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Family Reunions and Reminiscence

Summer is the time for family reunions, a time to eat, drink, and tell stories.

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Summertime provides an opportunity for many gatherings including, of course, family reunions. In a society all too often characterized by age segregation, such gatherings provide an increasingly rare opportunity for intergenerational communication and connection. At reunions, elders, grandparents, parents, [teenagers](#), and children gather to catch up, re-connect, swim, play sports, eat, and perhaps most importantly to tell stories that reminisce about the past. Reunions strengthen family bonds, preserve traditions, and create a sense of connection and belonging.

During these times of incessant migration and immigration, families are often dispersed, living lives removed—spatially and temporally—from their cultural roots. Children may grow up in new places without understanding the language and culture of their parents. Parents long for their "real homes, places that exist only in their memories. Family reunions can bring to life and reinforce memories and ideals of "home" for parents, children, and grandchildren.

Family gatherings also provide an important space for fostering and reinforcing inter-generational connections and relationships. My family recently had a reunion in North Carolina. As a member of a diverse immigrant family, I was happy to see that our religious, political, and philosophical differences, which are significant, did not create undo [stress](#). Although we allotted an hour each day for "Family Drama," we experienced few disagreements. We chatted, cooked, ate, drank, swam, even had a talent show. Beyond these enjoyable activities the gathering gave us a space for reminiscing.

Among others, Robert Butler has written extensively about the considerable psychological benefits of reminiscing. Reminiscing about the past can help people gain critical insights; enhance [happiness](#) and increase life satisfaction. Although we often associate reminiscence with elders, it is an experience in which people of all ages can engage.

Is reminiscence a process that can help reorganize, resolve, and reintegrate important sources of meaning in our ever-changing lives? The work of Erik Erikson provides an some answers. In his theory of life-span development, Erikson argued that reminiscence enables people to both accept their early memories and experiences as they integrate them into an overall life story. By focusing on your contributions, your place in a family, culture, historical time and place, reminiscence about the past can help contribute to ego integrity. Narratives of the past reminisce can create a sense of personal integrity and individual consistency in a changing social and cultural environment. It is a process that transcends the present, expands concepts of time. Indeed, it helps to refine our [philosophy](#) of life. For immigrant families especially, it is a way to preserve cultural values and promote an understanding of one's past, present, and future.

At my recent family gathering we spent considerable amount of time talking about my father who had passed away in 2012. A larger than life person who loved to eat, drink, and enjoy life fully, we noted his absence of noted

throughout the weekend. With [humor](#), we reminisced about his sometimes outrageous behavior. Our stories helped us to cope with his palpable absence.

We also shared many stories about our [childhood](#). Social psychologists have found that people usually tend to recall a disproportionately large number of memories from their early life experiences. These experiences, which lay the foundation for later life [identity](#), serve as important anchor points on the path of life. For those of us in middle and later adulthood, thinking about early life experiences can teach us how to cope with our present life transitions. Family reunions give us the opportunity to tell and retell stories of those early adventures. Telling and listening to these narratives that can help us to reconstruct disjointed past experiences into a more meaningful and coherent autobiographical narrative.

In childhood we envision possible scenarios for our lives. Most children engage in [magical thinking](#)—envisioning a life of endless possibilities, imagining multiple realities. As we travel through life more realistic thoughts and [dreams](#) develop. In [midlife](#), the sudden awareness of our diminishing time once again compels us to re-evaluate the paths we have chosen. We realize that regardless of what we do, life, while sweet in many ways, does not necessarily work out as we had anticipated. It is a realization that can make us confront our fears, dependencies, and let go of our illusions of mastery and control. Despite these existential difficulties, reminiscing about the past can also help us to realize that we have the freedom to choose a different path at any point in life. Reminiscence can help us live life more fully—especially once we realize that all moments are fleeting and changeable. Time with family and friends; time during we share stories of the past, can help us journey forward with an increased appreciation and acceptance of a long vanished past.

What better way to conclude than with a Sufi story about the changeable nature of life. The story, “The Tale of the Sands,” was reputedly recounted by Dhun-Nun, an Egyptian who died in 860.

The Tale of the Sands

A stream, from its source in far-off mountains, passing through every kind and description of countryside, at last reached the sands of the desert. Just as it

had crossed every other barrier, the stream tried to cross this one, but it found that as fast as it ran into the sand, its waters disappeared.

It was convinced, however, that its destiny was to cross this desert, and yet there was no way. Now a hidden voice, coming from the desert itself, whispered: 'The Wind crossed the desert, and so can the stream.'"

The stream objected that it was dashing itself against the sand, and only getting absorbed: that the wind could fly, and this was why it could cross the desert.

'By hurtling in your own accustomed way you cannot get across. You will either disappear or become a marsh. You must allow the wind to carry you over, to your destination.'

But how could this happen? 'By allowing yourself to be absorbed by the wind.'

This idea was not acceptable to the stream. After all, it had never been absorbed before. It did not want to lose its individuality. And, once having lost it, how was one to know that it could ever be regained?

'The wind,' said the sand, 'performs this function. It takes up water, carries it over the desert, and then lets it fall again. Falling as rain, the water again becomes a river.'

'How can I know that this is true?'

'It is so, and if you do not believe it, you cannot become more than a quagmire, and even that could take many, many years; and it certainly is not the same as a stream.'

'But can I not remain the same stream that I am today?'

'You cannot in either case remain so,' the whisper said. 'Your essential part is carried away and forms a stream again. You are called what you are even today because you do not know which part of you is the essential one...' (Shah 1970-23-24)