are therapoetic, where “poiesis” refers to the process of making meaning through memory and imagination, and frequently through words.

In a nutshell, to counsel someone is to listen closely to both the content and the form - the substance and the style, the told and the telling - of the stories that they recount about their life. And it is to help them make sense of the themes (and under-stories) those stories reflect, and, with the aid of one therapeutic masterplot or other, to assist them in re-storying in more positive, more preferable, and ultimately more liveable directions (see Freedman & Combs, 1996; Kenyon & Randall, 1997). “People reach out for therapy,” maintain Michael White and David Epston (1990), pioneers of narrative therapy per se, “when the narratives in which they are “storying” their experience, and/or in which they are having their experience “storied” by others, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience” (p. 14). People reach out for therapy, one could add, when the stories that they have internalized about their lives inhibit them from living those lives as fully - and as meaning-fully - as they might.

Spirituality and Narrative

Spirituality, too, is a narrative process, insofar as - whatever else it entails - it has to do with making meaning. In the words of adult educator, Robert Atkinson (1995), “everything we encounter as adults that gives us a new and deeper meaning in life is spiritual” (p. xiii). Spirituality and narrative, one can argue then, are symbiotic, to the degree not just that stories are structures for meaning (Polkinghorne, 1988) but that the very act of telling them - above all, the stories that are integral to our sense of self - is “a quest for personal meaning at deeper levels” (Bianchi, 2005, p. 321). “Telling our stories,” Atkinson maintains, “is an act of transcending the personal and entering the realm of the sacred” (p. 11).

In a similar vein, regardless of the form our expression of it takes, spirituality is something we experience, not despite the stories by which we comprehend our lives, but through them. We do not meditate or pray, we do not make sense of sermons, we do not have mystical awakenings, in some sort of existential vacuum; rather, in the context of, or through

the filter of, the complex set of storylines by which our sense of self is shaped. Furthermore, these storylines are tied in turn (for better or worse) to the master narratives of whatever doctrines or philosophies have shaped our understanding of the world in general (Brockelman, 1992): narratives that make up the “ideological setting” (McAdams, 1988; 1996) in terms of which, explicitly or otherwise, our individual reality is interpreted. On that point, though, the connection between spirituality and religion is ambiguous at best. Witness the growing number of people - including many seniors - who take pains to stress that, while they consider themselves “spiritual”, they resist the term “religious”.

Aging and Narrative

Aging, too, is a narrative process. Let me put the point another way: we do not just age and change in biological ways; we age in biographical ways as well (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots, & Svensson, 1996). We age with respect to our sense of identity: of who we are as a person. We age with respect to our concept of “my life” in relation to a particular past, present, and future; in short, in relation to our story. For psychologist Dan McAdams (1996), in fact, “identity is a life story” - which is to say, “an internalized and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose” (p. 132). We do not have this story so much as are this story (Randall, 1995). Furthermore, this myth-identity-story (whether it be “I’m a loser and nothing will ever work out” or “I’m capable of accomplishing whatever it is I want”) is continually changing, slight though the changes may be. And as it changes, we change. Accordingly, biographical aging is every bit as intricate and dynamic as biological aging. Nor is there some intrinsic limit to it, some maximum lifespan, as the latter, for example, is said to have: 115 years, says biogerontologist Leonard Hayflick (1994, p. 66). Barring the onset of dementia, our “narrative development” (Ray, 2000) can conceivably continue till our dying breath. Says psychologist Mark Freeman: “it is a potentially infinite process” (1991, p. 90).

“When it comes to our lifestory,” adds McAdams (1993), “nothing is ever final. Things can always change” (p. 278). And yet, directly or otherwise, biological aging far more than biographical aging has guided the agendas of gerontology up to now. Indeed, the implicit equation of “aging” with what happens to our bodies has coloured our experience of aging in general in terms of what cultural studies scholar, Margaret Morganroth Gullette, calls the “narrative of decline” (1997).

Another point to make is that the sheer passage of time itself can instill in us a more intense awareness of the depth, the complexity, and the thickness of our lives - experienced as stories, that is. And it can intensify the need to reflect upon our stories and to pass along whatever wisdom they may embody to whoever is willing to listen (Randall & Kenyon, 2001). Old age, observes Freeman, is thus “the narrative phase par excellence” (1997, p. 394).

Put another way, the very movement into later life itself supplies us with an “inner push” (Cohen, 2005) to wrestle with important developmental tasks, “philosophical” tasks, one might even say (Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995) - tasks which, while easy to ignore, are critical to tackle if we hope to cope maturely with the challenges that later life can bring. Among them, as social work scholar, Kathryn McInnis-Dittrich (2005) expresses it, is that of “finding meaning in past memories as part of constructing meaning in life” (p. 273). In other words, our task is to make sense of the past and, in the process, make peace with the past, through such autobiographical activities as life review (Butler, 2007) and reminiscence (Webster & Haight, 2002): activities which assist us to “assimilate” (Coleman, 1999) and thus “redeem” our past (Brady, 1990) by transforming the negatives of our life into positives, the sufferings into learnings, and the losses into gains (see McAdams, 2006). Equally important is to forge an increasing sense of connection with the broader horizons that border our existence, past and future: with the past, through interest in history or in genealogy, and with the future, through one mode or other of generativity (McAdams, 1996; 2006). The consequence of our engagement

in such endeavours, I would argue, is a greater openness to the human story overall, to “the universe story” (Swimme & Berry, 1992). And with it comes a greater openness to letting our own stories go.

Narrative Foreclosure

Tackling such tasks requires - and at the same time fosters - what I like to call “a good, strong story”. Good health, adequate income and social support, proper exercise and diet, surely these are valuable resources as well: essential to “successful aging” (Rowe & Kahn, 1998). Yet even in their absence, such a story can assist us in (actively, consciously) growing old and not just (passively, resignedly) getting old. It can serve as an important internal resource as, despite the losses and setbacks that may befall us in our latter years, we persevere with the journey of personal development. While this may be the ideal, however, many seniors are unable to sustain such a story and, for a variety of reasons quite apart from dementia per se (which is beyond the scope of my reflections here), succumb to what gerontologist Lawrence McCullough (1993) calls “arrested aging”. They lose “the ability to respond to time” (p. 186) and become imprisoned in “a past that seems to allow no escape” (p. 191). Rather than living off the past, and drawing upon their memories and reflections as a kind of “biographically accrued capital” (Mader, 1996, p. 43) that enriches their inner worlds, they live in the past. They fall prey, in other words, to “narrative foreclosure” (Freeman, 2000; Randall & McKim, 2008, pp. 128-136).

For Freeman (2000), narrative foreclosure is “the premature conviction that one’s life story has effectively ended” (p. 83). It is the conviction that, even if one’s life as such continues on (beyond retirement, for instance, or after the children have sprung the nest); even if one continues getting up each morning and plodding through the motions, no new chapters are apt to be added to one’s story. No new characters or turning-points are apt to thicken its plot. From an emotional perspective, it feels - quite literally - like “the same old story”. As a quasi-literary

work, one's story is experienced less as an "open text", with a wealth of meaning waiting to be harvested, than as a "closed work" (Barthes, 1989). Author Kurt Vonnegut (1982) captures the situation well: "If a person survives an ordinary span of sixty years or more, there is every chance that his or her life as a shapely story has ended and all that remains to be experienced is epilogue. Life is not over," he says, "but the story is" (p. 235). In consequence, a sense of meaninglessness or ennui may overwhelm a person, a sense of despair, the ultimate "pitfall" in the final stage of Erik Erikson's (1998) much-cited schema of psychosocial development. And thoughts of suicide may not be far behind. As such, narrative foreclosure can be seen as a factor in, if not a synonym for, depression per se. In light of these possibilities, our challenge as professional helpers is to do or say whatever we can to re-start stalled life-narratives and re-open closed self-stories so that, no matter how old the people we work with may be feeling, they can be coaxed out of "epilogue time", where "no present action could make any real difference" (Morson, 1994, p. 142), and be empowered to get growing again.

Informing the concept of narrative foreclosure (which is something that youth, as well, can certainly experience), and fundamental to the thinking of narrative therapists themselves, is the idea that how our lives unfold through time - our life-course, that is - has less to do, in the end, with the actual events that constitute our lives than with the interpretations that we place upon them - our life-story, in other words. It has less to do with "the facts" as such than with the fictions (Steele, 1986) which we weave around them - or at least around that comparatively tiny range of facts that manage to claim our attention and that we forge into the memories, large or small, by which we identify for ourselves and others what "my life" involves. In other words, depending on a multitude of factors - including, naturally, our basic personality type (McRae & Costa, 2003) and the narrative environments of the families, communities, and cultures in which we have lived across the years (see Holstein & Gubrium, 2000), many of which have imposed foreclosure on us from without - the lion's share of our actual existence goes virtually

unnoticed and, to that extent, unexperienced. Accordingly, it is not woven into the meandering inner text that is integral to our identity, to our existence (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 5), to the novelty of our lives (Randall, 1999). In the case of narrative foreclosure, what does get noticed is remembered in a thin or limited manner, with a more or less rigidified reading - an under-reading - of what, otherwise, the events in question might be seen to “mean”. The bottom line is that we live our lives and experience our selves less in terms of facts than in terms of stories. As narrative therapists are wont to say, our stories “live us” (Parry & Doan, 1994, p. 44). To speak of someone in the throes of narrative foreclosure - an older adult, for instance - is to say, then, that the myth by which they are living, that is providing their life with unity and purpose, is for various reasons lacking: too stunted or constrained, too chaotic or incoherent, too pessimistic or tragic, or simply too dominated by the stories of others, including the master narrative of a given religion, plus the ever-seductive narrative of decline.

In what follows, I will be alluding to this concept of narrative foreclosure as I sketch an overall process that social work practitioners, whatever strategies or agendas might guide them on the surface, can envision themselves as quietly facilitating in their work with older clients. The process I have in mind, a kind of story-work that aging itself impels us to undertake, involves four main phases. Though they obviously overlap, and though for a given individual they scarcely need follow one another in the order I present them, I call them: expanding our stories, examining our stories, transforming our stories, and transcending our stories. In relation to the first phase, I will be touching on the topic of memory; regarding the second, that of meaning. The third will get us into the topic of wisdom, while the fourth - transcending our stories - will bring us back to spirituality per se. Critical to note in this regard is that, in mainstream gerontology, discussions of such topics are seldom closely linked. From a narrative perspective, however, the links become easier to appreciate and more compelling to consider.

Expanding Our Stories

The relationship between memory and the self is, in many ways, symbiotic (see Beike, Lampinen, & Behrend, 2004). Our sense of self is dependent on our memories, yet what we remember is dependent on the self, or selves, for whom it holds meaning and is deemed worthy of retaining. The sorts of memories at issue here - “episodic” memories or “autobiographical” memories - invariably have a narrative dimension (Rubin, 1996, p. 2f). In effect, they assume the form of little narratives that we tell ourselves, and others, about events in our lives that in some way, for some reason, seem pertinent to our identity. In short, such memories are stories, and taken together, they constitute “the story of my life”: the internalized, evolving myth that rumbles around in the backs of our minds as inseparable from who we see ourselves to be. As philosopher Edward Casey puts it, “we are what we remember ourselves to be” (1987, p. 290).

That said, irrespective of everything they have come through to date, have accomplished and learned, many older adults end up operating with too constricted a story of who they are: a closed-in, tightly edited narrative that, effectively, curtails their curiosity, their interest in the future, their will to live. Sadly, this often happens just at that stage in life when precisely the opposite is what they need: a story that is sufficiently fluid and open, substantial and dynamic, to supply them with a lively sense of meaning. Yet with limitations on their mobility and income, the loss of familiar routines, and the deaths of spouses and friends, their world can steadily shrink, to the point where meeting that need is difficult to do. And this predicament is due to a variety of reasons, among them the narrative of decline - the ageism - that permeates society and that they themselves have unwittingly internalized; not to mention the impoverished environments in which circumstances may require them to live (e.g., nursing homes), where their stories are rarely if ever invited, much less listened to and honoured.

As I say, to respond effectively to such challenges, what we need is a good strong sense of self - in other words, a good strong story. For starters, this means an expanded story. As social

workers, how can we help older adults to expand their stories? In a nutshell, it means listening. Allowing a person to indulge in their natural inclination to talk about their lives, what elsewhere (Randall, 1995) I have called “the autobiographical imperative”, takes time, to be certain. And, all too often, time is something social workers lack. Still, it is less the quantity of time we spend with someone that matters most, I would submit, than the quality of our connection. What I mean is compassionate listening, careful listening, empowering listening, listening in the sorts of ways that therapists (especially narrative therapists perhaps) are well-equipped to do: asking open-ended questions (“tell me about your life ...”), questions that open a person up so that, at the very least, they realize just how much material their memory has preserved, and thus how rich their inner world really is. In turn, this permits the limiting versions of their past that they have clung to up till now to breathe a little bit, to open out, and so be readied for closer, more soulful inspection.

Examining Our Stories

“The unexamined life,” states Socrates, rather starkly, “is not worth living” (Plato, 2002, p. 4). Such an observation can be interpreted in terms of those unexamined recollections, those un-reflected-on memory-texts, that we all no doubt possess, which easily invite a variety of alternative readings, many of them more self-supporting and life-affirming than those we have pinned our identity on to date. Here, I appreciate the work of memoirist Patricia Hampl (1999). In a fascinating essay entitled “Memory and Imagination”, Hampl relates a memory from her early childhood (her first piano lesson at the age of 7) to illustrate the incredible complexity, if not mystery, of our more “self-defining” memories (Singer & Blagov, 2004): memories that seem potent with emotional significance, whether positive or negative in nature. Peering into them carefully can surprise us with the more inventive, more creative sides of what, hitherto, seemed our surest reminiscences. As a consequence, we can begin to play with alternative

interpretations to those we have been wedded to thus far. As important as it is to tell our stories, Hampl says therefore, it is equally important to “listen to what our stories tell us” (p. 33). Put another way, as important for our growth in later life as telling our lives can be (lives as texts, that is), so is reading our lives (Randall & McKim, 2008) - reading in that deeper, more indeterminate sense which the greatest stories are adept at enticing us to do: stories from which, though technically they end, no end of meaning can be derived. Part of what such a reading of our lives entails, of course, is both acknowledging and critiquing the impact of the larger stories (of family and marriage, community and culture, class and creed, gender and race) by which our personal ones have been shaped to date, including the narrative of decline that has inevitably had and impact upon our experience of “age” as such.

Among the means by which examining our stories can be facilitated - in the process, opening ourselves to the range of versions that they implicitly invite - are reminiscence therapy (Viney, 1995), life review therapy (Garland, 1994), dynamic reminiscence (Chandler & Ray, 2002), and creative reminiscence (Bohlmeijer, Valenkamp, Westerhof, Smit, & Cuipers, 2005). In effect, this means any sort of strategy - including simply soulful conversation - that stretches our inner world and permits the emergence of a more nuanced, more resilient sense of self; a more self-aware, dynamic self; a self whose story reflects a healthy sense of completion that is, at the same time, open-ended; one for which new themes and new chapters can still be opened up. Gerontological social workers Nancy Kropf and Cindy Tandy (1998) have written persuasively, for instance, about the utility of such strategies in assisting a woman in her 80s, suffering from depression following a series of major losses, to shift her basic self-storyline from that of “I’m a failure” to the more positive, more affirming one of “I’m a survivor”.

Transforming Our Stories

What I am offering in this paper is scarcely a step-by-step therapeutic technique. Rather, it is an over-arching point of view to bear in mind when working with older clients, regardless of the problems they may face or the strategies we employ to help them. The third phase of the process I envision - a process of story-work that is integral to our spiritual development in later life - is transforming our stories. To talk about it, let me begin by suggesting that the second phase, examining our lives, is less an end in itself than a means to liberate the “ordinary wisdom” (Randall & Kenyon, 2001) of which our stories are arguably the medium. Yet, ironically, wisdom is not a topic to which gerontologists have devoted the attention one might think. Instead, it has been viewed as something of an embarrassment: too vague, too individual, too idealistic, or simply too difficult to measure to be worthy of scientific interest (see Baltes & Smith, 2008). Dominated by a mainly empirical-medical paradigm of human life, gerontology has tended to expend far more energy on studying such things (important in their fashion) as fall prevention, medication usage, and aging bones and organs than on considering what, traditionally, aging has been thought to carry with it.

What is wisdom, though? While I am hardly about to define it, what I will propose is that whatever else it may or may not be, wisdom is not a thing. It is not a commodity. It is not a collection of tidy conclusions about “the meaning of life”, nor a neat set of lessons learned - though learning is naturally involved. Rather, it is an ongoing process. It is the continual opening-out and deepening-down that the phases of expanding and examining help initiate. As such, it is characterized by an ironic stance on life that is rooted in an awareness of the perpetual reinterpretability of one’s existence (Randall & McKim, 2008, pp. 236-242). To cite Rabbi Zalman Schacter-Shalomi and Ronald Miller (1995), authors of *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, it is a process of continual “re-contextualization”, whereby we “open old files, relive them, recontextualize them for deeper meaning, and then refile them in the “plus” files, from their

negative emotional valences” (p. 117). Expressed another way, wisdom is a searching and a savouring of the stories that we are, a journey of “autobiographical learning” (Nelson, 1994), of self-discovery, of transformation: a journey to which there is no built-in, no pre-determined end. As such, it is inseparable from the process of spiritual growth - a process which, ironically, later life itself provides the conditions that can enable it to flourish.

Transcending Our Stories

As I mentioned near the start, spirituality itself is a narrative process. In this respect, it parallels wisdom, in that, while wisdom is related to knowledge, the relationship is hardly straightforward. “Where is the wisdom that is lost in knowledge?”, inquires T. S. Eliot (1940). Wisdom has to do, not with the quantity of our knowledge, but with the quality of our relationship to the knowledge that we have, especially our self-knowledge (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 223-231). In the same way, spirituality is more than religion, or is deeper than religion - even if, for many, its expression takes a religious form. In sum, spirituality transcends religion. Viewing it in narrative terms, spirituality is the process of transcending our stories. But how is this possible? If our self-stories are our identity; if we ourselves are continually composing them, as author, narrator, character, and reader all at once, then how can we possibly transcend them? How can we have an existence - a human existence - apart from stories? In my view, the answer is clear: we cannot. We live in stories and stories lives in us; they are us. And, as they change, we change. As immortalized in “The Chambered Nautilus” by the poet Oliver Wendell Holmes (2005 / 1895), and as reflected in the image of The Evolving Self, sketched by psychologist Robert Kegan (1982), there is a continuous push within us to outgrow the myths by which we comprehend our lives and to grope our way toward broader, more all-encompassing self-stories: stories that can embrace the ever-changing circumstances and ever-widening horizons of our relationships, our commitments, our world. And it is in this connection, I

suggest, that we need to understand the passion that many older adults bring to the study of family history, to genealogy, to tracing their “roots”. It is also how we need to understand the impetus within us to impact future generations - or our sense of generativity, as psychologists call it (McAdams, 1996; 2006), whatever form our expression of it takes: from rearing children to writing books to contributing to the community as a volunteer. Both impulses (one toward the past, the other toward the future) reflect the need to link our personal story - to merge it, even - with the story of the world at large (see Tornstam, 1996).

When we are children, we understand our lives in terms of child-like storylines. As we grow older, though, life itself pushes these lines to become more complicated, however much the push may be resisted. This, I argue, is in keeping with the internal dynamics of stories in general: they push inexorably toward their own conclusion. In a real way, the meaning of a story lies in its *telos*, in its end - “closed” or “open” though that end may be (Taha, 1998-99). In a comparable manner, life pushes us to relinquish - to transcend - our stories. Indeed, the processes of expanding, examining, and transforming prepare us to do exactly that. The prospect of death itself, which looms ever larger in our consciousness as time wears on, functions in a way analogous to “the sense of an ending” (Kermode, 1966) for the reader of a novel. In terms of narrative, in other words, death is an aesthetic necessity in the structure of our story. It is - literally, or literarily - The End.

What do such insights imply for those who work with the elderly, or with anyone facing their mortality, at any age - in the context, say, of palliative care (Kuhl, 2002; Kuhl & Westwood, 2001)? It implies that the impulse to review one’s life (Butler, 2007), to finish unfinished business and deal with un-dealt-with memories, to achieve a measure of resolution about one’s life overall, is not to be discouraged as unduly morbid: “Oh no, you mustn’t think that way. You’ll be feeling better before you know it!”. Nor is it necessarily a sign of narrative foreclosure, though in some cases it can be - i.e., the sign of giving in too easily to the inevitability of one’s

end without engaging in the sort of story-work I have been considering up to now. To use the language of author Thomas Moore (1992), it is the “soul” doing whatever it must do to ready itself for whatever may be next - for the continuation of one’s story beyond The End perhaps. And the role of the social worker, I will propose, is to do or say (or not do or not say) whatever possible to encourage this to happen.

The end result, however, is not necessarily for one to feel a tidy sense of closure about the story of one’s life, with its various “loose ends” tied conveniently together. This may be how it is for some in the course of approaching death, and that is well and good. But except perhaps in Hollywood, endings do not always work this way, nor should they necessarily. In fact, the greater the story, I would argue, then the messier its ending, the more open the sense of closure it conveys (Taha, 1998-99), the more it points to larger stories beyond it (the human story, the cosmic story), and the more it leaves us pondering and wondering as we prepare ourselves to let it go.

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