The Uses of Reminiscence: A Discussion of the Formative Literature

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1. IMAGES OF REMINISCENCE

From ancient times, reminiscence has been particularly associated with old age, and attitudes towards remembering the past have long been a measure of a society's attitude towards its old people. In preliterate societies, elders often occupied positions of power and dignity because it was upon their memories that the transmission of culture depended. In present-day societies, however, many kinds of knowledge quickly become obsolete; books are a more reliable warehouse of the accumulated wisdom of the past; and memory is no longer an invaluable social asset. The position of old people has paralleled the declining fortunes of reminiscence: it is no longer held in high esteem as a storehouse of cultural riches, and neither are they. What makes the recent reevaluation of reminiscence so culturally significant is that nothing less than our attitude towards old people is at stake.

One of the more persistent images of old age fuses, or rather confuses, the age-old activity or reminiscence with hopelessness, denial of death, turning away from present realities, loss of memory, and intellectual deterioration. In the *Rhetoric*, Aristotle wrote of old people that "They live by memory rather than by hope, for what is left to them of life is but 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.[1] This passage is less remarkable in its error than in its perspicacity. The conviction that old age is necessarily hopeless because of its close proximity to death is still with us, and still distorts our perception of old people. Of great interest is Aristotle's recognition of the value of reminiscence: it is not only a source of pleasure, but it helps old people cope with their knowledge of the imminence of death.

It is startling to find Aristotle's view of the matter so closely echoed twenty-four centuries later in the gerontological literature. Take, for example, the following thumbnail sketch of "the aging process":

> In the psychological area, [the elderly person] may suffer from organic mental deterioration. His loss of memory may be marked and he may have a lessened capacity for grasping or understanding ideas. Moreover, the aging person is usually preoccupied with the past. While the younger person is inclined to look forward to "tomorrow" the older person's "tomorrow" may be the end of his life. It is for this reason that a preoccupation with the past can be a helpful defense in the older person's efforts to survive.[2]

This passage, which is representative of enlightened professional opinion of fifteen years ago, agrees with Aristotle in viewing denial of death as the chief motive for reminiscence. Furthermore, it loosely associates reminiscence with "organic mental deterioration." It does not seek to define precisely the relationship between "organic" impairment and a "preoccupation with the past," but freely allows us to assume that reminiscence is a somewhat pathological mental activity which is the result of senescent changes. A kind of half-conscious syllogism governs this view of reminiscence: since reminiscence is the characteristic activity of old age, and since old age is characterized by a general deterioration of intellectual and emotional capacities, then it must follow that reminiscence is a sign of senescent impairment. This stereotypical "portrait" of aging does not begin to suggest the clinically pejorative tone of the negative—and until quite recently, prevalent—view of reminiscence. Dr. Theodore Lidz, whose text is used to induct so many social work and medical students into knowledge of *The Person: His Development Throughout the Life Cycle*, offers us a compendium of demeaning "insights" veiled as neutrally causal explanations. Significantly enough, he discusses reminiscence under the chapter subtitle of "Memory Impairments":

> Elderly people, as is well known, spend an increasing amount of time talking and thinking about the past. It seems natural that as they feel out of the run of things, they should turn back to the days when life was more rewarding and enjoyable, and when events had a deeper impact on them. When the future

> holds little, and thinking about it arouses thoughts of death, interest will turn regressively to earlier years. Still, in most persons who become very old, the defect is more profound. The person becomes unable to recall recent events and lives more and more in the remote past, as if a shade were being pulled down over recent happenings, until nothing remains except memories of childhood. This type of memory failure depends on senile changes in the brain and is perhaps the most characteristic feature of senility. We do not properly understand why earlier memories are retained while more recent happenings are lost.[3]

Dr. Lidz is hardly alone in viewing reminiscence as a "defect": the traditional and "common sense" view of our culture, of which Dr. Lidz is an authoritative representative, also equates reminiscence and regression, and sees it as the royal road to the proverbial "second childhood." As with sexuality, so with reminiscence: old people themselves adopt the conventional wisdom about themselves and become fearful of reminiscing:

> Our population [of old people] showed the effects of this common attitude. They hesitated to talk about the past because they did not want to be characterized as old people and because they did not want to meet with rejection. Consequently, they were conflicted about this and often criticized one another for being guilty of such behavior.[4]

The old people whom Aristotle described were at least better off in this respect: they still could "enjoy remembering" without the intervention of a cultural bias against the elderly which cloaked itself in the garb of psychosocial wisdom. They, like the horses to which Dr. Lidz metaphorically compares old people, may have been "out of the run of things," but they at least deemed reminiscence the natural, and even honorific, activity of old age.

2. LOSS OF MEMORY

The present state of our knowledge about memory function has been described as "equivocal."[5] There are, for example, studies which show that "the memory decline which accompanies aging seems to involve long-term memory forgetting rather than short-

term memory."[6] There are also "A number of recent studies of memory function in the aged [that] have encountered great difficulty in explaining the apparently greater impairment of recent memory as compared with remote memory on organic grounds alone, and have suggested that emotional and motivational factors contribute significantly to this finding. There appears to be a complex interrelationship of physical and emotional factors at work in senescence affecting both memory and learning."[7] Then, too, there are studies which indicate that "the decline with age in memory performance is attributable to the decline with age in learning performance."[8] Hulicka and Weiss found that the old people whom they tested needed more time than younger people to learn new material; "but once having learned the material, they retained equally when compared to the young."[9] Finally, there are studies which "require us to consider most of the intellectual decline in the healthy old to be a myth."[10]

These studies, with their contradictory emphases and results, demonstrate that it is not easy to sift out the kernels of truth which lie scattered in the sands of our culture's prejudice against reminiscence. They are reviewed here for the sake of the coherent and affirmative view which they jointly make. Most of the evidence we have attests to "the greater impairment of recent memory as compared with remote memory." The knotty problem which has yet to be unequivocally disentangled has to do with the factors which cause impairment of recent memory. Now, learning and memory are not functionally independent,[11] and a number of studies have found that there are "no age differences in recall performance when acquisition [of new material] was equalized for young and old."[12] Apparent memory impairment, then, would be caused by a "deficit in cognitive ability" in the old.[13] However, in challenging the "myth of intellectual decline," several studies have shown

> with great clarity that a much larger proportion of the variance associated with age can be attributed to generation difference than to ontogenetic change. . . . In other words, there is strong evidence that much of the difference in performance on intellectual abilities between young and old is *not* due to decline in ability on the part of the old, but due to higher performance levels in successive generations.[14]

These studies demonstrate that the earlier cross sectional studies of

intelligence confound individual development with sociocultural change, and do not take into account "motivational factors which may indeed interfere in the performance of old adults on intelligence tests as well as life tasks designed for the young."[15]

If impairment of recent memory is actually a sign of intellectual deterioration, and intellectual decline is in large measure a myth, how are we then to account for the memory loss that is commonly observed in old people? Is this, too, like the apparent decline in intellectual functioning, "at best a methodological artifact and at worst a popular misunderstanding?"[16] In summarizing the findings of a long-term study on normal aging conducted at the National Institute of Mental Health (NIMH), Dr. Robert Butler writes:

> To our surprise, we found that psychological flexibility, resourcefulness, and optimism, rather than the stereotype of rigidity, characterized the group we studied. Many of the manifestations heretofore attributed to aging per se clearly reflected medical illnesses, personality factors, and sociocultural effects. The belief that cerebral (brain) blood flow and oxygen consumption necessarily decreased as a result of chronological aging was not confirmed. It was found, rather, that when such changes occurred they probably resulted from vascular disease. The forty-seven men in our sample who were over sixty-five were found to have cerebral physiological and intellectual functions that compared favorably with a young control group. Intellectual abilities declined not as a consequence of the mysterious process of aging but rather as the result of specific diseases. Therefore, senility is not an inevitable outcome of aging.[17]

In the absence of organicity and specific diseases, we must examine "the motivational and emotional factors" which may be manifested as memory loss.

That memory loss may, in fact, be a manifestation of anxiety has been repeatedly confirmed in the literature on treatment of the elderly. We know that anxiety is the "constant companion" of old people, and that they have been "singled out to be its special prey."[18] Dr. Muriel Oberleder writes:

> It is true that certain symptoms appear more frequently in old age. However, I do not feel they are necessarily due to old age

> any more than drug addiction is due to adolescence or bedwetting to childhood. A person usually chooses the symptom appropriate for his age group—appropriate in the sense that it is his main dread. At age forty we all start to worry about losing our memory, and at fifty we are convinced we have. At sixty we begin not to care any more. . .; at seventy we may get sore as hell about it; at eighty we can cause a lot of trouble for everybody because we are so outraged by it. I purposely cited decade birthdays because they are the ages when we review our life situation. As anxiety increases in old age, the symptoms become more and more limited because of the stereotyped and limited expectations of the aged. Thus they have very few symptoms to choose from, and memory loss is the most convenient because it serves so many purposes.[19]

For many old people, memory loss is "a very handy way of tuning oneself out of a totally unbearable situation."[20]

Memory loss, then, is frequently a symptom of withdrawal from present reality and of denial. Dr. Butler speaks of this type of defensive behavior as "selective memory":

> The dulling of memory and the propensity to remember distant past events with greater clarity than events of the recent past have generally been attributed to arteriosclerotic and senile brain changes in old age. However, it appears that such memory characteristics can at times have a psychological base, in that the older person may be turning away from or tuning out the painfulness of the present to dwell on a more satisfying past.[21]

Now, this passage was written by the theorist who is primarily responsible for our reevaluation of reminiscence; but it appears so reminiscent of Dr. Lidz that it may well be asked whether Dr. Butler is not himself a proponent of the negative view. Just here, where the issue seems most confused, we are closest to our first substantial clarification.

Dr. Butler would call the kind of reminiscing which is done for the sake of denial "selective memory," whereas Dr. Lidz equates reminiscence solely with selective memory and fails to distinguish between a complex psychological process and one of the aims it may serve. Reminiscence and selective memory, like mourning and

melancholia, are terms which distinguish between normative and pathological processes. The negative view never sees in reminiscence anything more or other than a manifestation of denial and impairment. In Butler's view, reminiscence is not reducible to selective memory. Rather, it is the psychological process by which the central life task of old age may be accomplished. Through reminiscence, an old person may review his life, achieve integrity, and face death.

3. MOTIVES OF REMINISCING: DISENGAGEMENT AND NARCISSISM

"Tuning out the present," which Butler and Oberleder speak of as a motivating factor in selective memory, is generally regarded as a manifestation of the "process of disengagement" which Elaine Cumming and William E. Henry observed in their famous and controversial study on aging. "In our theory," they write;

> aging is an inevitable mutual withdrawal or disengagement, resulting in decreased interaction between the aging person and others in the social system he belongs to. The process may be initiated by the individual or by others in the situation.[22]

Whether the aging individual withdraws from society, or, as the "activity theory" asserts, society withdraws from the individual, the outcome is often a decline in social and psychological engagement. "Inner life processes" assume greater importance, and there is a "decreased efficiency in certain cognitive processes."[23]

"Disengagement"—or apathy and rage brought on by social exclusion—may, in part, account for the decline in short-term memory and the "deficit of cognitive ability" which often accompany aging. In discussing the factors which motivate reminiscing, Dr. Arthur McMahon and Dr. Paul Rhudick write that turning away from the present results in a

> disinterest and avoidance of new learning which disproportionately affects memory for recent events. In fact, it has been suggested that reminiscing is an attempt to fill the void created in the present by failing memory. Remote events, on the other hand, were better learned initially, unhampered by the process

> of disengagement, and are associated with pleasanter memories of the unimpaired capacities of youth.[24]

Another factor that McMahon and Rhudick discuss is the role which the emotions play in determining what is forgotten and what is remembered.

> The emotional condition of the present: hopes, fears and expectations directed toward the future, determine the appearance in which events of the past are revived or are prevented from reviving (repression). . . . Events which are forgotten presumably under certain circumstances have unexpected revival when a personal situation or phase of life favors it.[25]

Memory, then, not only preserves a sense of self-sameness, but has a creative aspect as well: "it is selective in the direction of. . . creating a sense of personal significance."[26]

Reminiscing may help the aging person maintain his sense of self-esteem by gratifying three persisting narcissistic aspirations, thereby helping him cope with late-life depressions. Bibring, in his theory of depression, identifies the normative narcissistic aspirations as:

> (1) the wish to be worthy, to be loved, to be appreciated, not to be inferior or unworthy; (2) the wish to be strong, superior, great, secure, not to be weak or insecure; (3) the wish to be good, to be loving, not to be aggressive, hateful and destructive.[27]

The capacity to remember events of the distant past with great clarity may be a source of pride and satisfaction, as well as an affirmation of the old person's "biological" achievement: he has survived the accumulating years, with their harsh adversities, to achieve longevity. In this respect, he may view himself, and be viewed by others, as strong and superior, and as possessing extraordinary powers of memory.

It has often been noted that the exercise of the capacity to remember remote events is pleasurable in itself. In explaining this, McMahon and Rhudick cite Freud's comment that when "we do not use our psychic apparatus to fulfill indispensable gratifications, then we let it work so as to derive pleasure out of its own activity."[28]

Reminiscence, like art, may be considered a culturally valuable form of play.

The free play of the mind which reminiscing makes possible may, like the making of art, provide a way of cutting through chronic depression and creating metaphors of self. The many losses which old people commonly endure in late life often bring on a "positive increase in narcissism."[29] The enhanced attention which they pay to themselves and to what is going on within them, their greater self-absorption, which may strike us at times as a disagreeable sort of self-centeredness, may also be responsible for the greater detachment, "contemplativeness," and self-knowledge which we admire.

Now, while increased narcissism in late life may spur some difficult summings-up, some clear-eyed self-encounters, it also "favors the reinvestment of libido in an ideal image of the self in the past."[30] Such ideal images are not to be dismissed as mere fantasies; they may, and usually do, contain and convey a good deal of reality. Like poems, they are acts of the imagination which adhere to, and illuminate, reality. A content analysis of the ideal images that old people create for themselves in their acts of remembering has not yet been undertaken. However, if Bibring's theory of depression were applied to a study of the nondirected reminiscences of old people, the results might confirm what most people who have worked with the healthy aged for any length of time have observed: that their reminiscences are, to a considerable extent, motivated by the wish to gratify the normative narcissistic aspirations. The wish to be loved and appreciated, the wish to be strong and superior, and the wish to be good and loving tend to reappear as recurring themes in many of the stories they tell about their pasts.

4. THE TASK OF OLD AGE

In 1961, Dr. Robert Butler suggested that there is a "universal occurrence in older people of an inner experience or mental process of reviewing one's life."[31] He wrote that

> this process helps account for the increased reminiscence in the aged, that it contributes to the occurrence of certain late-life disorders, particularly depression, and that it participates in the evolution of such characteristics as candor, serenity and wisdom among certain aged.[32]

This formulation was suggested by the results of Butler's NIMH study on normal aging. Forty-seven healthy men, whose mean age was sixty-seven, were studied to determine what medical, personality, and environmental factors contribute to adaptation or maladaptation in the crises of old age. In the six-year follow-up of survivors, Butler reported that "supporting data were found for the hypothesis that, triggered by the approach of death, older people universally undergo a life review leading to various preparations for loss, bodily dissolution, and death."[33]

In everything that Butler has subsequently written or said on the subject, impending death has occupied a central position as *the* motivating factor of reminiscence in the elderly. It is not too much to assert that the profound sense of significance which attaches itself to Butler's concept of the life review derives from his view that it is nothing less than our modern way of facing death, and therefore the spiritual equivalent of older transcendental beliefs and philosophies which taught one "the art of dying." The relation of reminiscing to the act of preparing oneself to face death is insisted upon, for example, in Butler's extemporaneous remarks at a symposium on the "Psychodynamics of Aging," held in 1967:

> I can only reassert that I have repeatedly observed a recurrent process of life review occurring in healthy as well as in troubled old people. . . . My experience has been that all old people have recollections, thoughts of the past, and that they are prompted to question and consider their lives as they have lived them by the realization of the proximity of death.[34]

In 1973, in a cogent review of his own contribution, he wrote:

> In 1961, [I] postulated that reminiscence in the aged was part of a normal life review process brought about by realization of approaching dissolution and death. It is characterized by the progressive return to consciousness of past experiences and particularly the resurgence of unresolved conflicts which can be looked at again and reintegrated. If the reintegration is successful, it can give new significance and meaning to one's life, and prepare one for death, mitigating fear and anxiety.[35]

If, with Butler, we see the life review "as an intervening process between the sense of impending death and personality change and as

preparatory to dying,''[36] how are we then to regard motivational factors as disengagement and increased narcissism, whose significance has been stressed by McMahon and Rhudick?

What we are confronted with here are not mutually exclusive positions, but rather differences in emphasis, and we must attempt to find a common frame of reference which will offer a meaningful synthesis of the various emotional and motivational strands we have been pursuing. At the outset, it must be said that Freud's principle of overdetermination allows us to accept a multiplicity of motivating factors, without any irritable reaching after the kind of elegant causal certainty which is possible in the physical sciences. However, psychological theories are not thereby exempt from the requirement of internal self-consistency; and it seems that Erikson's concept of the eighth stage of the life cycle provides the theoretical coherence we are looking for. Erikson's concept, when applied to ''reminiscence theory,'' suggests that it is the need to master the developmental conflict of the final stage of life which provides the primary motivation for reminiscence in old age.

Erikson views the great task of the final stage of life as the integration of all the previous stages of one's life and as the attainment of ''the acceptance of one's one and only life cycle as something that had to be and that, by necessity, permitted of no substitutions.''[39] If the aging person's attempt to give order and meaning to his life experience does not succeed, then ''the lack or loss of this accrued ego assurance is signified by fear of death''—by despair. ''Despair expresses the feeling that the time is short, too short to start another life and to try out alternate roads to integrity.''[38]

Butler's concept of the life review may be regarded as a crucial extension of Erikson's theory; for Butler has postulated the process whereby the old person either accomplishes his task of achieving ego integrity or succumbs to despair. In addition to characterizing the ''mechanism'' of the life review, he has brilliantly extended Erikson's antipodal concept of ''ego integrity vs. despair'' by describing the ''varied outcomes'' of the life-review process in all their ''protean manifestations.''[39] He has devoted as much attention to the ''psychopathological manifestations'' as he has to the ''constructive and adaptive manifestations.''[40]

Like Butler, who has written that the influence of Erikson's concept of the life cycle has been ''deserved and considerable,''[41] McMahon and Rhudick acknowledge Erikson's theoretical generativity. In their view, the adaptational significance of reminiscence

can best be understood in the light of Erikson's theory that identity formation is a lifelong development.[42] In saying that reminiscence appears to foster successful adaptation in old age "through maintaining self-esteem [and] reaffirming a sense of identity," they are conceptualizing the significance of reminiscence in Eriksonian terms.[43] And yet, how can the elderly person's "disengagement" and "increased narcissism"—the motivations for reminiscing which they stress—be related to the task of achieving ego integrity? We might begin answering this question by noting that McMahon and Rhudick regard reminiscence as "operating under the control of the ego."[44] They emphasize its conscious, constructive, task-oriented aspect when they say that "affective states in the ego" direct the memory towards "preserving and creating a sense of personal significance."[45]

The increased narcissism which fosters the resurgence of memories that embody a positive or ideal image of the self in the past must also be seen as part of the process of continuing identity formation. If the past is sufficiently charged with experiences that have realistically gratified normative narcissistic aspirations, then it can legitimately provide rich materials for the task which awaits the ego in old age, and the "ideal image" which the ego constructs out of its past may be, in effect, a crystallization of the positive capacities and experiences actually possessed by the old person. However, this will occur only where an increase in the narcissism of a reasonably healthy person plays a part in motivating the life-review process. Butler has provided abundant evidence that the life review of narcissistic personalities—the proud, the arrogant, those who have consciously exercised the power to hurt—must end in despair.[46] And Erikson states that ego integrity is a "post-narcissistic love of the ego—not of the self—as an experience which conveys a sense of world order and spiritual sense."[47]

The process of disengagement may also be related to the ego's task of attaining ego integrity. Erikson, in pointing to a "few constituents of this state of mind," says that ego integrity is

> a comradeship with the ordering ways of distant times and different pursuits, as expressed in the simple products and sayings of such times and pursuits. Although aware of the relativity of all the various life styles which have given meaning to human striving, the possessor of integrity is ready to defend the dignity of his own life style against all physical and eco-

> nomic threats. For he knows that an individual life is the accidental coincidence of but one life cycle with but one segment of history; and that for him all human integrity stands or falls with the one style of integrity of which he partakes.[48]

This "portrait" of the possessor of ego integrity summons to mind some of the old people with whom I have worked: emigrants from Eastern Europe in their own and this century's adolescence, they view themselves as the "pioneers" who "planted a new life in America," and their sense of personal conviction about the worthiness of their lifework and the rightness of their traditional life-style gives them a tremendous sense of integrity. It is their sense of identity, their sense of the dignity and value of their own life-style, which in part motivates their disengagement from the contemporary world. It is not to be thought that this disengagement is without pain; but it is undertaken, as Erikson writes, in defense of the dignity of their own life-style. Thus, upholding lifelong practices and beliefs, and customs which they have inherited from previous generations, may often tend to separate them from others in their world, and particularly their own children. However, this is an instance where disengagement is a responsible human choice made for the sake of deeply valued commitments, and cannot be regarded as pathological, although it may, indeed, be sad. The old person may be seen to possess a certain moral passion and a vision of life to which he is unshakably committed; others may find this inconvenient, yet they cannot help but recognize that the passion and the vision are a source of strength.

5. THE USES OF REMINISCENCE

McMahon and Rhudick's study of the adaptational significance of reminiscence supplements Butler's concept of the life-review process; and it provides, along with Butler's writings, the theoretical framework and body of knowledge from which later modifications and elaborations have been developed.

Their study evolved out of a multidisciplinary study of 150 veterans of the Spanish-American War which was begun in 1958 at the Outpatient Clinic of the Boston VA Hospital. It was observed that these men, whose average age was eighty-one, were coping unusually well with the problems of aging, and that when initially in-

terviewed they devoted much of the time to reminiscing. "These facts suggested that reminiscing in some way might be related to the success of this group in coping with the problems of later life."[49] Twenty-five of the men were then selected at random, and an hour-long nondirective interview was conducted with each of them. Each sentence of the transcripts was classified according to whether it related to the past, the present, or the future. The men were also rated on the presence of depression and on the degree of intellectual deterioration.

McMahon and Rhudick found that "66 percent of all responses referred to the remote past; 32 percent to the present or immediate past; and 2 percent to the future."[50] There was no correlation between reminiscing and the level of intellectual competence or the decline of intellectual abilities. Further, in the one-year follow-up, they found "that three of the four subjects rated as depressed had died; four of the five subjects rated as suspected of depression had died; and only one of the 16 subjects rated as not depressed had died."[51] In summarizing the results, they write:

> The findings of this study indicate that reminiscing is not directly related to intelligence or to intellectual deterioration and suggest that it is positively related to freedom from depression and to personal survival.[52]

In the first round of interviews, the nondepressed group—and these were the survivors—showed a tendency to reminisce more than the depressed group.

What may well be the most valuable aspect of McMahon's and Rhudick's study is their discussion of the uses of reminiscence. They divided the subjects of their study into four groups "on the basis of their personal use of reminiscence," and they were then able to demonstrate how reminiscing can be useful in coping with the common problems of old age. These problems were identified as "the maintenance of self-esteem in the face of declining physical and intellectual abilities; coping with grief and depression resulting from personal losses; finding means to contribute significantly to a society of which older persons are members; and retaining some sense of identity in an increasingly estranged environment."[53] These problems, together with the fear of death, must be coped with successfully in order for ego integrity to be attained.

It should hardly surprise us that one group enlisted reminiscence

in the service of denial: this use of reminiscence has long been recognized. In an article entitled "Ego-Adaptive Mechanisms of Older Persons" published in 1965, denial heads the list of "defenses commonly employed," and the author presents the following case illustration:

> Mr. J., aged 80, is an ambulatory but somewhat feeble patient in a rehabilitation center for the aged, and he displays some mental confusion. Each day Mr. J. tells a staff member stories of his former athletic prowess, comments on his present muscular vigor (even as the nurse is helping him to walk), and requests his discharge from the center.[54]

The relation between remote memories and present denial could not be more vividly demonstrated.

The "case" which McMahon and Rhudick present as typical of the first group also uses reminiscence to deny physical decline:

> I remember the really great players who did everything well. The players nowadays fall asleep on the job. They're good players; but there's something missing there. They. . . don't have the pep the old-time players used to have.[55]

The attitude described here is so nearly universal that it may be said to constitute an archetypal pattern in world literature: both the banishment from Eden and the classical myth of the Golden Age idealize the past and depreciate the present as a time of spiritual and physical decay, of "sin and death." The "golden ager" who projects the symptoms of his own old age—falling asleep, lack of pep—onto contemporary ballplayers was formerly an athlete and clearly identifies with the great players of the past: the days of his own greatest powers become, in fantasy, the great days that are gone. The authors suggest that there is a similarity between this use of reminiscence and the normal adaptive process of fantasy:

> Hartmann has emphasized that fantasy can have positive adaptive elements and contrasts it with dreaming in its attempt to solve the problems of waking life. He maintains that there are avenues of adaptation to reality which at first lead away from the real situation and defines this process as regressive adaptation.[56]

This use of reminiscence, which literally wishes away signs of physical decline, is ultimately a denial of death.

A second group was composed of "several of the subjects. . . [who] seemed preoccupied with the need to justify their lives, and their reminiscences reflected themes of guilt, unrealized goals, and wished-for opportunities to make up for past failures."[57] The use which these "obsessive-compulsive subjects" made of reminiscence was suggested to the authors by Butler's concept, which—as they tellingly summarize it—claims "that the aged person has a need to review his life preparatory to death, and that reminiscences serve to provide the material necessary for this review."[58] But they did not find evidence of life review in the majority of their subjects, who, like the normal elderly population that Busse studied, did not seem preoccupied with a need to justify their lives.

McMahon and Rhudick carefully avoid using the term "life-review process," since Butler's well-defined use of the term denotes a "universal" and "normative" process. It is precisely on these two points that McMahon and Rhudick take issue with Butler:

> It may be significant that the subjects described by Butler (1963) were psychiatric patients who showed evidence of obsessive rumination and clinical depression. Some of the interview material quoted in his article suggests the breakdown of repression and the return of the repressed rather than the organized quality characteristic of the reminiscences of our subjects.[59]

In the article to which they refer, Butler characterizes the life review process as "a progressive return to consciousness of past experiences, and particularly, the resurgence of unresolved conflicts."[60] He would, therefore, have no quarrel with a description of this material as "the return of the repressed." He does, however, add that "simultaneously, and normally, these revived experiences can be surveyed and reintegrated."[61] It is the capacity to reintegrate hitherto repressed material that for Butler, gives this process its normative quality. Further, Butler maintains that the reminiscences may come unbidden, or they may come as a result of a purposeful seeking of memories.[62] This too implies ego control. And Butler himself affirms that "the varied manifestations and outcomes of the life review may include pathological ones."[63] In severe form, these may include anxiety, guilt, despair, and depression; in the most ex-

treme cases, obsessive preoccupation with the past can lead to states of terror and suicide.[64]

The results of the NIMH study on aging which Butler and two colleagues conducted seem to confirm the prevalence of a life review among the normal elderly. Blank, in summarizing the findings, writes:

> At the third point in this eleven-year study, Robert Patterns, Leo Freeman and Butler reported on eighteen of the twenty-three survivors. They state that the survivors often indicated they had reviewed or were still reviewing their lives. Ten of the survivors had been depressed at one of the three times they were examined during the longitudinal studies. Three of these depressions were caused by the despair the subjects experienced while reviewing their lives. The subjects who had reviewed their lives without becoming depressed appeared sometimes to have attitudes that Erikson described as acceptance of one's own life cycle.[65]

This study, while it tends to refute McMahon and Rhudick, in no way may be said to settle the issue of whether the life-review process is or is not normative and universal. This is a fertile issue for further research.

We may, at present, contrast the two views of the life review as follows. McMahon and Rhudick regard a need to review one's life as an indication of a need to justify one's life; unlike Butler, they do not believe that a need for self-justification is the normal fate of humankind, an emotional and spiritual task which awaits all people at the end of their lives. Rather, they regard it as characteristic of "obsessive-compulsive subjects who, we may suspect, have been reviewing their past behavior in the same judgmental and evaluative way all their lives."[66] For them, it is evidence of a lifelong and ongoing pathological process. Butler maintains that "as a natural healing process, it represents one of the underlying human capacities," and that the resolution of intrapsychic conflicts depends upon it.[67] Nor would he view the presence of intrapsychic conflicts as necessarily pathological; insofar as they would be manifestations of an Eriksonian developmental crisis, they would be normative.

Of the group of old men who were clinically depressed, McMahon and Rhudick write:

> Depressed subjects showed the greatest difficulty in reminiscing. Their excursions into the past were interrupted repeatedly by anxiety and concern about their physical health, failing memory, personal losses, and sense of inadequacy. They seemed to have given up and to have lost self-esteem.[68]

Bibring has defined depression as a loss of self-esteem brought about by the ego's awareness of its helplessness and incapacity to live up to its narcissistic aspirations;[69] and Butler has found clinical evidence which indicated that the life review process can cause despair in narcissistic personalities. Bibring's "basic mechanism of depression" and Butler's connection of late-life depressions with narcissism strongly suggest one of the factors which may account for McMahon's and Rhudick's finding that the depressed have difficulty in reminiscing. Reminiscence, in narcissistic people, may be inhibited since it would prove too threatening to their self-esteem. Another factor which may cause the inhibition of reminiscence in depression has to do with the way in which depression affects memory. In severe depressions, the memory of well-being is so "decathected," it temporarily disappears, and depressed persons suffer from the delusion of the eternity of their depressed state.[70] Thus, the only memories available are those which exacerbate and enlarge upon the themes of present pain; memory serves as another grand inquisitor which accuses the suffering person the incapacities whose loss he laments. McMahon and Rhudick speculate that the absence of reminiscence in depressed people may be related to the absence of mourning in the "interrupted grief reaction."[71] Further, they find a striking resemblance between mourning and reminiscing:

> The attempt of the ego to cope with loss through repeated recollections, the absorption of the self in this process, the relative lack of interest in the present—these elements are all characteristic of reminiscing behavior.[72]

This is a provocative insight; but the authors' suggestion that reminiscing may be related to "grief work" meets with a seemingly fatal objection:

> The crucial difference is that reminiscence is a process whose function is to deal with attempted *reunion* with past objects,

> whereas mourning is a process whose function is to deal with *separation* from past objects.[73]

In a brilliant response to this objection, Dr. McMahon points to the developmental process in which the ego acquires the capacity to cope with separations and loss through the process of identification.[74] In melancholia, the ego likewise identifies with a lost object in order to give it up. The capacity to tolerate separation by substituting a satisfying memory for the missing "love object" begins in infancy and becomes an important process in identity formation:

> the satisfying qualities of the early object relationship become an essential part of the memories of the interaction, providing incentive for and giving a satisfying quality to subsequent identifications and eventually providing a sense of identity and continuity which can exist independently of the object. True reminiscing appears to have this quality and function and is both a manifestation and reaffirmation of the experience of continuity. . .[75]

In old age, mourning often cannot follow its normal adaptive course. For older persons who have lost their life partners and lifelong friends, there are frequently no new "love objects" to become invested in. And so McMahon and Rhudick postulate an extended state of mourning in old age; in this situation, reminiscing becomes "both a manifestation and reaffirmation of the experience of continuity."

For McMahon and Rhudick, the normative use of reminiscence par excellence is the one which was traditionally made of it by village elders, medicine men, oral poets—wise custodians of the knowledge of the past who were revered in primitive and preindustrial societies. They describe their "best-adjusted" group, quite simply, as storytellers:

> [They] recount past exploits and experiences with obvious pleasure in a manner which is both entertaining and informative. They seem to have little need to depreciate the present or glorify the past, but they do reminisce actively.[76]

The authors cite Hartmann's theory that adaptive behavior, "in the happiest instances," serves both personal ends and social goals.[77] It

is its twofold adaptive function which gives the use of reminiscences in storytelling its special character:

> The older person's knowledge of a bygone era provides him with an opportunity to enhance his self-esteem by contributing in a meaningful way to his society.[78]

Yet this natural power of old age may be described as a vestigial human function since it can no longer assure old people a place of power and dignity. The various kinds of memory banks in which a technological society stores its knowledge have gone a long way towards making human memory obsolete. However, our culture's reawakened interest in oral histories and in the "roots" which may be found in the reminiscences of older family members may, to some extent, provide a social climate more favorable to old people. While a heightened interest in ethnicity, in "the world of our fathers" and mothers, cannot unmake the structure of modern society, it may to some degree provide the social situation which McMahon and Rhudick so poignantly called for more than a decade ago:

> It seems essential that we find new ways to provide opportunities for [old people] to contribute their knowledge of the past. Anxious relatives sometimes discourage reminiscing behavior within the family group because they consider it a sign of deterioration in their loved ones. It would appear, to the contrary, that this behavior should be encouraged; we should create occasions for older people to reminisce and not expect their reminiscences to conform to the standards of accuracy of historial texts.[79]

Such reminiscences may offer what no historical text can: an enhanced sense of how an individual life is part of a larger historical and cultural process; and hence, they may be the source of a deepened sense of identity and a more profound knowledge of our interconnectedness with the world.