

Age as Adventure: Restorying Later Life

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Volume 11, 2022

Special Issue: Narrative and Personal and Social Transformation

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1108955ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108955ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Centre for Digital Scholarship, University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Randall, W. (2022). Age as Adventure: Restorying Later Life. *Narrative Works*, 11, 73–86. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1108955ar>

Article abstract

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SPECIAL ISSUE:
NARRATIVE AND PERSONAL AND SOCIAL
TRANSFORMATION

Age as Adventure: Restorying Later Life

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For many people, aging is perceived and experienced in implicitly tragic terms: as a narrative of decline, as little more than a downward trajectory toward decrepitude and death. Such a way of storying later life can set us up for (among other things) narrative foreclosure, which can fuel the mild-to-moderate depression to which older adults are susceptible in the face of aging's many challenges. Insofar as our experience of aging is inseparable from our story of aging, this paper argues for an alternative narrative of later life. Drawing on concepts from narrative gerontology and narrative psychology, it outlines how later life can be regenerated from tragedy to adventure in at least four inter-related directions: outward, inward, backward, and forward.

Keywords:

aging, lifespan development, adventure, narrative, gerontology, restorying

DECLINE, DIGNITY, DISCOVERY: AN INTRODUCTION

I've spent most of my academic life playing around ... with *metaphor*, that is: one metaphor in particular, our common denominator at a conference called Narrative Matters. Psychologist Theodore Sarbin (1986) calls it the "root metaphor" of *narrative*, or if you will, of *story*. In very much a preliminary manner, I'd like to outline where this metaphor has been leading me of late.

Brian Schiff (2017) writes about the need of *A New Narrative for Psychology*. The same is true, I believe, for gerontology. As I reflect upon my years within the field, which (with the best of intentions) remains dominated by a

biomedical model of aging, this is what I've been trying to do: sketch a more enticing script, a more inviting counter-story, for aging itself. Not as a "narrative of decline" (Gullette, 2004, p. 28), which is how it tends to get cast within the western world and which, to the degree that we internalize it, can set up us for "narrative foreclosure" (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011): the premature conviction that our story has effectively ended and that no new chapters are apt to open up. Nor even as what could be called a "narrative of dignity," the more noble manner in which gerontologists such as Jan Baars (2012) and Frits de Lange (2015) construe it, whereby we arrive, ideally, at a humble but empowering acceptance of our mortality, of our *finitude*. On this point, it bears noting that Dan McAdams and colleagues have written recently on the importance of older adults developing "narratives of acceptance" in later life (McAdams, Logan, & Reischer, 2022).

But going beyond acceptance, and taking my cue from Florida Scott-Maxwell, I would like to view aging in more hopeful, more positive terms as potentially, and perhaps even primarily, a "narrative of discovery"—or as Arthur Frank (1995) might say, of *quest*. Listen to what Scott-Maxwell says, for instance, writing in her 80s, in her little book—her diary, really—called *The Measure of My Days*. "A long life makes me feel nearer truth," she says, "yet it won't go into words, so how can I convey it? I can't and I want to. I want to tell people approaching and perhaps fearing age that it is a time of discovery. If they say—'Of what?' I can only answer, 'We must each find out for ourselves, otherwise it won't be discovery.'" (p. 142).

Yale theologian, Janet Ruffing, writes about narrative and spiritual direction. In one place she states simply that: "it matters how we tell the story" (Ruffing, 2011, pp. 93-130)—words that are music to the ears, no doubt, of therapists everywhere, especially narrative therapists. But, indeed, it matters very much how we tell the story of our own identity, to invoke Erikson's iconic concept, insofar as our identity, as McAdams (2001) insists, "*is a life story*" (pp. 643; emphasis McAdams'). It matters how we tell the story of our aging, too. It matters what story we subscribe to concerning it. Do we construe it as a matter of passively and resignedly getting old or of actively and intentionally *growing* old (Randall & McKim, 2008)? Do we story aging as a way to the darkness alone or also to the light, as a process of narrowing in and closing down or also of widening out and keeping open?

The narrative of decline portrays aging as implicitly a tragedy. And, God knows, there is much about aging that points in a tragic direction: arthritis, diabetes, cancer, heart disease, dementia, bereavement, loss. There doesn't seem much that's

terribly “redemptive” (McAdams, 2006) about it. For many, then, it is something to be *against*, to be “anti-,” to delay, defy, deny. The very phrase, aging as *adventure*, would seem a contradiction in terms. I’d like to suggest however that, despite these tragic elements, and in some ways maybe because of them, aging can be re-storied in the more positive manner that I’m envisioning here.

Admittedly, I’m using the terms “adventure” and “tragedy” in a very broad sense, as if they are clear opposites. But, as a beginner’s knowledge of literary theory soon reveals, the boundaries between genres are frequently blurred. Not only do we speak of tragic misadventures, tragi-comedies, and the like, but there are various ways in which adventures themselves can unfold. I think of Christopher Booker’s (2004) massive volume: *The Seven Basic Plots: Why We Tell Stories*. Among the recurring plotlines that he claims run through western literature, besides tragedy and comedy per se, are such classic adventure patterns as: *Overcoming the Monster*, *Rags to Riches*, *Voyage and Return*, *Rebirth*, and *The Quest*. And in not a few stories—he cites *Lord of the Rings* as a prime example—they can all be traced. The same, I would say, can be true in the stories of our own lives.

There are various ways, in other words, in which aging can be “re-genre-ated” from tragedy to adventure, filled (as adventures always are) with both discovery and danger, reward and risk. As I see things at present, four, broad, intertwining directions are involved: the adventure *outward*, adventure *inward*, adventure *backward*, and adventure *forward*. Included too, one could argue, is the adventure *downward*, where we face down our inner monsters and own up to our shadow side, plus the adventure *upward*, where we strain toward what Mark Freeman (2006) cautiously calls “the *transcendent horizon* of the life story” (p. 94; emphasis Freeman’s). Theologian Richard Rohr (2011) talks, for instance, about “falling upward” in later life. But I’ll stick here with these first four directions and sketch briefly my thinking on each of them.

A footnote is in order, first. In using the term “adventure,” I have in mind Joseph Campbell’s concept of “the hero’s adventure” (see Campbell & Moyers, 1988, pp. 123-163), which might therefore disqualify my perspective here as being hopelessly biased toward men. For me, though, heroes can be male *and* female. However little narrative agency or narrative imagination we might possess, however much we are locked into the role of, say, victim or orphan or martyr in our lives, we are all, arguably, the central figure, the hero or heroine, in our own unfolding story, the story by which, for better or worse, we are living (McAdams, 1993). And it matters a great deal how we position ourselves within it.

THE ADVENTURE OUTWARD

This is perhaps the more obvious way in which later life—leastwise for those with sufficient means and decent enough health—can be adventure. By this I mean such things as going on that cruise that you’ve dreamed about for years; taking up painting or piano or other activities that you had no time for while making your way in the world; nurturing long-buried talents; learning another language or joining a cause in which you form new friendships, weave new characters into your story, open new subplots and chapters, and expand your horizons in fresh new directions. In her book *The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk, and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50*, Harvard educator, Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot (2009), explores how such ventures can present amazing opportunities for learning and growth that we could not possibly have imagined for ourselves before. Two heroes from my own life illustrate nicely this aspect of aging as adventure.

My mother, age 100, is legally blind due to macular degeneration, yet amid one Covid lockdown after another in the facility where she lives, she makes over 25 calls an evening—sometimes over 30—to folks from various corners of her life, all of them younger than her, not surprisingly! A few she calls every night, some every two nights, some weekly, and so forth. And she knows all of their numbers by heart! We once counted up the names: nearly 150 in total. She phones them, though, not to complain about *her* situation, which she has accepted totally, but to ask about theirs: “Will your daughter get home for the holidays? Did you hear back from the doctor yet?” And she always ends by telling them, “I love you very much!” Her heart has grown that big, her world brimming with people and purpose.

My sister Carol, stricken with polio at the age of eight, has led a life filled with adventures big and small adventures, according to psychologist Karl Scheibe (1986), being a pre-requisite for the formation of a healthy narrative identity. Two years ago, at 76, her limited mobility more limited still by the onset of Post-Polio Syndrome, she and her saint of a partner, Eldon, sold their house of 35 years and moved to a senior-friendly apartment complex where she has been busily broadening her horizon of relationships. A self-taught photographer, entrepreneur, and writer, she also recently published her memoir (Randall, 2021), and what a good, strong story it lays out. It’s a narrative not merely of acceptance, but of accomplishment, resilience, and adventure!

THE ADVENTURE INWARD

At some point, the adventure outward can merge with the adventure inward. Learning another language, returning to university, or any other involvement in later life can awaken us to sides of ourselves that we were oblivious to before, and face us with items of developmental business that beg to be addressed. Besides *The Third Chapter*, books like Thomas Moore's (2017) *The Ageless Soul*, Parker Palmer's (2018) *On the Brink of Everything*, Rabbi Schacter-Shalomi's (1995) *From Age-ing to Sage-ing*, Mary Catherine Bateson's (2010) *Composing a Further Life*, or Betty Friedan's (1993) *The Fountain of Age* (which incidentally has a whole chapter on "Age as Adventure") often probe the internal complexities of later life far more insightfully than do we earnest gerontologists with our blithe talk of "successful aging," "active aging," and the like. They also help us to appreciate aging as an intrinsically "spiritual" process, which nudges us into territory that can leave us ill-at-ease and adrift, unsure where to go. "The longest journey," notes former United Nations Secretary-General, Dag Hammerskjöld (1964), "is the journey inward" (p. 48). Except for important but mainly marginal work within gerontology on religion and aging, it is a journey or an *adventure* (I like that word better) which we're left to undertake largely without maps.

The adventure inward is linked closely, of course, to the adventure backward, or to what I've come to call the *autobiographical* adventure. I'll return to this aspect of aging in a moment, and here there are more maps at our disposal, more strategies for exploring our past. But first, let me talk a little about the adventure forward.

THE ADVENTURE FORWARD

Aging as an adventure *forward*? In what joke of a universe does this phrase even make sense? Surely, this is how the story goes: *we're born, we suffer, we die*. Talk about a "contaminated sequence" (McAdams, 2006, p. 211)! No matter how successfully we may keep aging at bay with our crosswords and creams, our Pilates and diets—let's be honest—it is ultimately a sickness unto death. Of course, there is the business of legacy and generativity (see, e.g., St. Aubin, McAdams, & Kim, 2004), and of how we live on into the future in the hearts and minds of those we leave behind, all of which is well and good. But apart from that, what really is there to look forward to?

I'm certainly not going to answer this perfectly good (if rhetorical) question, but I find myself moving more and more towards the sort of vision that Scott-Maxwell hints at in another enticing passage in her book: "I remember," she writes, "that in the last days of my pregnancies the child seemed to claim almost all my body, my strength, my breath, and I held on wondering if my burden was my enemy, uncertain as to whether my life was at all mine. Is life a pregnancy? That would make death a birth" (p. 76). We are people," she goes on, "to whom something important is about to happen. (p. 138) "All is uncharted and uncertain, we seem to lead the way into the unknown"(p. 139). The scientist-mystic, Teilhard de Chardin (2001/1957), voices a similar sentiment when he writes of "the hidden mystery in the womb of death" (p. 76; see also Randall 2020a). With such a vision in mind, with death storied not as termination so much as transition. transition to perhaps the *ultimate* adventure, why not think about aging itself as a "near-ing death experience"?

In recent decades, there has been a growing body of literature concerning the so-called "near death experience," or NDE. One example is a fascinating volume by the Dutch cardiologist Pim van Lommel (2007), whose initial findings earned him a publication in the prestigious medical journal, *The Lancet* (Lommel, van Wees, Meyers, & Elfferich, 2001). The book is entitled *Consciousness Beyond Life: The Science of the Near-Death Experience*. Like other books in this whole area, such as Dr. Raymond Moody's (1975) bestselling *Life After Life*, it identifies certain common elements which, regardless of their backgrounds or beliefs, people who have been declared clinically dead (if only for minutes) report experiencing, as well as certain transformative effects that ripple through their lives upon their return. Among these effects are: less concern with material possessions, greater commitment to loving others, a sense of the interconnectedness of all things, an enlarged sense of Time and Reality, and a heightened sense of meaning, to say nothing of a huge reduction in their fear of death itself. If you will, it's the ultimate happy ending! Most of these effects, coincidentally, are characteristic of what the Swedish gerontologist, Lars Tornstam (1996), has called gerotranscendence. In narrative terms, our story—of ourselves, of life, of the cosmos—is widened beyond anything we could have imagined before.

THE ADVENTURE BACKWARD

Among the common elements of the NDE is a kind of panoramic review of our past—a spontaneous, simultaneous, warts-and-all survey of our lives within

a loving, non-judging environment. Here, then, I would like to circle back to the “adventure backward”—a phrase which definitely sounds like a contradiction in terms. Adventures, by definition, go forward, not backward, right? But, if (perchance) there truly is “life beyond life,” and if a review of the life that we’ve just lived is one of the first things that we undergo, then it adds another whole level of credibility to the views of Erik Erikson (1963), for instance, that achieving “ego integrity” and avoiding “despair” in later life hinges on our engaging in a measure of *life review*. Put simply, and I’m drawing in part here on a little known field called transpersonal gerontology (see, e.g., Wacks, 2011)—where, as it were, it is our IN-finitude as much as our finitude that we need to accept—if we are slated to review our lives anyway on “the other side,” then why not get a head start on it now? Why not get prepared? That said, looking backward, as Mark Freeman (2006) argues in *Hindsight* is fraught—like any adventure worthy of the term—with promise and peril alike.

At the time of writing this paper, I am looking forward, in less than two weeks, to my 50th reunion from college. Reunions can be wonderful or they can be awful, and you never know what you’re letting yourself in for. To prepare for my own, therefore, I’ve been doing some homework, namely pawing through letters that I wrote home as far back as freshman year and that my dear mother dutifully saved, plus journals from my early twenties onward, including the 15-plus years that I devoted to seminary training and, after that, the exhausting adventure of parish ministry.

Concerning this period especially, my autobiographical adventure has so far not proven particularly fun. In fact, I fell into a kind of mini-depression earlier this spring when wading through long-winded, God-haunted, self-critical ramblings, not about what I had for my supper or what was happening in my life externally, but about the state of my soul. Here’s the cheery sort of wording that I found, for instance, in an entry from May of 1978: “such a miserable, miserable sinner!” I had to stop reading: I felt so sorry for myself, the self I was at the time, or at least the side of my self—the *darker* side—that these pages bespeak, one of several selves that lie layered within me to this day.

I can only imagine what other sobering surprises lie in store for me, what unfinished developmental business I’ll uncover, as I peer into further corners of my past, as I scamper down rabbit holes that seeing, say, the name of a certain person on a page is apt to open up. So, then, the adventure backward and the adventure inward are intimately connected, not only to each other but, in many respects, to the adventure downward, too. Quite frankly, the whole experience has, to date, been disturbing, on a personal and professional level alike.

As an example of the “positivity effect” (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005) that researchers claim comes rather naturally with age, much of what I’ve written on “narrative care” with older adults (see, e.g., Randall, 2020b) has, I fear, disproportionately stressed its *positive* dimensions, seeing autobiographical reflection as inherently healthy, if not fun: as I say, the autobiographical *adventure*. James Birren, for instance, who is to narrative gerontology what Jerome Bruner is to narrative psychology, extols the various benefits of a unique approach to life review that he designed called “guided autobiography.” Among these are an increased sense of meaning and purpose, an enhanced experience of agency and self-esteem, a heightened feeling of life satisfaction overall, and so on and so forth (see Birren & Deutschman, 1991, pp. 4-6). All of these are great, I hasten to point out, but once again, adventures have positive and negative aspects alike. There is discovery but there is also danger, reward but also risk, promise but also peril, including the possible peril of being crippled (not by polio but) by regret and despair. “Memories,” observes psychologist, Paul Wong (1995), “can cut both ways. They can depress us or elevate our spirit; they can bind us or set us free” (p. 35).

I’ve touched enough now, though, on the perilous part of the adventure backward, and in the larger project that this talk is (I hope) a first foray into, I’ll be considering it more fully. Certainly, in his book *Hindsight*, where he employs such intriguing notions as “narrative foreclosure” and the “narrative unconscious” to explore the intricacies of the remembered past, Mark Freeman (2006) does so in a highly insightful way. (Of course, in hindsight—who knows?—he himself may disagree with half of what he wrote!)

On the *promise* side of things, however, as we stroll down memory lane, as we make our way deeper into the thicket of our past, there is always the potential for deepened self-understanding, for realizing just how many selves there are, in fact, within us. Says autobiography scholar, Paul John Eakin (1999), “there are many stories of Self to tell, and more than one self to tell them” (p. xi)—including the “possible selves” (Markus & Nurius, 1986) and “lost possible selves” (King & Mitchell, 2015) that can swirl around inside of us on any given day, the selves we might have been or might still be. And each one has its own unique story as to who “we” really are.

There is the potential in the adventure backward for seeing more clearly the path that our life has taken to date and therefore, for insight, if not answers, as to why we’ve gone where we have gone, done what we have done, turned out the way that we’ve turned out. It can be argued, in fact, that there are several things about our lives and our selves that we can really only start to understand when we

reach our 60s, 70s, or 80s. In *The Art of Time in Memoir*, Sven Birkerts (2008) writes, for instance, about how, as he recalled them and wrote about them, his “earlier years—from early childhood to the time of my late 20s—offered themselves to me as a mystery,” and how, as he puts it, “I discerned the possibility of hidden patterns ... that, if unearthed and understood, would somehow explain me—my life—to myself” (p. 4f).

There is also the potential for “moral recuperation” (Freeman, 2006, p. 8) of the past, for “redeeming” the past (Brady, 1990), for the “recontextualization” (Schacter-Shalomi & Miller, 1995, pp. 94-96) of past suffering or failure, past trauma or betrayal, into retrospectively invaluable occasions for learning and growth, not to mention for deepening our compassion for others. And there is the potential for strengthening our inner stories and widening our inner horizons, not to mention for achieving a measure of psychic integration, which is to say, for pulling ourselves together. “When you truly possess all you have been and done,” writes Scott-Maxwell (1968), “which may take some time, you are *fierce with reality*” (p. 40; emphasis mine). And in all of this there is the potential for realizing that, no matter our age, the past remains amazingly open, its text amenable to multiple interpretations. As Freeman (1993) eloquently expresses it, “Our lives [are] like richly ambiguous texts to be interpreted and understood ... whose meanings are inexhaustible, whose mysterious existence ceaselessly calls forth the desire to know, whose meanings cannot ever yield a final closure” (p. 184).

Analysing the journals of older adults such as Scott-Maxwell and the poet, May Sarton, gerontologist Harry Berman (1994) writes about this inherent openness to our stories, and thus to our pasts. “As our horizon of self-understanding shifts” in the course of writing in our journals, he says, “it may become apparent that we were not in the middle of the story we thought we were in the middle of. Perhaps we thought our life was a tragedy and all along, unbeknownst to us, it was a romance. Or perhaps we thought that our life was almost over, at least in terms of the future holding anything new, and it turned out there was a lot more to it” (p. 180).

So, the adventure backward can lead us to some intriguing surprises, and to novel occasions for internal expansion and personal growth. Listen to these words from Jungian psychotherapist, Ira Progoff (1975), designer of the *Intensive Journal*, a unique strategy that he pioneered for journeying both backward and inward at once. “As we work in our Journal,” he says, “the solid clumps of past experience are broken up so that air and sunlight can enter ... soon the soil becomes soft enough for new shoots to grow in” (p. 100).

This re-working of the past is no straightforward endeavor, however, and certainly not linear in nature. Nor is it for everyone. The need to review—or as I would say, to *read* (Randall & McKim, 2008)—our lives, research shows, is not as universal as has been assumed (see, e.g., Wink & Schiff, 2002). And, in fact, many older adults opt unconsciously for what psychologists Jack Bauer and Sun Park (2010) describe as a “security narrative” over a “growth narrative.” The very elderly and very frail are perhaps cases in point.

Frits de Lange (2015) acknowledges frankly, for instance, that “frailty affects one’s narrative capacity” (p. 100). It can render one a truly *wounded* storyteller (Frank, 1995), with dementia doing so in spades. “The problem in advanced old age,” de Lange argues, “is finding the narrative capability for identity construction” (p. 98). He suggests, then, that “developing a ‘narrative identity, version light’ may be the last possibility for the oldest and frail elderly to support their sense of self-worth” (p. 100).

While I think de Lange underestimates the capacity of the very old—my mother and sister as cases in point—to nurture strong, resilient stories that will sustain them through difficult times, I take his point. The adventure backward is not for the faint of heart, nor is the adventure inward. There are numerous narrative challenges that await us in later life (Randall, 2020b), narrative foreclosure being but one. There is important work to be done, in other words. “Storywork,” I call it (Randall, 2010); spiritual work, you could also say. Schacter-Shalomi (1995) calls it “philosophic homework” (pp. 124-127). Nor will tackling that homework lead necessarily to a tidy summing-up of our life. For as that last quote by Freeman suggests, reading our lives knows no end, given the complexity and open-endedness of autobiographical memory in terms of content and interpretation. Depending upon our perspective, this built-in indeterminacy to the process of autobiographical reflection could either be exhilarating or threatening. Sociologist Peter Berger (1963) refers, for instance, to the “metaphysical agoraphobia” one can suffer “before the endlessly overlapping horizons of one’s possible being” (p. 63). On the other hand, Margaret Morganroth Gullette (2004), in her important book, *Aged By Culture*, celebrates “the thrill of narrative freedom” that we might taste as well (p. 158).

AGING AS ADVENTURE: A FEW FURTHER THOUGHTS

To wrap up this sketch of where my thinking has lately been taking me, adventures can naturally be solo or shared, and certainly both at once. My own adventure of aging—outward, inward, backward, and so forth—is naturally unique

to me, due to the multiple ways in which my life differs from anyone else's. But, insofar as all of us, no matter how many birthdays we have had, are aging, then we can also undertake that adventure together. We can support one another in the soulful work of later life by listening closely to one another's tales, becoming vulnerable readers of one another's lives (see Frank, this issue), and helping each other to remain narratively open, to keep on growing, to the point perhaps where we do, indeed, become *fierce with reality*.

Karen Scheib (2016), formerly a professor of pastoral theology at Emory University, stresses the importance of being "story companions" (p. 61) to one another—not so much counselors or confessors, though these roles clearly have their place—but companions. Ideally, this conference has connected, or reconnected, us with wonderful companions on our respective adventures into the world of narrative ideas. In my own such adventure, I have found myself clinging to the vision of our friendships, our communities, and our institutions transforming into "wisdom environments" (see Randall & Kenyon, 2001, pp. 169-173; Randall & McKim, 2008, pp. 242-246). By this I mean supportive, respectful narrative environments in which, through listening closely to one another's tales, whatever our age and however wounded we might be, we accompany each other on the adventures of later life, mentoring one another into elderhood and sharing such insights and questions—such wisdom, even truth—as we are discovering en route.

These are, of course, early days in my thinking on such themes. There are a thousand "yeah buts" and "so whats?" that I'll need to anticipate, countless avenues I'll need to go down, concepts I'll need to consider. Among them is one suggested by Gene Cohen, a gerontologist who has done valuable research on the topic of creativity and aging, and written on the positive potential of the aging brain itself. Cohen (2005) points to what he calls the "encore" phase of late life development, a stage which he says "generally starts during one's late 70s, becoming more pronounced during the 80s and extending to the end of one's years" (p. 82). "I see this time," he says, "as a manifestation of our creatively restless brain creating an Inner Push for reflection and a desire for continuation and celebration. ... [as] a time when entirely new perspectives on life can come forth" (p. 82f).

I also want to work more with Arthur Frank's (1995) typology of the *restitution narrative*, the *chaos narrative*, and the *quest narrative* for how we can story our experiences of aging itself. I want to look at the potential of interventions in "narrative care" (see, e.g., Randall 2020b) to help us shift from chaos to quest before the slings and arrows of later life. I want to play more, too, with Bruner's (1986) oft-cited distinction between the "landscape of action" that a story always has—including a *life* story—and its "landscape of consciousness" (p. 14). For a

number of rather obvious reasons, our landscape of action tends to narrow in with advancing years, thereby limiting the scope of our outward adventures. But, barring the onset of dementia and other such conditions, our landscape of consciousness—and with it, our adventures inward and backward alike—need have no limits at all.

In any case, there is lots ahead of me to do, but I'm excited to proceed. I realize, of course, that I may come across like little Pollyanna spouting this whole idea of aging as adventure in an age that seems dominated by tragedy and trauma wherever we look. Just possibly, though, this underscores the need to lay out a more hopeful, more affirming vision of life overall, and of later life, too.

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