

The Unitary Life Pattern of Persons Experiencing Serenity in Recovery From Alcohol and Drug Addiction

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People recovering from addiction to alcohol or drugs often acknowledge the need for complete change in life pattern orientation in a journey toward healing. Serenity is the hallmark of recovery according to the tenets of 12-step programs, but little is known about the actual experience of serenity in healing from addiction. From a perspective of unitary pattern appreciation and a method of unitary appreciative inquiry, this study explored the experience of serenity among 9 people recovering from alcohol and/or drug addiction. Results are portrayed in both individual and group profiles, depicted in a format that integrates empirical findings as poetry. **Key words:** *addiction, healing, serenity, 12-step programs, unitary appreciative inquiry, unitary life pattern*

*Grant me the
Serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
Courage
to change the things I can, and
Wisdom
to know the difference¹*

“If you have decided you want *what we have* (emphasis added) and are willing to go to any lengths to get it—then you are ready to take certain steps.”^{2(p70)} So reads an excerpt from chapter 5 of *Alcoholics Anonymous*² used as a preamble reading, which opens ev-

ery 12-step meeting of Alcoholics Anonymous (AA). That desired “what we have” is serenity, gained from learning to live life differently, a life free of alcohol and drugs, through spiritually based recovery programs like AA. Indeed, serenity is the hallmark and pivotal cornerstone of recovery according to the philosophy and tenets of AA and other 12-step recovery programs. *Serenity* has been defined as a desirable spiritual state of “sustained inner peace,”³ and “independent of external events,”³ that is thought to decrease stress and improve physical and emotional health.^{3–5} For those whose lives have been shattered by addiction, serenity is experienced, perceived, and expressed as a regenerating, inspiring, strengthening, healing change in life orientation in a journey toward recovery and wholeness.

Persons recovering from addictions in 12-step recovery programs acknowledge that their whole approach to and direction for life must change if serenity and healing are to occur.^{2,6–9} They come to realize that sobriety and serenity are essential if they want to have a life that is different from the existence of addiction. Such programs promote the idea that

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abstinence alone will not change one's life; there must be a change in the way a person approaches life and its problems. The whole life pattern orientation of the person in recovery changes from one of addiction to sobriety and serenity. *Alcoholics Anonymous*,² called the "Big Book" by members of AA, lists 12 promises that can be expected if the 12-step principles are consistently practiced. One of these promises includes serenity: "If we are painstaking about this phase of our development [working the steps], we will be amazed before we are half way through. . . . we will comprehend the word serenity and we will know peace."^{2(pp83-84)} In this study, AA was used as the referent for 12-step recovery programs for the following reasons: (1) it was the first program established specifically to help overcome addiction to alcohol as a drug used to excess; (2) alcoholism continues to be the most problematic addiction after nicotine; (3) the preponderance of research on addiction focuses on alcoholism; and (4) the AA program provides the most common model for other programs that address addictive and/or excessive, destructive behaviors.

Although the term *serenity* appears to be central to recovery in such 12-step programs, little is known about the experience of serenity in healing from addiction. Nurses and other healthcare professionals need to understand the experience of serenity for effective communication and cocreation of an environment conducive to a person with addiction for becoming and being a different person with a changed life pattern.

The discipline of nursing has a history of appreciation for the role of spirituality in illness and recovery. However, many nurses continue to be uncomfortable in dealing with spiritual needs of patients.¹⁰ Serenity is a spiritual concept that assists persons with grief, loss, and healing. Persons who are recovering from addictions in many instances need to grieve the loss of a former lifestyle as part of the recovery process.¹¹ Taylor and associates¹² asserted that simply listening to one's story provides spiritual care. Many patients recovering from addiction in-

clude values, beliefs, and interpretations of life in telling their stories. To mutually participate with another person through storytelling helps achieve connectedness and intimacy and becomes an act of grace; it helps ease a life transition.¹⁰ Listening to and telling stories expand connections and help maintain wholeness. Storytelling is a way of sharing the essence of one's life experiences and perceptions.

In order to witness, to participate in, and to understand the meaning and magnitude of the change from addiction to sobriety and serenity, it is also necessary to understand the story of the burden of addiction and the recovery process as a person in recovery struggles to maintain sobriety and attain serenity. Such participation allows the professional to glimpse the desperation that motivates the person with an addiction to change a life pattern from one of constant fear and suffering to one of sobriety and serenity. Understanding will enhance recognition of serenity in the life of the person recovering from addiction.

REVIEW OF RESEARCH

Although research is abundant in areas of determining possible causes and contributing factors of addiction to alcohol and/or drugs, as well as in testing strategies and interventions to promote recovery, very little has been published that addresses either the concept of serenity or serenity as a factor in recovery from addiction. Roberts and colleagues have begun the seminal work with serenity by conducting a concept analysis, providing an instrument to measure serenity^{3-5,13-15} and have studied aspects of serenity in helping older adults and hospice patients.^{4,5} Following Parse's methods,¹⁶⁻¹⁸ Kruse¹⁹ studied the meaning of *serenity* for survivors of cancer. With the exception of a theoretical analysis of personal experience of how lesbian women recover from alcoholism,²⁰ no other research has addressed the experience of serenity in recovery from addiction, particularly from the perspective of unitary life patterns.

THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The study is broadly framed within the Unitary-Transformative paradigm elaborated by Newman^{21,22} with a focus on the Science of Unitary Human Beings (SUHB) developed by Rogers.²³⁻²⁸ Rogers envisioned people as energy fields integral with their environmental energy field. The central characteristic of an energy field is its wholeness and its irreducibility. The human energy field and the environmental energy field are recognized by pattern that reveals the uniqueness of each. Pattern, the distinguishing characteristic of an energy field, is an abstraction revealed through manifestations. According to Rogers,²⁷ "pattern is not directly observable; however, manifestations of field patterning are observable events in the world"^{27(p30)} that allows for recognition of the field. Human-environmental field mutual process (mutual interaction) is manifested as rhythmical waves vibrating at different frequencies that are continuously evolving; becoming more complex and diverse. Manifestations emerge as mutual process unfolds. Cowling²⁹⁻³⁶ noted that pattern manifestations emerge from this mutual process in the form of experiences, perceptions, and expressions.

Cowling²⁹ further proposed that persons are largely aware of their own manifestations which allows participation in mutual process. If this is true, then people are involved in directing the flow of energy in their field. If persons can maneuver their energy flow, then a person's life pattern orientation both orders and reflects the direction of energy flow thereby influencing the patterns that emerge as unitary life pattern manifestations. As the individual changes his or her orientation, the direction of energy flow changes, thereby changing the emerging manifestations.

The purpose of this study was to provide information to extend what is known about the unitary life pattern of a group of people experiencing serenity in the process of recovery from addiction to alcohol/drugs in 12-step

programs. Addiction suggests an orientation and a lifestyle that comes to engulf a person completely. In the process of recovery from a destructive addiction, a total transformation of the person must take place. From a unitary perspective, the experience of serenity in the context of recovery evolves over time, eventually coming to permeate and encompass everything a person thinks, does, and says. In other words, the whole orientation or direction toward life changes and is manifested in changed attitudes, actions, and orientation of the person recovering from addiction. This study focused on a group of individuals whose life and living changed from an orientation of addiction to alcohol/drugs to an orientation of sobriety while experiencing serenity in a 12-step environment. Thus, serenity was examined from a unitary perspective, one that looked at people as wholes embedded in and integral with ever expanding wholes, pattern within pattern within pattern.

METHODOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The method for this study followed the principles of unitary appreciative inquiry (UAI) developed by Cowling,²⁹⁻³⁶ who extensively examined the notion of unitary pattern and advanced definitions for pattern manifestation to allow research on life pattern wholeness and uniqueness.

UAI has emerged as a distinctive melding of cooperative inquiry, appreciative inquiry, and forms of participatory action research.³⁷⁻³⁹ It is grounded in a unitary ontology and guided by a participatory epistemology; it incorporates a unique blend of unitary knowing, appreciative knowing, and participatory knowing.

UAI is built on a foundation of four central dimensions: pattern, participation, praxis, and power. *Pattern* is the primary interest of UAI and centers around the "appreciation of unitary life pattern, the discovery and generation of knowledge relevant to that pattern and the creative use of that knowledge in the betterment of human lives."^{36(p204)}

Participation is the primary mode of UAI “developed through a partnership between and among the participants.”^{36(p205)} *Praxis* represents a “context for the integration of theory, research, and practice in its aim to advance knowledge to serve the benefit of humankind.”^{36(p206)} It embodies negotiation, reciprocity, and empowerment as central elements of research as praxis.^{22(p41)} *Power* resides in 4 areas: knowledge, awareness, cooperation, and liberation or freedom to choose.³⁶

UAI has an orientation, is composed of a process, and uses an approach or a group of strategies that guide the methodology. The *orientation* revolves broadly around the ontologic and epistemologic assumptions of the unitary-transformative paradigm but more specifically involves use of the “metaphysics of the unitary perspective as a means of viewing, seeking, and envisioning human life and possibilities.”^{35(p33)} The focus of UAI is the “appreciation of the wholeness, uniqueness, and essence (of human life) manifested as a singular pattern”^{35(p33)} which Cowling termed unitary pattern appreciation. While the focus of the inquiry may be an individual, group, family, community, or society, the point of reference is the pattern of that entity in its wholeness.³⁵

The *process* is composed of four essential aspects: appreciative knowing, participatory aspects, a synoptic process, and transformation. *Appreciative knowing* is the overarching ideal of the process of UAI. Appreciative knowing acknowledges the metaphysical concept that human life is a mystery that can never be fully understood. This type of knowing is fundamentally different from critical knowing and seeks to know those things that can never be fully known nor accurately and completely captured and represented.³⁵

The *participatory* aspect of the process brings inquirer and participant together in a partnership and depends on the willingness of all involved to agree to join together freely and openly in the exploration. Because humans can knowingly participate in change, in-

sights that emerge during the course of the inquiry contribute to potential paths for action. Whether change is actively pursued or passively emerges, the participatory nature of the relationship remains a critical feature of the process of UAI.³⁵

The *synoptic* aspect of UAI’s process seeks to understand all elements of human experience that reflect the wholeness, uniqueness, and essence of human living. Synopsis within a unitary framework is aimed at sensing the underlying pattern emerging from the textual data in the form of pattern manifestations. Synopsis examines aspects of experience that most people might see as disparate, dissimilar, or unrelated in such a way that links or connections are uncovered and reality is perceived from a wider perspective.^{40,41} The process of synopsis necessitates taking an inclusive position toward what constitutes evidence, scrutinizing all points of intersection and bifurcation of the data. Therefore, multiple elements of human experience, perception, and expression, which initially may seem dissimilar, unrelated, or disconnected, come together in an ensemble of information that confers a distinctive singularity. Developing the ability to view data synoptically is a goal of UAI.³⁵

The potential for *transformation* is intrinsic to the process of UAI. When attention is centered on pattern and its innate wholeness, affairs of living are seen through a pandimensional lens. Intimacy is created as researcher and participant join together to explore phenomena of living as information and feelings are exchanged in a unique way. This special relationship expands the consciousness of all involved in the inquiry and opens the real possibility for change or reveals change in process.³⁵

The *approach* sets up standards for actions taken during the inquiry. The elements of the approach are strategies or suggestions for carrying out the plan of study. The approach reflects the unitary ontology and epistemology that shapes the foundation of UAI and helps guide any study carried out within this framework.³⁵

METHODS

Sample and setting

Approval for the study of human subjects (institutional review board approval) was obtained. The researcher attended 12-step meetings in a multiple county area of a southeastern state and obtained permission to make announcements about the study prior to the meetings and to leave recruitment flyers on group bulletin boards. The recruitment flyers asked for participation from persons who felt that they had experienced serenity in their recovery process. Nine people, 5 women and 4 men, who were recovering from addiction to alcohol and/or drugs, responded and indicated that they felt they met this criterion.

Age of participants ranged from 34 to 69 years; eight were Caucasian and one was African American. Educational background ranged from a high school diploma to a PhD, and income levels ranged from less than \$20 000 annually to over \$100 000. The majority of the participants claimed dual membership in AA and Narcotics Anonymous (NA) because most had abused and/or had been addicted to both alcohol and other substances. The average sobriety time was 9.5 years; however, there was a history of relapses, with an average of 5 relapses. All participants self-identified as having experienced serenity in their recovery process.

Data collection, analysis, and development of profiles

Interviews were arranged at a day and time mutually agreeable to the researcher and the participant. Most interviews took place in 12-step meeting places in small private rooms separate from the main meeting room and at a time when no meetings were in session. One interview took place in a study room at a public library. Prior to the interviews, the study was again reviewed and all participants were told that they were under no obligation to participate, that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and that if they did, their information would be destroyed. Questions were also encouraged for

clarification. Each participant then signed a consent prior to the interview. The interviews lasted about 1 to 1½ hours and were audiotaped. The goal was to produce an individual profile for each participant. The individual interview data and profiles, viewed collectively, served as the basis for the group profile. To that end, synopsis of the interview information was performed in 3 phases.

First, the transcript from each individual interview was examined extensively to gain a sense of important happenings or significant events to grasp a sense of a state of being that was characteristic of each person's evolving pattern. The outcome of this process was the individual profile rendered in an aesthetic format that portrayed changes in manifestations of an evolving pattern over time with identifying features for each. As the orientation of each person changed, the flow of energy changed or was redirected and the manifestations reflected that change in directionality of energy flow. Individual profiles represented the story of each participant.

Cowling³⁶ proposed that profiles may be constructed by the researcher, the participant, or as a joint venture. Profiles in this study were constructed by the researcher with approval and validation by each participant. Clues to how best to present each story were suggested by participants during the interview. The researcher chose to share the profiles aesthetically in the poetic form, which emerged naturally from the empirical data of the interviews. One story was depicted as a narrative fantasy tale; another was presented as a set of combined acronyms; yet another was in the form of a military drill chant combined with free verse. Several emerged as purely free-verse poetry. Following is an example of an individual profile:

Reflections of transformation

Mirrors—look at me—who do you see?—a person's reflection—but not the person inside—Who is reflected in the glass?—someone pretty—someone you'd like to know?—Not me—I know the real me—Not the one you can see—in the mirror—My soul is trapped—trapped in a maze

of mirrors—everywhere I turn—all I see is me—reflections of a life—distorted and ugly—tall me—looking down at me—short me—almost flat—like a doormat—everywhere I turn—all I see is me—thin me—hollow me—fat me—bloated me—like a bug waiting to be stepped on—running to escape—nowhere to run—nowhere to hide—grotesque and misshapen—warped me—bent me—twisted me—cold me—I don't like who I see—Like living in a world of smoke and mirrors—I can never see clearly—What's the face of reality—it's the one I see—looking back at me—from a mirror that reveals the inner me—the one you can't see—I want to crawl up inside of me—to escape the image that I see—in the mirror.

What I need is transparency—to shatter the illusions contained in the mirror—to smooth out the distortions—to create a window to show me a way to escape this house of mirrors—to give me some clarity—a lens to change my vision so I can clearly see—the possibilities waiting for me—a new way to be—no longer trapped by an image in a mirror—an image that's not a true reflection of me—a new reality.

Mirrors—look at me—Who do you see?—if you could step inside and see the real me—the one that I see—this image of me—would you see someone pretty?—someone you'd like to know?—I would—I know the changed me—the real me—the inner me—the one you can't see—in the mirror—the me that I see is a loving me—a warm me—an unfolding me—someone who has clarity—a transformed me—a whole new me—outside the mirror.^{42(p302)}

During the second phase of synopsis, individual transcripts and profiles were examined for shared manifestations and commonalities across participants. The objective was to find similar shared experiences and/or characteristics for the group as a whole. To that end, the shared manifestations were grouped into a matrix that was organized using Cowling's²⁹⁻³⁶ definition of pattern manifestation as the experiences, perceptions, and expressions of persons in mutual process with their environmental field. The matrix was divided into 4 broad areas, each of which represented an unfolding of facets of the life pattern of the group as a whole. These shared manifestations were utilized to help construct the group profile. For clarity, the

matrix has been converted to a narrative format, which follows below. The narrative outlines how the life pattern of each participant manifested during each of 4 phases or facets: *addiction*, *turning points*, *early sobriety*, and *finding serenity in recovery*. Each facet or phase of the journey, though outlined by the researcher, seemed to reflect natural designations of facets of life pattern as related by the participants in their stories. Each segment blends what came before with what comes after and points to future potentials thereby reflecting the seamless wholeness and uniqueness of increasing pattern diversity within a pandimensional reality that becomes the pattern of the group.

Shared pattern manifestations

There were 4 facets or phases that unfolded both with each of the individuals and the group as a whole: addiction, turning points, early sobriety, and finding serenity in recovery. The facet of **addiction** was *experienced* as a downward spiral characterized as, initially, enjoying drinking or using drugs recreationally or socially and feeling in control of the situation. However, this evolved into living to drink or use drugs with an increasing loss of control over the use of substances. With the escalation of loss of control came losses of other important things in life; job, home, marriage, and/or disrupted relationships and eventually using drugs/alcohol just to survive. This phase was *perceived* as a progression of enjoyment, then escape, followed by doing things to survive, and finally wanting to die or perceiving that death would be better. This perception ran the full gamut from feeling like "I'm having fun," to slowly changed behaviors; perceiving that they were hurting self and others and feeling anger, resentment, guilt, shame, and/or remorse accompanied by growing feelings of increasing loss of control and power over their use of alcohol/drugs. There was the loss of contact with the spiritual side of life. At this point, the perception was one of feeling trapped and that their freedom to choose had been

taken away. Addiction was *expressed* as doing things for fun with friends and situations that involved the use of alcohol/drugs; going out and having a good time to using to escape reality to using for survival. Over time, the use of alcohol/drugs was accelerated. Behaviors such as lying to self and others, selfishness and self-centeredness, self-pity, self-deception, and sneaking or hiding the alcohol/drugs was common. The addicted person tried to create a façade that all was well; attempts to control use of the alcohol/drugs accompanied this self-deception. The addicted person would many times "swear off" use and make empty promises to assuage their feelings or to keep others at bay, to no avail. These expressions devolved into wanting to die and many times included suicide attempts.

The facet called **turning points** was *experienced* as a flash of honesty: "hitting bottom." Rationalization that different circumstances or situations would change the outcome continued the cycle of attempts at change with no actual or substantive change in situation or circumstance. The realization came that strategies that had been used to quit were not working because the behaviors themselves had not changed; the person almost always ended up in trouble with self or others. The *perception* was the growing realization of the negativity of the final outcome unless real change was made. "What I'm doing isn't working"; "I've hit my bottom"; "I need to change or do things differently or I'll die." Accompanying this perception is anger at or humiliation with self. *Expressions* occurring during this facet of the pattern focus on considering change and seeking help. There is an increase in efforts to control the use of alcohol/drugs to no avail accompanied by self-deprecating thoughts to finally feeling "whipped" and in need of outside help to change. These thoughts lead to actions to make good on the decision to quit.

The **early sobriety** facet of the pattern is *experienced* early on as feelings of ambivalence; wanting and not wanting to change; surrendering to win; giving up to receive; "I want what they have." There is relief accom-

panying this decision to give up. The addicted person oftentimes experiences trouble with feelings and questions whether they are truly addicted. However, little rewards also accompany this change or transition. There is the support of the group; working with a sponsor; and the connection or reconnection with the spiritual. This facet of the pattern is *perceived* as moving back and forth. The person perceives that change is not easy. There is uncertainty if the right decision was made; progress may be slow and the person may be unsure of redemption. It is during this facet of pattern that relapses can and often do occur. However, there is also a perception of hopefulness and of having some good days and progress in the direction that is expected. This facet of the person's pattern is *expressed* as doing and questioning. Meetings are attended fairly regularly; the person picks up a white poker chip symbolic of surrender; sponsors are chosen or appointed and worked with. There is a change in attitude; the person begins to listen to others and begins to share experiences with the group. If relapses occur, the person returns to the group and starts over. They begin to think about forgiving themselves for their past behaviors and then seek to make amends to others; the person is doing things differently in his or her life.

As more and more time elapses and as desired change is acquired and maintained, the addicted person begins to **find serenity** as his or her recovery progresses. This facet is *experienced* as a changed way of doing or being, a transformation or transcendence over old ways. The person begins to heal physically, mentally, and spiritually. There is an acceptance of or a commitment to a new way of life, a reclamation of spirituality, more "good" days and less "bad" days. Occasionally questioning and struggles occur, but are more easily dealt with through newfound strength and the support of the group and sponsors; each little victory reaffirms the worth of the recovering person. They experience acceptance of themselves by others and experience forgiveness of themselves and by others. This facet of the pattern is *experienced* as hope for

today, living one day at a time, and experiencing serenity in the process. The addicted person has changed feelings about himself or herself and others; they become aware of a "spiritual awakening"; of new knowledge about themselves and the 12-step program; and better judgment about how to and when to make decisions. There are also the perception and realization that recovery is an ongoing journey. The addicted person experiences and lives serenity as an integral part of his or her recovery. The person experiences a transformation of self accompanied by feelings of healing and wholeness. Finding serenity in the recovery process is *expressed* as regeneration or renewal and living life differently. The person attends meetings as often as possible; they "work the (12-step) program" daily. They become involved with the 12-step community by helping others, sponsoring new members, sharing with others, and speaking at meetings. The person makes a habit of reading some 12-step literature daily and of prayer and/or meditation. Relationships with others are healing or have been restored and many enjoy doing volunteer work in the broader community outside of the 12-step group.

Finally, the third phase of synopsis was the creation of the group profile that appears at the end of this article. Clues to the presentation of the profile were suggested by each participant from his or her own stories shared during the interviews, from the individual profiles, and from the grouping of shared or common manifestations. Polkinghorne⁴³ noted that "by changing their voice to storyteller, researchers will also change the way in which the voices of their participants can be heard."^{43(p3)} According to the theoretical and methodological contexts, as well as the wish of the investigator and participants, the voices of persons who had shared a common journey toward healing were communicated through more than just typical facts, figures, or descriptive categories. Each profile tells a story, the format for each profile is different, and the group profile integrates the stories of the group.

DISCUSSION

Because this study was undertaken within a unitary-transformative context in a framework from the SUHB, conclusions are viewed as manifestations of pattern of a human energy field in its wholeness with its ever-changing and evolving nature. Conclusions of the study emanated from the evolving facets of shared/common manifestations of pattern. Each of the conclusions is intrinsically linked, flowing seamlessly from what came before into what comes after. Such conclusions included the following. (1) Participants related a litany of negative consequences, both episodic and emotional, from the addiction. (2) All participants identified themselves as members of a 12-step organization and valued the support they both received and were able to give others. (3) All participants shared that a 12-step program was vital to their success in recovery from addiction. (4) With only a single exception, all of the participants had experienced 1 or more relapses and all related that they were ever mindful of the potential for relapses. (5) Each participant shared that a spiritual experience/awakening was pivotal in the recovery process. (6) All participants related that regular involvement in 12-step activities and frequent, consistent attendance was necessary for their long-term sobriety. (7) All self-identified as experiencing serenity in their journey toward sobriety, healing, and wholeness.

This study represents a beginning effort to understand the unitary life pattern of persons experiencing serenity in the context of the journey of recovery and healing from addiction. The method of this study may require perception, willingness to share and risk, and a broad background in human sciences to produce valid and sensitive profiles. While it requires a broadening of the scientific perspective among healthcare disciplines, it adds richness to the general discipline of qualitative research and expands the tradition of storytelling as a method to build and disseminate knowledge.⁴⁴

It was the intent of the researcher neither to elaborate on what serenity is nor to explain how one "gets" serenity. However, the participants themselves, through the profiles, did just that. In talking about her serenity, Deana M., one of the participants, said, "I guess for me, part of it (serenity) was healing of old wounds and on focusing on what I had instead of what I'd lost. Part of it was making amends. I don't think there is really one thing. For me it's more a state of being, it's kinda' like, it's a by-product; it's a bonus. . . . it's not something you say I'm gonna' do these things and I'm gonna' be serene. It's not a goal, it's a journey; there's no beginning, middle, or end of it." Another participant, Gerald H., shared, "Serenity to me is the absence of all that negativity." Yet another, Bob R., shared, "To me a serene life is being happy; being happy with myself; knowing I'm doing the right thing; knowing I'm pleasing God; knowing that I'm being a good person. I think the biggest reward to me is my freedom; freedom to do whatever I want. The more I'm sober, the more I realize what a good life it is . . . how good it is . . . and that's when I started realizing I'd got that serenity."

Sandelowski wrote, "We see the story in the study, the tale in the theory, the parable in the principle, and the drama in the life."⁴⁴(p161) For hundreds of years, people have used storytelling to convey meaning, attach significance to life events, and celebrate rites of passage. Recently, the attention to narrative knowing as a framework for understanding research participants and interview data has assumed increased importance in qualitative research findings.⁴⁴ Furthermore, sharing stories is an intrinsic part of the 12-step tradition: "Our stories disclosed in a general way what it used to be like, what happened, and what it's like now."²(p70) The life stories told by the participants constructed through appreciative profiles share individual and common actions, characters, settings, and plot ordered in a way that is coherent and plausible.⁴⁴ Participants in this study resonated with the aesthetic format of the profiles. They were able to validate findings as personal, authentic, and true.

This study represents beginning efforts to examine the experience of serenity in the context of recovery from addictions in 12-step programs in a small area of a southeastern state. Group meetings in other areas of the United States or in other countries may have different perspectives. In addition, whether or not serenity is experienced in the recovery process of persons involved in more secular programs would be interesting to explore as well. Since the experience of addiction is a most difficult and enigmatic life stressor, it would be important to explore if the experience of serenity is also a factor in persons who are in the throes of other types of life stressors. It may be possible to develop a theory of serenity and test it in a variety of situations and circumstances, but at this time, that possibility would need the additional strength from more studies.

For the participants in this study, serenity was a way of living and being, an orientation to life, a transformation of personality. Serenity was deeply tied to their recovery journey and was envisioned as a healing quality that seemed to emerge as each experienced a spiritual awakening or a transcendence of experiences. Participants spoke of their experience of serenity using words and terms such as "journey," "healing," "wholeness," and "connectedness." They spoke with bravery and honesty; they exemplified courage, humility, and gratitude for their sobriety and serenity. Their stories were moving reminders of the power of story to illuminate, relate feelings, and bring healing. Sandelowski⁴⁵ reminded, "We are the stories we tell and our stories provide a sense of connection to other people."⁴⁵(pp25,26) If this is true, then the participants, the author, and others may come to share in the pattern of this group who revealed their passage of transformation and transcendence from addiction to sobriety and serenity.

Group profile

Reclamation

I am the voice of many
With a single malady

A malady that once claimed
my whole life
Body
Spirit
Soul
I always felt different
Like I didn't fit in
"If only. . . ." Was my cry
I was fearful
Afraid others would see me as I really was
And shun me
As a nobody
With nothing to offer
I felt alone
Unhappy
Fearful
Unloved
My life was hollow
I hated myself.
But one day, I was presented a unique potion
From a seller of death
Death in disguise
I didn't recognize him for who he was
This dealer in death
He said, "It will give you the power to
change your life."
"To change my life?", I thought. "Just what I
need!"
"But," warned the seller, "It comes at a price."
I didn't listen
I didn't hear
I didn't care
His voice was so persuasive
Like a piper leading a band of willing
disciples
He had so many customers
So many used his wares
I wanted what he had
I needed to belong
I started giving myself away
One piece at a time.
I made new friends
All customers of the seller
We had such a good time
It was hard to see
I was giving myself away
One piece at a time.
I ran along my merry way

Having fun
Going places
Doing things I wanted
I felt so good about myself
I never wanted to stop
I would do anything to keep this feeling
And for a while, I did.
I used the seller's product gladly
It made me feel just fine
But what I didn't notice was
It played tricks with my mind
I thought I was in control
"I have the power," I said
"I am in charge of my destiny"
And yet
I was giving myself away
One piece at a time.
I gave away my money
I gave away my time
I gave away my job
My family
I gave away my self-respect
Stealing
Cheating
Lying
Like a spider encapsulating her prey
One slender thread after another
Slowly creating a silky prison,
This dealer in death was taking away
My life
My spirit
My soul
I lived in a fog
I lost track of myself
When I finally woke up
I saw I was like a puppet
A wooden imitation of life
Tethered by strings
Manipulated by an outside force
No longer my own person
All alone
My life in chaos
My spirit broken
My soul in despair.
I had given myself away
One piece at a time.
Stripped of my liberty
Stripped of my identity

I am tormented
 Miserable
 Suffering
 I am no longer in control
 No longer do I have any power
 I am bereft
 I can claim nothing
 No life
 No spirit
 No soul.
 I had given it all away
 One piece at a time.
 "What can I do?" I cried
 "I am no longer whole"
 I have been shattered into pieces
 Pieces taken by another who holds
 My life
 My Spirit
 My Soul."
 I need to remove the strings that control my
 every move
 That keep me tethered to my captor
 From out of my haze
 I heard a voice.
 "Surrender," it said
 "You get more entangled the more you
 struggle
 Accept that you can't get free on your own
 Become willing to do what's needed to
 reclaim
 Your Life,
 Your Spirit,
 Your Soul."
 "To begin your reclamation
 Twelve steps are suggested
 The choice is yours
 The work is hard
 The reward is restored wholeness."
 The voice continued, "You can choose
 To admit you are powerless. . .
 That your life is unmanageable."
 You can reclaim your wholeness
 One day at a time
 Become willing
 To give yourself over to someone or
 something
 that can relieve you of your suffering
 You can reclaim your wholeness

One day at a time
 Become willing
 To do whatever is necessary
 to release you from your bondage
 You can reclaim your wholeness
 One day at a time.
 Become willing
 To look at yourself honestly—
 Every day
 Become willing
 To admit when you're wrong
 And make amends
 Every day
 Become willing
 To talk about yourself
 To remind you of progress made
 And progress needed
 You can reclaim your wholeness
 One day at a time.
 Become willing
 To be of service to others
 Friends will help and support along the way
 You will have what they have
 You surely will belong.
 You can reclaim your wholeness
 One day at a time
 I followed the suggestions
 The days are not all easy
 Sometimes I get tangled up in old strings
 Progress is hampered
 But TODAY
 I am learning to live differently
 I feel different about myself
 I am making some progress
 TODAY
 I am relating to group members
 I finally feel like I "fit in"
 Like I really "belong"
 TODAY
 I can talk about myself honestly
 I can share with others
 TODAY
 I can forgive myself and
 Ask for forgiveness from others
 I can make amends to others
 TODAY
 I can pray, meditate, and seek guidance for
 my life

I have choices where once there were none
 TODAY
 I have reclaimed myself
 My Body
 My Spirit

My Soul
 I am free
 I am happy
 I am whole
 I have serenity^{42(pp195-200)}

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