Age Identity and Making Sense of Meaning in the Lives of Older Adults

by

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ABSTRACT

The link between age identity and meaning in life is examined through the process of story-telling and the analysis of life stories told by older adults. This research applies the personal existence perspective outlined by Gary M. Kenyon, which is a conceptual framework that is premised on the metaphor "life as a journey", that views aging as a journey and humans as travelers in time. This perspective argues that story-telling is a way of communicating meaning in life, and that the larger stories existing outside of us as individuals in turn shape our individual life stories. In this study, the term age identity is used to refer to the way in which older adults are aging biographically, or storying time, throughout the journey of life. Life stories were collected from four older adults living in Victoria, B.C. and Calgary, A.B. The different meanings that are attached to plot lines, themes, characters, and settings within these lifestories are examined. An awareness of age by these older adults was expressed in their lifestories in the way that they verbalized the passing and compression of time, compared societal values over time, articulated new attitudes towards life and what they learned in life, and were dealing with bodily changes, caregiving responsibilities, alterations in partnership status, and their impending mortality. The story of this research is also presented in order to illustrate the conceptual and methodological difficulties lying at the heart of conducting research on age identity.

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CHAPTER ONE: Introduction

Probing into the core of what it means to be human and alive in this world has been left to the realm of existential philosophers. Debate over the meaning and purpose of life has recently received attention from researchers in sociology, gerontology, psychology, and the humanities alike. Consequently, it is now considered acceptable for social scientists to ask fundamental questions such as, "Does life as a whole have ultimate value?" and "Does my individual life as a whole have meaning?"

Characteristically, research on meaning in life has located the question of meaning at the individual level ("What is the meaning of my life?"). Further to this, it is argued that with the segmentation of the life course into the stages of childhood, adulthood, and old age, which accompanied modernization, the question of the meaning of life has been relocated to later life, and as a result older adults are thought to hold the key to the meaning of life (Moody, 1991). This argument is based upon the assumption that older adults hold special knowledge about the meaning of life because of their positioning in the life course, but controversy exists around whether old age has special significance in comparison to other life stages. What is generally believed to be more important is that research on meaning in life in later life considers the various meanings attached to the aging process (Moody, 1991).

Narrative gerontology is a burgeoning field of study that examines the topic of meaning in later life, which is reflected in the plethora of approaches to, and uses of narrative found in the literature today. Guided autobiography sessions (Birren and Birren, 1996), life writing groups (Ray, 2000), and more traditional lifestory interview settings (Atkinson, 1998) are a few common forms. Narrative gerontology was in part

derived out of a concern that we may not arrive at the whole story of aging because of an overemphasis on the objective "facts" of aging due to the dominance of the "scientific method story" found in gerontology (Kenyon et al., 1999). Narrative gerontology offers the ontological image or metaphor of "life as a story," which provides a unique lens to the study of age and aging. The influence of postmodern sensibilities suggesting that knowledge itself is storied (Kenyon et al., 1999) is key to this approach. This perspective requires a change in conceptualization, or "perceptual turn" (Kenyon et al., 1999) to theory, method, and life as a "story" in and of itself. Accordingly, life comes at us in the form of stories and pervades our everyday life, in that, "we live by story and in story, and story lives in us" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 37). Stories are also multi-dimensional and exist both internally and externally (Miller, 2000), and come at us in different forms because they can be public, lay, personal, or collective narratives (Randall and Kenyon, 2001).

From a narrative perspective, life as a story is not intended to be viewed as a carbon copy of a life lived, but posits that the stories we tell about our lives resemble life rather than mirror it (Ruth et al., 1996). Instead, the stories that we tell reflect a personal view that we have about our life. These stories are narrative reconstructions through which we ascribe meaning to our life while interpreting our experiences and take into account the multitude of pleasurable and traumatic incidents that we encounter throughout the journey of life. The actual life events themselves provide the basic framework or structure of our lives, however, the object of narrative inquiry is the narrator's interpretation of these events, rather than an analysis of what actually happened. Our analyses of narratives are useful because they reflect how we achieve our

personal identity over time (Polkinghorne, 1988). They also reveal how cultural values and expectations configure into how we act in situations throughout our lives, and illustrate how values and norms rest in individuals from a particular historical period in time (Ruth et al., 1996). In essence, the stories that we tell about our lives are essential to the study of how people express meaning in life, and perceive their lives to be meaningful. The stories that we tell are windows into the formations and reformations that occur as we make sense of life events and experiences from our past (Reissman, 2002).

The metaphor "life as a story" is not a theory of aging per se, but provides a lens that can be used to view the whole person as existing in and through time (Kenyon et al., 1999). It enables us to focus on the subjective experience of age, or the inner reality of the aging process from the perspective of the individual experiencing it (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996). This perspective also suggests that we live in more than one type of time. Drawing upon the work of Achenbaum (1991), Kenyon and Randall (1997) outline two types of time that can be found in our stories: clock time and story time. Traditionally, gerontology has focused on the study of chronological age, as measured by the number of years a person has lived, but has not investigated to any great extent the way in which we interact with our outer clock. Although our outer age is part and parcel of our essence as humans, we need to consider further our "story time." More specifically, this includes how we story our lives and ascribe meaning to them in light of past experiences and patterns of meaning, from the perspective of the present, but while also considering what has not yet happened in the future. Consequently, our biographies, or lifestories, can be viewed as personal and social constructions that create identity and

establish coherence and continuity, while also drawing upon a system of rules used to ascribe meaning to our individual lives.

The way in which we story our lives is also situated within a larger cultural story. This cultural story plays a significant role in fashioning the aging experience for older adults today and concurrently shaping how they endow their individual lives with meaning. Various cultural narratives and metaphors of aging, which are socially and culturally situated, such as the medicalization of aging (Zola, 1991), fixations on youth (Friedan, 1993), denial of death (Seale, 1998), and construction of population aging as a social problem (Evans et al., 2001) are a few examples. A common thread is that the aging process is not valued and underscores societal perceptions held by young and old alike in society today, and for this reason, research on meaning in life in the biographies of older adults is worthy of investigation.

The focus of this thesis will be on older adults as "creators" and interpreters of their own meaning in life as conveyed through the process of story-telling. Accordingly, this research assumes that older adults are existential beings who are actively seeking out and constructing meaning in their everyday lives in order to make sense of the world in which they are situated. More specifically, using a lifestory interview approach, I examine how the age identities of older adults shape the stories that they tell reflecting meaning and purpose in their lives. The term age identity will be used to refer to the way in which older adults are aging biographically, or storying time, throughout the journey of life. The different meanings that are attached to plot lines, characters, and settings within the lifestories of older adults will be examined in order to assess how each older

adult has arrived at their own unique wisdom story, also referred to as "ordinary wisdom" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001), which is intimately tied to each person's life history.

In Chapter Two, I begin with a review of the different approaches that can be used to study existential meaning, and then introduce the narrative perspective as the standpoint taken in this study. The personal existence perspective proposed by Gary M. Kenyon, which is an ontological image of "life as a journey," and extension of the "life as a story" metaphor that can be applied to the study of meaning in life, is outlined. This perspective provides a framework for examining how individuals relate to their physical and social environment, and posits that story-telling is a way of communicating meaning in life, but that the larger stories also existing outside of us as individuals, in turn create and shape our individual lifestories. Finally, I discuss how the metaphor "journey of life" contributes to the study of age and aging.

In Chapter Two, I also review the research to date on meaning in life in relation to age. What I find is that this research has been limited conceptually and methodologically in capturing how meaning changes over time or pays tribute to the idiosyncratic nature of the existential meaning-making process. Then I discuss why the use of chronological age, as a sole indicator of our age identity, is problematic. The contributions of the constructionist perspective to the study of age and aging are introduced in order to challenge our knowledge of what constitutes age and aging. I also illustrate how our current age vocabulary as researchers, and as individuals in society, impedes our ability to communicate about aging between social researchers and older adults themselves. Finally, I show how the contributions of narrative gerontology are useful for refashioning age identity and studying existential meaning-making.

In Chapter Three, the lifestory interview strategy used in this project is introduced and the form of the research text is discussed.

In Chapter Four, I present my story of the research in order to illustrate the conceptual difficulties lying at the heart of conducting research on age identity. The characters in this study are then introduced: Betty, Walter, Mary, and Charles. Separately I illustrate how they are making meaning in their lives based upon their own unique life histories.

In Chapter Five, I make comparisons between these characters about what the content of their stories has to tell us about meaning in life from the vantage point of later life. I conclude by trying to extract the wisdom story of each of these narrators by disclosing how their lifestories are personally relevant for me. Wisdom stories evolve from the knowledge that each of us has obtained from the experiences we have encountered throughout our journey of life. Our "ordinary wisdom" consists of everyday knowledge that can emerge from more formal research encounters, such as that used in this study, and from casual spontaneous and interactive conversations with friends and family (Randall and Kenyon, 2001). Like our lifestories, our wisdom story, can evolve in light of new life experiences.

CHAPTER TWO: Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1 Existential Meaning

Existential meaning is concerned with how individuals perceive their place in the world and attempt to understand how life events fit into a larger context. In general, existentialism probes into the core of what it means to be alive and human in the world, and asks two fundamental questions: "Does life as a whole have ultimate value?" and "Does my individual life as a whole have value?" The first question is situated at the cosmic level and is the most expansive and far-reaching level of meaning, as it focuses on whether human existence has ultimate significance in the universe as a whole. From this level, the study of meaning in the cosmos is like asking, "What is the meaning of life and death?" (Courtenay and Truluck, 1997). The second question, however, is situated on the individual level and is concerned with whether or not a specific individual's life has meaning. The concept of meaning, defined in terms of having purpose, goals, and a sense of coherence, typically is the way in which the value of an individual life as a whole is appraised (Reker and Wong, 1988).

There are many different viewpoints regarding the 'true' nature of existential meaning (Debats, 2000) that theorize the location and nature of meaning. From a nihilist point of view, meaning does not exist. As a result, existence and an individual's life within the universe has no meaning. Since meaning is not a physical phenomenon, there is no room in the natural universe for it. This perspective, however, is largely criticized because there is nothing that can be done to justify the claim.

According to Yalom (1980), there are two additional ways to conceptualize meaning. The first approach to meaning is the cosmic perspective and maintains that life

has meaning, but that meaning is something existing outside of the perspective of human beings (O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996). Meanings, according to Frankl (1969), are not an arbitrary human creation, but possess an objective reality of their own. Further to this, meaning can be discovered through a process called self-transcendence, which involves moving beyond a concern for one's self, and instead, focusing on other people and social and spiritual values. Each situation has only one true meaning, and individuals are motivated by their conscience to find this true meaning, a 'will to meaning'. Through engagement in productive and creative activities, and confronting unavoidable human conditions, existential meaning can be attained. By contrast, theists locate meaning in the nature of God. God created human beings and our existence in the cosmos for certain purposes. These objective values, which are rooted in God, have implications for the importance and purpose of our individual lives.

The second approach to meaning is terrestrial (Yalom, 1980) and maintains that meaning is not derived from an external source because there is no ultimate design or purpose to the universe (Debats, 2000). Instead, individuals are free to construct their own meaning in life, and endow life as a whole with meaning through structuring their own individual lives with meaning around the values and desires that are important to them. From this perspective, the process of meaning construction is essential (O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996). Meaning is specific to a person's perception of reality, and is something that individuals create for themselves (Adams-Price et al., 1998; Debats, 2000; O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996; Prager, 1996; Kaufman, 1986). Accordingly, existential meanings are no more than individuals' creative responses to the absolute meaninglessness in the world (Yalom, 1980).

One way in which "meaning-making" is portrayed is through the telling of stories. The narrative approach is a relatively new branch of study within the social sciences, and is seen as a "more heuristic way to understand the construction of self than other approaches that downplay our narrativeness" (Rodriguez, 2002: 2). Central to this approach is the notion that life comes at us in the form of stories, and that we learn about life through the act of storytelling (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). According to this perspective, narratives are everywhere as they are "present in myth, fable, short story, epic, history, tragedy, comedy, painting, dance, stained glass window, cinema, social histories, fairy tales, novels, science schema, comic strips, conversation and journal articles" (Richardson, 1990: 117).

This perspective postulates that we construct and portray understandings of our self through the stories that we tell about our lives. The assumption that personal identity is actively constituted through story-telling is a central tenet of narrative theory: "We achieve our personal identities and self-concept through the use of narrative configuration, and make our existence into a whole by understanding it as an expression of a single unfolding and developing story" (Polkinghorne, 1988: 50). In turn, when examining the personal life experiences of individuals it is necessary to consider both the cultural context (Shenk et al., 2002), and larger ideologies and discursive formations (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998) embedded in the social world, in order to understand the complex intertwining of meanings between the personal stories elicited and the broader context in which stories are situated and formulated over time.

The narrative form shows considerable promise in helping us to understand how we know ourselves, each other, and the world around us (Heikkinen, 1996) because

through story-telling people express meaning in life (Kenyon et al., 1999), and make sense of the events in their lives (Polkinghorne, 1996). Narratives are a unique way to examine meaning-making, in that, they are able to tap longitudinally into personal experiences and processes of meaning-making (Luborsky, 1998). The telling of one's life story emerges from the interplay between individual and society, and in turn, one's life is evaluated in terms of core questions referring to existential meaning: "Who am I? What is happening to me? What does this mean about who I am? How do I feel about who I am?" (Luborsky, 1998), and finally, what is the meaning of my life.

In this present study, I use the terrestrial perspective in order to study existential meaning, but apply a narrative way of knowing the world in order to examine how older adults describe meaning in their lives. I seek to understand how the age identities of older adults shape the existential process of making sense of life experiences in an effort to maintain unity and coherence within their lives. Specifically, I draw upon the work of Gary M. Kenyon, who uses insights from existential philosophy, phenomenology, social constructionism, and narrative theory, in order to delineate the characteristics of the "personal existence metaphor," which can be used to study existential meaning. The personal existence metaphor is an ontological image of human nature premised in the image of life as a storied journey. Story-telling is the way in which individuals communicate meaning in their lives, however, the personal existence perspective also recognizes that "my story and my life are already larger than my individuality" (Kenyon, 2000: 18). This metaphor emphasizes that in order to understand how meaning is individually constructed, and hence the nature of existential meaning, it is important to discuss human beings' relationship to the social world, or our way of being in this world.

We cannot study meaning without considering that meaning is both personally constructed, and socially and culturally situated (Kenyon, 2000). Thus, in research, it is essential to consider the paradox of human existence, that human beings are both simultaneously individual and social (Kenyon, 2000). This perspective contributes to the understanding of existential meaning and illuminates how human aging is part of the existential meaning-making process.

2.2 The Personal Existence Perspective

Existentialist thought is characterized by several general themes (Barsoum Raymond, 1991), which coincide with the key characteristics of the personal existence metaphor outlined by Kenyon (2000). This elucidation of this metaphor of aging and human life as a journey has been explored throughout his career, and can be found in many of his essays (Kenyon, 1991; Kenyon, 2000; Kenyon et al., 1999), and recent book entitled *Ordinary Wisdom* (2001) co-authored with William L. Randall.

The three characteristics of the personal existence perspective include the following: human beings are embodied; situated in a physical and social environment with other people; and, capable of creative, active, and intentional perceptual activity (Kenyon, 2000). As do the existentialists, in the first characteristic of the metaphor, Kenyon (2000) recognizes that a distinctive aspect of human nature is that we are embodied beings, and as a consequence, are aware that we have bodies (Kenyon, 2000). As a result, human beings have a unique perspective on our bodies, which has meaning for us, and is the basis for our perspective on the world. For Kenyon (2000), being aware of our world through our relationship with our bodies is what Heidegger means by

situatedness, which is the second characteristic of the personal existence metaphor. As Heidegger (1962) states, we are thrown into this world and as a result find ourselves having to make sense of the situation. Moreover, we are relational entities and are involved with other persons, and the physical and social environment surrounding us (Heikkinen, 1996). Since our body is both a physical and a social object, and belongs both to the world and to the self (Gadow, 1986), the body becomes the object of our consciousness, rather than the cause of our consciousness (Merleau-Ponty, 1963). This characteristic of human existence is particularly important when understanding the experiential nature of aging. Finally, Kenyon (2000) argues that it is important to take into consideration how human beings actively apprehend the objects of our experience, which is the third characteristic of the personal existence metaphor.

A central principle of existential thought maintains that human beings have no essence. As Jean-Paul Sartre (1956) famously exclaimed, "existence precedes essence." Thus, as human beings we are immersed in the concreteness of existence given to us independent of our will, and since purpose and order are not intrinsic to life we are "condemned to be free." As a result, we are forced to make choices because we lack any essence other than our own freedom. Through the process of defining ourselves, however, we also create ourselves by endowing ourselves with meaning and in turn establish our essence through our existence, that is, "by what we do and how we choose to live our individual lives" (Barash, 2000: 2). Even if God exists, we are free to believe or not to believe, and have choice about how we want to live our lives (Barsoum Raymond, 1991).

Drawing upon narrative theory, which maintains that personal identity is actively constituted through storytelling, Kenyon (2000) argues that even though we are free to author our lives, our life stories are created by the larger story in which we live because we do not create meaning in a vacuum (Kenyon, 2000). For Kenyon (2000), in order to understand human beings' relationship to the social world two points need to be considered: the personal and interpersonal. The personal dimension is where we create and discover meaning, while the interpersonal dimension relates to the notion that we can only know ourselves through our relationship to other people (Kenyon, 2000). This leads to the fundamental paradox of human nature, that is, "we create our world personally, idiosyncratically, and dynamically; yet, to a significant extent, we are also influenced and created by a world that is larger than ourselves, individually speaking" (Kenyon, 2000: 10).

Since from the constructionist position positing our everyday knowledge evolves from a collaborative relationship between social structures and social processes, which simultaneously create and perpetuate one another (Berger and Luckmann, 1966), the knowledge we have about our selves is "always grounded in the signs of one's existence that are received from others, as well as from the works of culture by which one is interpreted" (Gunn, 1982: 31). Moreover, as "makers of meaning," our freedom to create meaning is heavily conditioned by factors such as social class, gender, ethnicity, religion, sexuality, age, and even by language itself (Manheimer, 1999/2000). Although the personal existence perspective emphasizes that social structure and culture influence the meaning-making process, Kenyon (2000) emphasizes that human beings have freedom to make choices. Even though our lives are fundamentally shaped by our genetic makeup,

and by the physical, social, and cultural environment surrounding us, "who we are is not determined exclusively by one or both of these factors" (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996). Thus, the personal existence perspective provides us with an ontological image of human nature, that is, it recognizes that we are all creators of meaning, but that we are also constrained by forces larger than us, in our construction of meaning.

The contribution of this perspective to the study of aging is founded in the "metaphor of aging and human life as a journey," which views aging as a journey and humans as travelers in time (Kenyon, 1991). This work lies in the insights of Gabriel Marcel, and his metaphor *Homo Viator*, which conceives human beings as "travelers" and "pilgrims." Kenyon (1991) and Randall and Kenyon (2001) draw upon this metaphor in order to flesh out in more detail the characteristics of the journey of life to emphasize the "possibilities, potentialities, and positive outcomes of the human adventure" (Kenyon, 1991: 19), while also acknowledging the various forms and losses that undoubtedly occur with age.

The metaphor "journey of life" consists of five key components that contribute to the study of aging. First, the journey is positive and personal, meaning that each individual's journey is special and unique in its own way because each person contributes their own set of experiences and values. Second, the journey is interpersonal, since our journey, and the stories within it, are co-authored with other travelers. Third, the journey is opaque because we do not always know what is going to occur along the way. Fourth, the journey is indefinite in its duration simply due to the fact that the time of our death is not available to us. Lastly, the journey contains a quality of impermanence, since our lives are constantly changing and evolving in and through time.

These characteristics of the journey of life are applied by Kenyon (1991) to examine the concept of authenticity and the meaning of aging. In accordance with other existential traditions, Kenyon refers to the authentic life as one that is lived in accordance with the basic features of the *Homo Viator* metaphor, in order to delineate a positive way to conceptualize and study the aging experience and move beyond metaphors and images that focus exclusively on bodily decline and loss. For Kenyon, "what is important for a storied being is whether I am participating in the unfolding of my story or only drifting along, having it written for me" (Kenyon, 2000: 18). This implies ownership and acceptance of the life that has been lived, and through this process "ordinary wisdom" emerges "out of a process both of active seeking and, paradoxically, of discovering through sometimes listening, letting life be, and letting go of things – that is, of unlearning" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 98).

2.3 Existential Meaning and Age

It is generally believed that "personal meaning is an integral part of human existence across the life course" (Prager, 1997b: 48). Researchers have been interested in whether the strength of meaning changes across the life course in light of the many life situations that occur with age. This approach to the study of meaning in life assesses whether older adults experience more meaning in their lives than younger or middle-aged adults. This is done usually by quantifying the amount of meaning and purpose already existing within an individual (Reker and Wong, 1987). Several measurement instruments have been developed in order to globally assess meaning. These include the Purpose in Life (PIL) scale (Crumbaugh, 1964), Life Attitude Profile (LAP) (Reker and Peacock,

1981), Life Regard Index (LIR) (Battista and Almond, 1973), Sense of Coherence scale (SOC) (Antonovsky, 1993), Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP) (Reker and Wong, 1988), and Sources of Life Meaning (SLM) scale (Bar-Tur, Savaya, and Prager, 2001). In addition, another method has been developed that asks individuals to write about all of the different areas in their lives that they find to be meaningful, which are then rated for depth according to the complexity and specificity of the responses by independent judges (Devolger-Ebersole and Ebersole, 1985).

There seems to be a consensus in the literature that the strength, or degree of meaning in life, does not change throughout the life course when age is controlled. Baum and Stewart (1990), using the Purpose in Life test, found no dramatic differences between respondents aged 25 or 85 years old in their sample of 185 women and men. A series of studies published by researchers using the Sources of Meaning Profile (SOMP), designed to measure the sources of present meaning in one's life, report similar results when the mean scores for all meaning sources are totaled. For instance, Reker (1988) concludes that there was a high degree of consistency in sources of meaning across all dyads in his study: young and middle-aged, middle-aged and older, and young and old. Additionally, Prager (1997a) states that there were considerable similarities among sources of meaning among his age-differentiated national samples of 372 Australian and 191 Israeli women between 18 and 91 years old. Similar results were documented when the sources of meaning were examined across age cohorts within an Australian female sample (Prager, 1997b), Israeli sample (Prager, 1997c), and another Australian sample (Prager, 1996). Interestingly, Bar-Tur and Prager (1996) report that few significant differences were found between young-old and old-old community dwellers in the attribution of

importance to sources and overall perception of meaning. Finally, Ebersole and DePaola (1989) found no significant difference in the depth of written descriptions of meaning among younger and older adults as judged by outside evaluators.

Researchers have also examined what makes individuals lives meaningful. The content of meaning in life is studied by asking respondents to write essays and to describe in detail what gives them the greatest meaning in life, and then to evaluate how deep they consider each aspect of meaning to be (Devolger-Ebersole and Ebersole, 1985). Following a series of studies and a review of the literature, Devolger-Ebersole and Ebersole (1985) conceptualize meaning in life as consisting of several categories, which should be used when analyzing descriptions of meaning. These categories of meaning in life include: understanding, relationships, service, belief, expression, obtaining, growth, and existential-hedonistic. Consistently, the category of relationships is the most important content of meaning identified regardless of age. In samples including only college students (Devolger-Ebersole and Ebersole, 1985), golden anniversary couples (Ebersole and DePaola, 1986), nursing home residents (DePaola and Ebersole, 1995), and young and old adults (Ebersole and De Paola, 1989), the most important factor contributing to meaning in life was human relationships. Overall, this research suggests that there is continuity in the content of meaning over time suggesting that individuals at different stages of the life course draw upon the same sources of meaning.

Sources of meaning are the areas of meaning within a person's life through which meaning is derived (O'Connor and Chamberlain, 1996). Although this approach shows us what is personally meaningful, it is unable to tell us how these sources provide us with personal meaning over time. For instance, this research indicates that the category of

human relationships is an important source of meaning across the life course, but we are left wondering if the way in which relationships provide us with meaning in later life differs from previous stages.

Other researchers have found that meaning changes across the life span. This research has been motivated by Neugarten's concept of interiority, which suggests that older adults shift toward a more philosophical orientation in later life (Neugarten et al., 1968). For example, Reker (1988) found tentative support that a shift in perspective occurs. In his sample of younger and older individuals, he noted that the need to meet basic needs and the desire to achieve declined as one grew older, while interest in religious activities, social causes, helping others, and values and ideals increased from middle-age onward. In addition, Meddin (1998) provides evidence that older people are less likely to focus on self and self-gratification in later life. Moreover, Prager (1998) found a greater emphasis on humanistic, and social and cultural concerns in his sample of Australian and Israeli women, and concluded that, "While meanings for the young and middle-aged are centered on the establishment of a stable identity, forming intimate relations, and being productive and creative, the task of later life is to develop a sense of integrity and an appreciation of why and how one has lived" (Prager, 1998: 134).

Along similar lines, Dittmann-Kohli (1990) argues that personal meaning systems are reorganized and reconstructed depending upon what is valued and respected in old age. Life experiences, historical events, and the social and cultural environment are also going to modify sources of meaning and purpose in life, as people grow older (Bar-Tur et al., 2001). It makes sense that the meaning of life events evolves over time and changes in accordance with life experiences that have not yet occurred. Mishler explains, "as we

access and make sense of events and experiences in our past and how they are related to our current selves, we change their meanings" (Mishler, 1999; in Reissman, 2002: 705).

Adaptive strategies are also developed by older adults in order to cope with the challenges of aging. In a review of the literature, Thompson (1992) identifies four ways older people find meaning in their lives: work, leisure, grandparenting, and intimate adult relationships. Similarly, Wong (1989) shows that older adults use four meaning enhancing strategies to help them maintain a sense of meaning in the face of personal loss, suffering, and death: reminiscence, commitment, personal optimism, and religiosity. Adams-Price et al. (1998) compared the meaning of aging among young and old people and found that older adults were more able to integrate both the positive and negative aspects of aging and find meaning in the experience. By contrast, younger adults associated aging with major events in their lives and even though these events were positive, they held a negative meaning for them (Adams-Price et al., 1998).

In research on aging, Andrews (2000) argues that it is important to acknowledge that both continuity and change occurs as we grow older. For Andrews (2000), the reality lies somewhere in between the continuity and alteration of meaning. Accordingly, this research takes the position that personal meaning simultaneously changes and stays the same as we age, and will examine how this is so among the biographies of older adults.

In part, the methodological approaches used to date have been limited in their ability to capture the complex nature of meaning-making and construction over time. The research designs have been largely quantitative and use measurement instruments that do not necessarily capture the multidimensionality of existential meaning (Reker and

Chamberlain, 2000). This approach, premised in the positivist paradigm, has been useful in outlining the nature of existential meaning as a construct, and its function and content in relation to similar constructs, but this orientation is less useful in capturing the individual and idiosyncratic nature of the existential experience. Moreover, what is known about existential meaning has been found using cross-sectional data and for this reason "findings of developmental trends may pertain more to... cohort differences than to age changes per se" (Reker and Chamberlain, 2000: 204-205).

There is also a need for a more detailed consideration of the way in which our age identity influences the construction of meaning over time. This is particularly important because the meanings attached to one's age will differ for everyone, which is not captured by a chronological definition of age that is largely used in research today. The various meanings that we ascribe to our age are influential in shaping how we derive meaning in our lives on a day-to-day basis. This type of meaning has been called "implicit meaning" and is concerned with levels of attachment to events or objects in life, and involves the process of assigning meaning to an experience such as aging. For example, when deciding what the experience of growing older means to them, older adults have to negotiate the meanings that later life events such as retirement, widowhood, and grandparenthood have for them. These implicit meanings of age and aging are related to existential meaning to the extent that the realization of implicit meaning initiates and enhances the search for existential meaning (Reker and Chamberlain, 2000). For this reason, this study will consider the link between the implicit meaning of age and the existential process of making sense of meaning in life. This necessitates a more detailed discussion of what constitutes an "age identity" and

how research on aging has traditionally studied and conceptualized age, and is the direction in which this thesis now turns.

2.4 Problematizing Age

Our age is integral to our personal identity and includes the feelings that we have about our age, and the various meanings that we attribute to the aging process. The young and old alike both have their own "theories" of aging, which are used to talk about what it means to grow old (Gubrium and Wallace, 1990). Age is inextricably linked to the development and change occurring within societies as a whole, throughout history, and to the interaction between the biological, psychological, and social dimensions of our lives (Settersten and Mayer, 1997).

Chronological age, defined as the number of years a person has lived, is the most common indicator of age used in society and in research on aging today. It is often referred to as our "objective age," but is not necessarily related to what our age means to us ("subjective age"). A chronological definition of age stems from the institutionalization of time that is fundamentally linked to our culture's interpretation of the phenomenon of time caused by the planet's axis of rotation around the sun and the creation of the calendar system dating back approximately 20,000 years ago, which organized time by segmenting it into days, months, and years and anchored it to a fixed point (Fry, 1999). Time became rationalized as politically neutral and independent of the social order, and it was commonplace to express age chronologically through the number of years lived since birth.

Chronological age is generally conceived to be a proxy measure for biological maturation, psychological development, and membership in larger social categories such as cohorts or life stages (Settersten and Mayer, 1997). Every society uses age structuring to some degree, which is implied in the roles and statuses of individuals that are embedded within the social structure and social institutions. In particular, age-grading refers to the various rights and responsibilities that are attributed to individuals depending upon their age. For instance, age regulations exclude "minors" from bars, and determine eligibility for pensions and social services. Individuals also internalize this age-grade system, and in turn know when the proper time is for a life event to occur (Neugarten et al., 1965). As a result, individuals of different ages conceive the timing and sequencing of life events and transitions to be on-time or off-time due to the social clock, or a shared set of expectations that we have regarding the appropriate time for life events to occur in relation to chronological time (Kenyon et al., 1999). Age norms also prescribe behaviour as being appropriate depending upon one's membership within an age-category. This concern over age appropriate behaviour is often evidenced in catchphrases such as "Act your age!" delivered to young and old alike (Neugarten et al., 1965).

To some extent, chronological age is a meaningful form of expression. Vital statistics and demographic profiles largely rely upon chronological age as a reference point. Specifically, chronological age is useful in determining cross-sectional age differences and cross-sectional structural arrangements at given periods of time (Riley et al., 1999). In addition, chronological age is easy to use as a defining term for entitlement to various social services and benefits in state-level societies (Fry, 1999). For instance, upon turning 65 in Canada an individual qualifies to receive an OAS/GIS pension

payment. Heuristically, chronological age is also useful because it places an individual along the life course referring to time past and years yet to be lived. In this sense, chronological age is useful in determining longevity based upon the latest life expectancy estimates.

Some researchers have recognized the limitations of chronological age as an explanatory variable. Neugarten and Hagestad (1976) warn that chronological age is often a poor indicator of biological, social, and psychological age. Age is considered to be a rough indicator of an individual's status along these dimensions. In addition, age is often meaningful only in relational terms, that is, when an individual compares their age to someone else's, or marks their progress in comparison to someone within their reference group. Most significantly, however, chronological age is "meaningless unless there is knowledge of the particular culture and of the social meaning attached to given chronological ages" (Neugarten and Hagestad, 1976: 240). For these reasons, chronological age has been called an "empty variable" and "we rarely assume that it is age itself that causes behaviour; instead, it is whatever age presumably indexes that is thought to be important" (Settersten and Mayer, 1997: 235).

The use of chronological age, however, remains prominent in social gerontology as the discipline largely relies upon quantitative studies that use chronological age in the construction of life tables, and in multivariate regression analyses in order to assess the effects of age upon the dependent variable (Maddox and Campbell, 1985). Often in research studies age-cohorts are selected covering either a narrow span of five years, or a larger span of ten to twenty years, in an attempt to examine the effect of environmental and/or social circumstances upon cohorts of people born during the same period of time.

Ironically, when these arbitrarily defined age brackets are formed, individual measures of age are lost. The problem with extensive use of chronological age as a variable for analysis, as Settersten and Mayer (1997) point out, is that researchers habitually break down their data into age-categories without compelling rationale. In turn, the undeniable variability among individuals with the same chronological ages and the way in which they idiosyncratically ascribe meaning to their age is ignored. In addition, the use of chronological age is a static concept in that the dynamic process of growing older, and growing older over time, is not captured. In fact, theorists of age stratification argue that the dynamism inherent in an individual's aging process cannot be examined without also acknowledging changes within social structures through time, since these processes are interdependent (Riley et al., 1999).

A few researchers have acknowledged the limitations of chronological age as the sole explanatory variable of our age identity and have developed indicators referring to different age attitudes, or more generally, individuals' subjective age identification, which refers to a person's evaluation of his or her age. Typically, subjective age is measured with a single-item phrase such as, "Do you feel that you are: young, middle-aged, old, or very old?" (Settersten and Mayer, 1997). Some research studies, however, examine more general views about what it means to be old. For example, Kaufman and Elder (2002) examine age identity on four dimensions: how individuals feel most of the time (subjective age), how old other people think a person is (other age), what age an individual wants to be (desired age), what age a person hopes to live to (desired longevity), and finally, the age at which an individual thinks the average man or woman becomes old (perceived old age). All of these dimensions of age identity were scored on

a continuous scale, and respondents were asked to give any age (in years) for each of the questions. Kaufman and Elder (2002) argue that these age identity measures are an improvement over previous measures that limit respondent choice to age categories.

These new quantitative measures of age identity reflect an attempt to conceptualize age at the level of subjective experience, but it continues to anchor age in chronological terms. This is problematic because older adults often do not think of themselves in a linear way. For example, Kaufman (1986) found in her study that the interpretations of life events associated with aging, rather than "age" per se were more important to older adults. She reports that the older adults in her study did not report being old as being a central feature of their self, or that chronological age was a source of meaning for them. She concludes that they perceived meaning in life through being themselves in old age. Instead, she argues older adults express identity through life themes that stem from their personal life experiences, individual interpretations of their cultural context, historical events, structural aspects such as socioeconomic status, family patterns, and educational history, and value systems. This suggests that what is central for study is the investigation of the complexity of meanings attached to age, since everyday life is not viewed in terms of age specific categories (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999).

The feelings that we have about our age also fluctuate and are positioned locally. For example, I can feel older when I walk to the cafeteria on the University of Victoria campus and notice the groups of undergraduate students, but feel younger when I return to my place of work at the Centre on Aging ten minutes later where I am one of the younger employees housed there. For this reason, our age identity depends upon where

we are, whom we are with, and what is going on at a particular moment in time. Accordingly, our objective age, or chronological age, is not necessarily related to our subjective age, or what our age means to us. Our "age identity" is a complex and multi-faceted concept, which is also socially constructed. The contribution of the constructionist perspective to the study of age identity is discussed further below.

2.5 Social Construction of Age

Social constructionist thought has been particularly helpful in challenging what we think of as knowledge of age and aging. From the constructionist perspective, the "so-called objective criteria for identifying age, for example, are determined by cultural, historical, and other contextual factors" (Ylänne-M^{c}Ewen, 1999: 418). Aging is conceived as a social reality that is produced by external forces. Since the experience of growing older is socially manifested, as a consequence it is "neither immutable nor 'given' by the character of external reality" (Estes, 1999: 27). Our age identity is formed and shaped by social processes, which are concurrently determined by the social structure and perpetuated by social relations (Berger and Luckmann, 1966). Thus, in the study of the social construction of identity, the leading questions are "who is the aged person and how are answers to the question managed in everyday life?" (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999: 292).

Constructionism has shown us how knowledge about aging is socially produced through historical images, politics, and language. Using a historical perspective, Cole (1992) describes how ancient folk versions of the stages of life have made their way into modern thought, and in turn shaped Protestant American views towards aging. Cultural

symbols, rituals, and images impart meaning upon old age, and convey the social opportunities available to older adults. Thus, the experience of aging cannot be studied apart from the ideals and social practices that conceptualize and represent the nature of aging, since these ideals "of old age are not always existentially sound" and are "socially located and implicated in relationships of power and authority" (Cole, 1992: xxviii).

Using a political economy framework, Carroll Estes illustrates how the role of the state and the economy influence the experience of aging. The state is central to understanding later life because it has the power to allocate and distribute resources, manage the different classes in society, and ameliorate conditions that threaten the social order (Estes, 1999). Furthermore, the activities of the state have been crucial in the construction of old age, and in controlling the relations between age, gender, ethnicity, and class.

Using a sociolinguistic perspective, Ylänne-M^{c}Ewen (1999), shows how age identities are negotiated interactionally during face-to-face interaction and in turn perpetuate popular conceptions of age and oldness. Using a single-case study of the interaction between three travel agency assistants and an older client couple, Ylänne-M^{c}Ewen (1999) illustrates how the older client couple create age identities for themselves, and how the travel agency assistants create age identities for them. In her analysis she found that the travel agents struggled to deal with the visibility of aging and age-related preferences of older adults, and showed that humour and patronizing talk were the means used to deal with the salience of aging.

Along similar lines, Ray (2000) tackles the challenge of examining the social construction of age through her analysis of specific language acts in her book, *Beyond*

Nostalgia. Through personal observations made at writing groups for older adults, interviews with the members, and analysis of the actual life stories told, Ray illustrates how age identities are continually negotiated depending upon the circumstances surrounding the talk of people from the same, or different, generations. For example, Ray (2000) tells a personal story about what happened in one of her life-writing groups after she shared a written story about the death of her boyfriend's father that contained flashbacks to her own father's death in the hospital. The story, she explains, also contained intimate glimpses into her relationship with her boyfriend. A week later a member of the life-writing group called and informed her that they were considering withdrawing from her research project and when discussing their participation in her project they decided to withdraw. She attributes this conflict to differences in the use of language and writing style, and generational differences in self-presentation. It was not acceptable, she reflects, for her to write about love, death, and intimacy from outside of marriage, or from the perspective of a middle-aged woman who was still experiencing and dealing with this pain. Her autobiographical writing was written, she argues, with a different purpose in mind, intending to try to make sense of her current emotional life and the unresolved conflicts within it, rather than from the distance of age and experience that she believes is a characteristic of later life.

Overall, the social constructionist position has usefully articulated how aging is socially negotiated and dictated through popular culture, literature, politics, and even through social interactions themselves. The focus of this perspective is on the analysis of the social conditions that establish the meaning and significance of age, and shows how narratives and images of aging may bestow attributes that promote or limit older adults'

options for imagining and achieving new goals in later life. Insights from theories of social construction help us to understand how personal identity is socially manifested, and how people learn to be old and age "successfully" by observing, interacting, and existing with other people in the social world. The creation and management of analytic descriptions and social categories of age in our everyday life are considered (Gubrium and Holstein, 1999). This has prompted some gerontological researchers to problematize the social meanings attached to our "age" vocabulary and examine further the words used to describe and document the aging experience from the point of view of both social researchers and older adults themselves, and is the point to which this thesis now turns.

2.6 Our "Age" Vocabulary

Some gerontological researchers have started to reconsider their aging vocabulary and the implications it has for theorizing age and conducting research on aging. An interesting debate has evolved among a few feminists and self-proclaimed age studies scholars (Andrews, 1999; 2000; Bytheway, 2000; Gibson, 2000; Gullette, 1997; Ray, 2000; Wilson, 2001), which is intended to motivate researchers to move away from essentialist theories of later life to theories that reflect a more fluid and dynamic approach that take difference and heterogeneity into account (Wilson, 2001). This debate is significant to the extent that it illustrates how the aging nomenclature we use to impose order upon an inherently ambiguous human condition in our research can situate a wall around the aging process, cause misunderstanding, and reinforce ageist ideology (Hazan, 1994). As Wilson (2001) puts it, as long as ageism exists, social research must remain political. If we want our research to be emancipatory then we must move from "research

on elders to research for elders" (Wilson, 2001: 473). Central to this movement is the way in which researchers decide to contextualize "old age." A common theme running through this debate is deciding what constitutes "old" and "old age" and how to make good use of the concepts.

One side of the debate maintains that old age exists as a stage of life and should be recognized as such in our conceptual frameworks about age and aging. This is the most common gerontological gaze used today that conceives old age as the stage of life in which we are "old." In some respects, boundaries are useful because they distinguish a large group of people from another (Fraser, 1997). Further to this, boundaries can exist in some circumstances without being visible so that older adults are seen as family members and friends, rather than as being just old (Fraser, 1997). According to Andrews (1999), we should embrace the word "old," since old people are old, and should accept them as such so that we can comfortably refer to old people as old. Age is something that we all have and as time goes on, the more full of age we become (Andrews, 2000).

The other side of the debate argues that we should move beyond considering "old age" as a category of meaning because when being earmarked as a citizen of old age, the category "old" becomes a defining feature of one's identity. "Old" is inevitably associated with its counterpart "young," and it is assumed that each is internally homogenous and different from one another. Wilson explains, "It implies that the not-old know what they mean when they say 'old', and that they are indicating a state or a stage in the life course that is clearly defined, bounded and more or less similar in all people called old, and identifiably different from 'young' " (Wilson, 2001: 475). In addition to emphasizing difference from others, the process of labeling old age as a stage of human

development ignores the fact that youth is favoured, whilst age is not (Cruikshank, 2003). Along these lines, Bytheway (2000) argues for the founding of a non-ageist gerontology using a relativist category that abandons the assumption that old age exists as a distinct and separate life stage. There should be no boundaries marking off the beginning and end of old age because even though most people are indisputably old at 105, most others are disputably old. Bytheway (2000) acknowledges that the meanings of the words used to talk about aging such as "elderly" can be rehabilitated, but he also questions the purpose that this would serve:

> The matter of old age is a different order. Whereas 'elderly' barely has a history of any significance, that of old age is long and extensive, going back to Cicero (and no doubt beyond). It is absurd to suggest that it has no meaning and that it can be eliminated. My argument was, and remains, that the future for gerontological theory is not bright if we do not question the existence of something called old age. It is hard to imagine, for example, how psychology might have developed and continued to develop had it not questioned the existence and nature of 'the mind' or 'personality'... It is important that we gerontologists note that Cicero (and all those who have contributed to our understanding of what old age is) were like us, ageing human beings. As such they must each have inherited some kind of understanding of the pattern of life from cradle to grave... So arguably, they were subject to the same uncertainties and fears about their own personal futures as do we gerontologists now entering the 21rst century (Bytheway, 2000: 787-788).

Accordingly, from this side of the debate, "old age" as a stage of life is perceived as an ageist metaphor because it assumes that the identities of older adults are normative and stable and that one comes into an identity, or finds an identity, at different times in life (Gullette, 1997). Viewing age as a category of meaning postulates that upon one's sixty-fifth birthday that they will come into the identity of "old," and instead establishes a false binary between the change and continuity that happens throughout the life course forcing researchers to choose between one pole or the other, rather than accept both as

simultaneous and dialectical components of the identities of older adults, "I am not who I was, though some principle of being abides" (Andrews, 1999: 313).

Another problem with viewing "old" as a category is the fact that older adults are forced to "lean on the concept of age" (Cruikshank, 2003) meaning that older adults are unable to define for themselves what their age means to them. This is made more difficult by the plethora of negative aging images accessible to older adults stemming from an "age mystique," founded upon a youth work male model, which denies, distorts, and devalues the aging process (Friedan, 1993). Similarly, Gullette (1997) argues that available age scripts are decline narratives premised on the assumption that once we turn 50 our life will be laden with loss and increased limitation.

An alternative framework offered to conceptualize age, conceives of older men and women as having multiple and constantly changing identities, in response to the argument that no boundary is relevant all of the time (Wilson, 2001). Instead, older adults are allowed to feel old in some contexts and young in others. From this point of view, older individuals are not envisioned as passive victims of ageism, but as active individuals who are able to resist the category of old (Cruikshank, 2003). Gullette elaborates:

> I am proposing an active concept of aging as self-narrated experience, the conscious, ongoing story of one's age identity. Once we can firmly distinguish between the culture's aging narrative and our own versions (particularly if we do so within a collective formed for that purpose), we learn that its threats to being and becoming are resistible (Gullette, 1997; in Ray, 2000: 29).

Thus, for Gullette, in social research we should acknowledge both our own, and our participants', multiple and contradictory aging identities. In research, we must study how people are "aged by culture in the broadest sense" through our "discourses, feelings,

practices, institutions, [and] material conditions," which are all "saturated with concepts of age and aging" (Gullette, 1996; in Ray, 1999: 180). This new perspective towards age and aging uses a more complex and inclusive conceptualization of age identity and is generally captured under the catchphrase "conscious aging" and is considered a way to empower older adults.

2.7 "Age" Identity Negotiations

When conducting research on aging, it is especially important to be aware of the variety of ways that older adults will "negotiate aging" (Hurd, 1999) in order to exempt themselves from membership in the aged group. This has important implications for social researchers when interpreting what older adults are communicating to us about the aging process.

One commonly reported finding is that older adults report a disjunction between their inner sense of self and their outer appearance (Kaufman, 1986; Keller et al., 1989; Thompson et al., 1990). Thompson et al. in their research study, *I Don't Feel Old: The Experience of Later Life*, report, as the title suggests, that older people do not feel old unless they are physically ill or emotionally depressed (Thompson et al., 1990). Similarly, Kaufman (1986) found among her informants that they did not speak of being old as meaningful in itself, but expressed a sense of self that was ageless.

According to Gibson (2000), an important element is missing in the above analysis. He states that when old people say that they do not feel old what they are trying to tell us is that they do not identity with the "false stereotype of what an old person is commonly supposed to be" (Gibson, 2000: 775). The underlying assumption is that

feeling old is a prerequisite for accepting oneself as old and "once people feel old they will then be perceived and treated as old by others and will begin to act in ways they believe an 'old' person should act" (Minichiello et al., 2000: 261). If a person acknowledges that they feel old then they are moving from a state of positive aging into a negative state of being old (Minichiello et al., 2000). Unfortunately, this exemplifies that older adults are not allowed to comfortably say that they feel their age, which in turn complicates self-understanding. Cruikshank eloquently elaborates,

> If they take on the despised identity of old, they cannot think well of themselves. If they identify as "not old," on the other hand, they can avoid stigma for a time by dissociating themselves from others but this requires a degree of self-deception. They must deny that aging is a process, one that includes them (Cruikshank, 2003: 155).

The age identities of older adults and the way in which they are negotiated are also related to popular conceptions of bodily awareness and appearance. For this reason, the recognition that we are embodied beings is fundamental to understanding the age identities of older adults. The body, however, has remained under-theorized in social gerontology and is ignored from the theoretical frameworks used to try and understand the lived experience of older people (Öberg, 1996; Turner, 1995). According to Öberg (1996), the reason for this lies in the ontological dualism between body and soul, which separates the body from the soul (or self), and places the soul in a hierarchical position over the body. Concepts like the "ageless self" and "mask of ageing" approach, which do not acknowledge the body, defend further this Cartesian mind/body split (Andrews, 1999).

The introduction of Featherstone and Hepworth's (1989) "mask of ageing" approach is central here. According to this theory, there is "a distance or

tension...between the external appearance of the face and body and their functional capacities, and the internal or subjective sense or experience of personal identity which is likely to become more prominent in our consciousness as we grow older" (Featherstone and Hepworth, 1989: 151). For Tulle-Winton (1999), when older adults report a disjunction between the outward appearance of their body and their inner sense of self, they are trying to make sense of the bodily changes and impairments that they are experiencing. As a consequence, the mask motif, however, creates a bridge between internal psychological and external social realities as an effort to conform socially (Biggs, 1997) and be accepted by the dominant youth ideology. Drawing upon Goffman's concept of impression management, Biggs explains further that the mask is both a "source of inauthenticity" and a "means of protecting the expanded self from external attack" (Biggs, 1997: 554), which coincidently gives rise to many other identity responses in relation to the aging process.

The mind/body dualism is central in our consciousness today and offers older adults a way to distance themselves from other older adults and the dreaded "old age." For Andrews (1999), the mind/body split is divisive on two axes, which in turn influences the age identities of older adults. The first chasm is between external age (evidence in bodily exterior) and internal age (evidence in how someone feels), and the second chasm is between oneself and other older adults. This is exemplified in a conversation with an older person who identifies another person as being 'old,' when in actuality that person is chronologically younger than she/he. This is due to the fact that our bodies are what people react to because "we read into them stories of people's age and their lifestyle" (Laws, 1995: 277). As a result, a divide is created between those who are old and those

who look old, "Although I may *look* like someone that *that* has happened to, in fact I am not, for though you cannot see it, inside I am still young" (Andrews, 1999: 305; emphasis in original). Unfortunately, this mind/body split and the hesitancy of older adults to wholeheartedly embrace the identity of old present difficulties for researchers who are trying to study and interpret the aging experience of older adults.

In essence, the point of this discussion is to convey that studying the age identity of older adults is a complex enterprise. The narrative gerontological perspective is useful as it provides researchers with a way to deal with some of these conceptual issues and refashion the study of age identity, which is discussed further below.

2.8 Narrative Gerontology, Existential Meaning, and Refashioning Age Identity

The advent of the narrative perspective breathes new life into the study of age identity because it examines how older adults have aged over time and enables researchers to move beyond the problematic "young" and "old" distinction in research on aging. The goal of narrative gerontology is to study how the aging process has been "fully shaped through an investigation of personal meanings of aging, which are expressed in metaphors, images, and lifestories" (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996: 2). Through story-telling individuals are able to create their own identities and their own sense of self, and for this reason, stories are identity-rich. Moreover, the narrative approach is a critical "space" for story-tellers because this "personalization of the interview method makes it a potential agent of social change, where new identities and new definitions of problematic situations are created, discussed, and experimented with" (Denzin and Lincoln, 1998: 36). The ontological standpoint in narrative theory positing that we exist in and

communicate through story enables narrative researchers to think more broadly about time and human aging than is typical of traditional theories of age and aging. The focus of narrative gerontology is on the lived experience, or subjective reality of the individual, which forces us to move beyond objective indicators such as chronological age. Although chronological time, or "clock time" is part and parcel of our essence as human beings, it is considered not the only form of time that we experience in our lives (Kenyon et al., 1999).

Narratives, and in particular lifestories, contain a wealth of information about "how a life has been lived, how it is lived, and how it can be lived" (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996: 2). Lifestories are full of the meanings that individuals ascribe to the experiences that they have encountered in their lives across all aspects of the lifecourse, which sheds light on their actions and behaviours in the present. The use of metaphor is also prominent in narrative theory and great confidence lies in the role of metaphor in the field of aging to "better reflect simultaneously the multiple levels and aspects of human functioning that may be evident at any point in the lifespan" (Schroots et al., 1991: 13). Thus, for some narrative gerontologists, the focus in aging research is to examine the interplay between the host of metaphors such as "story time" and "journey time" that can be found in our personal stories (Randall and Kenyon, 2001). These metaphors are used to reflect the different forms of time, which are by-products of our autobiographical memory or the inventory of individual and collective memories that we have about our lives, found in our lifestories. "Story time" refers to the stories that we tell in the present about past memories, which are given new meaning through story-telling. These memories, and the stories that we tell about them, are continually reinterpreted in light of

new experiences. Accordingly, "what we do with our life stories today can change the meaning of where we have been and where we are going" (Kenyon, 2003: 31) throughout the journey of life. Taken together these two forms of time that are found in our stories, compose our "inside age" story, and offer a new way to study age identity. Through story-telling we can examine how we have aged biologically, socially, and cognitively, but also biographically as human beings journeying throughout life:

> We age with respect to our inner, subjective experience, both over time and of time – past, present, and future. With respect to the memories we fashion from, the interpretations we place on, and the meanings we ascribe to the events and circumstances of our lives. We age with respect to the images and metaphors, the myths and stories, by which we construct our beliefs and conduct our affairs. We age with respect to how we author and narrate, how we read and revise, the stories by which we live (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 36).

In particular, this approach is well-suited to study existential meaning because as we grow older the amount of time in the future is shorter, and as a consequence, "this realization elevates the experience of personal time to a unity in which the past, the present, and the future and one's existence are seen as a whole, a single episode" (Heikkinen, 1996: 188).

Taken together, a narrative gerontological approach is particularly useful for this research on how the age identities of older adults shape the stories that they tell reflecting meaning and purpose in their lives because it allows older adults to consider for themselves the extent to which, and in what way, their age is relevant for them, as they tell stories and construct meaning about their lives as a whole through story-telling. Age, from the vantage point of the narrative perspective, is conceived biographically and as an accumulation of stories that they have to tell about their life as they have lived it. The connection between aging biographically and existential meaning is basic, in the sense

that, "what people find meaningful about themselves and their world is manifest or expressed through language in the form of metaphors, stories, narratives and autobiographies" (Kenyon, 1996: 660-661).

CHAPTER THREE: Methodology

3.1 Lifestory Interview

A lifestory interview approach was chosen as the way in which to collect personal stories and gain access to "experiential data" in this study. The lifestory as an interview strategy has an extensive history and has evolved from oral history, life history, and other ethnographic approaches (Atkinson, 1998). Lifestory interviewing allows us to obtain an in-depth look at an individual's life as a whole, and at their experience in and through time. Most importantly, from a research perspective, our lifestories are data rich:

> [L]ife stories are a storehouse of experiences and become very important from an existential meaning perspective because, in one sense, the past exists *only* as it is remembered and created and re-created in the interaction with present and future experiences and the meaning, interpretations, and metaphors ascribed to those experiences (Kenyon, 2000: 14).

When telling a story about our life, we become more conscious of our own life and our place within this universe. As Randall and Kenyon explain, we are better able to interpret and make sense of our life experiences through "a process of textualization, that is, by turning the data of our senses into accessible images and words. It is through such textualization that we experience both the world around us and our existence within it" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 39). Story-telling assists us in forming our identities and in gaining context and recognizing meaning, while also ordering our experiences for both the teller and the listener (Atkinson, 1998). Historical reconstruction or the complete documentation of an individual's life history was not the goal of this research. Instead, the focus is on how older adults perceive themselves as individuals and make meaning in their lives from the vantage point of later life. The intent is to better understand the

metaphor "life as a story," and the lifestory as an autobiographical creation, or personal view, rather than collect and probe into the actual life as it has been lived.

One concern with biographical research is the issue of clarifying whose story is being told or constructed during the lifestory interview situation. This is particularly important when conducting biographical research because our research intentions are intermingled with our professional and personal stories and can shape the story-telling process (Kenyon, 1996a). For this reason, autobiographical writings such as personal memoirs and journal or dairy entries are another fruitful way to examine how personal identity is constructed over time. In these forms of writing, authors are forced to find their own voice and in turn become "meaning makers" through the process of writing about their lives.

Guided autobiography is another popular biographical approach involving both a written and an oral component. The oral component is key as it invokes responses from other group members within a community of discourses that provide "ample opportunity for generating critical and reflective discussion" (Schuster, 1994: 138). Guided autobiography, or life-writing groups, does not necessarily sort out the problem of determining whose stories are being told, since research shows that narrators in group settings alter their stories according to the norms espoused and experienced by members of the group (Ray, 2000). However, the oral reading component is advantageous because it encourages reflections and dialogue to emerge about the attitudes and meanings of aging, which can be useful in clarifying whose story is being told and constructed (Kenyon, 1996a).

Another concern with biographical research involves the "trustworthiness of our interpretations" or the validation of our narrative work as social scientists (Reissman, 1993). For most narrative researchers, the boundary between "fact and fiction" is blurred since what is believed to be important is the interpretations placed upon life events by narrators, rather than an analysis of what actually happened in their lives (Rosenblatt, 2002). This issue of narrative truth is more important for some scholars such as Bertaux who believe that "every life story contains a large proportion of factual data which can be verified" (Bertaux, 1995; in Reissman, 2002: 704). What is key from a social constructionist perspective, however, is an attempt to try to understand the change and fluctuation in meanings found in personal narratives. The problem though is that participants can challenge the validity of a researcher's interpretations, since stories are not static and continually change as new meanings and interpretations of events transpire (Reissman, 1993). Accordingly, Reissman (1993) suggests that narrative researchers should strive to evaluate the validity of their interpretations by making their interpretations more transparent to audiences. Transparency can be achieved by providing information such as descriptions of how interpretations were produced and of the research process, while also making the original transcripts available to other researchers to make their own deductions. For these reasons, I provide a detailed account in the sections that follow of how I read the lifestories that I collected, and present my own story of the research process.

There is also a tension in narrative research about the extent to which generalization from narrative data is possible considering that such close attention is paid to individual action and biography, which can make it difficult to identify patterns across

lifestories. Generalization is not feasible due to reliance upon small samples and unrepresentative pools of participants. Given these obstacles, narrative research remains valuable in attending to the level of personal experience and to the meanings ascribed to life experiences. Biographical methods can facilitate the development of conceptual frameworks and lay the groundwork for larger-scale research projects, but this approach is not suitable for all research situations.

3.2 Sample Recruitment and Composition

I interviewed 4 older adults (2 men and 2 women) living in Victoria, B.C. and Calgary, A.B. and in the community during the months of September 2003 through May of 2004. Participants were recruited using a snowball sampling strategy. Due to the time-intensive nature of collecting and analyzing lifestories, a small sample size was used in this study. Nevertheless, these four lifestories are useful in exploring how older adults make sense of meaning in their lives, and how their age identity shapes this process when story-telling.

An equal number of men and women were chosen to participate because as Hagestad notes, men and women attach different social meanings to age, and use different guidelines to measure progress in their lives (Hagestad, 1991; in Settersten and Mayer, 1997: 236). Considering that ethnicity is a category of social life that shapes individuals' lifestories, and that our ethnic identities are socially constructed and vary in different contexts and across time (Satzewich, 1998), participants were only recruited into the study if they were born in Canada or else had immigrated to Canada from Great Britain. I acknowledge that the lifestories of ethnic older adults (including both visible

and non-visible minorities) are equally valid, but as a white researcher from a different ethno-cultural location I felt I would have difficulty penetrating the meaning-making process within their lifestories. Health status is also intricately linked to our interpretations of our age identity; in fact, a significant alteration in health is often a defining feature indicating to an older adult that they are "old" (Heikkinen, 1996). Moreover, learning to live in a long-term care environment can require a radical reorganization of one's personal meaning systems and cause an abrupt shift in identity as one seeks to fit into the new environment (Schuster, 1994). For these reasons, the selection of participants was limited to those older adults who were living independently in the community in this study.

Although a broad array of key demographic characteristics could not be sampled for given the small sample size, vastly different lifestories were collected. A wide variety of chronological ages are not represented (three participants were in their mid 80's, while the other participant was in his late 70s), yet variation remains in the meanings ascribed to the aging process and to how they experience their lives to be meaningful. There are also several structural commonalities among the participants. Mary and Charles were born and raised in England and immigrated to Canada shortly after the end of WWII.[1] Betty and Walter were both born in Alberta, Canada. Presently Walter lives with his wife and adult son at home, while Betty lives only with her adult son in an apartment. At the time the interviews were conducted, all participants were able-bodied, however, Betty and Walter are both visually impaired. Walter, Mary, and Charles are currently married, while Betty is widowed. Charles and Mary are caregiving for their spouses; Betty was a

[1] Pseudonyms were used to replace the original names and identifying information was altered in order to preserve the anonymity of the participants in this study.

caregiver until her husband died. Over the period that Mary's lifestory was collected, her husband was admitted into hospital and at the time of our last interview she was grappling with whether or not she should request that he be placed into long-term care.

3.3 Collecting the Stories

Several interviews were conducted with each participant in order to collect their lifestory. Between two to four interviews were conducted with each participant and every interview was generally no less than two hours in length. The interviews took place in each participant's home after signing an informed consent form (refer to Appendix A).

The lifestory interview schedule was flexible and intended to encourage participants to tell their lifestories in their own way. The following query, or a variation thereof, was used to elicit the lifestories of the participants: "Now that we've met and talked for a few minutes I'd like to know more about you and your life. Would you describe your life for me; whatever comes to mind about it? Start where you like, take as much time as you need" (Luborsky, 1998). This prompt is designed not to focus attention upon cultural cues or life events such as work, marriage, and family that may or may not have meaning for a particular individual (Luborsky, 1998). Participants were able to determine when their lifestory began and ended and what should or should not be included. If a participant struggled to keep their lifestory going as the interview progressed then I would insert a question or two from the interview schedule. I also listened to the tapes of our previous interview prior to each meeting, in order to achieve familiarity with their story as it progressed, and determine if I needed to ask any

additional questions from what I had been told. As a result, each series of lifestory interviews was tailored to meet the individual needs of each story-teller, and thus, this research takes the position advocated by Atkinson (2002) that lifestory interviewing is itself an "artful endeavour." Occasionally, I prompted my participants and asked a question in order to promote reflective thinking to get at the meaning inherent in the story:

> The key to meaning making through life story-telling, for the one telling the story, is reflective thinking. If this is not happening, more work may be required for meaning making to take place. To help a life storyteller to be reflective, to encourage him or her pull out the story's inherent meaning, the interviewer can ask direct questions aimed at discovering the meaning, especially the emotional, level of the story (Atkinson, 2002: 135).

The interview schedule was also designed to encourage participants to talk about their happiest and saddest moments in life, significant turning points, prominent memories, significant persons and organizations in their lives, and religious and spiritual beliefs (refer to Appendix B). Oftentimes the participants would address these broad subject areas without my help and threaded them on their own into their lifestory. When talking about their lives participants were also urged to tell their life story, describe themselves and their life today, talk about their expectations for the future, and portray their lives in light of previous life experiences (Shenk et al., 2002).

Conversational interviews about their aging experience and their perceptions of growing older were also conducted with the participants. These conversations occurred either spontaneously during a lifestory interview if a topic of interest transpired, or during a separate interview scheduled to take place after the lifestory was collected. The age identity interview schedule was used to the extent that it was needed to facilitate a discussion about age and aging (refer to Appendix C). Meaningful areas of discussion

included: attitudinal changes, bodily experiences, meanings of age and oldness, physical and social constraints in the present, and comparisons of societal values over time.

3.4 "Reading" the Lifestories and Narrative Meaning Making

In total, 12 individual interviews were conducted, and except for four interviews that were transcribed by research assistants, I transcribed the interviews myself. Prior to beginning the process of transcription, the research assistants were required to sign an oath of confidentiality (refer to Appendix D).

As is the nature of narrative research, the collection, transcription, analysis, and interpretation of data are intimately and intricately woven. In fact, analysis and interpretation began during the first interview. At their best, transcripts are incomplete, partial, and selective representations of what occurred between a story-teller and a story-listener (Reissman, 1993). With this in mind, when transcribing, I decided to make the information on the tapes as useful as possible for reading these lifestories in a textual form. I transcribed verbatim the verbal talk interaction or the actual "words" of my participant's stories.[2] Utterances ("uhm" and "ahh") and pauses are included in the text, but I did not attend to, or grapple with how to represent, other language structures including inflections, sites of emphases, or other poetical features in speech patterns. Moreover, from the actual tapes themselves, I was unable to capture non-verbal speech patterns, another central mode of communication, but through journal entries and field notes documented throughout the course of this research project, these research

[2] Walter requested that the actual text of his lifestory be edited for grammar and word repetition. For this reason, Walter was provided with the chapter that I wrote about his lifestory and he edited the narrative text to his satisfaction. Due to lack of time, the other participants did not receive copies of their individual chapters and were not asked to comment on them. Each participant did receive copies of the transcripts from our interviews together.

reflections were useful in helping me attend to the other meanings laden within the text, albeit limited. I also did not edit out my questions and comments, which is a technique suggested by some lifestory scholars (see for example, Atkinson, 1998), since my presence and remarks were often vital to the introduction of a story by a participant.

Defining a "lifestory" is a knotty endeavour because simultaneously we "are" the stories that we tell about our lives while also consisting of numerous stories at once (Kenyon, 2000). Furthermore, I realized that when my participants were telling their lifestory that they did not own one "singular" lifestory, rather their lifestory consisted of multiple overlapping and "smaller" (Bamberg, 2004) stories, which were weaved together coherently (and sometimes incoherently) into *a* lifestory. As a result, I use the terms "lifestory" and "lifestories" interchangeably when referring to a specific individual's life narrative. Moreover, during the lifestory interview spontaneous conversations frequently transpired after a specific life episode had been shared. Although these conversations deviate from the typical narrative form, this "non-narrative" text remained particularly helpful in learning about the personal value systems of these older adult narrators, and I would maintain is a central component to lifestory interviewing and the story-telling process itself. Mathieson and Stam (1995) report a similar distinction in their work on cancer narratives:

> But conversations are not always narratives, they are frequently the product of the momentary, practical realities of daily life. They become narratives, we argue, when they are part of the quest for personal identity (Mathieson and Stam, 1995: 284).

Given that an interview is a collaborative enterprise between a story-teller and a story-listener and that the production of knowledge is co-constructed, it makes sense that other communicative, non-narrative strategies, were generated during the interview encounter.

Consequently, when reading the lifestories of my participants I attended to both the narrative and non-narrative text when interpreting how they were making sense of meaning in their lives.

The meaning-making process in story-telling is a multifaceted phenomenon, and thus, the interpretive process is also a highly complex matter. Narrative analysis involves consideration of how a story is told, but also includes an assessment of what is included in the story, the context within which it is told, and the audience for which it was intended (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). Moreover, meaning is generated between the story-teller and story-listener through the act of story-telling itself, but is also created when reading the texts of lifestories. Gubrium and Holstein (1998) advise that it is helpful when conducting narrative analysis to "analytically bracket" and focus on one level of narrative practice, or level of meaning-making, while temporarily suspending analytic interest in the others. This advice was followed, and in Chapter Four, I focus exclusively on the biographical activity within the text of the lifestory itself as generated by these older adult narrators, which is extracted by me, a social researcher, engaged in reading their lifestories. This level of analytic interest was appropriate since this research seeks to understand better what is and remains personally meaningful for older adults over time. In Chapter Five, I focus on a different form of meaning construction, and discuss the personal meanings that I took from these lifestories as a fellow human being.

The four dimensions outlined by Kenyon et al. (1999) and referred to in the personal existence perspective were also used to examine how the self is narratively constructed through the story-telling process. These dimensions with modification provided me with a different mechanism to think about age identity and conceptualize the

lived experience of an older person. For Kenyon et al. (1999), the dimensions shaping our individual life stories include: structural, social, interpersonal, and personal. Structural elements are the political and power relations in society that can silence the element of possibility within one's story. The social dimension includes all of the social meanings integral to story-telling and the different ways in which age, gender, ethnicity, and class shape the stories told. The interpersonal dimension refers to the various relationships that we have with other people, while the personal dimension consists of "the creation and discovery of meaning and coherence, the way in which the pieces make or do not make sense to a person" (Kenyon et al., 1999: 41). For this thesis, the structural and social are viewed as one, given the sociological overlap in meaning and that both dimensions are instrumental in organizing individual experience. In addition, an important aspect of the personal dimension is the biological story as it refers to the way in which we relate to our body and perceive bodily changes over time. When reading these lifestories, I assessed the significance of the social-structural, interpersonal, and biological dimensions in each participant's lifestory in order to understand what was meaningful and how it was meaningful for them based upon their unique life history and personal experiences. These dimensions compose our "facticity," or the stories that we "are" at any given moment in time and are central to our sense of "possibility," or those aspects of our lives, wherein new meaning can be created.

In order to assist me further in extracting the personal meaning within the texts of these lifestories, Randall (1999) maintains that lifestories contain certain fundamental elements that can serve as a point of departure when reading a lifestory. These include common story structures such as plot, characters, point of view, genre, and themes.

Accordingly, when reading these lifestories I attended to these story structures in order to discern "how" the personal stories of my participants were linked together to create a coherent lifestory (Gubrium and Holstein, 1998). The lifestories were read for the following elements:

1. What are the "plot" lines? What are the sequences of events as they happened? What importance does this temporal ordering have for the narrator?
2. What are the "themes" emitting from the story?
3. Who are the main "characters"? How are they described? What role do they play in the story?
4. What are the "settings" illustrated? How are they integral to the stories told?

The plot is the main underlying structure of a lifestory. Plot is the main unifying thread, or essence, that binds together the content of the lifestory and gives it coherence. In the course of creating the plot of one's lifestory, life events or episodes are interwoven together into a series of interrelated sequences, and since stories are temporally bounded the plot of our lifestories is often ordered sequentially. Forming a plot though also involves comparing and contrasting "what is happening in the present with remembered happenings in the past and anticipated ones in the future," (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 43) and thus, through this process we are not stuck in a single time zone. Plots are also edited profusely when story-telling because many decisions must be made along the way regarding what should or should not be included in the story. Consequently, when reading these lifestories I discerned "how" my older adult narrators were imposing order on the flow of experience and narratively linking the past, present, and future when story-telling in order to make sense of past events and actions in their lives, in light of current events occurring at the time of story-telling. Taken together, as Ruth et al. explains,

much can be learned by considering how the narrator actively constructs the plot of his or her lifestory:

> Through the placement of life events in the story and the plot that binds them together, we can achieve an understanding of what has given meaning to the narrator's life. Are some events recurring? Are some events or issues mentioned only in passing? The aims of the narrating self, the goals and the motives, are seen in the plot that the narrative is formed around. These objectives reflect various life projects, developmental tasks or crises, and turning points in life (Ruth et al., 1996: 680).

The themes found recurring throughout the lifestory were also considered. Themes constitute the conceptions of meaning that emerge continually in the text (Kaufman, 1986). They are connected together to create a coherent retrospective and readable text, and moreover, reflect a particular message or point (Randall and Kenyon, 2001). Themes can exist both topically, that is, through categories of meaning, which consist of structural features that are meaningful for someone such as marriage, work, or religion, but also through interpretive labels that reflect an individual's sense of self in the world through how they identify with cultural scripts and evaluate their own behaviours and those of others (Kaufman, 1986). The focus in this thesis was on themes as an interpretive label and how they are important to a person's sense of self over time.

A review of how my participants characterized themselves and others, and described the various settings of their lives, was useful in determining the main plot line within their lifestory, and delineating what themes were interwoven throughout. Characters, or the individuals that we interact with throughout our lives, are also an integral aspect to one's lifestory. These are the companions that we travel with through life; some are with us for short periods of time, while others are with us for the duration of our lives. Most importantly though, we learn about ourselves through our

relationships with other people, which is seen in the way that we characterize, or describe, the thoughts, feelings, and intentions of people we encounter in our lives. As Randall and Kenyon (2001) explain: "To characterize is, most importantly, to form a working picture (a moving picture, as in ever revisable) of what we ourselves are like, a self-image or a self-concept or a personal myth" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 44). For this reason, I attended to how my older adult narrators characterized both themselves and significant people in their lives in order to learn more about how they perceived themselves within the social world. I also looked at how my participants remembered, or described, the role(s) that these characters had in shaping their lifestory.

The various settings and backgrounds in which we live out our lives are also prominent features of our lifestories. There are many landscapes in our lives; these settings vary from our actual place(s) of residence, to cities we have lived in and visited, and to the country, for most of us, that we have inhabited throughout our life. When telling stories about our lives, our stories are structured so that the listener is oriented to the setting, or location, in which the story is situated. Historical events are often earmarked in our stories if they have impacted our life in some way. Although I did not initially set out to inquire into this aspect of the story-telling process, I realized when conducting this research project that I was hearing, usually during our spontaneous and casual conversations, that my participants because of their status as older adults who have lived many more years than myself, were in a unique position to juxtapose current societal values with those of their upbringing. Moreover, they were eager to do so out of a concern for the state of society, or the world as a whole, in the future based upon the changes that they have witnessed over their lifetime.

The "narrative intelligence" (Randall, 1999) of each of these older adult narrators was fundamental to the uniqueness of each of the life narratives collected. Each narrator had a distinct story-telling "style." Narrative intelligence is "the capacity both to formulate (compose, narrate) and to follow (understand, read) the story of our own life" (Randall, 1999: 13). Each narrator was differently skilled at developing the plot of their story, describing the characters in their lives, and identifying the settings in which they lived. Taken together, these story structures were useful in answering the following questions from the perspective of each of these narrators: Who am I? (based upon what happened to me in my life), How am I? (based upon the story that I tell), and Why am I? (based upon the meanings that I ascribe to my life experiences). By default, when story-telling we address these questions, which are part and parcel of the process of making meaning in our lives.

3.5 Composing the Research Text

Although a life-story approach seemed well-suited as a way to collect data in order to answer my research question, I was skeptical when beginning the data collection phase that older adults were actually going to want to tell *me* their lifestories. I questioned why I was entitled to probe into their lives. My participants though were extremely eager to participate in this study. Both Betty and Mary told me that they wanted to document their lifestory, prior to being invited to participate, for themselves and their family. Mary had even attended seminars about how to write her lifestory, but prior to participating in this project had not yet found the time to get started. Similarly, Betty had purchased several blank tapes to record her lifestory since she is unable to

write due to her glaucoma, but like Mary she had not yet begun. Both expressed difficulty with getting started and were glad that they were finally being encouraged to get the task done.

During my initial interviews, I was shocked further by the sheer breadth and depth of the lifestories that were shared, but also by the intensely personal nature of our encounters and the emotional roller-coaster ride I experienced when listening to their stories. As a way of example, I distinctly remember after my first interview with Mary ended that I was eagerly anticipating hearing "chapter two" as she called it. During our two hours together, I felt like I had been reading a page-turner novel that I did not want to put down. It did not take me long to realize that each of my participants had lived unique and interesting lives and started to wonder how I was going to do justice in my writing to what I was experiencing and feeling in the field. I had not anticipated the "extraordinary" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001) nature of these stories. Thus, naturally, when the actual writing process of my thesis project began, I struggled.

I found myself floating in a "midst of uncertainty" (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) and grappling with the issues of voice, signature, and audience that Clandinin and Connelly identify as inevitable issues that a narrative researcher must confront when composing a research text from narrative data. The problem that I encountered was that each story was special and engaging to read on its own. However, my "research self" haunted me, and for this reason, I did not feel re-arranging and presenting in a more clean, readable form an abridged version of the lifestory of each of my participants written using their own words was going to satisfy my desire to address my research question, nor was it going to meet the needs of my supervisor and academic institution to

adequately fulfill the requirements necessary to complete my Master's degree. In addition, as a sociologist, I felt that these lifestories had potential to reveal how social life presents itself through an individual's story. Thus, in the chapters that follow, a research-focused authorial stamp is prominent in my writing, as I consider the audience of this research text and the sociological significance of these lifestories. In part, this form of writing does not capture the fluidity of the meaning-making enterprise as the various meaning sources are compartmentalized and fragmented, while attempting to discuss the patterns of meaning that I identified in these lifestories when reading them. It could be easily argued that the "meaning" already lies in the text of these lifestories, but through this research I endeavoured to extract and identify for the reader the patterns that I became aware of within each participants lifestory. As a consequence, the "voice" of my participants is thinned, even though without them this project could not have taken place.

3.6 Organization of the Research Text

In the chapters that follow, a research text is presented for each of my participants: Walter, Betty, Charles, and Mary. Throughout these chapters I show how they are experiencing their lives as being meaningful in the present, in light of their own unique life histories. A brief profile of each participant precedes the chapter in order to provide the reader with the background information needed about the life that was lived to ease into reading the more formal research text. In these chapters, I examine the narrating dimensions outlined by Kenyon at al. (1999) and the importance of them to each person in their lifestory in an attempt to understand better personal meaning as experienced by these individuals. Finally, I discuss how each of these older adults are

storying their lives in the present and the way in which they perceive their lives to be meaningful from the perspective of the present based upon how they emplot their lives, characterize themselves and others, and describe the various settings that they have lived in. Drawing from this, I identify the prominent themes that are found within their lifestories, which alludes to their sense of "possibility" in life today and in the future. In Chapter Five, I attempt to draw comparisons and outline distinctions between the lifestories that were collected.

CHAPTER 4: The Stories

4.1 The Story of the Research: Age Identity and What I learned

As suggested in my literature review, a rethinking of how we traditionally think about, write about, and conceptualize age is required. I argue that social gerontology has been too conceptually tied to chronological definitions of age, and that this approach is fundamentally limited in understanding the multiplicity and fluidity of one's age identity. I conclude that the concept "conscious aging," which is intended to be a non-ageist approach to research on aging that enables older adults to define for themselves what their own age means to them, is a promising alternative approach advocated in the literature today. I also argue that it is important to be aware, as gerontological researchers, of how older adults negotiate their self-understandings of their own aging experience.

The "story" of this research, which is intertwined with my theoretical growth about the topic "age identity," is a key component to this project.[3] This story is important to tell because it illustrates the conceptual and ideological barriers that a neophyte gerontological researcher can encounter when studying "age ideology." It reflects the difficulty researchers can have trying to move beyond established conventions for thinking about and talking about the aging experience and when trying to transgress their own engrained ageist stereotypes. For this reason, I deviate from traditional research writing that hides the messiness of our conceptual development throughout the course of

[3] The purpose of this research was to investigate how the age identities of older adults shaped the stories that they told about meaning and purpose in their lives. An additional story of this research involves my conceptual development regarding the role of narrative inquiry and what it reveals about "meaning" in later life. This story is less important to tell because it does not contribute theoretical insight to narrative gerontology or age conscious research as a whole.

a research project in order to tell the story of how I came to learn more about "age identity" in this study. Although to some extent I feel that I have not achieved conceptual clarity regarding the concept of "age identity," my research reflections portray the difficulties that lie in the pursuit of "age conscious" research.

When beginning this research, I planned to let my participants define for themselves their personhood of age (Friedan, 1993) and intended to look for their own self-descriptions involving age and aging. I understood that this might be difficult to do because of pre-established and institutionalized age discourses outlining how we talk about age. At the outset of this research project, I had configured "age identity" to mean:

> When using the term age identity, I am referring to subjective evaluations of one's age within which are embedded older adults self-awareness about ageist cultural narratives, and in turn to their resistance and challenge against the status quo. Specifically, I will be looking for how self-awareness, when it exists, shapes the stories older adults tell about the meaning and purpose of their lives as whole.

I embraced this definition of age identity as empowering older adults to define for themselves what their age meant to them. Thus, I had planned to capture the ways in which the older adults in my study were "aging consciously" and then interpretively connect this to how they were making sense of meaning in their lives.

I began to panic though during the course of this research when I could not get my older adults to be "angry" and "politicize prejudicial social practices against the old" (Woodward, 2003), which I felt were entitled to them. I wondered why they could not see the injustices, and moreover, why they were not talking about them with me. I expected and desired to hear powerful and angry aging stories. I realized later that I was assuming that being angry was the key to "aging consciously" for older adults and thought that anger is how resistance would be articulated in these lifestories.

In retrospect, this approach may have been more suitable for a lifestory interview with either Betty Friedan or Maggie Kuhn, or any other member from the Grey Panthers for that matter, who have tried to raise public consciousness about ageism in order to resist social stereotypes about the elderly. In addition, the ethical nature of a research agenda of this type is debatable. For instance, as Nye (1998) realized in her study with a lifestory writing group designed to raise age consciousness, she reflects after the fact while quoting bell hooks (1994) that it may have been threatening to ask an older person to "think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstances" (hooks, 1994: 47). If anger wasn't a prerequisite for "aging consciously" I began to question further what conscious aging would look like.

At the outset of this project, I was aware that social research commonly reports that older adults do not identify themselves as being "old" (Kaufman, 1986; Thompson et al., 1990). I felt though that the participants in my study would be different, or at least, that I could lend a different interpretative lens to this phenomenon. Not surprisingly, my participants did not actively take on the identity "old." Was claiming the identity of "old" integral to "conscious aging?" How is it possible for older adults to "resist" against and challenge social and cultural archetypes defining for them what they should be and do in later life if they do not perceive their "age" as having meaning for them? What level of awareness is required for an older adult to possess about social definitions of age and aging in order to "age consciously?" These questions plagued me throughout the course of this research, and in part, reflect the lack of conceptual clarity regarding the use of the concept "conscious aging" found in the literature today.

During this research I constantly questioned my role in it and my ability to address these complex and intricate meanings of age as a 24-year old female graduate student who lacked the perspective becoming of older age. Ray (1996), a feminist and gerontological researcher, suggests that aging researchers should ask themselves: "To what extent does the standpoint of the researcher... affect what is studied and how the findings are interpreted and presented?" The importance of this question was confirmed for me in my third, and last, interview with Charles when he pinpointed the problem that the two of us were having conversing about aging. The reason, according to Charles, was that I was not "old" myself. My written reflections that were documented in my field notes following this interview illustrate how my "age," knowledge of the gerontological literature, and approach to the research question formulated around my original conceptualization of age identity were shaping this research and making it difficult to transgress age boundaries and age ideologies. This journal entry begins with a rambling in which I am comparing and contrasting my interview experiences with Walter and Charles:

> I noticed when transcribing my last interview with Charles that very rarely when talking about his aging experience did he talk in the first person; sometimes he slips, but rarely. By contrast, Walter seemed extremely comfortable discussing his "own" experience and even made notes to this effect prior to our meeting. Charles often talked about the category of "seniors" as a group of people having to deal with certain things, but he never includes himself as being a member of that group... Maybe it's because he does not identify with what an old person is commonly expected to be, as Gibson (2000) would argue...
>
> It was readily apparent during this interview that I had an agenda as a researcher [during this interview we were using my age identity interview questions], but I also believe that Charles did as well. We were co-existing within a swell of meaning-making struggling with terms such as "young" and "old." I was forcing the concept upon Charles, yet at the same time, I was hesitant to use the word when I was asking my questions. Perhaps I sensed Charles was not applying the word to himself? Astutely, Charles noticed my discomfort and said that it was because I was not "old" and couldn't understand. "If you were older,"

> he said, "you would understand." I asked if he would be more comfortable if an older person had interviewed him. He responded by saying, "No, I'm comfortable with you. Just the questions they would ask would be different. They would understand." What don't I understand? I understand that he doesn't call himself "old" and can interpretively understand why he doesn't want to do this. Is this denial? Is this resistance? Is he resisting against my imposition of the word/concept/term "old" to describe his experience? Or does he not want to admit that to some extent he *feels* old? For example, he also talks about the need to fight aging. He outlines many things that he does to stay "young" (like being physically active and socially engaged). Now I sound like I am judging him. What type of "wisdom environment" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001) have I created for him? Or do I simply have a different understanding of his experience due to my sociological imagination? Is he exercising because the social and cultural aging script suggests that he do "youthful" things? He said that he was exercising because being active was key to aging well. However, this also makes practical sense: exercise feels good and IS healthy. I understand that. But is there more to why he feels the need to emphasize the fact to me that he is exercising regularly? Now I'm sounding like he is trying to deceive me. Maybe he is and wants to create a persona of someone who is not "old." Would I be more satisfied if he told me that aging sucked and that he knows he should exercise because it keeps him active and healthy, but doesn't do it simply because he knows that he should. Is that resistance or is that mere stupidity? To what extent is active aging healthy? When does it become "aging consciously"? Where is the unactive couch potato aged person that is so often described to me by older adults as an example of someone who isn't aging well? Does this person exist? I haven't met one yet. Or do they conjure up this image in order to make their aging experience appear more healthy and appropriate? This is confusing...
> (journal entry: March 23, 2004).

This journal entry demonstrates the struggle I was having with the terms "young" and "old" themselves. These terms (among other factors) were impeding my ability to think about and conceptualize the aging experience. I found that these terms were not particularly useful to older adults themselves when trying to talk to me about aging. Though the more I thought about it, they were not denying their "age" when refusing to describe their experience using these terms. Instead, I realized that age had a different meaning for them than I had pretheorized, or expected, "age" to configure into their age identity. Ironically, even though I had set out on this research journey not to define "age" for my participants, I was doing just that by imposing upon them my own theoretical

critical thinking cap by assuming that since they could "age consciously," as the age studies literature suggests, that they should be doing so.

Kenyon (2000) argues that the stories we "are" at any given moment in time are not accessible to us because we are in the midst of living them. These stories compose our "facticity" and are not quite facts because we are currently living them. For this reason, our "age story" is not easily accessible to us, though we continue to remain "ageless" (Kaufman, 1986) and "ageful" (Andrews, 2000). For instance, when we are not talking about or reflecting upon age, our age does not have meaning for us, but the moment we begin to story our experience to others and attempt to make sense of our life experiences, we become "ageful" in many unique and wonderful ways. Still we do not become ageful in a chronological sense (even though we are), since the number of our years itself, does not have meaning for us.

For these reasons, I had to radically reconsider my initial definition of age identity. I had to force myself to rethink what it actually meant to "age" without thinking about "age" itself, since "age" has nothing to do with it and does not necessarily have meaning for us. When reading a recent article by Margaret Gullette (2003), I heeded her warning that being "too conscious of age" can impede true age consciousness. I needed to broaden my understanding of what constitutes "age identity" and look at other ways that we can be conscious of age that at the outset may not initially appear to have anything to do with aging. As a student of social gerontology wanting to draw conclusions about age and aging, I found this extremely difficult. This involved heavily reconsidering not the ways in which I was different from my "older adult" participants,

but instead the ways in which we were both grappling with similar issues together since we are *both* struggling to travel along this journey called life.

Coincidentally, I had outlined in my research proposal that I planned to draw upon Gary M. Kenyon's conceptual framework called the "personal existence perspective," which posits that we are all traveling together through time in the journey of life. When starting this project I knew that this metaphor was key to understanding further the human aging process, but I had not yet realized the power and ability that this metaphor had to force me to think beyond meaningless age categories and boundaries. I was aware that these categories existed and that gerontological researchers were being prompted to move beyond them, but I still found myself trying to make sense of them throughout this research. My "age identity" interview schedule, when reflecting back now, was not open-ended enough to let my participants define for themselves what their aging experience meant to them. I had assumed simply by the design of such questions like "What does old mean to you?" and "What does young mean to you?" that these categories would be meaningful for them. Fortunately, somewhere along this research journey, I realized the socially manufactured nature of these interview questions. Consequently, I was not surprised when Mary told me that she shared many laughs with her daughter when she reviewed my list of questions prior to seeing me for our scheduled age identity interview, since I had left them with her when our last meeting ended. On the whole these interview questions were not particularly helpful to this research. Although these questions address very real, tangible, and important issues for older adults, they are less meaningful for older adults who do not think of their age in these terms in their everyday lives.

The challenge from a research perspective then is to get older adults to talk about their experiences without confining them to the discussion of issues that may not have meaning for them. Interestingly, I found that if my participants wanted to talk about "aging" as a topic on its own that they would raise this issue without my guidance. This may in part have been due to the fact that they knew I was a student from the Centre on Aging interested in "aging," but it was also strongly apparent that this topic was important for those individuals who raised it, which was noticeable in my conversations with Charles and Walter who talked a great deal about "aging."

The narrative methodology employed in this study, that is, asking older adults to tell me their lifestory proved useful in understanding their journey of life as they had lived it and were currently living it. This aspect of my research design was key because older adults could "talk" aging, without appearing to talk it, simply through telling me their lifestories. They were living life, just like I was living life, and in that sense, I was not that much different from them. In this research, when reading these lifestories I considered how my participants were sharing with me what they had learned as individuals throughout this journey in time and listened to what it felt like for them to exist within a certain phase of the life course that I was not yet a part of. In doing so, I was continually struck with how clearly these older adults articulated philosophies of life, and how these personal messages resonated with the way in which they had lived their own life as conveyed to me in their lifestories. The metaphor "story time," as introduced in previous chapters, was key to this process because they were formulating these personal messages in the present in light of previous life experiences and value systems based upon what they saw for themselves and the world in the future. These personal

messages were integral to how they perceived their lives to be meaningful and constructed meaning in life in later life. In Chapter Five, I explore this issue further in my discussion of what I learned from these lifestories, and what I found to be personally relevant for me, in order to illustrate further their unique "wisdom story."

4.2 Making Sense of Meaning in the Lifestories

Charles

Life as a curriculum vitae

Charles was born in Dingsbury, North London in 1927. His mother died when he was 10 years old and as a result he was sent to a private school, which was paid for by his grandfather. He lived there for the next 5 years until his father married his step-mother who then took over the child raising responsibilities. He continued in private school and had the opportunity to learn a trade and decided to study to become a compositor or typesetter, which would prepare him to set up his own newspaper. When he was 17 years old he was conscripted into the army due to the onset of World War II. He was initially a solider in the Grenadier Guards, a segment of the Queens guard, but was then sent to Palestine where he was responsible for working with the Palestine police in order to monitor the Transjordon border for ships carrying displaced persons. After catching typhoid fever he returned to London and was assigned to a different regiment in which he was an orderly to a general. He married his wife, Emma, in 1949, and immigrated to Canada shortly thereafter, in 1957. His first job was in Edmonton, A.B. where he worked as a police officer. He moved to Victoria, B.C. approximately 7 years later and worked towards becoming a Senior Correctional officer at a local jail. He was the Acting Deputy Director for 42 months before a new jail was built. His last year of service was as a Director of a small Community Correctional Centre because he was not awarded the position of Director of the new jail. Charles retired in 1987 and since then has volunteered profusely. Charles and Emma were also foster parents for 25 years. He is currently living in a rural area outside of Victoria with his wife whom he has been caregiving for since she lost one of her legs due to an infection in her prosthetic knee.

The plot of Charles lifestory revolves around outlining what he has achieved and how he has achieved it, while acknowledging those factors that have inhibited his ability to achieve throughout his life.

His lifestory begins by drawing emphasis to the death of his mother that occurred when he was 10 years old and resulted in his attendance at a private school, which was paid for by his grandfather, and enabled him to study to become a "compositor," a 7-year long apprenticeship. This background creates the context for the beginning of his work

history that follows and sets the narrative tone because it marks the first impediment that he encountered along his career trajectory.

His work history is most prominent in his lifestory and is interwoven with various social-structural elements that are perceived to have shaped his life and impeded his ability to advance further in his career. The first hurdle that he encountered in his work history was the commencement of World War II due to the British governments policy that conscripted young men into the army. His time in the army is perceived as something that he had to do ("I didn't have any choice at that time"), and as a result, he was forced to leave an apprenticeship he thought would "set him for life." He was also not allowed back into the program upon his return from the military, which disappointed him further:

> So that was another, well I don't say it was a rejection, but it was sort of, you know, when you think you've been fighting for your country it was somewhat... you know, I had 3 ½ years in that apprenticeship, so it was, you know.

His various positions and ranks that he held as a soldier in the military are important to him, but it displeases him that his status fluctuated. Charles reflects, "I had various ranks but you know can't definitely say I had one or the other. They were what you call shadow ranks. If you were doing the job you got the rank. When the job was finished you lost it. It was confusing." Similarly, when working for the police force in Edmonton he notes that he trained policeman as a Sergeant and when there were no classes to teach in the summer his position was downgraded to that of an Acting Constable. After several years, he grew to be particularly discontented with this variability in status and decided to move to the West coast where the weather was more suitable and to look for a different job. When reflecting back, Charles notices a pattern of fluctuation in job position status

that occurred throughout his work history. This pattern started when he was a soldier in the British military and carried through to his position as a Senior Correctional Officer in Victoria: "Then again I had, this is really what happened to me in Edmonton. I got into this trend, it happened to me here [in Victoria] as well. Just couldn't seem to get out of that." Towards the end of his career as a Senior Correctional Officer in Victoria he felt that he could finally end this trend by obtaining the position of Director of the jail, but unfortunately this did not happen for him:

> I always wanted to be the Director of the jail but you know that's, they picked the guy from Alberta which (laughs) doesn't make any sense, but then you know that's, he wasn't any better qualified than me, but he was a, a the reason he got the job because he was the only guy in Canada who built a new jail (laughs).

Throughout his life, as shown through the telling of his employment history, Charles tried to shape his own destiny. Deciding to move to Canada in order to circumvent the class system in the United Kingdom at the end of the war is one example. He wanted to be able to "move up the ladder" more quickly than he thought would be possible in the UK:

> I certainly never, never regretted coming to Canada but to me that was a move that, see in England at that time, well, it had always been that way, to make a move up the ladder you're waiting for someone to die, basically, you know... People in jobs 30, 40, 50 years you know. Emma's father, he was in the job 55 years in one job, you know... Anyway, from a guy shucking coal in an engine right up to, to a superintendent. But it took him all that time you know. And he would be in one position 6 or 7 or 8 years, you know.

In addition, when working as a Senior Correctional Officer in Victoria he started taking evening classes at the local community college towards a degree in Applied Criminology in hopes that it would help him obtain the position of Director of the jail. He is somewhat dissatisfied that he was unable to finish his degree due to a scheduling conflict that arose with his employer necessitating him to work evening shifts and discontinue his

educational pursuits. In spite of this, he is proud of this "almost" achievement. This education also confirmed for him that what he had learned on the job was valuable knowledge because he felt he was not learning anything new at the college:

> I had eh, 32 credits in a 36 credit course in Applied Criminology, it never really helped me, not in my job, you know... 'cause I felt at that time if I wanted to make a move then this is what I've got to do, eh? And I put myself out because I was working, I was doing this, I was going to college here in the evenings, you know, (laughs) after work (laughs)... I didn't quite complete it because I had a bit of a problem with, uhm, shift work because they got me on afternoons, you know. I did get a promotion out of it, but eh, so it did pay off... But what I learned actually didn't really help me. There was nothing there that, except for some big high falutin' words and that (laughs), I really didn't know about you know, well you know... I got an average of 82, no, 80.2, all through the course, but you know, I didn't do too bad... But it was kind of interesting, but as I say, I didn't, didn't really need it.

Although these classes did not enable him to become the Director of the jail they did facilitate him in obtaining a smaller promotion.

Altogether these narrative linkages, suggest that the theme "accomplishing" has great importance for Charles and is where he has largely found meaning in his life over the years and remains important for him in his life today. His retirement was a turning point for Charles because feeling important at work and striving to achieve within his position was meaningful for him. Accordingly, he had to adjust when he departed from the formalized work environment and find new ways to be active and feel worthwhile: "[I]t's a tremendous shock to your system to lose, to retire you know." Keeping occupied through his various volunteering endeavours has helped to fill this gap for Charles. Since his retirement he has managed two social programs for Seniors ("I got two grants totaled over $100,000") and been a police liaison for his municipality. Today he is an active member of the Lion's Club and is the President of a local community association.

The value Charles places upon achieving is reflected further in the theme of "being self-reliant," which is a quality he considers to be important for himself and others located in his lifestory. For example, he often characterizes himself and others as being, or not being, self-sufficient and frequently uses the following words to portray himself: "achiever," "ambitious," "progressive," "opportunistic," and "realistic." When describing himself he comments: "I'm objective in my goal whether you want to call it, aim. And I usually go after it if I set my sight on something, and most times I achieve it." Moreover, he is extremely proud of how easy it has been for him to obtain employment throughout his life. When moving to Canada from England, he reports that he "arrived on a Saturday morning" and "was working Sunday." He also had three job offers after arriving in Victoria from Edmonton and outlines in extensive detail what they were, "So I had a bunch of applications in and I had three jobs come up in a week." He felt wanted and reflects later that he made the best choice because he was able to move up the ranks and become a Senior Correctional Officer in a relatively short period of time.

For most of his life he felt like he was in control except during his early years when he was sent to a private school after his mother died and was conscripted into the army as a young man: "I think the early part of my life I had no control over it. The war was on and they said, "Go here. Come here. I didn't have any control." He narratively links these life events as being influential to his development of independence in his early life: "My life has always been so very, very self-reliant so it's a sign of the times you know, you had to be. Yah, when you are out there during the war, you had to be very, well you had to rely on other people as well but I mean you had to be self-reliant." Moreover, he perceives the multiple settings he has encountered due to his diverse

employment history as having been instrumental in shaping his character and what he values in life:

> I mean, I'm 77, so you know, I think I've been around the form a few times, and know a few things and I lived in some pretty rough environments and, you know, inside prisons and on the streets, and, I've been around and seen some things that other people haven't seen on the battlefield even, you know, and don't want to see, don't have to see, don't want to see.

Charles also values self-reliance in others which is reflected in his descriptions of friends and family: "I really think that people should try to be independent if they can you know." When describing his children he focuses on their place of residence, occupational status, and ability to look after themselves. This quality is most noticeable in the way that he characterizes his wife:

> My wife is very independent. She's very clever with her crafts and stuff like that you know. She was quite sharp and bright when she was younger. She went to the London School of Economics... She was quite a, had a chain of bakeries under her, set up the bakeries, it was a nice job... She's never worked since, since we've been over here. She was basically a homemaker, or housewife, homemaker. Homemaker, I like to say homemaker.

Although he depicts his wife as being independent, he emphasizes her reliance upon him since she has lost her leg and been confined to a wheelchair. In spite of this, he tries to ensure that she maintains her own sense of self by helping her to do the things that she likes to do:

> She's ah, she's the ah treasurer at the local community association here so got to try and accommodate those things for her to do like by taking stuff to the bank and getting stuff from the bank... If she wasn't Treasurer, I wouldn't have to do that, but you know she likes to do that... But I don't let her know that you know that I'm doing it you know. It's just ah, just naturally do that... But I wouldn't say, she would be able to do it if I wasn't able to take the stuff to the bank...

The extent to which he values self-reliance is most prominent in his social and political viewpoints: "I'm not a real socialist. I think people should make their own way

of life. They shouldn't be reliant on the government to, some of these social programs that people get themselves in; once they get in they can't even get out." In addition, the fact that he was an immigrant who made something of himself when he moved to Canada largely shapes how he perceives the immigrant stories of others and how the political system should address the issue of immigration:

> And I think they've another thing is that ah, I know I'm an immigrant myself, but I think they've got to ah start looking at this Immigrant Act a little more closely... I mean when ah when I came to Canada in '57 one of the things they said to you is, "Do you have sufficient money to last you for "X" number of months?" Ok, "Are you willing to work right away?" "Do you have a job to go to you know?" ...When you start thinking about a lot of these people who are coming here now you know. They're, they're leeches on society is what they are really... Go to Canada yah. They'll look after yah... Sure, it's the same in England you know. They step on the shore and they're running down there to give them money you know. It wasn't like that when I came to Canada. They did have assisted passage over here and things like that in them days, but I mean ah you know, you was expected to work. I landed here and ah on Saturday morning and was working Sunday night. Of course I did have experience mind you, but I knew there was lots of work around. Didn't have any trouble, didn't have any trouble finding a job... There should be specific regulations in place... Do you have a job to come to? Do you have a certain amount available? Are you willing to learn our language you know? A lot of them don't even speak English. They don't want to even try... I am a believer of when you are in Rome you do what the Romans do right. And ah, if you go to another country and then you are prepared to, you're gonna stay there you should be prepared to adopt their philosophy in life you know and do what they do in Canada... I've never had to ah get ah any kind of assistance in any kind, shape, or form, since I've been here 'cause I've always been willing to work.

The interpersonal dimension is subtly apparent in Charles' lifestory because he does not discuss to any great extent his relationship with his wife and children, or his role as a foster parent; however, it is obvious that these relationships have been meaningful for him over time yet he does not talk about these roles emotively. Not being emotional is a quality that he recognizes in himself and he attributes this to his employment history: "I'm not an emotional person. I think that's a lot to do with training. The type of

training that I received during my life that, the training that I received just kind of made me a little on the rigid side in some aspects." Nevertheless, when he refers to his childhood he his obviously disgruntled that his father did not make more of an effort to be involved in his life after his mother died.

His long-standing relationship with his wife remains important to him today, and keeping in line with the theme of "accomplishing," he finds meaning in celebrating the success of the duration of his marriage, which he feels is an accomplishment because marriages today do not last long: "We are going to have a bit of a celebration this year. This is our 55th year of being married so. We had one on our 50th, I think every 5 years we'll have something you know."

When discussing his role as a foster parent, Charles was surprisingly humble considering that he and his wife "had 72 foster children through the house in 25 years." His childhood background and personal experience as a police officer were triggers:

> Well, I think one of the big things for me was the fact that my mother died when I was quite young and eh, I was not in a, in a foster home, but I was in a, eh, what they call a residential school, which was like a trade school. And eh, I was away from my father for four years you know, so I think that, that was something that certainly developed my interest in it. Uhm, I think, eh, what really started it was that eh, when I went to a, to a family complaint one time and I found these two kids in the basement, half starving and that kind of started it. Actually, those two kids, well one of them came into my home (laughs). That's what kind of started it you know.

Another reason for foster parenting, which corresponds further with the theme of accomplishing, is that he was able to see the results of his efforts from this role:

> I mean if you work in corrections, it's very, it's a very difficult thing to accept that you never see the results of your work. Like, if you're a carpenter and you build a wall, you can say, "I built that wall." You can go back in a couple of year's time and it's still there. But if you get a kid who comes into a jail and you are dealing with him for 9 months or a year and he goes out... you never see him again... so that's kind of a very defeating, eh, I find that difficult to explain that

> to anybody, but you can never actually say, "Well, I built that," you know... You say, "Well I worked with that kid for 2 years," I don't know where he is now, you know.

He was dissatisfied with his work in the community justice system because rarely was he able to notice what he had accomplished. He found meaning though in helping children through traumatic times in their life, and is especially proud of the fact that he adopted two foster children and of the role he played in another child's life for 16 years.

Discussing "aging" was important for Charles, and in doing so the biological dimension materializes in his lifestory. He does not have any significant health problems currently, except for a prosthesis, which he describes as being a common malady for someone his age. However, his perceptions of what is possible for him have changed through subtle alterations in his bodiliness. Decline in short-term memory, energy level, bladder function, stability, weight gain, and sexual function are identified. He also reports feeling like time is moving faster in his life today:

> Certainly time, like a day, ...seem[s] like a few hours now. But when you were a, when you were much younger you used to say, I wish it'd hurry up? Now it's just the opposite you're saying no, boy that's gone quick, what happened, where did the day go you know?

He also emphatically argues that older adults need to have the right perspective towards aging, which is an acceptance of aging-related changes that are both physical and attitudinal in origin:

> I used to be a little bit impetuous, but I'm not anymore. In fact, now I realize now that my physical capabilities have changed. So, I think you become, you realize that you eh, are not what you used to be. You've got to accept that I think. A lot of us want to believe that we could do what we used to do, but not anymore... One thing that we've not talked about and eh, I used to be very sexually active, but I don't, I'm not now anymore because I do have a problem with you know Emma being, it's being honest, you know, 'cause it's a very important, very important part of growing up, you know. I think getting older I should, I was always very active, but not anymore now so that's eh, had an effect... And that

> keeps you young... Other people just give up... So, yeah, I mean eh, things do change. I think... have accepted my limitation and I know what I'm capable of physically. I certainly slowed down a lot that's for sure. I'm very, very cautious now about walking down stairs and conscious of the fact that if I fall over I could break eh, limb quite easily, yah. If I do that I would have an effect on Emma, so I think about that.

Aging, he claims, is analogous to accepting being an "alcoholic":

> I think it's the acceptance of aging that you ah, the fact that you do accept the fact that you are aging and ah one day you're gonna die. You've got to accept that. You've certainly got to acknowledge that. It's like being an alcoholic really. If you're, if you don't admit to the fact that you're alcoholic you're going to be an alcoholic all your life you know. First, you've got to admit that you've got a problem you know... You know, aging is not a problem, but ah it's akin to like you know a drug addiction, or because you know, you've got to admit that you're gonna age you know. If you don't admit to it then I think you'll have a hard time with aging. And a lot of people just sit on the chesterfield and vegetate you know.

Aging should also be managed and controlled by staying physically active and mentally engaged in order to care for your body:

> And I believe it is really important to exercise your body and your brain, you know. Both of them, not just your body, 'cause you know, I walk you know, not a great deal, but I walk and I keep eh, I do exercising with small weights and those kind of things and I swim once a week, you know...

Bearing in mind, the theme of "being self-reliant," of course he worries about becoming dependent upon others in the future if his body fails him:

> I hope I'm going to grow old gracefully (laughs)... I hope so. And I'd like to see the future that I don't become too reliant on anybody else. I'm quite concerned about that. And we're able to live in this house, you know. And eh, finish out our life together.

When storying his life in the present, his role as a caregiver to his wife is central. It is obvious he feels that his current caregiving responsibilities are inhibiting his possibilities and opportunities in life. Charles comments,

> I'm a caregiver because its certainly slows me down, that's for sure... I'm not really doing what I want to be doing, but my circumstances dictate what I'm doing. My wife has lost her legs so it's ah... influences what happens to me...

He identifies social, fiscal, and environmental constraints. An unfortunate side effect of Emma's pain medication is that she sleeps frequently, which limits his interaction with her. Her health has also restricted his participation and advancement within the executive branch of the Royal Canadian Legion, an organization he has been a member of for 30 plus years, because he is unable to attend out of town meetings due to difficulties traveling with his wife's disability:

> I could propose to go higher but, uhm, just can't you know you've got to pick what's right for you. And you never know what you're going to get yourself into you know. Especially when you can't get into the rooms half the time you know. I've got the wheelchair and, uhm, you know... I'm absolutely fed up with, with any prospect of going any further but I'm still a Lion you know. Been a Lion for years with all my trophies... I went up as a cabinet secretary, was the highest one and uh it's not the highest one but basically you've got to try to achieve these, a list of (incomprehensible), I was actually going for that at the time that Emma lost her leg so that you know.

He is also no longer able to travel with other friends from the Lion's Club:

> We used to do enough camping per se, but like, ah, we had, ah, like a motorhome, we had a motorhome that we used to go around in that you know. We sold that now but ah... And we used to go down to the States a little bit. We had friends down there like, you know, go down to places you know, get a little bit of, be a bit of a Snow Bird you know. A lot of my ah friends out in the Lion's Club, they all take off one or two months a year... "Why don't you come along Charles? Well you know but ah... Like to do it but ah.

His wife's condition factors into his perceptions of his own future and for this reason he feels that it is vital to look after his own health and try to prevent something from happening to him so that his wife does not have to go into a "home." In order to cope with his caregiving commitments, Charles finds meaning and respite in his weekly days off: "And I have, Tuesday is my day off, so I have eh, I go out in the morning and have a swim and go to the library and eh, wander around a little bit, you know."

When story-telling Charles possesses an awareness of the life that he has lived, which revolves around the themes of "accomplishing" and "being self-reliant" that are found in his lifestory. When reflecting back upon why he joined the Lion's Club he states, "I don't think you realize it at the time but when you get some wisdom you start to think about what you've actually done and you find out you've done the right thing, or at least you think you have anyway." He recognizes further in himself that accomplishing has been important to him, but has learned that sometimes you have to accept that it is not always possible to do so. He advises that your ambitions must match your abilities:

> But I mean, if you change the things you can change well you can do it, you know. But if you, if you can't change them, don't do anything, 'cause you know you're just wasting your time and then you get all fed-up inside about it and really it's not going to do you any good in the long-run. I got like that after I didn't get a promotion. I didn't feel good for a couple of years you know; it just eats away at you. And you just got to really think about what you are doing. So if you set a goal and it doesn't work for you well, ok, maybe you've got to raise it, or lower it, or... or something you know. Maybe you say well I'm not that, maybe I'm not that intelligent or maybe I'm not that physically able to do that, whatever it is, you know. I used to be an experiment, quite an experimental judo in my younger days, but I know now my physical limitations are (laughs), not, well you can't do it, you can get really hurt if you don't know what you are doing. I even progressed to a black belt.

In extension to this, he offers further that it is worse to fail to try than fail to succeed: "You know, you've got to try regardless of. If you don't try, how would you know if it's going to work or not so? ...if you fail to do something it's even worse you know."

Betty

Life is a party

Betty was born in 1918 and is the "baby" of her family. She was raised in Edmonton, Alberta, but spent many summers as a child out at the West coast in her parent's cottage. Shortly after World War II started her brother who was a member of the "wavy navy" urged Betty and her mother to move to Victoria, B.C. in 1939. They were living alone in Edmonton at that time because her father had died a few years prior. Less than a year later, her two older sisters who were married and living in England obtained passage for themselves and their children to come to Canada in order to seek refuge during the war. Her sisters also arrived with ten other children, which Betty calls "evacuees" of friends of the family from Britain who they obtained responsibility for. She worked throughout the war, while her sisters ran clothing exchanges and other fundraisers in order to financially manage looking after these children, and others that came and went during the war. Her mother, who had been a prominent figure in her life, died in 1940. After the war ended and the "evacuees" returned to their families in Britain, Betty continued to work and live with her oldest sister who did not return to Britain because her marriage had broken up. Betty eventually married at the age of 29 and then four years later her first child, Michael, was born, and then two years later, her daughter, Linda, arrived. When Michael was 19 he was in a serious car accident, and as a result, lost much of his short-term memory, and has lived his life with this disability. Alongside her husband in mid-life, they started a successful Import company. Her husband was 80 years old when they decided to sell this company, and he died 3 years later several months after having a severe stroke. Betty is currently living in a new apartment with her son, Michael, after selling her house when her husband, Joseph, died. She has glaucoma and suffers from "balance problems."

The plot of Betty's lifestory reads as though it lacks conflict even though she has experienced traumatic episodes on her journey in life. However, she chooses not to focus upon the negative impact of these events. Rather, the circumstances leading up to a change in location either geographical or dwelling related is often how the plot is moved forward in her lifestory.

Her childhood especially, as she remembers it, is devoid of conflict. The stories, or memories, that she shares about her childhood are used to illustrate that it was fun, interesting, and exciting. These adjectives reflect the narrative tone of her lifestory and

are found consistently throughout it, but the summers spent at her parent's cottage on the West coast are central:

> ...the coast was much home to us as Edmonton because we spent every summer at Point Con and Long Island... A lovely childhood to come out... So every year after school was out, off we went to Point Con and that was a lovely part of ah because there was just that fun you made yourself.

Interestingly, Betty was the only participant who when asked, "what are some of your happiest moments in life," was overwhelmed with the question because she had too many to choose from:

> "Oh, that's a hard one."
> *Jessie: Is that a hard one?*
> "Yes, because ah I've lived nearly 85 years and I've had a very happy life."

She was often emotional during our interviews, but assured me that they were tears of "joy," rather than sadness. Betty says, "There have been such excitements. So many people and so many interesting people."

When story-telling, the socialstructural dimension does not figure largely into her lifestory. Although constraints existed in her life, she does not recognize them as inhibiting her possibilities in life. She alludes briefly to larger gender roles indicating what was expected of women during the late 1930's and 1940's when she was a young adult but her tone is one of statement of fact, rather than one of lament. As Betty explains, she wanted to attend university in order to obtain her law degree but instead her brothers were supported in their objectives:

> And so I wanted to be a lawyer but there wasn't any money so I made the best of it by helping Bob by typing all his moot cases because I went to a, ah took a business course instead of going to university. And ah also accompanied him out to the Alberta villages where he had a law office on Saturday to make a little money in the '30's and pretended to be his secretary. And so that was quite fun too.

The impact of World War II upon her life is not a dominant feature of her lifestory, and instead, when storying this part of her life she focuses on the houses that she lived in during the war and who she interacted with. Given the subtlety of the social-structural dimension in her lifestory, this begs the question about the extent to which she is able to read and develop this aspect of her story, although it could be the case as she declares, "it doesn't matter what happens to you, what matters is what you do about it."

Her work history and family life though are important components of her lifestory and valuable to her narrating self. Betty was unable to attend university as a young adult, but she found meaning in life through being employed. This story, or chapter of her life, ends with her marriage to her husband. However, when her husband decided to change his career in mid-life and launch his own Import Company, working re-emerges as an important source of meaning for her. Her first job was as a junior ledger keeper with the Bank of Toronto, and over time her position evolved and she worked as a teller and then as an accountant. She was especially content with her work as a receptionist for physicians, a line of work that started when she was hired by a family friend. Betty comments, "And so then I was a receptionist for various doctors for several years. That was a job I loved... [and] it was a job I always wanted because it was one you could make something of." Moreover, she found satisfaction in work because it enabled her to help out others. In fact, she enjoyed working as a receptionist so much that she waited two years after meeting Joseph before getting married, but eventually decided that since she was 29 and wanted to have children that she had better move on to what she calls another "chapter" of her life:

> It was really fun to help and ah it was in there that I met my husband and ah it took me a couple of years because I liked my job very much. I eventually wanted

> to be married and have children, but ah, it was two years before we got married and decided I'd better if I wanted to have any children because I was 29 by then. And so that's another chapter.

Later on in her life she again found meaning through working with her husband on their Import Company:

> ...well Joseph had been working in ah real estate and insurance and got fed up with the rat race and real estate and so he stopped and went into just general insurance. And then he got a little tired of that too and I said, "Well for heaven's sake, what do you want to do?" There is no point doing what you don't want to do all your life. "Oh," so he said, "I've always liked to have a little Import Company." So not knowing what I was going into I said, "Ok, let's have an Import Company." So for the next 30 years we ran Miller Imports... And that was great fun! ...We turned the sleeping quarters, the children had moved out by this time, and turned it into an office because the office had been on the dining room table and into my bedroom and you know and so... we made it into and Joseph was the President and the Salesman and I was all the other things. And we worked happily together and ah the garage turned into the warehouse and the children turned into helpers. And so it was fun! And ah we did very well.

The success of the company that they built together, as evidenced with the ease in which they sold it, continues to be meaningful for her today. As mentioned earlier, her employment as a receptionist ended when she decided to start another "chapter" of her life. This chapter includes meeting Joseph (she tells a very detailed story about how this happened), getting married to Joseph, having a family, and building a house with her husband. Getting married and having children were important life objectives for Betty. In one interview, she proclaimed enthusiastically to me that all women share these aspirations: "All girls do... And having children."

Most interestingly, Betty's lifestory is interwoven with vivid descriptions of the various settings in which she lived out her life. She explains in extensive detail where she lived and what the interior and exterior of the home looked like. This is particularly apparent when talking about the three different houses that she lived in, in Victoria after

arriving from Edmonton with her mother, and the various homes that she lived in after marrying Joseph. Detailed stories were told about why she had to move into a particular house and who was involved in this process. As a story-listener, Betty's story was difficult to follow and necessitated questions on my part in order to elucidate more details about what else was happening in her life when she was living in these homes because she was so caught up in sketching for me a picture of what the house looked like.

Accordingly, the theme of "place" is continually threaded throughout her lifestory. She finds value in the fact that she was part of and able to observe Edmonton grow as a city, since as a child she was born and raised there only a few years after the province of Alberta was formed in 1905:

> And anyway ah growing up with Edmonton, it was very interesting because it started out with living on the edge of town and ah down the road was ah, a big horse trough for the farmers and stopped and fed their horses when they came to town. And now it is practically in the middle of town although it is still on the ravine... And ah so ah Edmonton is a great big city... But it was just a town when I started out.

Similarly, she finds meaning in the historical significance of the homes that she has happened to reside within. She points out that the house she grew up in, in Edmonton is now a Heritage House. In addition, she notes that one of her former residences in Victoria was supposedly haunted and built by John Tod, a chief trader with the Hudson's Bay Company in the early 1800's, while another is a children's centre today. The theme "place" is also meaningful for Betty due to the fond memories she associates with particular places that she has lived in. For example, she holds many cherished memories of her childhood summers at her parent's cottage on the West coast, and as a result was motivated to purchase a cottage for her own children to spend their summers at, which was an important life goal for her:

> And my husband and I in 1960 bought a lot to lease some property out on the east Sooke basin for some reason. Not entirely, I said to Joseph, let's fool ourselves, this is for the children. We've still got it and the children love it and their children love it because it is ah, we don't have television or telephones or things like that and ah so there is just the fun they make themselves. So they have had the privilege too, which is good.

The homes that she has lived in have symbolic significance for Betty, evidenced also when "place" is a coping mechanism for her while caregiving for her husband and dealing with his failing health following a severe stroke three years after selling their Import Company. She coped with this experience by making sure that he died at home 15 months after having the initial stroke:

> [A]nother turning point was Joseph dying of course... He died at home, thank heavens. I had a hard time getting that done. ...he went off to hospital and I was there everyday and ah the ah specialist was going to put him into an extended care and I said, "Over my dead body." And he said, "You realize that your husband will probably, there's a 50% chance he'll never swallow again." And I said, "So there's a 40% chance he will. And if I know Joseph he will." And ah so I had him home and he had to be fed by tube through his tummy and so I learned to do that and then I tried to get him onto solid foods, mashed potatoes and pea soup, which he loved, but every so often he just ah it would go down the wrong way and then boom he was in hospital again. And then it took me 6 weeks to get him home again every time. And ah I told my daughter I had to put on my white gloves and make like a Duchess and raise a fuss. So I did. And every time it worked and I got him home again 'cause I was bound, determined he was going to die not in a hospital. The last time he got into the ah Jubilee in the you know, the last gasp for cancer patients and things. What's it called?
> *Jessie: Uhm, palliative care.*
> Palliative care. And ah when I realized he got in there that all they were doing was just feeding him morphine, keeping him comfortable, and ah so I was furious! Got him out of there quick, as fast as I could get him home again, and so I got a hospital bed at home, got nursing care, and so ah stayed there until he died.

The interpersonal dimension is most noticeable in her lifestory. Relationships are extremely important for Betty, reflecting the theme "interacting with and helping people" found in her lifestory. She enjoys interacting with family, friends, and neighours, and finds meaning in introducing people to others, but also in staying connected with and

helping out others. In the following passage, she explains how she facilitated networking in the various neighbourhoods that she lived in:

> And ah it turned, well it wasn't the only thing that turned that end of McDonald Drive into a neighbourhood. But ah the other thing that turned it into a neighbourhood was when we were living in our little cottage that we called a shoebox in the first year of our marriage. There were about 6 other houses along on each side of the lane... I'd discovered the original recipe for Tom and Jerry drink and so ah we went up and down the road and asked all the neighbours in for New Years Day. And they all came much to our surprise. And so our little house was full. It was a very good party! ...And ah but the main real thing of the party that surprised us was that we were introducing people to each other... But they'd never met. And we were astonished... We hadn't met them, we were the new kids on the block. We'd just got there you know. And ah so I said to Joseph, "This is ridiculous." I said, "Wherever we live after this on New Year's Day we are going to ask all the neighbours in." So we did. It was a very good idea... We did that each year. So we moved up into our house on McDonald drive and asked all the neighbours in. And ah it was wonderful. And after awhile they started asking each other in to. And ah Joseph, there were times when Michael was going through those kind of crises and ah Joseph and other neighbours had the party. And it's always been a neighbourhood, which has been very nice and ah very helpful to each other.

The cottage that her and Joseph purchased provided for her a gathering place for close friends and family:

> [W]e spent lots of weekends out there and did a lot of work around the place... I said, at the beginning, I said, "I'm not going to spend my life over a hot stove in hot summers." So what we did was to say to our friends, "Come on out and bring a picnic." So that was just fine because then they felt they could come without being a pest and they joined, when lots of people came we joined picnics and had a party. Sometimes nobody came and that was alright too but ah (incomprehensible) so that was a very good investment.

Her cottage remains important in her life today even though she is reliant upon her children to get there.

As a young person, Betty's parents had a significant impact upon her life and the way in which they influenced her life is clearer for her today. For example, as a child, she did not recognize the meaning behind her mother's actions:

> And ah it took me a long time and I had to grow up before I realized that ah mother's giving was ah, well have you, have you read the Prophet?
> *Jessie: No.*
> 'Cause there is those who give with joy and that joy is their reward. And ah it was this chapter on giving. And the trouble was that it wasn't only mother's own things that she gave away, she gave away my, my sleeping bag that she made for me... We were out at the Pointe and... she loves these little Indian... so I was up along the roads and I found them in the most delightful clump and they were slowly pink and so I ah gathered them up and made a little box... and she was just thrilled. And then along came Mrs. Ruggers down to the cottage in the afternoon and said, "My aren't those flowers pretty." And my Mom says, "Do have them." ...well when I was 15 you know I had to grow up a great deal before I realized that it gave her more joy to give them away than to take it.

When describing her mother further she also refers to what she did not learn from her. Although she loved her mother dearly, she strongly disliked her mother's nickname for her, "Baby," and being treated as such. In fact, it was only when her mother died when she was in her late 20's that she felt like she was able to grow up. Her eldest sister who was largely in her life at this time granted her this freedom: "But until she died, then my eldest sister let me grow up because I was the baby. And so she let me make all the stupid mistakes I should have made in my teens." From her father she learned the importance of integrity, a quality that she has always associated with him:

> My father was, he was a very good father. He worked at various law firms in Edmonton... A children's father if you know what I mean. I was very proud of him, but I didn't know him very well... But ah, his ah, he was very good lawyer and a very fair one and I know that he did quite a lot of work for people that ah really couldn't pay him like doctors do you know and lawyers do to. And he ah, he was very fair when ah the country club, the Edmonton Golf and Country Club, were, was formed. And he was asked to be on the board of it, so he was, and discovered that the other members were voting not to include ah two Jewish lawyers... And he raised a root, insisted that they be included... It was very ah useful for us. We were brought up not to ah have prejudices like that, and ah, and it stuck so, it's ah, I've been very glad.

She also has fond memories of time spent with her older brother, Bob, in which he taught her important life skills:

> Ah there was just the cottage and we always had a row boat and I learned to swim to row and to fish... Good skills to have and ah at that time, of course, you could catch fish, any amounts you wanted, and so we had lots of fish. My brother and I used to sneak out at four o'clock in the morning at dawn and go fishing clutching an orange in our hands. And ah so my brother Bob taught me all the old skills.

Overall, when characterizing members of her family, she talks about what she "learned" from them, which is another theme found in her lifestory.

The biological element of Betty's lifestory is slightly prominent. The fact of the matter is that changes have occurred in Betty's physical body. She has glaucoma, and as a result is no longer able to read or watch T.V., and also suffers from balance problems making it difficult for her to remain steady on her feet without an assistance device. However, she does not dwell on these problems. Betty is aware of her mortality and for this reason tries to enjoy each day as it comes:

> The future is much the same. I don't really think of the future because it's today. Tomorrow, tomorrow. (long pause) Some things have to be done. I cancelled the last will because the one Joseph and I made out together is not relevant now. So I got to write a new one.

Her instability has been something that she has lived with for a long time, and thus appears very comfortable with her bodily limitations. Since meaning in her life is derived largely through interacting and existing with others, bodily changes have not been too problematic for her. She is still able to enjoy daily walks in her new neighbourhood and visit friends in her old neighbourhood nearby: "But I can, I walk to the village all the time. I go for walks. I walk as much as possible. I walk down to Telegraph Bay occasionally although that's quite far."

At the time of our first interview, it had been approximately two years since her husband died. Today she is learning to live her life without Joseph and appears to be adapting well. Betty comments,

> It didn't bother me leaving it [her house that she built with Joseph] and moving here. I didn't miss it.
> *Jessie: Why didn't you miss it?*
> Why didn't I miss it? Because I was onto a new chapter. Turned the page. Quite a different life.

When storying her life in the present it is apparent, in line with the theme "interacting with and helping people," that she continues to find meaning in life today, and most likely will continue to do so in the near future, through visiting friends in her new home, an apartment building for seniors:

> No, this chapter's just fine. There are only 20 flats in this building. 4 of them are rented. And ah so ah everybody knows everybody... We have ah tea in the lounge on Wednesdays... Various people have different jobs... once a month dinners we have at the end of the month... she [a friend] organizes those and we have them in the downstairs dining room. There's the once a month meeting of everybody to ah go over things, you know, a general meeting to ah. And ah as I say, "Everybody knows everybody." And ah it's very friendly.

She also makes an effort to keep in touch with friends in her old neighbourhood:

> I still walk down McDonald drive and meet people, either they're outside and ah say, "Oh, come on in for a cup of tea." Or they stop as they're driving by to visit... I haven't lost touch. ...there are lots of friends to see and to keep in touch with and ah I, not having a computer, I don't do any emails or anything but I can write though I can't read what I've written and ah so I have friends that I write to. I get letters from, from my ex-neighbours in Queenswood.

She is also appreciative that the money she earned from selling her house has made it possible for her to live in her apartment today. When considering the future these funds will help her provide for her children after her death, since she worries about their financial circumstances:

> Both children are working with handicapped people. How I got onto that was because they are not earning very much... Put the house funds into the stockbroker's hands. I've got to provide for a couple of children still that are not children anymore. Michael is 52... and ah Linda is 48.

She worries in particular about Michael, her son, due to the brain-injury he sustained as a young adult, but finds value in the fact that he is living with her today. Due to her attachment to "place," she continues to derive meaning today from the house that she built and lived in for 46 years with Joseph because she finds comfort in the fact that this house is now a home for another family: "And the people who bought our place... They didn't tear it down because I couldn't, I would have found that hard to bare because it was so beautifully built."

When story-telling Betty is aware of the value she places upon "interacting with people" found in her lifestory activity. Consequently, she advises that being "friends" with your husband is more important than being in love with him, since love will come later, and is a lesson that she learned after realizing she had been engaged to the wrong man:

> I was thinking. One bit I left out was getting engaged to the wrong man when I was 23. And uh, he realized before I did that it wasn't going to work so he left and that was awful. That was a sad time in my life... That had finished and I'm very glad it did. I was grateful to him later... it grew me up a little more... it made me realize that, the things my mother used to say... You marry the man who is the father of your children. And that is a very good thing to do... I like him so I knew he was the person, also the person who I'd like for the father of my children. And love comes later... I had friends say to me, "You and Joseph are friends, aren't you?" I said, "Yup." And that's one thing I've learned... Being friends is important.

Walter

Life as learning

Walter is 85 years old and is living at home with his wife and adult son in Calgary, Alberta. He was born and raised on a farm in rural central Alberta and was one of eight siblings. After completing his normal school[4] education, he taught children in country schoolhouses for three years before attending classes at the University of Alberta in Edmonton in order to complete his Bachelor's in Education. He completed one year of his university education before joining the army in 1943. Even though his marks were high enough to exempt him from partaking in the war he felt pressure to join regardless. His first post was as an instructor in the army barracks in Calgary, Alberta where he trained troops about how to appropriately use weapons. He later took a course in security intelligence at the Royal Military College in Kingston and became a Sergeant and taught troops in Halifax on how to avoid being "sunk at sea" during their convoys to Britain. He went overseas himself in 1945 but the war ended shortly after completing his infantry training. He returned to university to complete his degree when he arrived home. Around this time, his engagement with Dorothy, a nurse he met after joining the army, ended when she decided to take a job as a Director of Nursing in Eastern Canada. He had completed one year of his Master's degree before meeting his wife, Anna, who he eventually married in 1949. After getting married, they moved to a small town in Southern Alberta where they both taught in country schoolhouses, while Walter continued to work on his Master's degree during summer school. They moved to Calgary and bought a house, where they still reside shortly after their first child was born in 1953. Walter taught in a city high school for 23 years and was the Head of the Guidance department for 14 years. He retired in 1978 and lost his eyesight in his right eye one year after he retired. Then in 1980 his vision failed in his left eye due to another detached retina. Today one eye is almost blind, while some normal function remains in the other. He is also a prostate cancer survivor.

The plot of Walter's lifestory threads together how he came to have a low self-esteem in his early and young adult years, which he attributes to life circumstances that shaped and constrained the beginning of his life. Along similar lines, he outlines how he managed to obtain a sense of stability in his life and explains why this was important to him. When story-telling he skillfully narrates how various aspects influenced the person that he became and is today.

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[4] Normal school is a term used to refer to an institution for training teachers, which originated in the early 19th century but is no longer commonplace.

His lifestory begins by relaying an episode stemming from an early childhood experience that sets the narrative tone for the rest of his lifestory. When Walter was about 4 or 5 he was playing with matches with his siblings in the family barn while his parents were working out in the fields and a fire started, which brought about the destruction of the barn. Along with his siblings, he lied to his parents about the cause of the fire ("Instead of punishment or taking responsibility we just lied like troopers"). This incident is marked as constituting a "bad start" to his life in the sense that feelings of guilt about being responsible for the hardship his father incurred due to the loss of his barn, feed, and livestock during the 1930's lingered for years. This story today remains integral to his being and is the most prominent memory of his childhood, which is reflected with its positioning as the opening story he tells in order to illustrate why he had low feelings of self-worth as a child and young adult. From this incident, he states that he learned at a young age that "life is tough" and "you aren't in control over everything."

When story-telling, several social-structural elements contribute to his sense of insecurity in life. The impact of growing up during the Great Depression, living on a farm and in a large family, and World War II are identified and assessed by Walter as being influential in developing his character. Moreover, these settings of his early years are perceived as inhibiting his possibilities in life. The unpredictable and devastating weather conditions and socioeconomics of the 1930's intertwined with living on a farm combined into feeling that life was "a matter of survival." He also describes himself as being "distressed" and "humiliated" by these circumstances. Walter explains,

> We had a lot of hardship with the depression, bad times, and with the poverty and so on... had a marked effect on me in that ah we saw the crops start... in the spring and then withering, dry up, and the wind, terrible winds blew the soil away... We were so poverty stricken. We had nothing to sell... I was

> humiliated by the poverty as well as by the fact that we had to walk to school without ah shoes in the summer... I found it humbling and ah uhm, rather distressing that we could work on the farm milking cows and weeding the fields and so on, but still not seem to get ahead. Just it was a matter of survival going through those terrible days of the depression for 10 years from '29 to '39.

He felt "trapped" by farm life because he worked relentlessly but was never compensated for his efforts:

> I thought oh my goodness. Is this all there is to life? Working and working and never getting paid for work. I'm just getting my bread and butter but that's about it; that went on for years. And I thought well this is a trap that I'll never get out of.

In addition, he felt disadvantaged further because he lived in a large family, which was compounded by the economic hardship characteristic of that period in history. The size of his family embarrassed him and he felt they "were not quite as good as some of the [other] people around." He also felt socially isolated and that he did not get enough attention from his parents:

> I felt diminished by the big family. Sure there were good things about it, but I felt as if I was just another potato in the pail. I thought well one or two or three kids, I'm sure they get more attention... With eight kids your Mom and Dad have no time for you really. So that's one of the disadvantages of a large family. As a matter of fact, I even felt quite lonely at times in a large family... You almost I guess to survive kind of have to isolate yourself from the din once in a while.

As a young adult, the impact of World War II was central because as a soldier that was stationed in Europe at the end of the war he became aware of the fragility of life and property:

> I think the army life and what I saw of the destruction of the war left the impression of the futility of war - such a waste of men and materials you know. That kind of, had a, lasting effect on me too. Didn't add to my (laughs) insecurity that I carried with me most of my life.

As a whole, these factors, Walter argues, played a role in developing an apprehensive attitude towards life in his early and young adult years.

Getting off of the unproductive farm and its corresponding "life of drudgery" was an important ambition for Walter and he achieved this when one of his older brothers became able to finance his education at a normal school in order to become a country school teacher ("And I thought well this is a trap [farm life] that I'll never get out of. Then I escaped with James' money to go to teaching school"). Working as a school teacher for a few years before joining the army in 1943 was important because he began to develop feelings of self-worth as a young adult. Earning money of his own and being responsible for others was key:

> Your own money gives you a sense of worth too. Yah, we did all that work on the farm. Dad had no money to pay us for our wages. Uhm, getting money, earning money was good even though it wasn't very much. It was good. You could buy your own clothes. I bought a bicycle to get back and forth from school. Ahuhm, just kind of getting out of poverty was a big, big turning point.

He also acknowledges that receiving respect from parents and taking on the responsibility of educating numerous children from different grades was an important development in his life at this time:

> I took on a lot of responsibility at age 20 you know. You take all those... 30 kids in a classroom with 9 classes. That is quite a job... but as I say I never felt like I did justice to all those kids you know. They put up with me.

Walter returned to university to complete his Bachelor's degree in Education when the war ended and eventually met his wife and got married. Together they moved to a small town in Southern Alberta where they taught in country school houses while he worked on his Master's degree in the summer. His wife urged him to apply to teach in Calgary, Alberta. Walter states that he would have been content to teach and live in a rural area, but that his wife "pushed him out of that." While working as a city school

teacher Walter began to feel more secure with his self and surroundings, but still did not feel comfortable taking risks. Walter reflects on this period of his life:

> I wasn't very ambitious. I wasn't a pusher. Don't disturb the water if things are going fine. I went back to being, to my life where I became cautious and fearful of taking chances.

In addition, Walter is humble and downplays what he achieved in life and the fact that he was the Head of Guidance for several years before his retirement was only mentioned in passing: "Although you know, I guess there was a time when as guidance counselor, Head of Guidance, I was in charge... So I think in that area of my life, I was quite in charge of things." Although historical events such as the Great Depression and World War II are identified as constraining factors in his early years, he notes that he was able to obtain a sense of stability and control in his life through his work as a city school teacher, but the pattern of not taking chances in his life that was established early in his life continued. When reflecting back he is not regretful about not taking risks in his career, but is regretful that he did not take advantage of investment opportunities that emerged throughout his life. Taken together, different social-structural factors interweave to establish the theme "not taking risks in life" found in his lifestory:

> I guess I didn't take very many chances throughout life likely because of being afraid of being knocked down... I think to this day that I became very conservative because I wanted to hold onto everything that I had. Ah, I was afraid to take chances in case I lose what I have. And I became rather pinch-penny I guess in a way.

This theme is also apparent in the interpersonal dimension of his lifestory and evolves when discussing his relationships with his various brothers, which are important to him. James, his oldest brother, is described as having a "lasting influence on my life" and was his role model at an early age:

> He was my ideal, he was a scholar, an artist, and I thought well I guess in my mind I thought if I am going to emulate anybody that would be it. So I sort of followed his footsteps. He became a teacher and then I followed as a teacher as well.

James also financed his normal school education enabling him to leave the farm. Walter returned the favor a few years later and gave James most of what he earned as a soldier in the army so that he could attend medical school.

Although Walter preferred not to take risks in life, Walter questions whether he should have been more of a risk-taker when contrasting the way he lived his life against that of his brothers. In particular, he evaluates himself against his younger brother, Thomas. Walter and Thomas entertained a special bond as children and continued to remain close as adults. As children they enjoyed pastimes not pursued by their other brothers such as philosophizing and physical activity that were not considered beneficial to farm life. Since Thomas was also a school teacher as an adult, it was relatively easy for Walter to measure his achievements against those of his brother: "[H]e took chances in life and climbed the ladder. And I didn't take chances."

His relationship with his mother is also integral to the development of his low self-esteem. He reports that he "wasn't gonna please her" and felt she had low expectations for him. In contrast, John and William were her "favorites" because they had an arduous work ethic compulsory for farm life:

> I think she thought I was a slow poke and had no future. I remember her saying to me once, "I'm sorry that I raised one lazy boy. John is not lazy. He is always out in the barn or out fixing something." I would sit in the house trying to keep warm in the wintertime. She'd kick me out. And I always did the chores you know help with the chores, but she still maintained that I was lazy. She had me branded.

Being surrounded and interacting with intellectuals was important for Walter and is how he has derived meaning consistently throughout his life. For this reason, "learning" is the second theme found in his lifestory and is prominent in the interpersonal dimension of his lifestory. When introducing characters into his lifestory they are often described as being "bright" or "not bright," or some derivation thereof. In fact, he attributes in part the end of his first relationship to Dorothy, a nurse that he was engaged to shortly before joining the army, to her lack of scholasticism:

> I criticized her a little too much. She couldn't spell for one thing... and her grammar was not great although she was a nurse. She was a good nurse. Of course she just wasn't intellectual and I thought oh bother... When we got together other than the kissing and hugging we had nothing intellectual we could talk about so... And then she chose to pursue her career in the East.

A few minutes later during the same interview Walter reflects further:

> I think I was a little snobbish, I always was, that's why my first ah girlfriend was a disaster. I always was attracted to very bright people... An intellectual snob when I look back on it.

Accordingly, it makes sense that as a child he was drawn to James who was "scholarly" and "bright" and less so to John and William who were "rough," "rugged" and more interested in hands-on tasks. He discloses further that he was drawn to his wife because of her intelligence: "She had far better marks than I had... I was just kind of flattered that she would put up with a guy like me, just a little better than ordinary." As he aged, his perceptions of his brothers evolved and he began to appreciate how they were different from him and realized they were also knowledgeable. The following passage is about how his opinion of William changed:

> I always thought he was kind of rough and uncultured, but he surprised me how bright, how well he did... He had these four children; they're all nice kids... He became a good carpenter and a good farmer and he became a counselor in his district... so he surprised me. I thought gee whiz I was very wrong about my

> judgment of him. He wasn't a smooth character you know at all. He had a coarseness about him.

When considering his early feelings towards his brothers, he is ashamed because he has appreciated a great deal having them in his life.

The biological element of Walter's lifestory surfaces when he discusses what happened to him approximately 25 years ago. It was crucial that he tell a story about how "aging" has affected his life and begins, "The changes that old age does to you as you age, the differences." The major changes in his life over the last two decades are attributed to "health problems." When he lost his eyesight shortly after retiring, his sense of meaning and purpose in life had to be radically reorganized and readjusted. Walter explains, "When I went blind and I thought oh my God, my life has come to an end. I can't do anything that I like to do anymore. I just have to sit and I can't read. At one time I couldn't read. And so I was between a rock and a hard place for quite awhile." Initially, he remained hopeful that his vision would return to normal and that one of the many operations he was undergoing would be successful. Even though losing his eyesight "took so much out of life" he still remained interested in living. In the following passage, Walter recounts how his life changed while showing how he adapted and created new meaning in life by finding other ways to be useful:

> I enjoyed golfing and enjoyed riding my motorcycle and driving a car. All these things were cancelled out once I lost my vision to detached retinas. So I had to find other ways of filling my time. Fortunately, they were able to reattach one retina so that I can see very short distances and I can with high magnification read the paper and read books and so on although I'm very slow... I can still walk, I can even do some useful things as I say I can make meals and I help Greg in the spring and fall to rake leaves and clean up yards, can still do that... But as I say, it's a change, a change in the way I can live.

Although Walter identifies deterioration in both physical and mental functioning, as he has grown older, he observes a fresher calmer outlook on life's misfortunes:

> I think there's a change in the way you feel about little mishaps, little things, that used to annoy you so much, seem to be a big deal. Now they don't seem like a big deal. Little mishaps or irritations you kind of take in stride now. And for example, losing, losing keys or dropping a dish, which I often do, oh I don't see where I'm knocking over a glass and breaking it, you just well – clean it up. One time we might have been yelling at each other for breaking something. We don't do that anymore. We just say, "Oh well." I think you become more, a little more patient.

When storying his life in the present, he narrates further how aging has changed him and altered his life. He is more conscious of his mortality and feels that time is moving quicker than when he was younger:

> As I get into my mid-eighties... you start thinking, when you're younger you never think that your life is gonna end, now you start thinking, "Oh my time is, I haven't got much time left." ...it starts to speed up I noticed, as you get older. Remember when you were younger the days were long days. Remember the poem when you're a boy the days are long days, ah now they're short. The time, it's like being on a canoe that's about to go over a waterfall. You can't stop it. It just keeps rushing forward towards the falls. You have that feeling. In fact, time goes so fast that I keep losing a day. Is this Wednesday already? I thought it was only Tuesday you know. So time alters things.

Consequently, he feels impelled to tidy up loose ends for his wife, Anna, and teach her how to clean the furnace filter and show her where he has hidden the extra house and car keys. Due to his enhanced awareness of his mortality, Walter finds meaning and value simply through being alive:

> I say every day now I wake up, "Gee whiz. I'm still alive." My heart is still beating. I say, well might as well live for the day, don't worry about the past, and don't worry about the future. Just live for the day and that's enough. You can't change the past and you don't know what's going to happen in the future." So the here and the now is the only thing that's important.

Keeping in line with the theme of "learning" that is situated in his lifestory, Walter continues to derive meaning in life today, and will most likely continue to do so in

the future, through learning. He finds meaning in learning about himself and through dealing with life experiences even if they are unpleasant:

> Life is a journey in time with a beginning and an end. Along the journey there are surprises, some are good, and some sad and disappointing, but life is always interesting. There is always another surprise waiting for you at the next turn of the road. For example, my little, new little great-grand-daughter is kind of a surprise. Other surprises is blindness, cancer, and prostate... Some are good things and some are not good. You learn to cope with them... Life's too darn interesting and we have so many communications now, means of communicating, and so many means of receiving information about the world. And there's so much to learn. I've fallen behind of course. I can't see well enough to work with the computer, which is unfortunate, but I see. Thomas also missed this, these beautiful pictures from Mars that are coming in right now. I find that terribly fascinating. There's so much to learn. You can't live long enough to, to learn all about it... Even with old age and all of my ailments. I still feel life is well worth the while.

Moreover, he finds meaning in keeping abreast of current social and political issues:

> As I said in my philosophy, life's still worthwhile, I'll find it worthwhile right 'til the end. I want to know what's going to happen next. For example, Thomas who died has already missed some very interesting things. He missed this 911 thing you know, New York. He's missed two wars, the Afghan and Iraq. And the Mad Cow disease, which is affecting us very close to home here. He's glad to miss that I'm sure.

When story-telling Walter is very conscious of why his lifestory unfolded in the way that it did and how this has made him the person that he is today. He is very aware that he has been reluctant to take risks in life, but warns that this is something that I should not be afraid to do.

Mary

Life as manager

Mary was born in 1918 and grew up in Liverpool, England. Her father was a sickly man due to injuries sustained in World War I, and for this reason, her family was quite poor. She spent the majority of her childhood and adolescence living in her grandmother's attic with the rest of her brothers and sisters. She eventually left school in Grade 10 and started working to help support her family. Her father later died during World War II. Mary got engaged to Howard prior to the onset of the war, but later met Frank, her future husband, at a local dance and grappled for the reminder of the war about how she was going to end her engagement with Howard. She married Frank in 1945, and their first child, Jill, was born 13 months later. They decided to immigrate to Canada shortly thereafter in order to leave the deprivation of post-war Britain. They eventually settled in Hamilton, Ontario and had a second daughter, Justine, in 1954. Mary started working a few years' later showing houses for local real estate agents. Her life changed dramatically when Justine, her youngest daughter, ran away from home at the age of 17 when she was finishing grade 12. Mary did not see her daughter for the next 21 years until Justine decided to reenter her parent's life. During this time Mary decided to move to Victoria, B.C. in order to help her cope with the loss of her daughter in her life. She worked in various accounting offices after moving to the West coast, but retired with her husband when she was 68 and kept occupied with her volunteer work with the Hospice Society. Her life today is primarily focused on caregiving for her husband, who has recently been admitted into hospital.

The plot of Mary's lifestory interweaves how she has survived in the past and is surviving in the present. She describes how periods of her life have or have not been demarcated with struggle while emphasizing how she has gotten through the various struggles that she has encountered throughout her life.

Her lifestory starts at the beginning with her childhood, and when story-telling she introduces characters and describes the settings in which she has lived in order to illustrate how her early and young adult years were times of survival due to a "scratch and live type of situation." The detailed description of her childhood sets the narrative tone for her lifestory because it was the first struggle that she had to deal with in her life.

Various social-structural elements are identified when story-telling this first phase of her life. Mary explains how the personal and social histories of her father, mother, and grandmother, the main characters in her life at this time, and the backdrop of both world wars were influential in shaping her early years. Her father's health was a key factor since he was severely injured during World War I and an invalid for the remainder of his life. Her family was "very poor" as a result. Mary reports that when she was younger she did not realize that she was underprivileged and that her family's meager existence "didn't matter" to her. Mary comments, "It didn't worry me one little bit... everybody was in the same boat as well." Even though she says that being poor as a child did not bother her, when story-telling today she carefully outlines how her early years were materially impoverished. For example, her first memory is of the day that her grandmother moved from a large, two-story brick house to a "less prestigious" and "old" house down the road. The following excerpt is a description of her living situation in her grandmother's new house where she lived in the attic with the rest of her family and conveys that her family did not have much:

> So we lived in the two attic rooms, and everything we used for cooking had to be carried up in a pail... we just had a table with a dishpan you know, and this little tiny fireplace. The one room, the small room was used for the kitchen and living and everything else... the other room was a great big room and had my parents bed in it, and then it had another double bed on the other wall, and the three kids would sleep in the one double bed on the other wall, and the three kids would sleep in the one double bed with two girls at the top, and the boy at the bottom, with all the feet in the middle. And for blankets we had old coats; you didn't have bedding. You had a mattress and a pillow and that was good... That's what you had.

Her father, mother, and grandmother are the most central characters described during her childhood. Except for her father, these characters are portrayed as hard-workers who actively tried to keep the family afloat. Her grandmother was a widow with

13 children, and the matriarch of the family who "did all sorts of thing," since "in those times you were on your own." She was also "intelligent" and "cultured." Her mother was the provider for the family who brought in the rations and did other people's laundry in public washhouses and often did not get paid for their work. In contrast, her father is portrayed as an embittered man due to his frail health and made life particularly unpleasant for her mother. Other characters are introduced into her story to show further what she did not have when she was younger. She reports that some friends of her grandmother's wanted to adopt her and through these connections Mary was invited to the pantomime and endowed with beautiful dresses and patent leather shoes. Her mother quickly pawned these items and she never saw them again, and accordingly, grew up wearing her cousin's castoffs since they were "quite well off."

One year Mary won a special scholarship to attend classes at a "fancy private school" that she had always dreamed of attending. However, she did not accept this offer because she knew that her family lacked the funds to send her:

> When I won the scholarship I realized that I couldn't go because I knew for one thing my mother was waiting for me to go to work to hand over the money. My brother... had to leave school at 14. Uhm, I realized that I couldn't go because although the fees would have been paid, I would need clothes, uniforms, and games equipment, and probably books, the rest of it you know, and I just knew there wasn't the money for that. I knew that my mother needed the money you know 'cause she used to go out scrubbing and she would do people's laundry with no facilities. You've got to remember that. No facilities. She'd pawn everything that she could get her hands on just so that she could feed us. She pawned her wedding ring, never got that back.

The fact that she "won" this scholarship as a student though remains meaningful for her today. Moreover, she is proud that when she wrote another comprehensive examination a year later at school that her excellent results awarded her a job: "I must have been quite on top of the list you know. Uhm, I didn't know what the job was, didn't know what it

paid, and knew nothing about it except I had to be at 24 Hattengarden at 9 am on Tuesday because that was the beginning of our week." Obtaining this job is considered an important turning point for Mary today when reflecting back on her life as it marked the beginning of better times for her family and the end of their financial struggles, since her mother was able to combine her wage with her brother's and rent a house of their own, which is described as being a "palace" in comparison to their previous living quarters. Mary says turning down this scholarship and leaving to work was something that she had to do and accepts the circumstances of her life that lead up to this particular course of action, but when looking back she feels she was not able to accomplish all that she could in her life because she declined the scholarship:

> I really feel that I short-changed myself there. I think quitting grade 11 to take a job with a corporation, a town corporation, was a waste of what I could have been... I've always felt that I never lived up to my potential. I've always felt that... Yah, that's, that's a definite capital letters underline for me... I felt I could have done more... But, uhm, the times and opportunities were not there you know... I wish I could have furthered my education. I don't know what direction I would have taken I really have no idea.

The onset of World War II marked another period of difficulty for Mary. Shortly after the war broke out Mary got engaged, as was characteristic of the time, to a friend whom she had known for years. She claims that she was not eager to marry but wanted to mollify Howard prior to his departure. Howard joined the army in December of 1939 and she did not see him again until 1945. During this time Mary says, "I had forgotten what his voice sounded like. I had forgotten almost what he looked like. There were no pictures you know and just letters with holes cut in them. So I felt I didn't know him." Mary eventually met her future husband at a dance during the war and after spending some time with him had an epiphany: "And then it suddenly struck me that I thought I

don't remember having this much fun with Howard you know. I just don't remember. I just felt bored somehow. I don't remember having fun with him. So I realized... I didn't want to marry Howard you see." Accordingly, for the remainder of the war Mary was distressed about having to confront Howard and explain to him that she had changed her mind about marrying him. Although she was pleased to have met Frank, the burden of facing Howard is remembered as being yet another struggle that she had to contend with. When talking about World War II she also refers to the trauma brought on by the London "blitz" and to the shortage of food, which was a daily challenge. In fact, the setting of her life in post-war Britain after marrying Frank and her inability to provide her daughter with the basic necessities of life due to the deprivation caused by the war was eventually the impetus for opting to leave the United Kingdom and move to Canada:

> So, uhm, one time ah Jill was just about 2 I think and she used to love eggs. The ration for eggs was one per adult per week.
> *Jessie: Oh really.*
> And two per child per week. So we used to give her our eggs because she loved them you see. So give up our eggs you know because, of course, we could eat meat if we could get it, which she sort of didn't eat. So, uhm, there was one day we went down to the shopping center, which was called the village and ahuhm she'd seen a window full of china eggs 'cause it was a place where they sold hen feed and animal feed.
> *Jessie: Ok.*
> And there was a whole window full of china eggs because they had nothing else to put in the window. And she decided that she wanted an egg and she stamped and raged about on the sidewalk and she turned blue and held her breath 'til she turned blue. She was enraged 'cause she wanted an egg you know... So I poked her stomach and ah went back home and I said to Frank that night, "You know what Frank. I think the time has come." I said, "When you can't get an egg for your kid it's time to go." So I said, "Where do we go? Let's just get out of here. I'm fed up."

Mary describes vividly her journey to Canada. While attending tea on the ship for the first time, she was struck by the sheer availability of foods that she had not eaten for years:

> Jill and I went through every meal. We didn't choose from the menu, we went right through the menu. I put on 10 pounds... As soon as I boarded the ship they served afternoon tea and I immediately wrote a postcard to my mother and got a sailor to post it telling him we'd had white bread.

Moreover, when visiting friends in Halifax before taking the train to Hamilton, Ontario where Frank's family was going to meet them, she describes the only thing she remembers about her initial arrival to Canada in Halifax:

> [T]hey took us to Eaton's food floor and I saw these canned salmon packages of biscuits and chalk glass, immediately broke down and started to cry... It's not fair. It's just not fair. We hadn't seen this stuff. If you were rich, or if you had big family with a lot of ration books, the grocer would be kind to you and give you stuff like this, but if you only had the mother that was poor like me. We didn't have enough ration books to be important... You never saw a can of salmon or a packet of chocolate biscuits you know. So when I saw all this stuff on the shelves to be bought you know I was crying my stupid eyes out you know.

Overall, her first years living in Canada were analogous she says to being on a "holiday" since her new country seemed like a paradise in comparison to the destitution plaguing Europe during and following the end of the war.

The next two decades of her life after moving to Canada were struggle free, but her life changed dramatically when her daughter, Justine, ran away from home at the age of 17. One day when arriving to pick Justine up from work, her daughter was not there. Mary tells a dramatic story of the multiple events that unfolded following this discovery and the years afterward. The main point, however, is that her daughter left home with her boyfriend when she was 17 and Mary did not physically see her again until she was 39. Her life during her daughter's departure was a struggle to say the least:

> But there's a lot of unrest and unhappiness and worry and all the rest of it. And unfortunately I decided I was to blame and I just assumed all the guilt. I didn't know what I had done because we never used to have rows or anything. But I just thought it's me, I took the blame. Well that sent me into a tailspin. So finally, uhm, they sent me to, oh I was thinking how to kill myself. I was terrible. I was beside myself. Ah the doctor, sent me to a psychiatrist, and I remember he said to

> me, "Have you ever had thoughts of suicide?" And I said, "Yes, I have but I don't know how to do it."

Eventually, this incident cumulated in Mary and Frank deciding to move out to the West coast in attempt to achieve some sort of normalcy in their life. Mary explains,

> I realized I was looking for her everywhere. If I saw anybody with long blond hair I'd run to catch up to them to see who it was you know. I was always looking. If I saw a crowd on T.V., I was looking at the crowd on T.V. I was looking for her all the time. I was demented. So I thought this can't go on.

Consequently, she suggested to Frank that they move to Victoria and start their life anew. When Justine remerged in her life years later, Mary made a conscious decision, following the advice given to her by a friend who was a social worker, that she was not going to question or ask further the reason why her daughter disappeared and accept her unconditionally back into her life. Since this happened, her and Justine maintain open and cordial relations and make an effort to see one another each year. Mary explains,

> Because this friend of mine who had been in Children's Aid for umpteen years was a trained social worker I suppose she said, "Don't ask her any questions. What she wants you to know she'll tell you. Don't sort of dig it up you know, just forgive her and forget." That's they way it went and it worked. There was one time and I think it might have been when we were coming home from the airport the very first time we picked her up. We were both in the backseat of the car and I think she said, "If you want to ask me any questions you can. You can ask me anything you like." That's what she said. But I didn't see any point in the why, in other words, I didn't see any point in it you know. I understood that she'd met the wrong person and had her mind sent along a certain path as a young impressionable girl you know and I didn't see any point in trying to dissect it and go over it. It would only hurt both of us, so it's never been mentioned ever again you know. Nobody's mentioned. She's very appreciative of us you know. She's very affectionate and very appreciative.

Altogether these narrative linkages, and the way in which she compares and contrasts the different periods in her life as being times of struggle, suggest that the theme of "being a survivor" is important to Mary. Although she has lived through difficult and tough times she is proud of her resiliency in getting through them. This is most

prominently seen in the way that she is currently coping with the change in her husband's health status, which is discussed further below.

When story-telling the interpersonal dimension in her lifestory the theme "being a manager" is found in her lifestory. Mary lived alone with her mother for quite some time after her father died and reports that her mother was quite distraught following the loss of her husband. Accordingly, she learned to take control and manage her mother and those around her. Mary explains,

> I think I was always a manager because I managed my mother. My mother was very, uhm, naïve and she hadn't had much schooling because her mother used to keep her home to do the housework... And she was a very willing person, uhm, very good person, but I, I used to be in charge. I was the oldest in the family... she was glad to ah, uhm, sort of submit to me you know. There was never any argument. I was gonna tell them what to do... I think I might have been bossy...

Throughout her lifestory she ascribes many qualities befitting a manager or a leader to herself, and mentions how she observed this quality in other people and how it has shaped her relationships with her husband and daughters. Being independent and innovative is important to her:

> I have a big independent streak... I never thought about it throughout my life, but now that I look back on my life, uhm, yes I feel very independent. And quite opinionated when you think about it. Uhm, and if I want to be nice to myself, I'd to say I was a leader and a forward thinker... I sort of, what do they say? Dance to my own drum. I never follow the crowd, never. And even now, when fashions come out, or fads, I still say "Look if everyone's got it, I don't want it." Yeah, that's just it, you know, if everybody does it or everybody's got it, count me out... I find it very difficult to ask for help... I'll manage somehow... I've got to be on my hands and knees, and I think I'm frightened that people would say, "No." I think that's what I'm afraid of, because if I asked for help, people said, "No." I don't know what to do you know. I think that's part of it, but I also pride myself on, "I don't need help, I can do it." You know I'll do it, find a way to do it... It was only when I was thinking about these questions that I was thinking, you know what? I'm a flippin' bulldog you know... I just get a hold of something I'm not letting it go... I'd rather be that than a wimp... And I've got two very independent girls too, they think for themselves, in fact they try to boss everyone around too.

She also depicts herself as someone who is an improver and embraces change ("I embrace changing things. I call myself an improver... I can always see what can be better") and is industrious and works hard:

> They began to call me the compulsive volunteer. If anybody wanted something done I'd have to hold my hand down you know. I'll do it... I've just got that mindset if I don't do it who will? ...It's a curse really.

Mary values being fiscally responsible, and this strategy she argues has enabled her to get through many struggles in her life:

> I reckon that it's just been being thrifty and even frugal that got us through it because we never went into debt. Ever. If we didn't have the case, money, we didn't get it you know. And we didn't spend a lot of money on entertainment. When the kids were young we used to say the kids are our entertainment.

Others who she has observed being responsible with their money have inspired Mary:

> I think one person and her boyfriend at the time impressed me terrifically. And ah I think I probably shaped my life along those lines. It was the girl I worked with and she was engaged to a fellow in the office and, uhm, they were able to buy a house like that and the reason why was they never spent any money. They went to the movies once a week. They never had new clothes unless they bought them on sale and very few of them. They were miserly but they saved with a purpose. And they were able to get married and move into a house when nobody else could... And from that time on I resolved, because my life had been lived ah with my mother buying stuff on time and people coming to the door to collect you know. This is how you lived in those days. You'd never get anything unless you were obliged to pay after you'd got it... So when I saw this girl doing this that really impressed me and then saw her buy the house... So we went into that way of life. We, we never bought anything until we had the cash...

The extent to which "being a manager" is a key component to her sense of self is reflected further in how she perceives the social world around her today. For example, she is concerned with the incompetence that she finds in society today and the diminished work ethic she observes in people, and perceives the setting of her early work history in part responsible for this quality:

> I'm very particular as far accuracy goes in everything I do and I can't understand why some people are so careless about details... I can't understand how people can go to work and use the company's time and computer for instance... for their own personal use... it's stealing. I'm very rigid about that. But I think I'm the only one left on this earth who cares... I wouldn't want to be in the workforce today. I couldn't stand being in the workforce today 'cause the attitude doesn't suit my way of doing things 'cause I'm so old-fashioned I guess. Well, you know, the places where I worked you were not allowed to use the telephone. There was one telephone in a big office with oodles of woman and it used to get cleaned once a week by somebody coming, a uniformed girl... The telephone was a sacred object. But you're not allowed to use it. Well nobody had a telephone. Who are you gonna call you know? ...I still think of the telephone as a business tool and I find it very difficult even now to phone up unless I've got a reason for phoning.

When discussing her relationships with her family members, the way in which Mary is in conflict with her "managerial" self emerges. For instance, she is somewhat self-conscious about being "critical," but thinks that she has improved with age:

> I'm probably still bossy... I'm possibly still critical. Maybe not hypercritical... I know I missed my vocation. I should have been a proofreader. Oh I see mistakes, they jump out of the page at me. That's part of being critical isn't it? ...I'm probably still critical too although I do think... less now.

She is also struggling with her emotive self and feels apologetic about the various emotions she feels when something upsets her. In the following passage, she reflects on how this quality has changed with time and attempts to convey that she is not as easily bothered as she used to be:

> I think in general I'm not so easily hurt. I can brush things off now. I think all my life I was sensitive to hurt to being, uhm, left out or, uhm, yah hurt feelings. Yah, I was very susceptible to feeling poor me about things - little things now when I think about it. Uhm, and I think it's fairly recently really that I think like don't care, doesn't matter you know... Yah, but it used to be terribly important that I wouldn't be snubbed, or left out, or whatever you see terribly important, and that's what used to hurt me when maybe they didn't even know they were doing it whoever they were you know.

However, Mary then proceeds to tell two explanatory stories in order to demonstrate how she employed her newfound attitude during two recent situations involving her grand-children who did not do what they said they would, but digresses:

> I don't know whether I'm wise and just sort of brush it under the mat or whether I should follow it to the end and say why didn't you phone him you know? ...Because it wouldn't make any difference in the long-run. They wouldn't do it next time necessarily you know. They're so busy with their own lives you know that ah it bothered me that they, it wasn't even a message, I said it to them face-to-face you know, and yet they didn't act on it. So it bothered me. Yah, it did. It bothered me. But I didn't follow it through.

Moreover, when discussing her role as a caregiver she is struggling with trying not to manage her husband's life in light of his failing health. She wants to preserve his sense of self, and thus, encourages him to complete a few daily tasks such as making breakfast in the morning. Additionally, she is not totally comfortable about being in the position of caregiver: "[E]verything sort of depends on me now. We're not sort of a couple, but before we shared any burdens. We shared them. But now it seems to be they are all on me."

The theme of "being a manager" is also found in the way that she discusses her relationship with her employers and colleagues. Mary also told two detailed stories about sad times positioned within her employment history in Victoria. Both stories revolve around her feelings of being managed by her employer in a fashion that did not suit her. In the first story she recalls about her boss,

> He had a reputation for sort of, uhm, mentally abusing the women that worked for him, mentally abusing them. Uhm, one after the other would leave in tears you see. And I never knew quite how he did it, but I do remember saying he's not gonna do that to me. I'll be out of here before he does that to me you know. But unbeknownst to me he was doing it to me all the time.

In the second story she reveals how her employer slighted her when he transferred some of her responsibilities to a newer and younger employee, who incidentally got charged with embezzling money from the company, an incident that bothered her a great deal because she had befriended this employee. In the end though, Mary found meaning in the experience through being able to have the last laugh, "I have a big laugh about this one getting caught and him having made a fool of himself and demoted me so to speak so he could use her as his go between you know. So he looked like a fool you know."

The biological dimension is apparent throughout her lifestory for different reasons and also shows further how the theme of "being a survivor" is meaningful for her. Mary reflects,

> I know as a young person I was very delicate and oh lost a lot of time at school because I was sick for this that and the other. And yet when I came to Canada I think I was 30... I think that's the time when my health really started to improve and ah I was never sick at all for years and years and years. I just wasn't sick at all. And I think that was the dividing line between being in different health and being in good health.

At the beginning of her story, she describes herself as being a "delicate" and "sickly" child who missed a lot of school. She remembers her mother coming to the gate at her school in order give her eggnog to build up her strength so that she could have her tonsils out. As a young adult, she tells a horrific story about her first experience giving birth that resulted due to the lack of resources available in British hospitals following the war. As a result, when she goes to the doctor today they proclaim, "This has been the scene of a battle." Due to this traumatic experience she sought out a specialist in Toronto who promised her a better childbirth experience when she got pregnant for the second time. When talking about her body in the present, she reports diminished energy and aches and pains that have made "aging" a reality for her. She initially retired from her volunteer

duties due to cataracts, which she has since had fixed, but is too tired to return. She also has difficulty sleeping at night, but this is a problem that she has struggled with throughout her life. Time is also moving quickly for her, and she has a "list of things she needs to do, rather than wants to do" but does not have the energy to get through her list. She is also somewhat dissatisfied with her bodily appearance today: "I just wish I could get rid of this big abdomen. It's not fair, and I don't deserve it. You know, uhm, so that's one big change... I wish I could get a tummy tuck or liposuction, but who would do it on a woman my age?"

When storying her life today, she outlines her current struggles ("We've sort of gone back to the survival mode"). In our second interview, she explains that the need to survive is due to changes in her husband's and her own health, which is a different type of struggle than she has experienced in the past. Although she has noticed changes in her own health, the change in her husband's health is the most constricting to her possibilities in life. She was trying to cope with life in general:

> I wasn't thinking about holidays and now we sort of don't want to go anywhere you know unless we can find a magic carpet. The thought of it is just to enervating. Just can't begin to think about it. So somebody was asking me how we were making out – oh it was in an email we got about Frank's niece, and I wrote back and said we were getting more like turtles everyday, but we were able to cope as long as we didn't get any curves thrown at us. And that's about the size of it. We feel fine but if something goes wrong it throws you off course and it doesn't take much... Dealing with each day as it comes and, uhm, trying to look after our general health, which I think is all we've got left really. Uhm, yah, it's just, it's just a case of ah sort of treading water right now. That's what it is. It's like treading water, just keeping afloat you know until something else smacks you... Just trying to, uhm, stay afloat, uhm, without much reward. You know very few treats, very few surprises or treats or anything like that you know. Little, little sparks of, of reward I suppose that you used to have you know. Uhm, it's just boring when I think about it... Yah, it's just boring... can't raise enough enthusiasm really 'cause I guess you've run out of steam... So you can't raise enough enthusiasm to say ah, "Let's go to Timbuktu this afternoon you know."

> You're just not free to make any sudden arrangements or decisions for, uhm, a bit of a lift or a surprise or anything like that you know.

She notes further that her current caregiving responsibilities are "narrowing her life" ("I'm missing out on something for sure") and informs me about her desire to attend her granddaughter's wedding in the summer and travel to England once more. In the time that passed during our second and fourth interview in which I planned to talk about her aging experience, her husband, Frank, was admitted into the hospital and when we met it was obvious that Mary was extremely distressed about what this would mean for her life in the present. "Aging," she claimed, had gotten more difficult recently because of her husband ("Well life has gotten harder."), and told me a long and detailed story about the events that had transpired at home before Frank was finally admitted into the hospital for assessment. She admitted to me that she did not think she could cope with caregiving for her husband at home any longer, but was worried about what this would mean for her husband. She even contemplated his death and deliberated out loud where she would live. In spite of these worries, Mary was looking forward to re-starting and re-claiming her life as her own and moving beyond this current struggle: "I can get on with my life... My life was on hold you know. Every time he turned over in bed, I was awake you know, I didn't want to."

Needless to say, I was slightly worried myself for Mary following the end of our fourth interview, especially when she said that this struggle was the "worst" that she had experienced to date. I held hope that she would be able to move forward from this experience and emerge again "as a survivor" like she had in the past. Interestingly, Mary called me several weeks later to ask me how my own "thesis struggle" was proceeding and to tell me that I could email her daughter the transcripts from our interviews. Of

course I asked how she and Frank were doing. Frank had been admitted into long-term care and was extremely physically and mentally frail, but she commented, "He's 89 years old, what do I expect? People rarely die tidily these days, and we have to deal with it as it comes." As for herself, she was doing much better and told me, "Grief cannot be dry cleaned; it has to be washed away with tears." She said she was dealing with it and moving on and drew strength from her widowed neigbours who appear to have adapted and are still living and enjoying life. The other reason for her telephone call was to inform me that she had invited herself to a friends wedding in Britain and was leaving in two weeks. Mary appears well on her way to reclaiming her life.

CHAPTER 5: Closing Commentary

5.1 Existential Meaning and Age Identity

The purpose of this study was to examine how the age identities of older adults shape the stories that they tell reflecting meaning and purpose in their lives. When referring to age identity, I mean the way in which older adults age biographically, or story time, when thinking about their journey of life. The focus of this research was on existential meaning, and draws upon the assumptions inherent within the "personal existence perspective" (Kenyon, 2000), which is a metaphor or ontological image of human beings as travelers, seeking and searching for meaning, throughout the journey of life. Lifestories were collected from older adults because they are sensitive to and allow for the construction of existential meaning, and focus on the inside of aging (Ruth and Kenyon, 1996).

In Chapter Four, I presented my reading and interpretation of my biographical encounters with Charles, Betty, Walter, and Mary. I attended to plot and theme, and to how they were characterizing themselves and others and integrating setting within their stories, in order to assess how they were making sense of meaning in their lives when considering their life as a whole through the telling of their lifestory.

Meaning in life, in this study, was not considered as an objective reality that could be quantified or measured, but as created through story-telling. The narrative approach directs participants to reference the past from the perspective of the present, and enables them to incorporate the past with the present based upon what is meaningful and important for them. What I found was that these narrators were experiencing their lives to be meaningful and purposeful and that the way in which they were storying time, or

narrating their own unique life biographies, was central to how they were continuing to create meaning in their life in the present. Different plot lines and themes were located in each lifestory, which reveals how narrators uniquely and distinctively evaluate and interpret their lives as a whole. The essence of the lifestory, or the plot line, that granted the lifestory coherence, and the themes interwoven throughout their stories, were key to how these older adults were making sense of and making meaning in their lives today, and relating to the social world around them.

The plot of Charles' story revolves around outlining what he has achieved and how he has achieved it, while acknowledging those factors that have impeded his ability to achieve throughout his life. Charles values highly independence and achievement in himself, and for these reasons, the themes of "accomplishing" and "being self-reliant" are located in his lifestory. When reflecting upon his life as a whole, he finds meaning in his life by what he has managed to achieve. His career successes prior to his retirement are key, but he continues to find meaning in his life through achieving in his various volunteering endeavours. When looking towards the future, it is no surprise that he worries about losing his independence and becoming reliant upon others for help. His current role as a caregiver also intensifies this worry because his wife is dependent upon him.

The plot of Betty's story is constructed around the various homes that she has lived in throughout her life. The themes of "interacting with and helping people" and "attachment to place" reverberate in her lifestory as they are important to her sense of self. She finds meaning in life today through keeping in touch with old friends and visiting with friends in her new apartment building. Although she worries about the

financial circumstances of her children, she finds comfort that she can still support them due to the money she has earned from selling the house that she lived in with her husband before his death. Overall, the significance of setting within her lifestory, or the houses that she has lived in, suggests that the meaning she derives in life today, and in her current environment, is influenced by the context and meaning of her past environments and the memories of "place" prominently found in her story. For example, she was quick to point out that the chair that I was sitting on during our interviews was one of the few that remained from her larger dining room set from the house she shared with her husband.

The plot of Walter's story threads together how he came to have a low self-esteem in his early and young adult years, which he attributes to life circumstances that shaped and constrained the beginning of his life. He also outlines how he managed to obtain a sense of stability in his life and maintains that this was important to him throughout his life. Accordingly, the theme of "not taking risks in life" is found in his lifestory. The theme of "learning" is also important to his sense of self, and to his creation of meaning in life today, as he holds a lust for learning about his own life, the lives of others, and what is taking place in the world around him.

The plot of Mary's story describes how periods of her life have or have not been demarcated by struggle, while emphasizing how she has gotten through the various struggles that she has encountered in life. She interweaves how she has survived in the past and is surviving in the present. For this reason, the theme of "being a survivor" is prominent in her story, as she finds meaning in her movement beyond the hurdles that she has stumbled upon. "Being a manager" is another theme in her lifestory, as this is largely

how she characterizes herself. She perceives her life to have been worthwhile through the fact that she has been an improver and a leader.

Chronological age was important for my participants only in the sense that it provided them with an accumulation of years lived, and accordingly, a larger repository of life experiences that includes greater numbers of people met and places traveled during their journey through life, than what fills my 24 years of life. "Age" did not hold meaning for them in and of itself, rather "aging" when prompted to reflect upon it, was considered yet another life experience that they have had to make sense of and adapt to. "Aging" difficulties were analogous to the difficulties brought on by life in general. This suggests that as researchers we need to move beyond considering "aging" as a category of meaning. They were aware of their age in the sense that it was articulated in the years they had lived, but also through the present and future. Awareness of their age was found in the way that they verbalized the passing of time, compared societal values over time, articulated new attitudes towards life and what they learned in life, and were dealing with bodily changes, caregiving responsibilities, alterations in partnership status, and their impending mortality. In addition, these lifestories show that differentiated patterns of living exist, and that current meanings in life, and the physical, psychological, and social capacities of older adults are linked to their biographies, which include all the parts of their life such as their childhood, adolescence, and adulthood experiences. Ruth and Öberg explain further, "Aging must be seen as a continuation of an integrated process, starting with earlier life, where the life lived gives meaning to old age" (Ruth and Öberg, 1996: 186).

These lifestories suggest strongly that later life is replete with many distinctive forms of personal meaning and show that older adults are existential beings who hold onto a sense of purpose and meaning in life. Through the reading of these lifestories generated by these four older adults, it was also apparent that they expressed in varying degrees an awareness of change in themselves over time, and were able to narratively link why this was so, yet at the same time they articulated an element of their sense of self that remained the same. They all presented narratives "of changing and of not changing" (Heikkinen, 1996). The awareness of change within themselves was found in the personal messages and advice that radiated from their lifestories about how, or how not, to live life based upon what they had learned through their own biographical journey. Despite the fact that they were able to report regrets in life, and things that they would have done differently, there was a widespread acceptance of the life that they had lived, which was integral to the awareness they possessed about why and how they lived out their life in the way that they did. This provides support drawing upon the words of Socrates, that the "examined life" is worth living, as Kenyon (2000) argues, if it leads to the emergence of existential meaning, or everyday "ordinary wisdom" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001).

One key aspect of conceiving life as a human journey is the assumption that there is a quality of openness or creativity that is built into the fabric of life (Kenyon, 2000). Moreover, another aspect of life from the personal existence perspective, and the implication for studying meaning in life, is the fact our lives are lived in interaction with other human beings. For this reason, "what is important is whether I am participating in the unfolding of my story or only drifting along, having it written for me" (Kenyon,

2000: 18). Each narrator when storying his or her life in the present identified factors that were defining or constraining their possibilities in life to varying degrees. Mary's story, however, is particularly useful in understanding better how our stories at certain periods in life can feel like they are being storied for us. During the course of her participation in this project, I witnessed a change in the way that she was storying her experience as a caregiver for her husband. Following our last interview, I was worried that Mary had become locked into her facticity, meaning that her "caregiving story" was determining exclusively her life in the present and making it difficult for her to realize the element of possibility within her story, or those aspects in her life where she could create new meaning. Mary explains, "I just lost all incentive you know, I'm just sort of keeping my head above water you know. It sapped, it sapped every idea that I had, you know, just coasting and going from meal to meal to meal to bed to get up and just waiting for life to happen to me." The quality of openness within her journey had begun to close. More specifically, she no longer perceived herself as being able to do the things that she liked to do and did not think she would ever be able to travel again. About this quality, Kenyon writes,

> Problems arise when our experiences are being "storied" by others, or ourselves in a way that does not represent our lived experience. In this situation, there is too much facticity and too little sense of possibility. Possibility can bring wonder, openness, feelings of well-being, happiness, gratitude towards life, and a view of life as an ongoing journey, and hope (Kenyon, 1996b: 33).

In the time that passed from our last interview and our next contact, Mary fortunately had moved forward in her voyage and was now able to write her story for herself again, as evidenced in the plans that she had made to travel to England for a family friend's wedding, which was made possible by her husband's admission into long-term care.

Another central component to the "personal existence perspective" outlined by Kenyon (2000) is that as human beings we are also biological organisms. Moreover, the body is important to meaning-making as Heikkinen explains, "So while the body is a means with which we perceive a world, it also creates and maintains a whole; it constitutes and regulates a world" (Heikkinen, 1996: 197). In addition, our relationship to our body in the past is going to factor into our interpretations of our bodiliness in the present. When storying their lives in the present, each narrator to some degree referred to their biology as determining their possibilities in life. Over time these narrators reflected that their body was becoming more noticeable to them, and accordingly, this was factored into their perception of the future. Walter and Betty were the most physically challenged in this study, but were the most comfortable with their bodiliness in the sense that significant alterations had occurred some time ago for both of them, and accordingly, were accepting of their bodies presently as they have already had to adapt their meaning in life. In contrast, Mary and Charles noted more recent bodily changes and were currently negotiating what these new limitations meant for them. For example, consider Mary's description of her current physical health:

> Up until about a year ago, two years ago, I would run for a bus sooner than miss it you know. I ran for a bus yesterday and when I got there [makes huffing and puffing sounds] I said to the driver, "I'm too old to run for the bus." But that's the first time I noticed that I shouldn't have run for the bus you know, but I can't let a bus go. I see it, I'm gonna get on it you know, and I'll run like mad.

Bearing in mind that the literature has problematized the Cartesian split that delineates a separation between the mind and the body, it is important to conceive an individual as a "single, complex being" (Heikkinen, 1996: 195). For this reason, when discussing the biological dimension of the narrating self, I include also attitudinal

changes that have emerged over time. Some of these attitudinal changes are related to the fact that as human beings our bodies have meaning for us, while other attitudinal changes are accumulated due to lessons learned throughout life. All of the narrators observed that "time is of the essence" and report feeling like they are running out of time when discussing their life in the present. The simile drawn upon by Walter in order to describe his feeling that time is shortening is particularly powerful: "The time, it's like being on a canoe that's about to go over a waterfall. You can't stop it. It just keeps rushing towards the falls." Despite the fact that these narrators report an increased awareness of their mortality, they "are still *living* time with a present, past, and future" (Kenyon, 2000: 15; emphasis in original) and are not waiting for death. In addition, these narrators observed in themselves a new attitude towards life, which enables them not to let issues that would have bothered them in the past to have that effect now. Again, Walter explains,

> I think I've become more, especially as I grow older, more accepting of other people and even though I would have been annoyed by some things earlier I kind of let, take it in stride now. And say, "Oh well, that's, that's the way they are and accept that." So I think a lot, a lot more patience. No, I don't get angry very often anymore, not angry. So I think there's been a change in temperament.

Another characteristic of the "journey of life" is that it is opaque meaning that we do not always know what is going to occur to us along our journey. It is not possible in this study to report whether or not these older adults were experiencing greater existential meaning, or acceptance of their life lived, than what they may have experienced during other periods of their life. Yet from my standpoint as a researcher who is in the early decades of life, it appeared to me that the meanings derived from the stories told from the wide landscape of their life was much clearer when considering their life as a whole. In

particular, this clarity was meaningful for me as a story-listener who is facing some of the same choices in life currently and in my future.

5.2 Crossing the Stories

These four lifestories reveal a great range of human experiences, yet despite this diversity, these older adult narrators are structurally similar in a few ways. Mary and Charles are currently caregivers, while Betty is a former caregiver. Walter and Betty are both living with a visual impairment. Charles and Mary both immigrated to Canada from the UK. World War II impacted in some way all of these narrators. Betty and Walter both grew up during the Great Depression. Being poor characterized largely the childhoods of Mary and Walter. Due to these social-structural commonalities, patterns of meaning were located in these lifestories because of the "larger stories" that we construct our lives within (Randall and Kenyon, 2001).

Historical events such as World War II and the Great Depression impacted the lives of these narrators greatly and were recalled with clarity. As a result, the early years for these narrators, with the exception of Betty, were not described as being particularly pleasant and happy times. For both Walter and Mary, the war was a key factor in ending engagements that occurred prior to the onset of the war. Personal circumstances such as the death or illness of a family member did not help matters in their early years for Charles and Mary. This is consistent with the findings from other research projects that when major historical events intersect with individual personal histories, the memories are vivid and perceived to have had a great impact (Dorfman et al., 2004; Shuman and Scott, 1989). Overall their lifestories suggest that their sense of possibility was

constrained during the beginning of their journey in life, but as their stories progress they are shaped less in relation to external circumstances and more towards personal abilities and achievements.

Gender was also a factor in the construction of these lifestories. Mary and Betty told lifestories that were emotionally charged and expressive. Our interviews also tended to be more anecdotal and conversational in nature. Characters were introduced more frequently and were carefully described. The various settings of their lives were richly illustrated. Describing the various homes they had lived in and the interiors of them was important for these women. On the whole, their relationships with their friends and family members were placed more prominently within their lifestories, while accomplishments and activities played a secondary role. Their stories focused on what happened to them, but also on who helped them to deal with the situations that they encountered. For example, Mary made a point of identifying all the persons who helped her over the years to look for her run-away daughter and cope with this traumatic situation. Their work history was important for both Mary and Betty because it had meaning for them, yet this story was fragmented and fractured as the responsibilities of child rearing and raising were considered.

In contrast, Walter and Charles told stories that were linear, concise, and highly structured. These narrators were also more reluctant to reveal their emotive selves, which corroborates what others have found in lifestory writing that men spend little time discussing their relationships or exploring their emotions (Ray, 1998). Instead, their public lives were more central in their lifestories. Although Walter provided elaborate descriptions about the role his brothers played in his life, this occurred only with

prompting after asking what it was like to grow up in a large family in a second interview.

These narrators also recognize changes in the social world around them, which are factored into their perceptions and concerns for the future. These concerns were formulated in relation to value systems that were internalized in a historical and cultural situation that is much different from the situation today (Heikkinen, 1996), and moreover, their stories suggest that they are trying to cope with these new values. For example, Mary is concerned about the work ethic she observes in society today. She comments on how the telephone was a "sacred" object at work and only used after it had been disinfected. For this reason, she has difficulty understanding why her children and grandchildren insist upon emailing and phoning her from the work place and considers this behaviour stealing. Betty expressed concern with the proliferation of entertainment options available for youth today and worries that this takes away from children's ability to "make their own fun," which she considers a key and valuable component of her upbringing. Overall, the concerns the narrators espouse with the world today suggest that each story "is written with a particular language during a particular era by a particular author" (Randall and Kenyon, 2001: 65).

5.3 Limitations of the Study

As alluded to earlier, each narrator in this study was differently "narratively intelligent" (Randall, 1999). The aim of this study was to assess how older adults were making sense of meaning in their lives and I attended to common story-telling structures such as plot, theme, characterization, and setting within the lifestories in order to examine

this process. I noticed that each narrator varied in his/her capacity to incorporate each of these elements into his/her lifestory. For example, Betty was clearly able to integrate setting into her life and provided extremely detailed descriptions of the different homes in which she had lived throughout her life. She was less skilled, however, at composing the social-structural dimension of her lifestory, which may suggest that this dimension is not a key component of her narrating self. Consequently, from the perspective of a social researcher it is difficult to examine in extensive detail how she has aged biographically in all realms of her life, since she was not able to compose this part of her story. Contrastingly, it was relatively easy to identify the plot in Charles and Walter's lifestory as there was great consistency in the way that they edited their story and connected events in their lives. The interpersonal dimension though was less developed in their lifestories, and as a result, it was more difficult to delineate how the relationships in their lives had meaning for them over time.

As Kenyon (1996a) warns, lifestories can sometimes be messy because of the many stories that we have to tell about our lives. Consequently, our lifestories do not necessarily blend easily into an overall coherence, or decompose into one singular and unifying thread. Even though I have identified only one plot line within the lifestories that I have collected, I suspect that many more subplots underscore these lives that I have not been privy to as an interviewer. Had I spent more time with each of the narrators and developed more of an interpersonal relationship with them, I expect that I would have been able to identify more than one plot line in their lifestory. This difficulty though, I would argue, stems from the lifestory interview structure itself. When the interview begins, like other lifestory interviewers, I prompted my participants to describe for me

their life, and in doing so, told them to start from wherever they would like. The interview setting, however, is a commonplace feature of everyday life (Gubrium and Holstein, 2002), and as a result, narrators expect to be asked questions when being interviewed, which can pose a challenge to the initiation of life story-telling. Moreover, the interview encounter is not a naturalized environment and because of this I noticed that my participants were more likely to tell neat and tidy stories reflective of this formalized structure. All of these narrators, with the exception of Mary, if I had let them could have told me their "whole" lifestory within an hour. In general, these narrators were less comfortable story-telling in a casual, spontaneous, and digressive fashion, which I suspect is needed in order to delineate more than one plot line. Along these lines, as additional plot lines are identified, so too will more themes.

Another difficulty residing in the pursuit of biographical research using a lifestory interview approach is that when interpreting the stories you are limited, as a social researcher, to the meanings of experiences pertaining only to the stories that were told within the interview encounters. For example, if Mary had not phoned me when I happened to be writing about her lifestory in this thesis, my interpretation would have been much different because without her phone call I would have concluded that she was currently locked into her facticity, being her story as a caregiver. Although the narrative approach is useful in capturing the fluidity of the meaning-making enterprise at a particular moment in time, it is remains limited in capturing the change in consciousness that results as new meanings of experiences transpire, which occur in light of new experiences that have taken place, and are taking place, in the life of the story-teller.

5.4 Future Research

One issue in particular haunted me during the course of this research and relates to the ethical issues integral to biographical research. I continually wondered whether I had provided a "wisdom environment," or safe and non-judgmental context, for my participants, which is carefully outlined by Randall and Kenyon (2001) as being central to life story-telling. I questioned further whether or not I was respecting the integrity and autonomy of my participants, and the story that they chose to live by, when examining their life from my vantage point as a social researcher. It is important for participants in lifestory research to feel like they "own" the stories that they tell about their lives. A direction for further inquiry lies in determining how to "read" the stories of others as researchers with the intention of learning about larger social phenomena in light of the intensely personal and somewhat spiritual nature of life story-telling. For example, more attention should be paid to the role of participants in the reading and analysis of the data, and the extent to which this is feasible throughout the whole research process, rather than returning to them at the end of the project with a summary of the research findings. Important questions for investigation include what it feels like as a participant to read a text written by a researcher about their life, and the role of the researcher in speaking about someone else's story. As Frank states, "Analysis has its legitimate sphere, but there is also a clear imperative for the analyst to step back from first-person testimony and allow those who testify to speak for themselves" (Frank, 2000: 361).

Another issue for future research lies in examining how narrators story their lives over time, and at different periods in life, while progressing through the journey of life. Most interestingly, there is a paucity of longitudinal research from a narrative approach;

and this is an area of inquiry that strongly needs attention. Longitudinal research is needed in order to investigate whether or not we change elements such as plot, theme, and the characterization of ourselves, and others, over time. This would help us to identity how and when plot lines and themes develop in our lifestories and provide undoubtedly new insights into the way in which we age biographically. Such research will help us to understand better the relationship between the change and continuity that occurs with human aging and how this relates to the construction of meaning in life.

Even though only four lifestories were collected in this study distinctive life patterns were found. Future research needs to continue to document the variety of ways in which older adults story time and incorporate plot lines and themes into their lifestories in order to uncover the similarities and differences in meanings that are ascribed to the way people experience themselves, others, and the social world. This means larger numbers of participants and attention to intersections such as gender, ethnicity, class, and health status to name a few during recruitment procedures to reflect the diversity of experiences in later life. Moreover, research needs to be conducted with both young and middle-aged adults in order to learn more about how their age identity, or the way in which they story time, shapes the stories that they tell reflecting meaning and purpose in their life.

5.5 Ordinary Wisdom, Personal Reflections, and Future Stories

In an attempt to close this chapter and this thesis, I feel that it is appropriate to evoke again my reflexive self and abandon my research voice. For this piece, I leave the narrative analysis and story structures behind and instead focus on the stories and what I

learned from them as a fellow human being. Accordingly, Frank (2000) in his promotion of ethics as first sociology warns that an exclusive focus on story structures "risks leaving out what may be most important to the storytellers themselves" (Frank, 2000: 354). In addition, these stories with Charles, Betty, Walter, and Mary were collaborative and co-authored with me and when focusing on the data for analysis, you risk "losing the purpose for which people engage in storytelling, which again is relationship building" (Frank, 2000: 355).

A relationship between these narrators and myself has developed during the course of this research. We spent hours together story-telling and story-listening and I spent several more hours processing and churning their lifestories, in order to transfer them from tape to text, and finally to the form presented in this thesis. I have lived with them for the last few months and appropriately they have become an integral part of my own journey in time. For this reason, I will reflect upon what I have learned from these stories as a fellow human being and traveler in time, and expose what is personally relevant for me within their stories while considering what aspects of their journey resonate with my own. This corresponds to what I value in their lifestories and the way in which I perceive these narrators to be ordinarily wise due to the life experiences they have encountered (Randall and Kenyon, 2001).

I listened to a segment of Mary's lifestory like a schoolgirl when she described to me having to make a decision between Howard, the fellow she got engaged to prior to the onset of the war, and Frank, a man that she had recently met at a school dance who she eventually decided to marry. The parallel to what was happening in my own life at the time of hearing this story was uncanny. Shortly before our first interview in which I was

told of Mary's dilemma I had recently met and starting dating someone, rather than pursue another relationship that was open to me at the time. Naturally, when deciding to travel one path I was letting go of another and wondered of course whether I was making the right decision. For this reason, it was gripping to listen to Mary's account of these events today and whether or not she had any regrets.

Betty and Walter's stories fascinated me for completely different reasons. Although I am not blind myself, my ability to see without the use of corrective lenses or glasses is seriously impaired. My optometrist informs me assuredly each year that no matter how much my vision declines that he can correct it, but upon occasion I ponder what my life would be like if I could not see. How would I write sociological papers? How would I read journal articles and conduct research? Even though Betty and Walter are severely visually impaired their stories inform me that a reasonable quality of life exists without eyesight.

Admittedly, I had great difficulty connecting with Charles during our interviews, especially during our second interview in which we discussed his social and political values and it became obvious to me that we did not share the same point of view. Naturally I kept my opinions to myself and continued to nod and smile, which of course prolonged my agony. I became the most uncomfortable though when he strongly criticized the need for higher education in society today. I wondered, and still do, what he thought about my reason for being there to interview him in order to complete my requirements for my Master's degree in Sociology. Despite these difficulties connecting with Charles during the story-telling process, his story resonated in a different way weeks later when I began to question how I wanted my lifestory to read when I was older while

making the decision as to what city I was going to travel to next in order to complete my last degree. Would I move to the United States in order to work with a world-renowned gerontologist or would I stay in Canada and live in a city that was close to family and friends? I began to question the extent to which "accomplishing" in my career trajectory was important for me.

Other sorts of messages and personal philosophies resound within these lifestories as well about how I should live my life. From Charles I learned the importance of making decisions quickly, and not dwelling upon a decision once it has been made. This is an issue that I consistently struggle with in my own life. Walter tells me not to be afraid to take chances in life like he did, while Betty informs me that it is not what happens to you in life, it is what you make of it. Mary strongly advises that I manage my money smartly, and turf the credit card offers that continually arrive in my mail-box. As a graduate student living on a tight budget, this is sound advice!

These are only a few examples of how these stories are personally meaningful and relevant for me in my life today. I wonder how these messages will be incorporated into my life as I continue my own journey through time? What will I continue to learn from these narrators as I encounter new life experiences and how will my personal meanings be re-evaluated? Only time will tell.

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APPENDIX A: Informed Consent Form

Age Identity and Making Sense of Meaning in the Lives of Older Adults

Introduction

You are being invited to participate in a study entitled "Age Identity and Making Sense of Meaning in the Lives of Older Adults" that is being conducted by Jessica Gish. I am a graduate student in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact me by phone at 250-###-#### or at 250-###-#### or by email jgish@uvic.ca if you have any further questions.

As a graduate student, I am required to conduct research as part of the requirements for a Master's degree in Sociology. It is being conducted under the supervision of Neena Chappell, a professor in the Department of Sociology at the University of Victoria. You may contact my supervisor by phone at 250-###-#### or by email at nlc@uvic.ca if you have any questions or concerns. You may also contact the Associate Vice-President, Research at the University of Victoria at 250-###-####.

Purpose of the Research

The purpose of this research project is to examine how the age identities of older adults shape the stories told about meaning and purpose in their lives. Research on meaning in life in older age is important because of the difficulty some people may have finding meaning in the aging process due to societal views that aging is a social problem and something that should be avoided. As a result, it is important to document the life stories of older adults so that knowledge of aging can be communicated to younger and middle-aged adults.

Procedures

You are being asked to participate in this study because of your firsthand knowledge and experience with the aging process as an older adult. If you agree to voluntarily participate in this research, your participation will involve one or two interviews about 1-2 hours in length in which you will be asked to tell me your life story. After your life story has been documented, you would be interviewed a third time about what the aging process has meant to you, as you have grown older. Interviews will occur during the next few months at scheduled times convenient for you.

Your participation in this research must be completely voluntary. If you do decide to participate, you may withdraw at any time without any consequences or any explanation. If you do withdraw from the study your information will be destroyed. However, with your permission the information gathered prior to your withdrawal will be used in the analysis. In order to assure myself that you are continuing to give your consent to participate in this research, during each individual interview that is conducted the consent process will be reviewed.

Risks

The only inconvenience associated with your participation in this project is the time that is required to complete the interviews. In addition, there are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research. By participating in this research there is the potential that you

may feel emotional upset at some time during the interview process as you tell me your life story. If you become upset during any of the interviews, you can ask to stop the interview at any time to take a break or we can arrange another time to complete the interview. If you feel that you need to discuss the issue further you can call the PCS Seniors Hotline at 250-655-4402.

Potential Benefits

The potential benefits of your participation in this research include a better understanding of what age means to older adults in their everyday lives, and how this understanding affects meaning in life. If you wish, upon the completion of this research, I will provide you with a copy of the transcripts during which you told me your life-story.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

Your confidentiality and the confidentiality of the information will be protected. No material will bare any identifying information and your anonymity will be protected using pseudonyms, or fake names, and by disguising any potentially revealing information. Your name will not be attached to the results and it will not be possible to identify participants in the thesis or in any presentations or publications from it. Only the researcher, Jessica Gish, and the person hired to transcribe some of the interviews (who will have signed an oath of confidentiality) will have access to the tapes. Any information collected in this study will remain confidential: interview transcripts, tapes, and other research materials will be kept in a locked room at the Centre on Aging, University of Victoria. Upon the completion of the research, all of the original audiotapes will be erased once they have been transcribed. The transcripts made from this study will be kept by the researcher for possible use in future research endeavours with the understanding that the appropriate research and ethics committees will approve any research projects using these transcriptions.

Uses of the Information

The information will primarily be used in the writing of my Master's Thesis; however, the findings from this research may also be used to generate journal articles and academic presentations. At the completion of the study you will be sent a summary of the findings and will have access to the study results once it is completed if you wish.

Your signature below indicates that you understand the above conditions of participation in this study and that you have had the opportunity to have your questions answered by the researcher.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	*Signature*	*Date*

A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.

APPENDIX B: Lifestory Interview Schedule

1. Now that we've met and talked for a few minutes I'd like to know more about you and your life. Would you describe your life for me; whatever comes to mind about it? Start where you like, take as much time as you need.

2. What were some of the most important turning points in your life?

3. What are some of your most poignant memories that you have about your life?

4. Tell me about some of the happiest moments in your life.

5. Tell me about some of the saddest moments in your life.

6. What have been some of the biggest challenges that you have encountered throughout your life?

7. What person, group of persons, or organization has had a positive (and negative) impact upon your lifestory?

8. Describe for me what your life is like in the present. What does a typical day look like for you? What do you do throughout the week?

9. How would you describe yourself when you were younger?

10. How would you describe yourself now?

11. How do you think you have changed over the years?

12. What do you see for yourself in the future?

13. If you could live your life over, what would you do differently?

14. What are some of your religious and spiritual beliefs?

15. What is your philosophy of life?

16. How do you approach social and political issues?

17. What else should I know to understand your lifestory?

APPENDIX C: Age Identity Interview Schedule

1. What does aging mean to you?
2. How have your perceptions of aging changed, as you have grown older?
3. Have you had a hard time growing older?
4. Do you consider yourself to be 'old'?
5. What does 'young' mean to you? What does 'old' mean to you?
6. What did you think your life would be like in 'old age'?
7. What have you learned about yourself in later life that perhaps you didn't know about earlier in life?
8. What do you like about being your age? Dislike about being your age?
9. Do you ever feel discriminated upon because of your age? If yes, describe for me why this is so. What have you done about it?
10. How do you think society as a whole views 'old age'?
11. Have you ever felt devalued because of your age?
12. Do you ever worry about what other people think about you because of your age?
13. What changes have happened in your life, as you have grown older? What have you done about these changes?
14. How have your perceptions of your body changed with age?
15. What changes have you noticed in your friends and family, as they have grown older?
16. How has aging been different for you than for other people?
17. What makes you feel old? What makes you not feel old?
18. Who taught you how to age? Do you have any aging role models?
19. Think about your past birthdays. What were you thinking and feeling when you turned 18/19/21, 30, 40, 50, etc.? What do you think about in regards to your next birthday?

APPENDIX D: Oath of Confidentiality for Transcriptionist

Project Title: **Age Identity and Making Sense of Meaning in the Lives of Older Adults**

Researcher: Jessica Gish, BA (Honours)
Masters Student, University of Victoria
Department of Sociology
Phone: ###-#### or ###-####

Supervisor: Neena Chappell, Phd, FRSC
Canada Research Chair in Social Gerontology
Professor, University of Victoria
Phone: ###-####

Role on Project: Transcriptionist

I have agreed to work on this study by transcribing interview materials.

I will protect confidentiality in this study by assuring that the anonymity of each participant is maintained at all times. This will mean that each participant is assigned a pseudonym that will be used on all tapes and written notes that apply to that participant so that their name and identity is protected. Thus, all identifying information within the transcriptions of the interviews that I transcribe will be deleted and altered to preserve anonymity. All research materials for this study will be kept secured in a locked filing cabinet while in my possession. After completing any work pertaining to the research project, I will return all tapes, original print outs, and copies to the researcher. I will also erase any materials pertaining to the research project from the hard drive of the computer that I am using once the information is given to the researcher. Finally, I will not, under any circumstances, disclose any information in the interviews to anyone.

I have had the opportunity to discuss these requirements with the researcher, Jessica Gish and have received a signed copy of this confidentiality agreement.

Signed: _____

Dated: _____