



Artur Fabiś¹

Family – joys and worries in the existential reflections of people in their late adulthood. A qualitative research report

Keywords: family, old age, perspective of death, worries, hardships, joys, balance sheet of life

Abstract

The paper is the presentation of the research study that answers the question about the role of the family in the reflections of the elderly, evoked by the proximity of death. The source of data analysis are letters inspired by the topic: “My life — my death.” The writers of the letters look back to their childhood and different phases of their adult life, pointing to the joys and worries present in their family relationships. While taking the stock of their life, they also point out to their family successes and failures. They express their concerns about leaving the family behind, at the same time giving them a range of warnings and advices.

Introduction

Family is the original and primary social unit where individuals grow up. Later, they can found their own family and take over the subsequent roles within it. At the end of the earthly existence, a reflection may occur upon one’s own life and the contribution of the loved ones – family members – to it. The paper presents the results of the study research into the reflections of older people about their life in the family context, in the perspective of approaching death.

The basis of the research methodology

The objective of the research was to determine the role of family in the reflections upon life, from the perspective of elderly people. The content of the letters – the messages written by seniors while reflecting on their own life and death

¹ PhD, Pedagogical University of Cracow, Institute of Educational Sciences, afabis@up.krakow.pl.

– was studied. The content analysis conducted in the studies, “is a data coding method where the analytical categories are derived from the concept of the research rather than from the study material, namely the analyzed text. Instead, the indicators of these categories are sought in the text” (Rubacha, 2011, p. 254). The object of the research study were invoked texts – personal writings (Kubinowski, 2010, p. 216) in the form of the letters written by people in their late adulthood or entering this stage of life. For this purpose, 31 out of 50 letters written by the seniors were selected and analyzed. The selection criterion was the occurrence of any family-related aspects mentioned by the authors in the letters. That was an indicator that allowed to assume that certain authors wrote about their family, thus the content analysis would help find the answers to the research question: What is the role of the family in the reflection on one’s own finiteness, made by the people in their late adulthood? This question allowed to develop the list of the detailed questions:

1. What is the place of the family in the balance sheet of life of the elderly?
2. During the course of life, what are the joys and worries caused by the family?
3. In the perspective of their own death, what concerns do seniors have regarding their families?

The letters were inspired by the topic: “My life – my death” and were written by people aged between 60 and 84. It was assumed that this topic would stimulate them to some deep reflections on their life, from the perspective of approaching death. It would also help to notice the interesting aspects of life in the old age, that are important to people who reflect upon their biographies. The particular focus was placed on the family, as the main “subject” of the invoked reflections. In order to ensure the full freedom and creativity of expression, the writers could address their messages to any person of their choice. The study material was collected from September 2011 to June 2014. The authors were family members of students who were asked to obtain letters from their loved ones who met certain criteria. Participation in the research was voluntary (it was an alternative, non-mandatory task for the students) and it did not involve any additional benefits for the students. Another source of the letters were the universities of the third age in the Silesian and małopolskie voivodships. After the lectures, the U3A students were asked to write their letters and send them to the author of the research. This way, 16 letters were collected. The interested persons were asked to follow the guidelines included in the short manual for writing the letters. The students were also given the manual and were trained how to present the principles for writing the letters and how to gather the data.

The specific nature of the subject of the research determined the study procedure, that is, qualitative approach, constructivist paradigm (see: Lincoln, Guba 2000, p. 168–173; Kubinowski, 2011, p. 101–105). In the ontological layer, this paradigm points to the “subjectivistic attitude towards the reality, accepting the

relativism or the presence of many locally constructed and reconstructed realities”. In the epistemological layer, it exposes the subjectivism and the creation of the outcomes. In the methodology layer, in turn, the constructivist paradigm refers to the hermeneutic studies of the created reality. The credibility and authenticity becomes the criterion for validity. In this paradigm, the researcher is involved in creating a polyphonic reconstruction.

Thanks to the selective coding (Kubinowski 2010, p. 261), four categories for further analysis were selected: (1) family in taking the stock of life, (2) concern about the family in the perspective of one’s own death, (3) the supportive role of the family, (4) family as the source of joy and worry.

The analysis of the data – the letters, was conducted according to the 3Cs principle by M. Lichtman. It involves moving from “*rough* data to significant description or statements by using: coding, categorizing and concepts (notions)” (Kubinowski, 2010, p. 238). The process of formulating the concepts had several stages: initial coding and revisiting initial coding that leads to the development of the code structure; developing and modifying the list of categories derived from the coded data. The final stage involved generating the list of categories and subcategories considered as crucial in the perspective of the adopted research problems, and developing the concepts that enabled the final description, interpretation and answers to the research questions (see: Ibidem, p. 238–239; Rubacha, 2008, p. 259–279). In the process of qualitative analysis, Nvivo 11 pro computer program was used.

Family members as the letter recipients

In the letters inspired by the reflection upon one’s own life, in the perspective of death, the family issues constitute a large part of the content, though there were also letters where this topic is not mentioned at all and the recipients were not even family members. The letters containing family references are often addressed to more or less specified, sometimes late, family members. They begin with the warmhearted greetings that prove the close relationships between the writers and the addressees: *Dear Dad; Mark, My Dearest Grandson; Dearest and Beloved Daughter; Beloved Husband* or *Dear Sister-in-Law!* In order to emphasize the solemn character of her letter, one of the writers decided to use a very sublime tone through the whole letter and a very official greeting: *The spiritual testament for my children.*

The recipients were spouses, children, grandchildren or parents. The endings of the letters were simple. Yet, they proved that the writers assigned a great value to their family roles, or revealed their feelings: *Wife, Mother, Grandma, Widow and Grandmother of 8 wonderful grandchildren.* Goodbye formulas, were also sometimes very emotional: *Loving, in love with life, preparing for the new, heavenly life Mother; Kisses, Your Mom; Good bye, remember I love you, Grandma.*

Family in retrospect

The memories recalled in the letters are not filled with much joy over the passed years. The joy can only be read in the emotions expressed towards other people with whom the authors spent their happy years. However, these are not the memories of careless moments. They refer to the years spent in the family home as children or later, as adults. But these memories bring back mostly difficult times, yet, spent with the loved ones, parents, grandparents, siblings. These statements are full of humility and understanding towards the loved ones, even if a given person was presented with their flaws that caused serious worries to the author of the letter.

Even though you were a strict father, I know today that you wanted to raise us to be good people and I can tell you that you have made it. I miss you so much... I didn't like you when I was a little girl, I was rather afraid of you because you were so strict with us and often when you were leaving for work I was repeating in my mind "Don't come back", because I was so afraid I would get a spanking. And you did not come back this one memorable Sunday... I couldn't understand why you left, why you got into that car... why you left us. (Anita)

Which one of you, young ones, would be happy to go to the forest and pick berries? But we earned extra money and helped our mom this way. My husband was also chosen by mom and dad, because he was a good catch. I had a hard time accepting this, because I was interested in another, and I had to marry this one and promise to be faithful to him. (Janina)

Dad, it's been so many years but it feels like yesterday. I'd never had a chance to tell you how much I loved you. (Anna)

Remembering the past often evoked longing for the days gone, missing the people who passed away. The authors recall their late parents, grandparents, family members — the persons who raised them or with whom the authors shared their happy moments.

I'm an older lady now, with a lots of life luggage and you're there, in heaven, and you're still 37. Dad, I would like to know if feel good there, if you're happy. I wonder when will I see you, I would have so much to tell you, but the first thing I will do is to hold you tight and say that I love you, Dad. (Anna)

There was only grandma left, the one I liked very much. I wanted to be at her deathbed. (Honorata)

The feeling of missing the dead ones occurs also when the authors remember their adult years. The losses experienced in the adulthood involved not only their parents but also their own children. The most recent losses were the spouses.

I woke up this morning and I felt I missed you greatly. Today, 5 months after you're gone, I realized how much I miss you. (Zyta)

I'm 62 and I've been a widow for 9 years. I spent amazing, the most beautiful 32 years of my life with my husband. He gave me so much joy and happiness that words cannot comprehend (Anna)

My dearest, beloved Daughter. You left as a beautiful, fragrant, fresh flower. You were smart, resolute, caring, the best daughter in the world. You have left me with beautiful memories, and pain, and longing of which one will never be free. You're gone but you're alive and I am with you. Every day, often during the day and night, we talk, laugh, plan what could have been perfect in the "reality", and in these moments I never cry. You were my greatest value, greatest treasure without which it is very hard to live on. My smile and the joy of life fades away, and there is only suffering, sadness and great longing left. (Elwira)

With these few words I want to tell you that you were always the most important to me. You were the only one I truly loved and I know our love will live still — there, in heaven. I'm waiting for this moment, when we meet there. God is merciful and he will be watching over us in this important moment, as he has been our whole life. (Magdalena)

At the same time, the loved ones who passed away seem to be a support in confrontation with one's coming death. They wait for the ones who remained and support them now — as believed by the authors of the letters. Re-uniting with them after death is something to look forward to and it gives hope for the happy moments not marked by loneliness.

I'm not afraid of death itself because I know my loved ones are waiting for me there. I also know how sad would be the ones who love me when I'm gone. (Michalina)

There are so many of my loved ones on the other side that I won't be lonely. (Janina)

...I'm slowly getting ready to go, to part with this beautiful world. I'm living with the hope we'll meet in our after-life. Looking forward to seeing you, my Daughter! (Elwira)

More often and in a more direct way than joys, the authors describe the hardships of their family life in the past. They were traumatic experiences of losing the loved ones or being harmed by them. Family home turned out to be a place of suffering, where there was no love but rather violence, lack of understanding or loneliness.

I experienced suffering already as a little kid, I had survived the world war II and I remember lots of blood and the piles of death bodies of my loved ones. Another hard experience was the sudden death of my son. (Henryka)

When I was 20, my grandfather got sick. We looked after him with my mom. He was lying and had bedsores. His son, my dad, was not interested in this illness of the old age. He was very nasty when taken care of. He used obscene words and I didn't like him. He died, I was not sad that much. (Honorata)

When I was an adult, yet, young woman (29), I experienced a "death within me". This may sound stupid but it is the only way I can describe it. My little boy died in my womb.

It was a great despair. I wanted a second child so much (I already had an 8 year old son). (Iga)

I was also taking violin and singing lessons in the Pedagogical High School. I was getting very high grades. That time, in the 1950s, there were admissions to Śląsk Song and Dance Ensemble. Because I was learning music and singing, I had a chance to get into the ensemble in the first place. It was possible thanks to my high school professor from Mysłowice. I passed the entry exam and I was to be accepted but, unfortunately, my family didn't let me because I was the youngest and they decided I should look after my parents. And so it was — the thing I wanted so much did not happen. I left this high school and moved to another. (Xenia)

Family in the life balance sheet

In the letters, there were clearly visible forms of evaluation and summarizing of the authors' life – the consequences of the decisions and choices made, or decisions to withdraw from certain activities. In such a retrospect, biographical approach to family, the balance was mostly positive. A sense of fulfillment in the family roles dominated in the statements. Disappointments with some aspects of family life were compensated by other successes and joys. These are mostly the roles of spouses and parents.

I used to be young, beautiful and attractive. I had everything women dream of — I was a mother, a wife and a friend. (Henryka)

I was lucky, even though I lived a modest life. I gave birth to, raised and educated three children who now have their own families. (Jagoda)

I'm glad I raised him to be a good man and that his grandchildren are good. I had a happy life, because I had work, husband and Janek – what more would I want? Some people divorce but God let me stay with my husband until his death. (Janina)

Out of the letters, the ones addressed directly to the beloved – spouses, parents, children, grandchildren – should be selected. They contain declarations of love, expressions of thanks for the life together, as well as pride and joy resulting from the happy, shared experiences.

Thank you for our life together. Thank you for being with me every day, for this awareness that you'll never going to leave because we made our vows before God. And I also thank you that were always honest. Thank you also for our beloved children. You were a great father – caring, protective but also demanding. It is thanks to you that our daughter has learned from the beginning what a good husband and a father should be like. And now she has her own good family and she is happy. Our son – he's just like you! He inherited your character. It's good he's followed his calling – he's happy and fulfilled there. I also thank you for enduring when I was giving you a hard time during my sickness. You were so patient and delicate, especially when the pain was unbearable. Thank you that you

watched over me in the hospital, during the surgery and after the treatments. I thank you with all my heart. (Magdalena)

I'm so proud of you, my children, because you've grown to be good and honest people, I didn't have any problems with you, you were my greatest joy and support, I've never had to be ashamed of you. (Sabina)

Not everyone, though, have such a positive view of their past. The letters do not lack sad memories from the previous stages in life. The majority of them are the losses of the loved ones, but there are also the results of taking the stock of life: failures in marriage and disappointment with people.

On the way, I lost my loved ones, that is, my mother, my father, my brother Zbigniew, my brother Leopold and I'd been left alone. And I also suffered from the lack of love, orphan disease when I was a child and then in my marriage due to egoism and coldness of the loved ones. I was and I am unappreciated and unnoticed person, with deficits and very sensitive... (Bożena)

When I was an adult woman, life wasn't saving me hard experiences, my husband, the father of my children, now late grandfather of my grandchildren, was not sparing me either. He was never helping our family, I had to work to pay the debts of his family, he was taking all the money to them and did not give anything to his own children. I had to go to Warsaw to work, so my children have something, and they did not have comfortable life. (Michalina)

However, the letters were also an opportunity to admit one's own failures, wrong decisions, negligence towards the closest family members.

We lived in a family but past by one another, everyone minding their own business. Work, housekeeping, studying, extra job — these were our goals. Talking to the loved ones, contacts with our family were in the background. We visited our parents only for holidays, weddings and funerals. Many of our loved ones and friends have already gone forever. It's a pity that so little has been said, so many unanswered questions. (Jagoda)

Now, I would also like to apologize for the things that had caused you pain. I know that you've forgiven me everything because you've always been so good, I also apologize that sometimes we cared so little to have time just for the two of us. I also apologize for the good words I have never said and that in the day-to-day business they were too scarce. (Magdalena)

I can remember you being sleepy and bored during the mass and my nervousness when you childlike patience was reaching its limits. I remember preparations to the First Communion, learning few formulas by heart and so much time spent on cooking, gifts and nothing more than that. How unreliable I had to look as a catholic in your small, smart eyes because you were always very intelligent. Wasn't that an empty ritual for you, a miserable decorum, dressed up and artificial? Did you, as teenagers, not despise such faith? You did not rebel and you are going to pass this great NOTHING on your children? I feel a spiritual bankrupt when I look at what I have passed on to you. (Patrycja)

Concern about family in the perspective of one's own death

The letters often took on the form of a manifesto, an inter-generational message or even the last will. The authors tried to formulate the most important message, a life motto, advices to the younger generations and to share life wisdom, like in the last example quoted above (Patrycja) when the letter became an opportunity to call for greater engagement in the spiritual life of children.

There is, however, something I can give you abundantly, freely. You and everyone who expects something after I'm gone. Those who were my happiness, joy and my everything. I wish to instill a real faith in God in you. (Halina)

Beloved, I beg you, don't copy our mistakes. Talk to one another. Be open to the needs of other people. Show your feelings, don't be ashamed to talk honestly, it helps in difficult moments. I know it now. And good that we show to others, comes back like a boomerang. (Jagoda)

Other messages were addressed rather to a general public and they are mainly calls to show kindness, love and tolerance:

What advice can I give to the young ones? To be happy with what they have. So they don't look for happiness where it's not possible. Because we will always want more and there will always be something missing. Where love is, there is also happiness. (Janina)

When founding families, we must remember to love children unconditionally, even though every reasonable person admits that it is easier to love children who make their parents proud, when they're growing up. (Józefina)

I wish to say to my children and grandchildren that they should live their life 100%. Don't be afraid of anything and move forward. One should live it to the full and take everything there is to take. (Wanda)

There were also reflections about death. The authors of the letters, as the older people who have life wisdom, used the letters to equip the recipients with this knowledge, helping them to confront human finiteness.

Sure, death brings pain and tears but this is the way world works – something begins and something ends. Someone comes to the world and someone dies, someone cries and someone rejoices. One needs to stop and cry, pray and then the heart is lighter. Talking to someone close and trusted also helps. It's not worth to store your sorrow inside. I know it's not easy but I guarantee it works. (Wanda)

I think we should not be afraid of death, it will make us infinitely good. You should live according to your conscience and then you wait peacefully for it to come. I wish you, Gosia, such life. (Stefania)

However, the reflections about human finiteness provoke also to look into the future. Dying means leaving family behind and this perspective seems to be the cause for concern about the loved ones. On one hand, the limited time does not allow far-reaching, long-term activities, on the other hand, there is an awareness of the great dangers one cannot control anymore. There is also a concern about being a burden to the family in case of a severe illness.

I always try to pass on all my experiences to protect them from mistakes. I know it's impossible because everybody must face their fate on their own, but I wish my family the best. (Michalina)

Is it too late to make it up? Does this time of my growth in faith mean anything to you, when you're not home anymore, when you have your own families, when your children — my grandchildren — are born? I have probably given you what I, myself, received at home. (Patrycja)

I always think about them and I worry they may go astray, because it is very hard to raise children now. More and more drugs, alcohol and bad company. Please, keep explaining to them how dangerous this is. (Sabina)

Actually, it's not fear from dying but a sorrow and longing that those you love will stay and I won't be able to share their joys, worries and they surely wouldn't make it without me. (Katarzyna)

... but if he finally wants to take me with him, I would like it to happen suddenly and quick, so I'm not a burden to my family... (Stanisław)

However, some authors are exceptionally peaceful when thinking about their family. They are convinced their loved ones would be fine. They are well prepared for life, so dying seems easier when they can peacefully look forward to the future of their families.

I believe each of them will have a happy life and I'm going to leave in peace, knowing they will be fine and will not have such a hard life like mine. (Michalina)

My children are grown ups, my daughter is already married and my sons would do just fine in life. (Dorota)

Regardless of their concerns about the future of the family, the authors wish they could share the future experiences they will not be able to participate in — there is some sort of longing for the future. These are some important family events like weddings or births, but also the daily joys.

I often wonder about the things I will not know anymore. I may not live when my first great grandchild is born, or some of my grandchildren get married. (Michalina)

Do you know our grandson will get married soon? These moments I regret the most — that you will not see it. But despite that, I hope you're watching over us from above. (Zyta)

Summary

According to Elżbieta Dubas (2016), one of the gifts of the old age is the time regained for ourselves. In this period of life, it serves its most important function – it gives meaning. “The old age helps people find the meaning of life – to understand the phenomenon of life, both, individually – as the sense of their personal life, and in the cosmic perspective — as the meaning of the universe” (p. 236). The serious reflection about one’s own biography when the life cycle is about to complete, naturally invokes pictures from the most distant past, seen through the eyes of a child. Times when the authors of the letters were children were not easy. Many of them recall the atrocities of war and their family in the situations of work or during the housework, or the absence of the closest family members. Olga Czerniawska, when conducting her review of many narrative-based research, describes the childhood memories of the oldest group as “difficult but happy” (2006, p. 72). This description can be used in case of the authors of the letters, and one can even notice a longing for the family home that was not there, for the parents who were always busy. But the respondents show great understanding of the times when they were growing up, they try to excuse their parents, idealize them. Not everyone, though. In one particular case, in the long letter to her grandson, the author writes without any reservations and with great honesty about the emotional distance she had experienced in her childhood and the lack of good family relationships.

The memories from the adulthood are also emotional and marked with sadness and the sense of missing the loved ones. The authors write a lot about those who passed away. The death of parents, experienced by the most seniors, is natural. It is, undoubtedly, a difficult experience, however, the loss of a life partner or a child becomes a very dramatic experience, hard to accept. “Experiencing the painful loss of a beloved person is an individual matter; like every death, it is a unique process. Each of us – regardless of age – experiences grief in their own way, personally. Moreover, it is easier to face the awareness of one’s own death than the loss of a loved one” (Zych 2009, p. 251). The deceased are pictured as extremely valuable, good, beloved persons who had done a lot of good to the authors of the letters. They express how they miss them, and at the same time they look forward to meeting them after death and they believe in divine Providence. Thanks to this, the confrontation with approaching death seems easier.

During taking the stock of life, the key reference is the family life, what is confirmed by the research by Jerzy Halicki (2010) who says: “family turned out to be one of the main factors of contentment in life” (ibidem, p. 143), and the decisive elements in life were marriage and successful children. Astrid Tokaj have reached the same conclusions, when she summarized her research: “we need to emphasize that in each time interval – according to the respondents – family played, is playing and will play the most significant role” (2005, p. 45). The analysis of the letters confirms this thesis.

The authors of the letters emphasize their satisfaction with the family roles they have played. They thank their loved ones that they could spend their life fulfilling their roles in the family. They are proud of their children and spouses, they express happiness that comes from performing the family roles – first of all, as parents and spouses.

The image of the family is much more often recalled in the positive light. In the research by A. Tokaj (ibidem), such opinion is shared by about 60% of the respondents, and the negative experiences from the past were connected with other areas of life rather than family. However, taking the stock of one's life also takes on the form of return to the negative past events. And then, the family may also become the source of suffering. The letters reveal the hardships of marital life. Spouses were often the perpetrators of domestic violence, they neglected their family responsibilities, committed adultery or abused alcohol. The negative experiences from the past must lead the respondents to ask themselves about their part in dealing with those problems. And even though the negative events were viewed by some as imposed circumstances that nothing can be done about, others saw their fault in those situations as well. They admitted their lack of involvement in the family life, ignorance, negligence of their spiritual life.

The confrontation with approaching death also provoked the seniors to think about the future of their loved ones who will be left behind when the time comes to part with this world. This confrontation resulted in formulated advises, a sort of testament, a call to the younger generations. The wisdom contained in the letters is, first of all, a call to show love and respect to one another, to take responsibility for others but also to live life to the full and, at the same time, do not neglect the spiritual life. Another form of caring for others are the concerns focused on the selected aspects, accompanied by advises and encouragement to overcome difficulties. These difficulties are connected with the threats of today's world, the hardships of family life and death.

The authors of the letters also think about themselves in the perspective of sickness and death. They are afraid that they will be a burden to their families, they do not want that and they want to protect their families against it. These are reasonable concerns as in Poland it is mostly children (51.1%) and children-in-law (13.45%) who are the carers of their elderly parents (Czekanowski, Synak, 2006, p. 184). The writers also express that they miss the things that they will not be able to experience, events that they will not see — the family events.

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