

# **Phototherapy and Reminiscence with the Elderly: Photo-Reminiscence**

**David A. Krauss, Ph.D.**

Long ago...it must be...I have a photograph. Preserve your memories; they're all that's left you.

Bookends Theme, Paul Simon

I shall be telling this with a sigh somewhere ages and ages hence: two roads diverged in a wood, and I-- I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference.

The Road not taken, Robert Frost

They live by Memory rather than hope, for what is left to them of life is little compared to the long past. This, again is the cause of their loquacity. They are continually talking of the past, because they enjoy remembering.

Rhetoric: Book II, Aristotle

Throughout time, perceptive observers of life have understood the human need to create meaning from memory. The eminent American gerontologist Robert Butler, who wrote on this subject in 1963 in the journal *Psychiatry* was the first gerontologist to formally discuss the importance of reminiscence and a review of one's life. He postulated that such a review was prompted by the biological certainty of death. This need to put one's life in perspective, to find order and meaning in life gives us dignity. Butler's theory fits well with the developmental perspective of Eric Erikson's last (eighth) stage of life, where "dignity verses despair."

For older adults who are in the last stage of their life and who are facing death in the relatively near future, the finding of a personal life's meaning is a key component of feeling whole and believing that life has been worthwhile: it is necessary in order to achieve peace and satisfaction. To not successfully accomplish this task leads to dying without finishing the business of living. Reminiscence and the more structured strategies of life review can facilitate this process. Reminiscence and life review are used to create the ego integrity of a personal and unified meaning in our lives. Failure to do so leaves us isolated from ourselves and dying in despair.

In my work with older adults, especially with those in nursing homes, I have often been struck with the power of photographs to create feelings in the here and now and to be stimuli to initiate reminiscence experiences. I have sought to present this paper as a way to overview the more general topic of reminiscence, including Photo-reminiscence. The model includes these key concepts: The first concept is the relationship of reminiscence to memory. One needs to retrieve stored memory, both recent memory but more importantly long term memory, in order to reminisce. One should also be aware that reminiscence

is often a distortion of past events that a patient strongly believes to be true. This is often harmless when done in service of the ego, but in extreme cases be associated with delusions, delirium, or a dementing process.

As in all aspects of self-revealing, there is selectivity in choosing and revealing reminiscence inspired material. Recalling autobiographical memory content present in photographs can provide increased self-knowledge. In other words, a visual source of memory content influences the quality and content of reminiscence and influences how the reminiscence is integrated into self-concept. This is a useful aspect of Photo-reminiscence because the photograph is such a direct and powerful source of memory stimulation. Stressors such as losses and other transitions in people's lives are often antecedents to spontaneous reminiscence. Again, the use of photographs can be powerful adjuncts in successfully negotiating loss, unless the images are too restimulative or the viewer is severely demented.

Photographs can be successfully used in reminiscence to validate as well as to lament, however lamenting reminiscence with excessive and prolonged negative remembrances are not useful. An obsessive rumination, which does not lead to increased self-awareness, suggests limited resilience to the ebb and flow of life events. Rumination is not healthy reminiscence. In a general sense, a basic function of reminiscence is to provide pleasurable experience and to improve the quality of life. Photo-reminiscence provides the additional benefits of improving elder communication skills, increasing socialization and enhancing self-confidence.

Life review, on the other hand, has but one goal; to facilitate integrity and is a more critical examination of a patient's life undertaken in the setting of a therapeutic dyad. The life review process is directive, covers the entire life span with the purpose of increasing self-esteem, decreasing depression, and increasing life satisfaction and individual integrity. Both of these concepts, when used primarily for therapeutic purposes with the elderly can have significant areas of overlap (where life review refers to a form of psychotherapy in which persons reflect on their life stories in order to come to terms with past guilt, resolve intra-psychic conflicts, reconcile relationships and find meaning positive in past experiences. It is in life review that painful reminiscence is often surfaces. Both life review and reminiscence may have outcomes with some similarities, but their purposes and Phototherapeutic methodologies are quite different. Therapists are well advised to consider the potential risks and potential benefits of any intervention strategy with any client.

Photo-reminiscence may be initiated with elders by using various photos of life events and loved ones as points of departure either into reminiscence or, into current topics and problems. Looking at the personal photo album, as a treasury of familiar memory, usually allows an elder to feel more comfortable in the interview session, and gives a degree of control in how he or she chooses to talk about the images, establishing ground rules for the therapeutic interactions. The viewed images have a high degree of relevance as the material comes from the elder's life. Reminiscing might make it easier for elders to disclose more sensitive issues or topics, and/or concerns regarding others who are present in

# Drivers License

David Krauss, Ph.D.

This is an exercise to demonstrate some uses of “everyday” photographs in reminiscence.

Find a partner with whom you will share this experience. Decide who will take the role of asking questions and who will take the role of discussing the photograph. After some time those roles will reverse, giving each of you the opportunity to explore the following questions.

When was this photograph taken?

When you look at the photo what is the first thing that comes to mind?

Name three things you like about the photo. Why?

Name one thing you would change. Why?

What is something that has changed since this photograph was taken?

Having this photo means that .....

How old were you when you learned to drive?

Who taught you to drive?

Have you ever taught anyone to drive?

How do you feel about driving?

Tell me about a favorite or early memory in a car.

What was your worst experience in a car?

Was there ever a time when you were frightened in a car?

Who would you most like to show this photo to?

Who would you least like to show this photo to?

If this photo could speak it would say...

If I were a car I'd be a.....

Finish this sentence, “By looking at the photo you would never know that.” .....

Find another dyad and share what stood out for you in each role as you engaged in this exercise. Have a note taker write down two or three of these statements for each person.