

ELEVEN

Life Review Exercises*



by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi

THE CYCLES OF OUR LIFE

All of us experience dramatic changes as we move through our life: from birth to childhood, from adolescence to first maturity, from middle age to elderhood, and on up to the door of death. However, grasping the larger pattern that unites these diverse stages of life often eludes us. The following practice can help us to perceive the “pattern that connects” by partitioning the continuum of our life into seven-year cycles in an attempt to discover how the parts are related to the whole.

In general, memory becomes sharper and clearer when it is associated with partitioned time. Telling someone to remember the past in general terms usually does not yield good results; targeting a specific period of time works far better.

**These exercises and practices by Zalman Schachter-Shalomi are adapted from those used in his Spiritual Eldering seminars.*

When we ask someone to remember what happened during the “April” of their life, say from ages twenty-two to twenty-eight, a person may respond, “When I was twenty-eight, I bought my first home and celebrated the birth of my second child.” Focusing on specific periods of time acts like a magnet in the psyche, bringing to awareness all the “filings” (the experiences) that we need to recover our past and harvest our life.

Once we have assembled the raw data of our experience, we can grasp the overarching pattern that was struggling to express itself through the ups and downs, the successes and failures that make up the rich texture of our life. Seeing which experiences remain incomplete, we can take measures to express the unlived life that beckons to us from within. Perceiving the larger pattern of our life, we can gain insight into how to harvest the rest of our life and steer it toward completion in the best possible way. Besides showing us directions for future growth, this exercise can help us cultivate an appreciation for all that we have had and enjoyed, even if our means were only modest by the world’s standards. We can say, “I experienced friendship, a home and family, a useful career, and I grew in maturity over my life span.” If we encountered sorrow and suffering, we can affirm, “By bearing these burdens, I grew in inner strength. I did something heroic.”

1. Down the left side of a large piece of paper, list the seven-year cycles of your life: January, 0–7 years; February, 8–14; March, 15–21; April, 22–28; May, 29–35; June, 36–42; July, 43–49; August, 50–56; September, 57–63; October, 64–70; November,

	Significant moments and events	People who guided and influenced me	What this phase contributed to the continuum of my life
JANUARY (age 0–7)			
FEBRUARY (age 8–14)			
MARCH (age 15–21)			
APRIL (age 22–28)			
MAY (age 29–35)			
JUNE (age 36–42)			
JULY (age 43–49)			
AUGUST (age 50–56)			
SEPTEMBER (age 57–63)			
OCTOBER (age 64–70)			
NOVEMBER (age 71–77)			
DECEMBER (age 78–84, and beyond)			

71–77; December, 78–84 (and beyond). Use the chart on the previous page as a model to draw one of your own.

2. Across the top, divide the remainder of the paper into three columns in which you write answers to the following questions for each of the twelve periods:
 - a. What were the significant moments and events of each phase of life?
 - b. Who were the people who guided and influenced you during each period?
 - c. What did each phase contribute to the continuum of your life?
3. To deepen your memory of people and events, you may want to devote a separate page or more to various time periods. You can enhance your memory by attaching photos to the paper, making sketches, writing little poems that evoke the era, or making a collage of newspaper and magazine clippings. Be creative in calling forth and harvesting the experiences of a lifetime.
4. Use this exercise to help recover memories of experiences that remain incomplete and that you can bring to completion as part of your “living-fully” work. You also can use the practice for working on forgiveness, recontextualizing difficult outcomes, mining the past for its untold riches, and discovering new growth.

THE TURNING POINTS

Like the preceding practice, The Turning Points helps you survey your life with panoramic vision. By revisiting some of the highlights of our personal history, we can contemplate the unfolding pattern of our life. Once we move from the past to the present with an awareness of the larger panorama, we can then look forward with a greater sense of optimism and confidence.

1. Sit in a comfortable chair or posture, relax your body, and prepare to write in your journal. Take several long, deep breaths to put yourself in a meditative state of mind.
2. Write down your memories of your . . . first holy day . . . first day in school . . . first love, first kiss . . . first and most recent experience of illness . . . high school . . . college . . . first job . . . first significant achievement . . . first failure . . . career changes . . . marriage . . . children (including births and weddings) . . . first and most recent experience with death (including your ideal departure).
3. On a piece of paper, make a time line on which you place the significant turning points of your life. Begin with your birth on the far left and fill in the experiences until you arrive at the present time.
4. Place a point beyond the present time to indicate the near future. Now ask yourself the question,