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Reminiscing: A Saint Paul Neighborhoods Oral History Project

Julie Luker, Ph.D.

Remembering the past is “one of the joys of life” (Bieza, 2019, para. 1). People reminisce about all sorts of things and for all sorts of reasons. Reminiscing is also educational in that it provides a foundation of lived experiences from which an individual or community can learn and grow. Under the right circumstances, reminiscing even promotes healing and reconciliation (Denborough, 2014). It certainly served all these purposes for me.

My first life ended in 1989 following tragic circumstances. It was March, and my 39-year-old mother had just died from complications related to diabetes. Life as I knew it ended with hers that night. I woke up the next morning having to begin again. Somehow, I summoned the energy to begin a second life. I began to move through my immense grief. I inched forward. I continued.

Continuing quickly became insufficient, however. My second life felt inauthentic, hollow, and unfamiliar. I missed my old bedroom, my neighborhood friends, and my old classmates. I missed who I used to be, the hobbies I enjoyed, and the emotions I felt. I was lost. Through the guidance of a children’s grief therapist, I learned to employ the process of reminiscing as a method to get back in touch with myself. With her encouragement, I collected artifacts from my first life to help reclaim who I once was and to reconcile my first life’s abrupt finality. I unearthed a throw blanket from my old bed, a cuticle clipper from my old bathroom, a pink rabbit’s foot from my old school desk. I catalogued my childhood photos and home videos, my school report cards, and my participation awards. I compiled my first life into several plastic containers, protecting these priceless artifacts from the elements. Lifting these lids, I would take a deep breath and, for a moment, remember myself. It brought me more than joy. It reminded me who I was, and it healed me. By reminiscing, I not only continued, but I thrived.

I am an adult now, yet I continue to use the process of reminiscing to move through big changes in my personal life. In my professional role as a Psychology professor, I am also integrating this process into a qualitative research framework. My current research project uses the process of reminiscing to reconstruct the histories of neighborhoods within Saint Paul, Minnesota, as they were experienced by the people who lived there.

Older adults who were born during the baby boom and spent their childhoods in Saint Paul, Minnesota, will be invited to participate in an oral history research project.

Through recorded interviews, these participants will have the opportunity to reminisce about their lives within the context of the neighborhood in which they lived during their formative years. I will further enhance the breadth and depth of this research project by connecting my work with artifacts and geographical data from Lyfmap (<https://www.lyfmap.com/>).

Lyfmap (<https://www.lyfmap.com/>) is a website that was developed by Twin Cities historian Larry Bieza. Registration is free. Users can upload personal Twin Cities-based memories as well as browse memories uploaded by other users. Memories are stored as a digital attachment (such as a .jpg or .pdf file) or as a story narrative (text) and are linked to a specific address or neighborhood on a virtual map. My research project will contribute to Bieza's work by providing participants with an additional format to tell their stories, combining their interviews with visual imagery, geographical details, and an opportunity to connect with the larger community.

My research will also benefit the Minnesota Historical Society (n.d.) as well as all Minnesota residents through my contribution to the society's existing digital oral history collection. This collection began in 1948 and is currently the largest digital collection in the nation (para. 1). Despite its size, the society's oral history collection does not yet include a category that focuses on childhood memories within specific Saint Paul neighborhoods. For current and future Saint Paul residents, this research project will provide a window into the past, allowing them a glimpse of what life used to be like on a particular neighborhood block several generations ago. For former Saint Paul residents, this research project will bring their past to life again. For those who participate, they will create a permanent, digital legacy.

Denborough (2014) states, "Who we are and what we do are influenced by the stories that we tell about ourselves" (p. 3). Reminiscing began as a form of healing and reconciliation that guided me through the abrupt and intense changes that I experienced from prematurely losing my mother. The healing work I did with my first life allowed me to establish a solid, thriving foundation for my second life. As an adult, I continue to enjoy reminiscing on a much broader and professional level. I acknowledge that the qualitative lens through which I view my research project can become, as noted by Cole and Knowles (2001), complex and highly personal. Yet, its importance cannot be overlooked. "Oral history provides a rich resource of information that usually does not exist in any other form" (Minnesota Historical Society, n.d., para. 2). My research project, which will combine artifacts from Lyfmap (<https://www.lyfmap.com/>) and oral histories from Saint Paul residents, will add a new dimension to Minnesota history that will be shared for years to come.

Author's Biography:

Dr. Julie Luker is an assistant professor of psychology at Concordia University, St. Paul. Her academic background includes degrees in psychology and education. She earned her B.A. in Psychology from The University of St. Thomas and her M.A. in Cognitive and

Social Processes from Ball State University. She then completed a graduate certificate in online instruction from The College of St. Scholastica, followed by an Ed.D. from Hamline University. In addition to teaching, Dr. Luker has consulted for institutions and organizations to design and develop course curriculum. She has authored and co-authored publications that investigate cyberbullying within higher education. In addition to her research on cyberbullying, Dr. Luker is initiating an oral history project that will capture and retain neighborhood histories within the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

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