



# LUKENOTES

SAINT LUKE INSTITUTE INC. • 8901 NEW HAMPSHIRE AVENUE • SILVER SPRING MD 20903  
LUKENOTES is a bi-monthly publication of Saint Luke Institute • Tel. (301)445-7970 • [lukenotes@slj.org](mailto:lukenotes@slj.org) • [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org)

"Icon of St. Luke" - Copyright© 1985 by Monastery Icons

## The Role of Feelings in Looking Back

Sheila M. Harron, Ph.D.

Vol. VIII, No. 3

May/June, 2004

One of the challenges that we face as we move gracefully through the last developmental stages of our lives involves looking backwards or a life review. Erik Erikson highlighted the goal of a life review when he talked about *being able to consider our whole life and embrace it as the one and only life we have had.*

What will we find in looking back? For everyone it will be different. Most persons will find deprivation and abundance, failure and success, loss and gain, times when we were selfish or took advantage of others and times when we were generous and self-giving, roads not taken full of "what might have been" and roads taken and well worn, relationships in which we were betrayed or deeply hurt and relationships of deep mutual respect and love. In other words, we will find both positive and negative experiences. The challenging task suggested by Erikson lies in embracing our whole lives, especially the difficult parts. This acceptance leads to peace.

A formal life review can help with the process of looking backward and embracing what we see. This process entails writing our autobiography in a slowed down, reflective way with the goal of understanding and accepting our lives. The review can be greatly enhanced when individuals come together regularly to tell their stories and to share their reflections. As we reflect and share, feelings will arise, inviting us to deeper work. In particular, feelings of grief/sadness, resentment/anger and guilt/shame signal unfinished work that deserves our attention.

**Mourning:** Feelings of grief/sadness suggest that we have some additional mourning to do over experience or relationships in our lives. If we feel sad when we recall a move in early grade school and the loss of our dearest childhood companion, we need to let ourselves mourn this loss. We need to sit with the feeling and not allow ourselves to minimize or intellectualize by saying "What is this compared to the losses others endure?" or "This is childish." By letting our feelings be, they will run their natural course. Feelings of regret sometimes signal the need for mourning as well. We become aware of regrets when we find ourselves saying "If only . . ." For example, a priest might experience feelings of regret over not having had children. He would benefit from mourning his loss sufficiently, accepting it as part of his life's journey and placing it in relationship to the positive aspects of his vocation.

**Forgiveness:** Resentments and anger can signal that we need to forgive. Many people, however, rush to forgive too soon before they have absorbed the hurt or honored the injustice. For example, a woman may be angry at her mother for dying when she was a child.

Even though this seems irrational, she needs to forgive her mother for leaving her when she was so young. The process may include accessing and expressing her anger and fighting a life-long habit of dismissing her feelings as unacceptable because, after all, her mother couldn't help dying. We need to allow the feelings of anger, hurt or sadness to surface long enough to accept them. As we do this, forgiveness can grow gradually and naturally rather than being forced.

**Forgiving ourselves:** Feelings of guilt and shame signal a need to forgive ourselves, perhaps the most difficult type of forgiveness. Frequently people say, "I know God forgives me and so-and-so has forgiven me, but I just can't forgive myself." We need to forgive ourselves for the ways that we have fallen short. Withholding self-forgiveness may reveal perfectionism or narcissism. Do we deserve condemnation? Are we above God? We keep punishing ourselves by guilt or shame instead of letting them go, accepting God's forgiveness, and getting on with our lives. We need to accept the fact that we are ordinary people with weaknesses, imperfections, foibles, and sinfulness. When we let go of punitive self-judgment, we will have lifted a self-inflicted burden. We also will find ourselves less angry and judgmental about others' failings.

**Gratitude:** We need to remember and be grateful for everyday things and the good times in our past and present. No matter what our life circumstances, if we approach each moment in a spirit of openness and gratitude, we will become aware of the simple blessings of our lives that can become lost - the natural beauty that surrounds us, relationships with family and friends, opportunities to continue learning and growing, and our spiritual experiences. We can let gratitude expand and deepen by spending a little more time absorbing and expressing it.

**Praying our feelings:** Doing a life review and processing residual feelings can become a form of prayer. We can take up our feelings just the same way we take up a scripture text. In this instance, we would ponder them, be with them, talk to God about them, open them out to God and listen quietly in silence. This deep personal prayer requires time and contemplation.

A formal life review is not the only way to do the developmental work suggested. And, this work is not only for our later years. We can do this kind of work daily by paying attention to our memories, dreams and feelings. The more we process the events of our lives in a timely fashion and choose not to minimize, rationalize, deny or idealize them on a day-to-day basis, the less we will have to let go of in our elder years. We may even end up being happy, integrated, and grateful seniors who can be witnesses of hope to younger generations.

*Sheila M. Harron, Ph.D., is the Coordinator of Outpatient Services at Saint Luke Institute.*

***LUKENOTES is a bimonthly publication of Saint Luke Institute. Permission to use these materials must be requested in writing by contacting [Lukenotes@sli.org](mailto:Lukenotes@sli.org).***

Telephone (301) 422-5499 • Fax (301) 422-5519 • [www.sli.org](http://www.sli.org)

Copyright © 2008 Saint Luke Institute, Inc. All rights reserved.