The Importance of Being Ironic: Narrative Openness and Personal Resilience in Later Life

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Received December 30, 2011; Accepted February 29, 2012
Decision Editor: Helen Q Kivnick, PhD

This essay applies a narrative perspective to the topic of resilience. On various fronts (physical, social, biographical), aging itself, it argues, pushes us past a perception of aging as intrinsically tragic and toward a more ironic stance instead, one marked by increased acceptance of uncertainty and ambiguity. Moreover, intentional engagement in narrative reflection—by means of integrative reminiscence, life review, and the like—fosters such a stance directly by facilitating narrative openness and, with it, “a good strong story” for coping with the challenges of later life.

Key Words: Biographical aging, Life review, Integrative reminiscence, Narrative foreclosure

We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high. If it is a long defeat it is also a victory, meaningful for the initiates of time, if not for those who have come less far. (Scott-Maxwell, 1968, p. 5)

Despite various adversities they’ve faced throughout their lives, certain people inspire us by their gift of keeping positive and open as the years advance: still learning and contributing—still growing old and not just getting old. We call such people resilient. Defined as “the ability to transform adversity into a growth experience and move forward” (Hengudomsuub, 2007, p. 115), resilience is the capacity to see something hopeful (Ong, Edwards, & Bergeman, 2006), humorous, or otherwise “redemptive” (McAdams, 2006) amid the negatives of our lives. It’s a capacity enhanced, it seems, through “life review” and having access to a range of “identity projects” and “possible selves” (Staudinger, Marsiske, & Baltes, 1995). Given, though, that “identity,” “life review,” and “self” can each be understood in narrative terms (see Randall & McKim, 2008), then resilience itself has a narrative dimension. It’s a function of narrative openness, I propose. It’s a function of a good strong story, a story of oneself and one’s world that has a healthy strain of irony running through it.

My aim in what follows is to weave insights from the social sciences with those from the humanities and introduce a narrative perspective to discussions of resilience. Pivotal to that perspective is the conviction that biographical aging (Birren, Kenyon, Ruth, Schroots, & Svensson, 1996)—aging with respect to our self-understanding over time, to “the story” we entertain about our life—is as complex and as critical to consider as, say,
biological aging. Pivotal, too, is the notion that “narrative reflection” (Freeman, 2010) upon that story facilitates a greater sense of irony by affording us an affectionate detachment from our life, intensifying our interior complexity, and thickening our sense of self. As such, it renders us more resilient.

I’ll begin by saying more about the two key terms that I’m connecting here: resilience and irony. After noting certain age-related changes that seed a sense of irony in us anyway, I’ll outline a narrative approach to gerontology, with emphasis on the role that narrative reflection can play in furthering ironic awareness. I’ll then return to the concept of A Good Strong Story and end with certain questions that invite consideration.

Resilience and Irony

In brief, research on resilience in later life suggests that it is linked to several factors. Among these are emotional complexity, namely “the capacity to maintain . . . the boundaries between positive and negative emotional states” (Ong, Bergemann, Bisconti, & Wallace, 2006, p. 730). Resilient people, one could say, exercise emotional intelligence and choose to focus on “positive emotions”—and positive memories—in the face of negative life events (p. 742). Gerontologists Kennedy, Fung, and Carstensen (2001), using the companion term emotional poignancy, defined as “the simultaneous co-occurrence of positive and negative emotions,” insist that “as time becomes more limited” and they realize that “every moment and event may be the last,” older adults “experience emotions that are richer, more complex and poignant, and perhaps more meaningful” (p. 66).

Resilient people are also said to have a “diversified structure of priorities and self-conceptions (and) multiple identities which are richly construed,” plus “access to a larger set of well-developed possible selves” (Staudinger et al., 1995, p. 818). Such cognitive complexity, as it can be called, “may be a protective factor as we confront and manage growing old,” rendering us “more successful . . . in (our) mastery of negative developmental changes with (our) health condition.” In short, it translates into “better mental health” (p. 818).

Also, at work in resilience is the capacity to identify with a culture, creed, or cause that situates our immediate concerns within a broader context. Becker and Newsom (2004) have found, for instance, that African Americans who remain resilient in the face of chronic illness tend to view their situation against the backdrop of oppression and discrimination experienced by African Americans in general. In relation to this history, their illness is but “one part of life” and “another form of adversity to be overcome” (p. 9).

For Boss (2002), originator of the concept of ambiguous loss, resilience is “the ability to tolerate ambiguity without forcing inappropriate closure” (p. 17). Besides often being “deeply spiritual” and making sense of things within a larger frame of reference, resilient persons, she says, have a greater capacity for “dialectical thinking,” for “hold[ing] two opposing ideas in their mind at the same time” (p. 17).

For its part, irony is commonly described as a mode of literary rhetoric in which a narrator or character says one thing although meaning another (Booth, 1974). Yet irony is more than this. Since at least the 18th century, it’s been seen as a matter of displaying contradiction between competing words, ideas, or perspectives. In our own times, it’s said to be the defining sensibility of postmodernity, dubbed “the age of irony” (Gibbs, 1994, p. 370), in which contingency and contradiction, uncertainty and ambiguity, plus the mistrust of master narratives of any sort are the hallmarks of human experience (Hutcheon, 1992; Prickett, 2002, pp. 14–53). In general, to be ironic is to have a certain distance on things, to view them critically or from the “edge” (Hutcheon, 1994). And it’s to be mindful of the numerous perspectives from which all phenomena can be interpreted, the multiple narratives that we can spin around them, and the indeterminacy of meaning that’s thus implied.

More specifically, irony is “endemic to narrative” itself (Prickett, 2002, p. 38). It is “built into the narrative form as in no other form of literature,” insofar as “the disparity of viewpoint” in “the relationship between the teller and the tale, the teller and the audience” (Scholes & Kellogg, 1966, p. 240), which characterizes traditional uses of literary or dramatic irony, operates in all relationships among tellers, tales, and audiences. In the case of life-narrative, such disparity concerns the stories that are central to our own identity, of which we ourselves are—arguably—teller, tale, and audience all at once. Through narrative reflection, our awareness of this disparity is enhanced.

Aging and Irony

We are naturally ironic to some extent at any age, of course, by virtue of being self-conscious
creatures mindful of the gap between I and Me, Self and Other, and Present and Past. Yet, late life in particular brings changes that can push us to be more ironic still.

On the physical front, our body can feel increasingly our nemesis as we age, more antagonist than protagonist in the story of our life. “Nothing in us works well,” sighs Scott-Maxwell (1968), writing in her 80s; “we have to make an effort to do the simplest things” (p. 35). The aches and pains of later life bring out the disparity between impulse and ability, between what we want to do and what we can. The same disparity, I propose, inspires the irony-laden humor—the jokes—in which the elderly themselves so often delight, for the levity it allows, the perspective it permits on their infirmity . . . and mortality.

On the social front, loss of employment and mobility can leave us feeling disconnected from the world, on the outside looking in. As well, our experience of close relationships can be increasingly ambivalent (Connidis & McMullin, 2002).

On the cognitive front, shifts in the mechanics of our aging brains make us more capable of postformal thought, which entails greater openness to paradox and contradiction, as well as metaphor and symbol (see Cohen, 2005; Laboviv-Vief, 2000). For educator Grams (2001), who notes the value of “a well-developed sense of irony” in later life (p. 104), postformal thought “requires accommodating ambiguity and uncertainty, irony and contradiction, with the integrative process of finding meaning in life” (p. 101).

On the developmental front, aging can bring disillusionment with certain “guiding false assumptions,” rooted in our childhood, by which, for psychologist Gould (1978), our maturation is constrained. For Kohlberg (1984), moral development consists in a gradual “de-centering” or “self-transcending.” For Loevinger (1976), ego development involves a decrease in black-and-white thinking and an openness to alternative versions of Truth. For Fowler (1981), faith development is signaled by the rise of “the ironic imagination” (p. 198): the ability to see “both (or the many) sides of an issue simultaneously” (p. 185). For Cohen (2005), aging brings increased potential for “developmental intelligence” (pp. 29–49) plus an “inner push” (pp. 31ff.) to undertake a “summing up” (p. 75–82) of our lives, a push intensified by awareness of our mortality. This awareness is, in turn, inherently ironic. Witness Erikson’s definition of wisdom as “detached concern with life itself, in the face of death itself” (Erikson, Erikson, & Kivnick, 1986, p. 37).

It’s on the biographical front particularly, however, that irony is ingrained in us. And pivotal to developing it further is narrative reflection, a topic I’ll return to in a moment. Before that, allow me to outline a few core concepts of a narrative approach to aging.

**Narrative Gerontology**

Narrative gerontology views human beings as hermeneutical beings, as makers of meaning (Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001; Kenyon, Bohlmeijer, & Randall, 2011). Equipped with “the literary mind” (Turner, 1996), one of our main means of making it is by making stories. To make sense of our life’s events, in other words, is to wield our innate talent for “narrative thought” (Bruner, 1987) and weave storylines around them, as around our life as a whole, a process that always leaves things open to interpretation. With every meaning we may glean from a given life event, in other words, part of us suspects that others could be gleaned as well. It’s in such suspicion that irony is rooted.

From a narrative perspective, says sociolinguist Linde (1993), our lives are “structurally and interpretively open” (p. 31). As stories, suggests psychologist Freeman (1993), our lives are “richly ambiguous texts . . . whose meanings are inexhaustible, . . . whose readings cannot ever yield a final closure” (p. 184). Yet closure, in a sense, is precisely what many can succumb to with advancing age: a state of heart in which, though life itself continues on, one’s story is all but over, with no new chapters deemed apt to open up and no new events or characters altering the plot. It’s a state, in short, of “narrative foreclosure” (Bohlmeijer, Westerhof, Randall, Tromp, & Kenyon, 2011).

Narrative foreclosure can be imposed on us against our will, of course, by persons, policies, or programs that, knowingly or not, conceive of aging in terms of a “narrative of decline” (Gullette, 2004, p. 28; see also Phoenix & Smith, 2011). In effect, they de-story us, treating us not as full persons with narratives of our own but as “cases” or “patients” or “problems” to be solved. The point is, for better or worse, and more or less, our lives are always storied for us. We weave them, not within a social vacuum, but amid various “discursive environments” (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000, p. 228) or “narrative environments” (Randall & McKim, 2008, pp. 50–57)—from families to communities...
to cultures—in which they’re interknit with others’ narratives in intricate coauthoring relationships. As such, where “my story” begins and “your story” ends is impossible to say.

From a narrative perspective, instead of being peripheral, story is in fact central to our sense of self (see, e.g., Bruner & Kalmar, 1998; Eakin, 1999; Freeman, 1993; Holstein & Gubrium, 2000; Kerby, 1991; McAdams, 2006; Polkinghorne, 1988). To use Erikson’s (1968) term, it’s integral to our sense of identity. As psychologist McAdams (2001) insists, “identity is a life story” (p. 643), namely “an internalized and evolving personal myth that functions to provide life with unity and purpose” (McAdams, 1996, p. 132; see also McAdams, Josselson, & Lieblich, 2006). It’s a myth-story-text that we don’t merely have, however, but on some level are (Randall, 1995). It’s a sprawling, semi-literary real-life novel that we think of as “our life” (Randall, 1999), one with its own brand of subplots, characters, and genres. And, overall, the genre that most naturally accompanies later life, I’m proposing, is irony.

If innocence characterizes childhood, in other words, and earnestness typifies adulthood, with all its striving to make our mark, and if for many, a more “tragic sense” (Levinson, 1978, pp. 225ff.) emerges as youthful aspirations remain unmet, then irony, as an over-arching orientation, goes best perhaps with later life. More than any other stage, it’s in later life that we face the limits of our identity, the edges of our being, and the cloud of unknowing that enshrouds our world. Put another way, if aging represents the postmodern era in our lives as individuals, then journeying deeper into it is marked by a subtle sort of re-genre-ation. Rather than seeing it as intrinsically tragic, that is, we come to view it from a more ironic stance instead, a stance that’s more flexible, more expansive, and more accepting of uncertainty, more able to appreciate the lighter, less serious sides of situations (past and present), as of ourselves—the tragic-comic sides. Such a stance, I'm suggesting, serves a “protective function” (Staudinger et al., 1995, p. 819) before the challenges of later life and renders us more resilient.

Biographically, then, we are complicated creatures whose lives—as texts—abound with potential for irony, a potential that narrative reflection can enhance.

**Narrative Reflection**

For Freeman (2010), narrative reflection is effectively hindsight, the process of “looking back over the terrain of the past from the standpoint of the present and either seeing things anew or drawing ‘connections’ . . . that could not possibly be drawn during the course of ongoing moments but only in retrospect” (p. 4). What Freeman means here is narrative reflection of a particularly intentional type, as opposed to the automatic type we all engage in anyway by virtue of being self-conscious creatures in need of making sense of day-to-day events. Intentional narrative reflection on our life as a whole, which Freeman refers to as “big story” reflection (pp. 165–169), plays a pivotal role in the development of self-understanding, insofar as “the forward movement of development” is tied to “the backward movement of narrative” (p. 14). Ironically, that is, going forward into the future depends on insights gained by looking back and seeing patterns in our past, acquiring distance on our life to date, and perceiving it as indeed a story with a Beginning, a Middle, and eventually an End.

For gerontologists, narrative reflection corresponds, of course, to integrative reminiscence, to life review, or to what might broadly be called “reading our lives” (Randall & McKim, 2008). In a variety of ways, involvement in such processes increases our interior complexity and permits us perspective on our past.

Through narrative reflection, for example, we become more curious about the selectiveness of our memory. Why have these few stories stood the test of time and not the many others that could have done instead, and why do we tell them this way and not that? Might there be deeper, more insightful ways? de Medeiros’ (2007) research on life-writing groups with older adults is pertinent here. Members are invited to explore especially poignant memories with the aid of different strategies: first-person memoir, third person story, a poem, a letter. “Using different forms [to explore the same episode] opens up different possibilities for the narrator,” she says, “and allows different types of stories to be told” (de Medeiros & Lagay, 2000, p. 14). James Birren links life-writing directly to resilience in discussing how through guided autobiography, a unique mode of life review which he pioneered, “a person can gain distance from the emotionally difficult and develop an increased sense of mastery” (Birren & Deutchman, 1991, p. 81). In this connection, Ernst Bohlmeijer and his colleagues in the Netherlands have shown a link between reminiscence, life review, and the alleviation of depression (Bohlmeijer & Westerhof, 2011; Steunenberg & Bohlmeijer, 2011). Reflecting on...
the life-writing groups she researched for her book *Beyond Nostalgia*, Ruth Ray (2000) makes a link to *wisdom* as well. "A person is truly 'wise,'" says Ray, "when she is able to see life as an evolving story and to create some distance between self and story by reflecting on it from multiple perspectives" (p. 28).

Narrative reflection increases our awareness of the disparity between events themselves and the meanings that we make of them after the fact; between "the facts" and the *factions* memory spins them into. It sensitizes us to the slippage between our thoughts or our feelings and the language we enlist to express them; to the fact that we can never capture anything completely (a mood, a memory, a dream) in *any* form; to how there's always something more that can't be put in words. It highlights for us the gap between telling and living, between the said and the unsayable—the gap where irony "happens" (Hutcheon, 1994, pp. 89–115). It makes us more aware of the stories that we can recount about our lives and those that we can't, that await the right audience or occasion to trigger their telling: troubling or traumatic stories that call for "reconciliation" (Coleman, 1999) or "restoring" (Kenyon & Randall, 1997) into the overarching narrative by which we understand our lives.

Through narrative reflection, therefore, we become more aware of the lives we haven't lived: our "unlived life" (Scott-Maxwell, 1968, p. 139). We become more curious about those sides of our selves we haven't yet explored, about our possible selves or "possible lives" (Brockmeier, 2002), the possibilities for being *us*. Put another way, narrative reflection alerts us to the variety of selves that populate our inner world (Hermans, 2002)—self-now versus selves-then, self-as-narrator versus self-as-character, self-as-knower versus self-as-known, and so on. "There are many stories of Self to tell," echoes autobiography scholar Eakin (1999), capturing the narrative complexity at work within us, "and more than one self to tell them" (p. xi).

Narrative reflection also helps us to appreciate that the past itself is never settled, for we invariably view it through the prism of the present, which we interpret in turn in light of the future we envision. But because both our present and our future are forever changing, narrative reflection pushes us to appreciate that our lives are open texts, with no intrinsic limits on the meanings they contain, the interpretations they invite. Accordingly, it helps us to tolerate indeterminacy, "to cope with the inchoate" (Gibbs, 1994, p. 369), to experience "the thrill of narrative freedom" (Gullette, 2004, p. 158). Analyzing the narrative dynamics in the late life journals of writer May Sarton, gerontologist Harry Berman notes, for instance, how "even in later life, the movement of [one's horizon of self-understanding] can lead to a reconfiguration of the events of the past and a radical rewriting of the story of one's life" (p. 194). "Perhaps," he says, "we thought our life was a tragedy and all along, unbeknownst to us, it was a romance. Or perhaps we thought our life was almost over, at least in terms of the future holding anything new, and it turned out there was a lot more to it" (p. 180).

**A Good Strong Story**

Critics raving about a movie will sometimes say it has a "great story," meaning that it has captivating sub-plots, complex characters, and compelling themes; that it "works" on several levels and invites from us continuing reflection. In saying that "a good strong story" is essential to resilience, it's such a narrative I have in mind.

"A good life story," says McAdams (2001), "shows considerable openness to change and tolerance for ambiguity." It "propels the person into the future by holding open a number of different alternatives for future action and thought. Life stories," he says, "need to be flexible and resilient" (p. 663). That said, the concept of a *good life story* and its determining criteria—openness being one; coherence, another—is not without detractors (see Hyvärinen, Hydén, Saarenheimo, & Tamboukou, 2010, on coherence alone), even if several have employed it or implied it as a heuristic for emotional well-being (see Coleman, 1999; Gubrium, 2003; McAdams, 2001). When giving a paper not long ago in which I introduced the companion concept of "a good *strong* story" (Randall, 2010b), the audience was concerned that the phrase connotes a narrative that's intransigent or ego-centric, authoritarian even, resistant to critique. This is hardly what I have in mind.

What I envision by a good strong story is analogous to a spreading oak or towering elm, with limbs and branches extending from a central trunk, roots reaching out in all directions, and the gift of bending gracefully to wind and storm. A good strong story is thick, not thin; wide, not narrow; resilient, not rigid. It is open to alternatives—alternative interpretations, alternative selves—at every turn. Overall, it extends in complex ways inside us and beyond us both.
Inside us, it is open to multiple readings of life-events and multiple levels of meaning. Because there are no intrinsic limits to what events can mean for us, there are therefore no built-in boundaries to our biographical development. In principle, our self-understanding can evolve forever—ever thickening, ever widening—as we view and review the past, as we read and re-read it, through the lens of an ever-changing present.

Besides cognitive and emotional complexity, a good strong story possesses narrative complexity as well. It embraces multiple characters, multiple themes, and “multiple fluid narratives” (Bateson, 2007) of our past and future alike. And, it contains multiple strands of story material, short and long, shallow and deep; and with them, multiple gaps: between the stories we tell and those that we can’t; between the told, the untold, and the untellable—once more, the gaps where irony happens.

A good strong story extends beyond us as well, beyond our family and community. Through genealogy, for instance, it reaches back in time to previous generations and, through generativity, it stretches out to future ones as well. As such, it is “time expansive” (Webster, 2011), open ultimately perhaps to our being creatures of the cosmos, composed of elements forged initially in the hearts of stars, a possibility which, if valid, leaves distinctions like present—past, young—old, and life—death a bit irrelevant in the end. Tornstam (1996) anticipates this with his theory of gerotranscendence, as does Hayflick (1994) with his delightful observation that “we are all billion-year olds no matter when we were born, and celebrating birthdays is absurd” (p. 18). A good strong story reaches out—in humility and awe—to something grander than ourselves, to a vaster narrative than that of our own little self, to what Freeman (2010) cautiously calls the “transcendent horizon of the life story” (p. 94). Open to the complexity of life on every front, a good strong story is marked not only by irony, therefore, but by wonder as well.

Apart from the quote included at the start by Florida Scott-Maxwell, I can think of few passages that express better the blend of humility and uncertainty, ambivalence and wonder that’s central to an ironic stance than this one by Carl Jung (1961) from the final pages of his memoir, written in his 80s:

The older I have become, the less I have understood or had insight into or known about myself. I am astonished, disappointed, pleased with myself. I am distressed, depressed, rapturous. I am all of these things at once, and cannot add up the sum.

I am incapable of determining ultimate worth or worthlessness; I have no judgment about myself and my life. There is nothing I am quite sure about. I have no definite convictions—not about anything, really. I know only that I was born and exist, and it seems to me that I have been carried along. I exist on the foundation of something I do not know. In spite of all uncertainties, I feel a solidity underlying all existence and a continuity in my mode of being. (p. 358)

The Importance of Being Ironic

Gerontology is an earnest discipline. Our research aims to make a concrete difference in older people’s lives, not to muse on topics which, alongside pragmatic matters such as seniors’ housing, fall prevention, and the like, seem somewhat esoteric. Perhaps, though, my musings on the importance of being ironic can add a little to our understanding of resilience, surely a quality which older people—if not us all—can benefit from acquiring. And perhaps they can add, too, to our understanding of “aging well,” defined for us by Chapman (2005) as “the coconstruction and reconstruction of multiple selves in an ongoing, open-ended process of meaning-making amid later-life events and transitions” (p. 9). Insofar as emotional complexity, cognitive complexity, and tolerance of ambiguity, for instance, contribute to resilience, if not also to aging well, then surely a well-honed sense of irony, seeded by the aging process itself and nurtured by narrative reflection, is a factor to consider too. In this case, certain questions bear looking into further.

If irony is always “edgy” and can be positive or negative in nature, then what’s to prevent an ironic stance from slipping into cynicism (been-there, done-that) and eventually despair?

What can we learn about resilience from discussions of the “late style” (Said, 2006) that’s evident, supposedly, in the work of certain artists or writers as they age? More specifically, how might exposure to works of literature about or by the aged themselves, plus memoirs of the same, aid us in experiencing our own life-texts in more ironic ways, given the complex “rhetoric of irony” (Booth, 1974) which such works reflect? How might we achieve a more “ambiguous, nuanced view of aging” in general (Holstein, 1994, p. 823), not to mention a view of ambiguity itself as “at the center of human life” (p. 827)?

And what of the relationship between resilience and religion, insofar as, for many, religion is more about certainty and rigidity than irony and wonder.
Perhaps for some of those resilient individuals identified as “deeply spiritual,” their strength before adversity is rooted less in tolerance for ambiguity than in the belief they hold the Answers to life’s enduring questions.

What is the link between irony and personality? Certain persons seem particularly ironic in the ways that they express themselves and view the world, regardless of their age. Is it possible that an ironic stance is ultimately, then, a function of our nature, as measured by how we score in terms of innate traits like “openness to experience” (see Staudinger et al., 1995, p. 820)? If so, can it nonetheless be nurtured by narrative reflection, if not by life experience itself?

What are the links between irony, resilience, and resistance? More specifically, what role does narrative reflection have in composing a “counter-story” of aging to stand up to the narrative of decline (Phoenix & Smith, 2011)?

Concerning gender, are women in general more complex, biographically, than men, and to that extent more ironic? Insofar as, from childhood on, the memories that they form about their lives tend to be more detailed, more textured, and more emotionally nuanced than those formed by men (see, e.g., Fivush, Haden, & Reese, 1995; Terrill & Gullifer, 2010), how might this contribute to increased resilience and, with it, increased longevity? Of relevance here as well, perhaps, are organizations like the Raging Grannies, older women activists who raise awareness on issues of justice and equality using outrageous costumes, humorous skits, and satirical songs (Caisse, 2011).

Concerning culture (a complex concept in itself), is it conceivable that certain cultures, by dint of their history or language or accepted assumptions about Time or the Self, are simply more ironic overall, and thus more apt to instill in us an ironic stance? If so, then “ironic” how? And what would count as evidence that elders in such cultures are any more resilient?

As for dementia, where one’s ability to tell one’s story “normally” is compromised for sure and one’s narrative, fragmented at best, then what do “irony” and “resilience” even mean (see Moos, 2011)? What, if any, levity can possibly be found for those whom it affects? From a narrative perspective, one small yet maybe worthy point to make is that, as spouses or carers of such persons, our narratives are inevitably interknit with theirs. The line between “our story” and “their story,” between Us and Them, is thus fuzzy from the start (Randall, 2010a).

And it can grow still fuzzier when, through one form or other of narrative care, we counteract the “narrative dispossession” (Baldwin, 2006) to which they’re otherwise subjected by honoring their stories for them, gap-filled and chopped-up though those stories (like our own) will be (Noonan, 2011).

Elsewhere, Gary Kenyon and I have introduced the concept of a “wisdom environment” (Randall & Kenyon, 2002). By this we mean any context or occasion—reminiscence, life review, or simply soulful conversation—who deep storytelling is elicited by deep storylistening, where narrative reflection is invited, and where wisdom (as awareness of alternative stories) is evoked. In each such context, how precisely is a good strong story fostered and, with it, an ironic stance?

Lastly, if a good strong story is as vital to resilient aging as, say, a good strong constitution, then ought not narrative reflection to be embarked upon—in earnest—in mid-life or before, and not be left to later life alone?

References