

## Narrative Works



# Narrative Gerontology, Spiritual Time

W. Andrew Achenbaum and Barbara Lewis

Volume 2, Number 2, 2012

URI: [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw2\\_2art06](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw2_2art06)

[See table of contents](#)

---

### Publisher(s)

The University of New Brunswick

### ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

---

### Cite this article

Achenbaum, W. A. & Lewis, B. (2012). Narrative Gerontology, Spiritual Time. *Narrative Works*, 2(2), 103–116.

## OUTSIDE THE BOX: INVITED ARTICLE

### Narrative Gerontology, Spiritual Time

W. Andrew Achenbaum  
*University of Houston*

Barbara Lewis  
*St. Andrew's Episcopal Church,  
Houston*

#### Editor's Introduction

William L. Randall  
*St. Thomas University*

No doubt, we each have a story about how we first got interested in *narrative*. For some of us, it was a chance meeting with a colleague whose enthusiasm for the topic we gradually came to share. For others, it was stumbling onto a book by Kenneth Plummer or Jerome Bruner, by Rita Charon or Ivor Goodson, by Michael White and David Epston or Michael Connelly and Jean Clandinin, that got us thinking, “Hey, it’s all about stories!” As for my own story, while a student in divinity school in the mid-1970s, I was assigned to work one summer with the Reverend Ian Lynk, a Protestant minister in suburban Montreal. My job was to shadow him around while he visited his parishioners and dispensed his pastoral tasks. Earlier that year, however, he had taken a course at New York’s Union Seminary taught by Old Testament scholar, James Sanders, who had infected him with an interest in something Sanders and others were calling *narrative theology*.

A core insight of narrative theology is that the Bible as a whole is less a collection of sacred edicts and timeless truths than a sprawling collage of narrative material—compiled by different redactors at different times—that takes in everything from myth to legend, chronicle to biography, and parable to dream. Moreover, the process of coming to belief entails the internalization of a *master narrative* which the scriptures sketch for us about where we have come from, where we are headed, and how we should behave in the interim—a grand story, if you will, with a Beginning, Middle, and End and with immense moral-cosmological weight. As such, sharing one’s faith with others involves telling one’s own personalized version of that grand story in the hopes that they “convert” to it and find their lives grounded and guided accordingly.

Ian’s infection having infected me in turn, I returned to Toronto at the end of the summer for my final year of studies, and embarked upon a kind of senior thesis that I entitled “My Story, Our Story, and The Story: Towards a Narrative Theology.” In the course of preparing it, I discovered the work of

American theologian, H. Richard Niebuhr (1941), whose book *The Meaning of Revelation* (especially his distinction between “outside story” and “inside story”) was a turning-point in my own thinking, plus the writings of other theologians who brought a narrative perspective to the topic of “faith”—people like Stanley Hauerwas (1977), Sally Teselle (1975), and Robert McAfee Brown (1975). The following year, while pursuing further studies at Cambridge, I was assigned Don Cupitt as my tutor. At the time, Don was Dean of Emmanuel College and author of (among many works, then and since) a volume entitled simply *What Is a Story?* (1991). In it, he engages in a provocative deconstruction of the grand master narrative of Christianity and examines the implications of such a critique for our self-understanding as people of faith.

More recently, I’ve been thinking about the focus for my next major project, one in which I hope to weave together what, for the past 30 some years, have been the three main strands of my professional and intellectual life: *theology*, or more broadly spirituality; *aging*, which is my obvious focus as a gerontologist; and *narrative*. My hope is to articulate what I’m currently calling “a narrative theology of aging” (Randall, 2010). In this invited piece by Andrew Achenbaum, a member of the editorial board of this journal, and his partner Barbara Lewis, a similar sort of weaving may be seen.

Achenbaum, a highly respected scholar who champions the importance of the humanities in the study of aging, has recently completed a biography of the late Robert Butler, geriatrician and gerontologist extraordinaire (Achenbaum, in press). Among Butler’s best-known publications is an article that appeared in the journal *Psychiatry* in 1963 entitled “The Life Review: An Interpretation of Reminiscence in the Aged.” Now widely regarded as a seminal contribution to the psychology of aging, the article builds on Erikson’s thinking about on the crisis of “Ego Integrity versus Despair” that faces us as we age to argue that pivotal to positive mental health in later life is a process of *life review*, i.e., stepping back from our lives and engaging in “narrative reflection” (Freeman, 2010) upon them, thereby (hopefully) achieving a sense of acceptance and affirmation of the particular path that our life course has taken. In what follows, Achenbaum and Lewis trace their own unique paths through the ups and downs of their respective lives: paths which led through different marriages and divorces, through various doubts and discoveries, and eventually to each other. In doing so, they weave an intriguing tale story about faith, about aging, and about love.

One further story, if I may . . . One of the scholars whose work I discovered early in my journey into narrative was the late Stephen Crites. Formerly a professor of philosophy at Wesleyan University, his 1971 article entitled “The Narrative Quality of Experience” was for me, as for many, a ground-breaking piece of thinking which set my mind spinning with all sorts of delicious questions about the storied dimensions of religious conviction in particular and the narrative complexity of human life in general. In May 2002, I had the privilege of chatting with Crites in person over lunch one day during the first conference called *Narrative Matters*, a series of biennial interdisciplinary events which, with my colleague Dolores Furlong of the University of New Brunswick, I had a hand in starting. It was one of those meetings I’ll never forget, and one of those stories I tend to trot out when asked how I got into narrative in the first place. A kindly gentleman with a soft sense

of humour and the unusual talent for actually listening to what you had to say, Crites—then in his 70s—had driven to New Brunswick, by himself, from his home in Connecticut, not as an invited speaker but as an ordinary delegate, to deliver a touching little paper entitled simply “A Love Story” (Crites, 2002). In it, drawing deeply on his own life story—as so many of us narrativists, explicitly or otherwise and regardless of our field, invariably do—he wove together a rich range of insights into faith and life and love; especially first love, reflected back on from the poignant vantage point of later life. It is just such sorts of insights that Achenbaum and Lewis have sought to capture for us here.

### References

- Achenbaum, A. (In press). *Robert N. Butler: Visionary of healthy aging*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Brown, R. (1975). My story and “the story.” *Theology Today*, 32(2), 166-173.
- Butler, R. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26, 65-76.
- Crites, S. (1971). The narrative quality of experience. *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*, 39(3), 291-311.
- Crites, S. (2002, May). *A love story*. Paper presented at Narrative Matters 2002, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.
- Cupitt, D. (1991). *What is a story?* London, UK: SCM.
- Freeman, M. (2010). *Hindsight: The promise and peril of looking backward*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Hauerwas, S. (1977). *Truthfulness and tragedy: Further investigations into Christian ethics*. Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press.
- Niebuhr, H. R. (1941). *The meaning of revelation*. New York, NY: Macmillan.
- Randall, W. (2010, May). *Open stories, open lives: Toward a narrative theology of aging*. Paper at Narrative Matters 2010, Fredericton, New Brunswick, Canada.
- TeSelle, S. (1975). *Speaking in parables: A study in metaphor and theology*. Philadelphia, PA: Fortress Press.

Readers of *Narrative Works* well understand why telling stories enables people to make sense of lives. “Man is always a storyteller! He lives surrounded by his and others’ myths,” observed Sartre (quoted by Gergen & Gergen, 1983, p. 254). “With them he sees everything in his life, no matter what befalls him. And he seeks to live his life as though he were telling it.” Storytelling yields insights into ways to (re)present ourselves to others. “A story approach invites us to examine the aesthetic aspects of the continual reconstruction of personal experience (past, present, and future) that is integral to making meaning” (Randall, 1996, p. 242). While emphases in meaning-making change as men and women grow older, there is much to learn about what experiences elders choose

to recount through narrative discourse—and how in old age they express insights, feelings, and reminiscences. The composite mosaic of late life in *The View in Winter*, argued Ronald Blythe (1979), reveals that “the natural checks and balances of old age lie in spiritual sublimations and in the slowly dying organism itself, not in socially convenient taboos” (p. 9).

Narrative gerontology dates back to Robert Butler’s pathbreaking exposition of the “Life Review” (1963). Ever since, gerontologists, mental-health professionals, literary analysts, and writers participating in workshops and senior centers have been reading and listening to mature adults as they compose their lives. The stories that elders share typically differ from those composed in youth or middle age, for older persons single out key events and relationships. They also seek to address unfinished business and come to terms with death. Narrators have more material from the past to interpret in light of current circumstances as they advance in years. Furthermore, elders usually acknowledge that time is short, that their stretch to the future is truncated. “Old age is not interesting until one gets there,” observed May Sarton in *As We Are Now* (1973). “It’s a foreign country with an unknown language to the young and even to the middle-aged” (p. 23). Simone de Beauvoir (1996) concurred; “Until it is upon us old age is something that only affects other people. So it is understandable that society should manage to prevent us from seeing our own kind, our fellow-men, when we look at the old” (p. 5). And for many Baby Boomers, including the authors of this essay, entering old age is like crossing into *terra incognita*, however recognizable some of it seems. Despite its vicissitudes and stereotypes, the last stages of life abound in opportunities and challenges hitherto unimagined and unimaginable.

In many instances, older women and men affirm an awareness of a spiritual milieu that envelops them as they journey. Spirituality becomes, as Blythe posits, a source of resilience and adaptability associated with successful aging—even as the body itself declines. Giving greater cognizance to (and trust in) an Ultimate Reality, some elders hope, serves to counterbalance, even compensate for, anxieties and fears that they perceive have been accumulating over time. For other older people, advancing in years liberates them from dread; they doubt that much more can go wrong so close to the finish line. What more than death, they wonder, remains to be feared?

Certain themes emerge from older narrators who intend to live as fully as possible in the present moment (Booth, 1992; Jones, 1985; Luke, 1992; Manheimer, 1999; Updike, 2008). To find themselves in the here

and now, observe elderly raconteurs, means to infuse past conditions into present circumstances. Elders go forward, keenly aware that all things will come to an end—including themselves. Many aging individuals find the courage, having accepted late life's contingencies and exigencies, to seize at least one more opportunity to address concerns of Self and Others. Ideally they do so with a sense of grace and gratefulness not always associated with earlier stages of human development.

Life reviews, autobiographies, and other modes of self-disclosure are challenging to arrange at any age. Because the process manifests distinctive features in late life, such as favoring broad strokes over pointillist recitations, insights shared by the old may not sufficiently resonate with younger readers and listeners. Yet grappling with intimate details of experiences over time affords elders an opportunity to underscore the human capacity for defining and refining authenticity. It does not matter that the self-conscious process of (re)interpreting life's weavings may yield stories that primarily have significance only to the authors themselves.

In narrating their winter tales, it seems to us, some elders go a step beyond conventional patterns of organizing their narratives anchored with customary end points. Without discounting their years or denying their rendezvous with finitude, some older narrators explore what it means to live sacred moments. They envision a new order of chronicity, which we define as spiritual time, or *kairos*.

By "spiritual time," we refer to a temporal dimension beyond the sort of chronology measured by watches or calendars. Spiritual time extends beyond what Randall (1996) characterized as aesthetic sensibilities, for it is not limited to descriptions usually germane to a particular stage of life or historical era. Proximity to death in advancing years, which often heightens an awareness of spiritual time, might stir a desire—or need—to savor bonds of friendship and to transact essential matters before it is too late. Facing finitude can enhance an awareness of spiritual time and, ultimately, forge deeper connections between people's souls and a Divine Presence.

Not every aging woman and man wants to insinuate "narrative gerontology" into "spiritual time," of course. The genre neither fits any familiar rite of elderhood nor serves as a prerequisite for delivering biographical nuggets for rising generations. It is like other forms of storytelling, which conjoin the professional and personal realms of a life. Narrative gerontology offers much more, however. Situating winter tales within spiritual realms adumbrates mysteries, ironies, and contrarities

that occur over individuals' lives. Such narratives facilitate "a greater sense of irony by affording us an affectionate detachment from our life, intensifying our interior complexity, and thickening our sense of self" (Randall, 2013). This in turn propels narrators toward a fresh understanding of a completion of being unique to each one of them—narratives that ultimately must be interpreted from the vantage point of every person's distinctive ripening into maturity (Van Tassel, 1979).

Scholarly interest in what and how older people disclose about their inner selves has lagged behind research on aging in the biomedical and socio-behavioral sciences. (The same can be said of perspectives on gerontology rooted in the arts and humanities.) And yet, narrative gerontology builds on decades of professional efforts and interdisciplinary collaborations to develop "an overall framework for thinking about 'the narrative fabric of the self' through time—for thinking about the autobiographical complexities of aging itself" (Randall & McKim, 2008, p. 10). Andy Achenbaum's maturation since the mid-1970s as a gerontologist and historian has coincided with concurrent explorations by academics into the "narrative turn" across the humanities and social sciences (Polkinghorne, 1987). So too, albeit in different ways, Barbara Lewis as a professional honed her ability to listen to people's stories. She developed skills and practices in a career that began with a social work degree followed by training to serve for decades as a psychoanalyst before she felt called to become a deacon and then a priest in the Episcopal Church.

What follows are narrative synopses of Lewis' and Achenbaum's journeys into spiritual time. Their respective narratives are winter tales—both are Boomers, born in 1947—divided into three parts: (1) Awakening, (2) Flowering, and (3) Ripeness. While their respective story lines differ in many regards, what is striking is that elements central to their particular identities converge in later years.

### **Awakening**

Both Lewis and Achenbaum were raised in the Episcopal Church in northeast US. Since both as children took delight and comfort in the liturgy, it seems in retrospect immaterial that Achenbaum's parents were active in parish life whereas Lewis' dropped their kids off at the door. The critical difference in their formative years centers around a death in one family: Lewis' younger sister died at age four, when Lewis was 12. Lewis' rector had no facility for dealing with the adolescent's grief,

including her fear that she had somehow been culpable in that death. Nor could the priest explain in terms of Christian theology why this had happened. It was patently obvious to the teenager that neither punishment nor testing could explain her sister's death unless the toddler's life was nothing more than an end to someone else's life lesson. Lewis could not believe in a God who creates humans only as foils. The concept of God as primarily being present to—and thereby mitigating—suffering was either not broached by the priest or it was not communicated in a meaningful way to the young woman.

Lewis left the church in high school and became involved in Buddhism, whose dualisms (though not its concept of karma) made satisfying sense of suffering in the material world. She loved Zen koans and the pleasure of bursting through attempts of purely intellectual understanding. She found it deeply nourishing to meditate regularly. Despite learning Japanese and spending her junior year of college in Tokyo, however, Lewis knew that she would always be an outsider to that culture. Still, through this initial exposure to meditation practices, Barbara grasped the paradox of her being in the mystical presence of a God who was ultimately beyond reach.

In her late 20s, now living in New York City, Lewis missed the Holy Eucharist. She returned to the Episcopal Church. Although her involvement in congregational life was minimal, she felt strongly connected to a familiar, transcendent God through the Eucharist and meditation. Lewis learned about Christian contemplative prayer; she read (among others) Theresa of Avila, Ignatius of Loyola, Catherine of Siena, and Meister Eckhart. This approach to God was solitary. Lewis did not yet experience the presence of God in other individuals, community, or the created world.

At the same time Lewis was drawn to study psychoanalysis as an approach to becoming deeply present to another person. She was fascinated by learning hidden truths of people, initially through her own psychoanalysis, and then through her study and subsequent practice of psychoanalysis. Seeking and exposing truths whose denial or deformation kept people from becoming free and authentic was challenging and gratifying work. It was a number of years, though, before the spiritual nature of this work became apparent to Lewis, wherein she saw connections between the truth that she and her patients sought, and the Truth in whom she believed and lived.

Unlike Lewis, Achenbaum was more interested in the Episcopal Church's capacity as an institutional catalyst for societal change than in



accepting the promise of serenity that it offered through inward grace. The liturgy complemented principles taught in the boy's home, which were reinforced in school: Achenbaum was being groomed to be an achiever and all-round decent fellow, in a manner consistent with the norms and ideals of postwar America. And when visions of a Great Society presaged a transformation in organizational dynamics and more inclusive relationships between insiders and outsiders—an alteration which threatened the hegemony of the power elite to which Achenbaum aspired—it neither deterred nor diminished the youth's ambition to serve God, country, and whatever socially acceptable college admitted him on early decision.

In retrospect, it is tempting to mock adolescent presumptions and expectations pervasive among young men in the vanguard of the Baby Boom cohort, a segment of the US population seemingly destined at birth to achieve greatness. Things would fall apart by the end of the 1960s, but Achenbaum stayed the course: professors and clergy on campus propelled him into the Civil Rights movement and anti-war protests and urged him to teach English to the children of migrant workers. After college he (like his parents a generation before him) became an active lay leader in the Episcopal Church, an individual who volunteered time and commitment to causes that inspired him to serve.

And yet, such involvement did not sustain equanimity when personal crisis struck. Seemingly in the prime of his life, having achieved success in the academy, Achenbaum sank into a deep depression occasioned by the deaths of a brother, a mentor, and a good friend. It would take more than reciting passages from the *Book of Common Prayer* for him to deal with the consequences of being diagnosed and treated for a bipolar illness at age 41.

Achenbaum sensed at the time (1988) that this mid-life crisis might eventually prove liberating, but he felt adrift. While he knew what it required to gain esteem as a respected scholar and effective teacher, Achenbaum no longer desired to habituate patterns of living to which he had grown accustomed. A change in lifestyle was hard. Still, he could no longer deny to himself that his professional mask was out of sync with the personal one.

An invitation arrived later that same year to speak at a "spirituality and aging" conference at an Episcopal retreat in North Carolina. There Achenbaum met spiritual directors (mostly lay women) who showed him fresh ways to read the Psalms and the Book of Job. They recommended spiritual masterworks in the Anglo-Catholic literature—John of the Cross,

Arthur Michael Ramsey, and Evelyn Underhill. Meanwhile, a friend broadened Achenbaum's horizons by giving him a copy of Rumi's earthy poetry; it excited him to discern new paths to romance God in ordinary ways that somehow transcended time and place. Achenbaum shortly thereafter became acquainted with Henri Nouwen, who taught him how to pray with icons, a practice he had observed on Mount Athos in Greece two decades earlier.

There are parallels and gaps in the *awakening* phase of these narratives. Not only did Barbara Lewis' awakening to spirituality precede Andy Achenbaum's, but she much earlier than he incorporated the practice of listening to stories into her personal life and career trajectory. In both cases, however, dealing with trauma and tragedy required changes of heart occasioned an awareness that familiar institutional buttresses and theodicies would not suffice in moments of crisis. Lewis and Achenbaum chose not to reject accustomed devotional traditions; instead, they endeavored to amalgamate the religious and spiritual domains of their lives in ways that made sense to them at the time.

### Flowering

Rather than insistently compartmentalize his private sphere from his professional calling, as he done most of his life, Achenbaum, for the past two decades, has sought gingerly to integrate these two spheres of his persona. For him, this seemed a fruitful path that would lead him to a fuller measure of well-rounded maturity. Looking backward, Achenbaum's decision to reorder priorities did not represent *metanoia* (a radical change in direction), although it did affect his *modus operandi*. In morning and evening meditations Achenbaum never adopted forms of centered prayer and breathing exercises, which friends highly recommended that he embrace. Instead, Achenbaum's approach to spirituality was eclectic: he was content to mine the sacred within secular and religious texts, to listen to classical music and jazz that stirred his soul, and more and more to fill his home and office with prints and carvings that evoked memories and induced deep reflection. Above all he focused his attention on ways in which he related to an Ultimately Reality through his connections with others. Besides joining faculty reading groups that concentrated imaginations on the inner life of the spirit, Achenbaum invited several post-doctoral students to collaborate on studies of wisdom; some projects were based on close readings of the

Book of Job. He increasingly offered lectures, workshops, and courses on “spirituality and aging.” These endeavors cumulatively drew Achenbaum to become a mentor—one seasoned enough to help guide students and junior colleagues to do well by doing good.

Spiritual bouquets, alas, did not guarantee freedom from pain or sadness. Achenbaum experienced several traumas in his mid-fifties: his marriage fell apart, his mother died, and he had to resign from a deanship on account of a prolonged fight with a chronic illness that could not be stabilized through medication. He suffered from an *e coli* infection after an initial cancer biopsy; on top of that, Achenbaum grasped firsthand that fighting prostate cancer was an insidious, draining business. Thanks to a skilled and patient surgeon who saved his life, Achenbaum seized the opportunity to rethink how he chose to prioritize life. Feeling as if he were living on borrowed time, Achenbaum focused more purposively on accomplishing tasks that warranted serious attention and in cultivating friendships that mattered. He initially felt guilty when people chided him for not participating wholeheartedly in faculty meetings or mocked him for acting like a Luddite who could not digitalize grades. After a while shame diminished; the criticisms were not powerful enough to undercut his (self) image as an elder of the academic tribe. Achenbaum in the Third Quarter of Life had become more interested in his spiritual journey than in student ratings or dean’s annual reviews.

Barbara Lewis, like Andy Achenbaum, felt impelled to integrate important aspects of her life in order to grow. To do so, she decided to start anew in order to deepen her basic commitments. Although she was a respected psychoanalyst, Lewis knew that colleagues in her professional community were inimical to spirituality. To her, in contrast, acknowledging the incarnation of God had to be central to her vocation, a commitment which no longer could be maintained through her practice. So, to get out of Manhattan’s manmade environment, Lewis retired as an analyst and moved with her husband and son to rural Pennsylvania. She studied to become a deacon in the Episcopal Church, that is, to prepare for a ministry of service to others.

A few years after her ordination Lewis resumed her work as a psychoanalyst; she engaged through an Incarnate God in the process of seeking truth and freedom with patients. The difference between this work and her Manhattan practice probably would not have been apparent to anyone familiar with either undertaking. It was Lewis’ awareness of the divine in others and in her work which made the process different—deeper, more grounded, and more mutually connected—for her.

As Lewis began to listen to those who told her she was called to be priest, increasingly she felt that they were right. Clergy and lawpersons in the church agreed, encouraging her on. Seminary was an exciting and engaging experience. Lewis eagerly broadened her parish ministry.

The protracted illness and death of Frank, her husband of thirty years, caused Lewis to relive painful memories of her baby sister's succumbing to leukemia. Widowhood reinforced Lewis' moments of feeling alone, accentuating fears that she truly was on her own. Yet in the midst of this tragedy, Lewis discerned more deeply thoughts she had dimly articulated in youth. Now in the Third Quarter of Life she saw that life does not end with the last breath. She believed that death draws us more closely in our bonds with the Ultimate. And Lewis discovered that she could lean on others; friends shared her grief, and parishioners succored her with their love and concern. Even if these members of her community were not fully aware of their impact on her, Lewis realized that their expressions of sympathy and acts of compassion were manifestations of God's love incarnate.

### **Ripening**

At sixty-five, as they became subjects and objects of narrative gerontology, both Andy Achenbaum and Barbara Lewis became more and more aware that spiritual time trumped any preoccupation with ordinary time. Neither was eager to retire. Achenbaum had reckoned since the beginning of his career that he would die long before he reached seventy, as his father had, so he rarely took to heart the demographic trends and gerontological advice that he imparted to senior citizens and students. Lewis, on the other hand, enjoyed building spiritual communities. She wondered whether in the next phase of her vocation she might develop an interest in writing, a form of spiritual engagement that she had not pursued earlier.

Together, the couple imagined how they would spend their days if they were to withdraw (even gradually) from the demands of endless meetings, deadlines, and the ebb and flow of liturgical and academic calendars. Professional dreams (such as the desire to write one blockbuster) remained important, especially to Achenbaum, as he moved to the sidelines, happy to turn over institutional affairs whenever practicable to junior colleagues. Lewis, unquestionably the more introspective of the pair, seized the moment to celebrate her freedom to

Be. She felt less accountable for fulfilling others' expectations. Lewis loved building bonds of community with her vestry and congregation—these were venues in which she could present her gifts to others through the grace of God; but she also hungered for the return of solitude and quiet which were hard to come by in day-to-day parish life. She maintained annual eight-day silent retreats, where she was nurtured by God's presence in contemplative prayer and returned to the parish work reenergized.

Lewis and Achenbaum began to number their days, as the Psalmist put it, recounting the ups and downs of accumulated experiences that now spanned chronologically longer than their fathers' lives. Well into the Third Quarter of Life, they had learned that time moves forward not backward—inexorably, steadily, relentlessly. Believing in the eternality of life—in *kairos*, the timeless presence of God—neither harbored any morbid dread of dying. As a priest, Lewis had been present with many people at their moment of death. Time after time she felt that the presence of God at that critical time erased the line between life and death. Achenbaum came to a similar conclusion in interactions with patients and families in a hospice affiliated with a department of geriatric and palliative care (an adjunct appointment he assumed after prostate surgery).

For Lewis and Achenbaum, the time for wrestling with the angels of death had passed. Without denying death, each pointedly acknowledged that they wanted to avoid pain and to forego the indignities of heroic interventions that might prolong their corporeal existence without assuring them continued contact with friends and companions. Because Alzheimer's disease afflicted both of their mothers, Achenbaum and Lewis feared losing their minds should they live past age seventy-five. Both wanted to maintain a capacity to relish laughter, sharing, touching—simple, comforting pleasures that have taken on heightened joy as they discussed and composed their winter tales. To one another and now to readers, they voiced a sense of wellbeing, almost a disinterested resignation to a reality that had to be experienced to be apprehended: humans can mark beginnings and ends of moments, years, and stages with scientific accuracy, but living in *kairos* adds a spiritual dimension to life as important as, if not greater than, economic security, physical mobility, and mental acuity.

More than ever before, Lewis and Achenbaum have come to realize that the fundamental order of living was to give thanks to God, to celebrate life in the presence of an Ultimate Reality who fosters love and

gratitude in the here and now. In different places this message had been conveyed to the pair in childhood, but it was a Truth only inwardly digested when the time was right and ripe. They lived long enough to discover together that there was love, fulfillment, and commitment in old age—a stage of life often stereotyped as so diminished, arid, and unappealing as to preclude such a possibility. Love, which animates this narrative, flourished in spiritual time. Love had been present to them in earlier times of their lives, too. But to see it as a sacred Gift is to discover anew the great potential that inhere in all people to taste and see the Divine in another.

The love of another human creation of God, ideally, both embodies and partakes of ultimate Love. Viewed as an emanation of the divine and a gift in human form, such love can be a transformative companionship in which the human and divine are entwined. Transformation in later years is as wrenching, difficult—and rewarding—as at any age. Spiritual change is most often preceded by—usually made possible by—disquiet, confusion, even considerable pain. The person who emerges from the suffering is not wholly the same as the one without that life-changing experience. In the best of circumstances, surmounting pain and suffering leaves one more at peace, more open, and more willingly vulnerable than before. Love is deepened.

Winter love has all the depth and complexity (and struggles) of earlier loves. In the later years, though, priorities are clearer. In a covenanted relationship of elders, in which death is seen as the only acceptable cause of permanent disunity, such death is not, as it was in earlier times, a remote and unlikely-seeming possibility, but a nearby reality whose time may come at any moment. Many seniors fend off love; some decide against such a bond because they are acutely aware that loss is not just a possibility but a certainty. So the only relevant question is when death will take whom first.

Alternatively, instead of diminishment into a static state of waiting for the end, aging could be a time of ongoing, perpetual possibility for spiritual transformation. Life Review need not, then, be the introduction to a postscript, but the material for a deeper engagement with Love, both incarnate and transcendent, even as the *chronos* time for this particular incarnation draws to a close.

## References

- Blythe, R. (1979). *The view in winter: Reflections on old age*. New York, NY: Harcourt, Brace.
- Booth, W. (Ed.) (1992). *The art of growing older*. New York, NY: Poseidon Press.
- Butler, R.N. (1963). The life review: An interpretation of reminiscence in the aged. *Psychiatry*, 26, 65-76.
- De Beauvoir, S. (1996) *The coming of age* (P. O'Brien, Trans.). New York, NY: W. W. Norton. (Original work published 1971)
- Jones, A. W. (1985). *Soul making*. San Francisco, CA: Harper & Row.
- Luke, H. M. (1992). *Kaleidoscope: The way of woman and other essays* (Ed. R. Baker). New York, NY: Parabola Books.
- Manheimer, R. (1999). *A map to the end of time*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Polkinghorne, D.E. (1987). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. Albany, NY: SUNY Press.
- Randall, W. L. (1996). Restorying a life: Adult education and transformative learning. In *Aging and Biography: Explorations in adult development*, Ed. J.E. Birren, G.M. Kenyon, J-E Ruth, J.J.F. Schroots & T. Svensson (pp. 224-247). New York, NY: Springer Publishing Company.
- Randall, W. L. & McKim, A.E. (2008). *Reading our lives: The poetics of growing old*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- Randall, W. L. (2013). The importance of being ironic: Narrative openness and personal resilience in later life. *The Gerontologist*, 53(1), 9-16.
- Sarton, M. (1973). *As we are now*. New York, NY: W. W. Norton.
- Gergen, K., & Gergen, M. (1983). Narratives of the self. In T. R. Sarbin and K. E. Schiebe (Eds.). *Studies in Social Identity* (pp. 254-273). New York, NY: Praeger.
- Updike, J. (2008, November/ December). The writer in winter. *AARP Magazine*, 38-40.
- Van Tassel, D. D. (Ed.). (1979). *Aging, death, and the completion of being*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.

**W. Andrew Achenbaum, PhD**, who teaches history and social work at the University of Houston, is a member of the editorial board of *Narrative Works*. Columbia University Press will issue his latest book, *Robert N. Butler: Visionary of Healthy Aging*, in summer 2013.

**Barbara Lewis** has been a psychoanalyst and member of the National Psychological Association for Psychoanalysis for over thirty years; she has been an Episcopal priest for twelve years and is currently rector of St. Andrew's Episcopal Church in Houston.