Speaking of Aging...

By Erlene Rosowsky

Ah, Nostalgia

The tears of nostalgia are mostly good tears. They are tears of gentle recall of a unique feeling, or more accurately a constellation of feelings, including joy, loss and longing.

Nostalgia is a meaningful emotional experience. It is also a purposeful experience, especially in old age.

Purposes of Nostalgia

Nostalgia serves to remind us of what was, of our self in earlier times. It serves to integrate events that have created the “me I am today.” It supports the feelings of being special, being unique, and universality.

A special purpose of nostalgia in old age might be to ease the anticipation of leaving the world. This latter can be heard in many ways. For example, “I wouldn’t want to be a youngster these days.” “I’m glad I raised my children when I did. These times are so hard for parents.” “I think we had more fun back then. We didn’t have much, but we had more fun.”

Cues of Nostalgia

It is interesting that there appears to be a limited repertoire of nostalgic cues, given the presumed uniqueness of peoples’ experiences. This repertoire includes favorite toys, games, and books; cartoon characters (“funnies”); music; food; childhood summer vacations; predictable daily events; parents’ habits; regular sibling interactions; and visits with grandparents.

The unconscious selection of material that cues nostalgia reflects the individual’s core beliefs or attitudinal system, whether this is the belief that “my
time was a better time than now” or “my time was a worse time than now.” Nostalgia can support a glorification of the past, an idealization of what was then. While purposeful for the elderly individual, this may be difficult for others with whom he shares his historical experiences.

For example, the comment that “When I was a little boy we never got ice cream except on our birthday” could mean “You get ice cream any time you want. But I, who was deprived, am of stronger character. I am able to recognize and appreciate a special treat.” Or it could mean, “I was raised in a very restricted way, with limited experiences of fun and pleasure. Your childhood is happier than mine was.”

Thus the meaning attributed to the feeling engendered by nostalgia can serve to reinforce one’s core belief that life had been in general a pleasure (“a good ride”) or a disappointment (“a rip off”). The expression of such core beliefs can recruit empathy, even sympathy, in response to deprivation, harshness and loss. It can conversely engender anger or frustration in response to feeling criticized or misunderstood.

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Nostalgia, Reverie, and Reminiscence

Nostalgia, reverie, and reminiscence are significantly different constructs. The experience of nostalgia occurs quite naturally, without intent. While conscious, it is affective. It can lead to reverie. It can lead to reminiscence. Reverie describes a generally pleasant contemplative state. It is conscious and cognitive. Reverie is passively intentional. The individual does direct his thoughts, but focuses gently on them. Reverie is similar in this way to a meditative state. While feelings can and do emerge from reverie, the cognition, the thought, mediates the transition to the feeling. Reminiscence describes a more active, cognitive process. In this process one calls up the past and actively thinks about it. The content of reminiscence can include a single experience or a collection of experiences. Its accuracy reflects the meaning attributed to the recollection at the time for the individual. We know that the recollection of events changes over time. Reminiscence can be positive or negative, and may or may not be accompanied by, or lead to, a feeling state. Nostalgia differs from reminiscence in that it bypasses the cognitive, and leads directly to the feeling. The feeling is generally experienced as positive or sweet, but inevitably sad too because it is over, past, and cannot be reclaimed, even while able to be activated by perceptual cues.

Reverie and reminiscence, while different, each supports the process of life review; the universal, developmental task of wrapping up and accepting one’s self and one’s life as it was. The purpose is to reduce the struggle of letting go and moving on.

Themes of Nostalgia

The themes of nostalgia are not arbitrary. There have been many experiences, so how do we “select” the ones that continue to evoke powerful feelings in us? Do these themes change over the course of one’s life? Are there developmental differences as well as individual differences? How are what you experience as nostalgia cues different from those of your parents? Your children?

I suggest that cues for nostalgia can change or become solidified with the passing of years. They are not arbitrary, but rather purposeful, both in process and content. While purposeful, a nostalgic moment is seldom manifestly intentional. When does it occur? It occurs when we are open to being engaged by a stimulus which transports us to an earlier time, place, or experience. The difference between this and other ‘memories’ is that this engenders directly in us a complex and powerful feeling; a constellation of feelings of longing, loss, deep sadness, essential joy. This feeling state resonates with something at the core of “who I am” and “how I came to be me.” Nostalgia is a self-defining feeling catalyst. We are most open to nostalgia when we need it most, which has particular relevance given the many challenges of old age.

Passing on Nostalgia

There is a “spread of effect,” a way in which the nostalgia cue can be bequeathed to another. (This often happens through grandparents’ stories.) The cue then can become a transitional object or phrase. For example, a photograph of an ancestor can cue the same nostalgic feelings transcending generations. A characteristic phrase can evoke the same feeling also
throughout generations. In other words, nostalgia cues can be passed on; they need not be initially a byproduct of one’s direct experience. Perhaps it does not quite become the other’s nostalgia cue in terms of strength, but it does continue to support the functions of nostalgia, that is to provide confirmation, continuity and roots.

Being a party to another’s nostalgia can leave one struggling to make sense of the potency of affect. “How wonderful could it have been to walk two miles to school each morning, especially in cold wintry weather?” But that particular memory triggered by some perceptual cue, evokes important feelings. These feelings themselves might be necessary at this time, and might include feelings of youthful vigor, of positive anticipation of playing with a friend after school, of a mother’s hugs as she wraps a scarf around his neck to keep him warm. Nostalgia serves old age well. Perhaps the feeling derived from a nostalgic moment emanating from the experience of the two-mile walk to school through the snow enables one to feel better equipped to handle the “chill” and “trudge” of life now being faced. The subconscious “chosen” events that are directly experienced as a feeling without thought, can serve to reinforce the individual’s hardness, courage, and a sense of being able to cope with current demands. In this way, nostalgia can be appreciated as an adaptive, naturally occurring resource for the individual in later life.