Life Review
When Course Assignments Change Lives
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When instructors assign pre-licensure, or RN and BSN nursing students to conduct a life review, their goals are to show the value of a life review for the interviewer and interviewee. The goals for the nursing student are to learn about the stages of life and an older adult’s hopes, dreams, and thoughts about death and dying, and see history come alive (Debrew & Rankin, 2009). The goals for the older adult are to promote self-esteem, diminish depression, and promote closure (Debrew & Rankin, 2009). However, changes in the lives of the student and older adult sometimes occur, as with Valera and her father. This is Valera’s story.

I was struggling with who to interview when my mom recommended my father. I was apprehensive. I knew my father when I was a child, but my parents divorced when I was 4. For the last 38 years, my father and I have only seen each other at Christmas visits. I hoped to resolve some deep wounds between us.

Setting out on this journey, I first sent a Facebook® message to my stepmother asking how to get a hold of my dad, unaware if he still worked. She gave me his cell phone number. I called and set up an appointment to come to his house. I explained what I was doing and he was glad to help.

Before the interview, I had to do some basic background investigating; otherwise, I would not even have known his birthday. I called my mom and sisters to ask if there were any questions that they would like answered. I also searched online for a list of questions and chose the ones I wanted to ask.

We met in his workshop at his house. Upon my arrival he came out to meet me. He guided me into the workshop and dusted off a chair for me to sit. He sat on his work stool. We started with idle chitchat. Hi, how are the kids? As we talked, I started to ask questions. We did not start at his birth and work through the next 67 years; we just started talking. It was a steady flow of conversation, but we hit lulls that created a few awkward silences. I sat with my dad in his workshop for 3 hours. We had moments of tears and realizations. I believe it is the most time I have ever had alone with my dad in 38 years, and I cherished this project forcing me to do what I do not think I would have ever done on my own.

As a follow up to some questions, my dad offered me a photo album. I visited him again and reminisced over pictures I had long forgotten because the last time I saw them was 20 years ago. As we looked at the album, I remembered times, places, and people who are no longer with us, who once held such important parts in the shaping of our lives. My dad and I shared moments of silence and laughter while reflecting on the pictures.
I am 42. I thought that I knew my father, but I knew about him based on stories that my grandmother and mom told over the years. Now I see him in a new light. In the interview, I learned new facts about specific events in his life. He mentioned the effect Vietnam had on him. I was aware of this, remembering him sleepwalking and talking when I was a kid. What I was unaware of was that he was not drafted. Being a rambunctious teenager, he liked to race cars and run moonshine with his buddies, and those activities along with the times (1968-1969) set into place a series of events that changed the lives of everyone my dad loved. He said, “I did things I shouldn’t have done and had to pay the price.” He was caught with 40 gallons of moonshine and a judge gave him the choice of 5 years in prison or 27 months in any branch of the military during war time; he chose the Army. That was not the story I was told so I asked more questions, searching to find why my version was different. He went on to say it was a secret he kept from my mom and grandmother; he was embarrassed, newly married, and it was a promise he made to his father. As we continued on the topic of Vietnam, I noticed he was hesitant. Our eye contact broke and he looked into the distance—past me, back to a time when I did not exist.

Some questions were answered openly with sincerity, whereas others were answered timidly. Intrigued by the newness of information, I pried for more, asking about his greatest regret. He replied, “The way I treated your mother.” Such simple words, but words I needed to hear and he needed to say. It was as if a thick fog lifted from the small space we shared. I asked him what was the most difficult thing he ever had to deal with. He responded, “I saw my best friend killed right in front of me. That will change a person in a minute.” We sat silent. After a few moments, he told me how he still keeps in contact with several of the men who were in his unit. Candidly, he stated, “We are messed up.” I found out from my stepmother that my dad and his buddies have been meeting for a weekend each year for the past 20 years. He has struggled with being a father, telling me he “didn’t know what to do with us” (meaning three girls after Vietnam). He has struggled with jobs in the past few years, explaining that he never held one job for more than a few years. After 40 years, he still walks the perimeter every night. Experiencing posttraumatic stress disorder, he sleepwalks and has night terrors. He can no longer share a bed with his wife.

I switched the question and asked him about his proudest moment. He smiled, looked me in the eyes, and said, “You three girls.” Delighted with directness, I asked more.

I asked him what he thought when the doctor told him that he had twin girls. He said, “Nothing; I didn’t know what to do.” Laughing, he reminded me that my older sister tried to give one of us away every chance she got; she was not a happy sister.

I asked him about the hardest part of having twin girls. He told me, “One of you cried and then the other one did, plus your sister was mean to y’all. She wanted one of you two gone.”

I also asked him to discuss his best and worst traits. He replied, “I am honest, hard-working, and I listen to people. That last one I had to work on over the years.” For his worst traits, he said, “I am hot headed, I have no patience.”

As the interview closed, it hit me that my dad, at 67, was an older adult. Depressed by that fact, I asked him how he felt about dying. His response was frank, proclaiming:

Every day I wake up that dirt isn’t in my face is a blessing. I should have been dead a long time ago. The good Lord has blessed me. I am not afraid to die. I made my peace with the Lord a long time ago.

REFLECTION

One year has passed since the interview with my father and I realize now that, in essence, I “met” him for the first time during that interview. I feel a peace with the past in relation to my dad. We got together at Christmas along with my sisters. With sweaty palms
and a rapid pulse, I explained to him that I had a gift for him. I presented him with a scrapbook version of his life in pictures along with a copy of the interview. As he flipped the pages, I watched his face for expressions in hopes to see the young man that once lived the life he was seeing. He elaborated on the pictures with some more details; as he reached the later years, he grew stoic and silent. He closed the book, looked at me, and said it was the best gift he had been given. I pushed back my own tears and we said our good-byes.

This simple interview has changed my life and has made me a better parent. I am able to see that all my actions affect not only me, but also my children. It has also helped me in my practice because I now listen better to my older adult patients. They all have a story to tell and most want to tell it. Some feel safer telling a stranger. I see how telling their story boosts their self-esteem, promotes closure, and diminishes depression.

As for my dad, I love him more for his silence. I look into his heart and those dark, almost black eyes, and I see a young man who was torn and mended, who loves me and I love him. I accept the past like my favorite blanket, wrapped up warmly in peace, knowing that I now, after 40 years, have met my father, Larry Smith.

REFERENCE

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