

## RE-MEMBERING

Once in a while we read something that brings to mind what we know but sometimes forget - in this case the importance of encouraging, listening and reflecting on the stories our older clients tell us about their lives. Such a book is *Stories as Equipment for Living: Last Talks and Tales of Barbara Myerhoff* (2007, University of Michigan Press). You might recall Barbara Myerhoff - a social anthropologist - for *Number Our Days*, a portrayal of an elderly Jewish community in California that drew attention to the multiple ways older people create meaning out of their lives.

Myerhoff's observations suggest that we look at our relationships with the older people we serve through an unaccustomed lens - a wider lens than we are accustomed to, a lens that places us squarely within the picture.

"The heaviest burden that a person can bear is the weight of memories when these memories, undischarged, are the testimony that one has lived, that tells what it has all been worth...half the tragedy is not to be heard and seen, and the other half is not to be seeing and listening."

How do we avoid the tragedy of not seeing and listening? By recognizing that the stories that elders tell us are for us as much as for them. We are there to bear witness, to attest to the fact that they lived, they suffered, they survived, and all it took for them to do so. We are there to help them re-member - to move from losing what they had to having what they lost.

## BEING A PRESENCE

Gabriel Marcel - a Christian existentialist philosopher quoted by Rita Charon in *Narrative Medicine* wrote of being present, "Presence is something which reveals itself immediately in a look, a smile, an intonation, or a handshake. The person who is at my disposal is the one who is capable of being with me with the whole of himself when I am in need; while the one who is not at my disposal seems merely to offer me a temporary loan...For the one I am a presence; for the other I am an object."

## ABOUT THAT STORY

We know the one. It is told to us at every meeting. So familiar are we with its characters, its plot, its turns of phrase, that we could recite it right along with our client. We don't, of course. We try to hide our impatience and bide our time till it ends and we can get on with our "real" work. But what would happen if we dove deep into that story? Asked more about the people who were in it? What happened before and after? Reflect back what we heard and that we will carry it with us?

How we can listen to our client's stories with the whole of ourselves, to be fully at the client's disposal, not merely on temporary loan? We may not always be able to do it - but it is a goal. And more than a goal, it is a gift - bringing us closer to our own humanity as we honor that of those we serve.

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