



The Stories We Carry Facilitator Guide



A six-session reflective life story workshop



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Purpose of This Guide

This guide provides the conceptual foundation and structural overview for *The Stories We Carry*, a six-session reflective life story course designed for older adults.

It is not intended to train facilitators in basic group process. Rather, it clarifies the architecture, pacing, and intention of the class so that seasoned facilitators can confidently guide participants through a process of reflection and meaning-making.

It is assumed that these sessions will be tailored to meet the needs of your group. Variables such as number of participants will affect timing and flow. The scripted curriculum provided should be adapted as needed.

Why a Lifespan Structure and Developmental Frame

Many older adults naturally return to familiar or emotionally charged periods of their life—often keeping the story narrow. A lifespan arc widens the narrative beyond familiar stories by inviting attention to less-explored chapters and overlooked transitions.

Participants are invited to see their lives as adaptive and evolving systems rather than fixed stories. Instead of emphasizing reminiscence or the retrieval of specific memories, the focus is on how individuals have grown, adapted, and made meaning across the lifespan.

The course invites participants to explore their lives not simply as a sequence of memories, but as a developmental journey. The facilitator's role is to create an environment where patterns, insights, and coherence can emerge naturally through reflection and shared experience.

Later Life Is Especially Suited for This Work

Later life often brings psychological capacities that can support reflective work. These capacities allow individuals to revisit earlier experiences not simply as memories, but as parts of a larger developmental story. The emphasis shifts from accumulation to integration—from what happened to what it means. These capacities support the shift from recounting events to interpreting them.

The benefit of having lived many years provides greater emotional perspective and increases tolerance for complexity and ambiguity. When exploring key developmental processes, the ability to recognize long-term patterns and themes becomes apparent.

The course follows developmental movement across time. These processes are not taught directly but arise through guided reflection and shared experience

- **Identity Formation** — how early influences shaped the self
- **Adaptation** — how individuals responded to change and challenge
- **Reinterpretation** — how meaning evolves over time
- **Integration** — how life experiences form a coherent narrative
- **Generativity** — the desire to contribute and offer forward

Architecture of the Course

The workshop follows a developmental movement built around a sequence of simple, accessible reflective tools. Each tool introduces a different way of seeing one's life, guiding participants from remembering to interpreting to integrating.

1. Life Graph — Seeing the Arc

The Life Graph invites participants to mark emotional highs and lows across the lifespan. It offers an initial view of patterns, transitions, and turning points.

2. Staircase Reflection — Recognizing Time

This tool reinforces the shared structure and the unfolding of life stages.

3. Spiral Reflection Sheet — Deepening Meaning

After each session, participants reflect on:

- Landmarks — what surfaced
- The Return — what is seen differently now
- The Thread — connections across time
- Narrative Maturity — perspective gained

4. Whole Life Spiral Integration - Overview

This image brings together the idea that life moves forward through time—like a staircase. And that we don't just move forward—we also return, like a spiral. It places experience across the span of a whole life.

5. Life Story Map — Integration

In the final session, participants create a visual representation of their life, identifying patterns, turning points, and themes. The map allows them to see how different chapters connect into a larger narrative landscape.

Core Metaphors: Spiral and the Staircase

Two complementary metaphors guide the reflective process:

The Staircase — Chronological Time

The staircase represents the forward movement of life across time. It provides structure, grounding the group in the progression of life stages and offering a shared sense of movement across the six sessions.

The Spiral — Deepening Meaning

The spiral represents the way understanding evolves as earlier experiences are revisited with new perspective. It reflects a central insight of narrative development:

We move forward through time, but we grow by returning to experience with new understanding.

Together, these metaphors help participants hold both the structure of their lives and the evolving meaning of their stories.

The Stories We Carry

Session	Core Identity	Emotional Tone	Developmental Focus	Metaphor Emphasis
1. Childhood	Origins & threads	Innocent, imagistic	Early identity seeds	Staircase origin
2. Adolescence	Becoming & first return	Charged, exploratory	Identity formation	Spiral begins
3. Early Adulthood	Building & patterns	Energetic, formative	Roles, commitments	Staircase forward
4. Midlife	Disruption & reorientation	Complex, pressured	Turning points, reevaluation	Spiral under strain
5. Later Adulthood	Integration & coherence	Spacious, grounded	Perspective, alignment	Spiral softens
6. Elderhood	Legacy & contribution	Generative, wise	Coherence, offering forward	Spiral completes

Session 1 | Childhood: Early Impressions & Threads

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To begin noticing the small sensory impressions and images from childhood that continue to echo across a lifetime.
 - To establish a reflective, relational environment and begin the process of life review by inviting participants to notice early impressions, images, and experiences that continue to hold meaning.
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Early childhood (origins of identity).
 - Sensory and imagistic memory.
 - Foundations of meaning-making.
 - Introduction to narrative reflection.
- **Session Arc:** Safety → Witnessing → Early Memory → Initial Pattern Awareness.
- **Materials Needed:** Copies of the *Developmental Features of Older Adulthood* handout, copies of the *Life Graph* template, pens/pencils

1. Introductions: Early Impressions (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Introduce yourself to the group. Use this opening to set a secular, inclusive, and grounded tone for the weeks ahead. This session serves as the origin point—remind yourself that the symbolic mind is the primary way children organize experience. Imagistic thinking, lived symbols, objects, characters, and sensory impressions all function as early meaning-markers.

Prepare the group to share their very first reflections. Remind them that early memories are often less about historical accuracy and more about internal meaning. They tend to be sensory, image-

based, and emotionally resonant. These early impressions often become the threads that continue through a life—sometimes quietly, sometimes more visibly.

Speak Welcome everyone. We begin our time together with a simple idea: every life is a story, and that story is shaped not only by what happened, but by the meaning we’ve made along the way. This first session is about beginnings; noticing the early threads. As we introduce ourselves to the circle today, I invite you to connect with your earliest foundations

Inquiry Prompt

Think about an early image, sound, or small moment from your childhood memories. It can be a place, a person, a sensory memory, or a specific moment that has stayed with you over the years. Please share this moment and tell us how it made you feel to remember it

2. Later Adulthood & Life Story Work (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Distribute Handout: *Developmental Features of Older Adulthood*. Take a minute for folks to look it over; you may want to mention a few of the features and entertain comments.

Speak In later adulthood—generally the late 60s through the 70s and beyond—we are offered something rare: the opportunity to pause, look back, and begin to see our experiences not as separate events, but as part of a larger whole. This chapter of life is naturally marked by perspective, coherence, and meaning. Many of the roles that once defined us begin to loosen, and the pace of striving eases. For the first time, the long arc of our lives becomes visible in a way it simply wasn’t while we were busy living it.

This shift isn’t about decline; it’s about readiness. It means the mind and heart are developmentally primed for integration. This course is not about documenting the past or telling a complete, chronological life story. It is about noticing what has stayed with you—and beginning to understand why.

3. The Practice of Witnessing (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Establish the relational agreements of the group. Sharing stories with others enhances integration and supports emotional well-being. Witnessing allows a person's story to be acknowledged—not judged, solved, or reinterpreted, but simply seen and heard. In this steady relational space, both teller and listener co-create meaning, giving the story weight and allowing it to settle into coherence.

Speak Before we move into our first mapping tool, it is vital to establish how we hold space for one another in this room. In this work, listening matters as much as speaking. Meaning develops not only from telling, but from being heard; we come to know ourselves in the presence of others.

Witnessing is not about fixing, advising, or interpreting; it is the simple, profound act of holding space so that another person can hear themselves more clearly. When we listen without interpreting or planning our response, something different becomes possible. In the steady presence of a listener, a story can deepen, soften, or take on new meaning each time it is told.

Setting the Container: Reflective vs. Therapeutic Space

Facilitator Note It is vital to establish in the very first session that while this work is deeply therapeutic in its impact, it is not a therapy group. Because we are looking at the long arc of life, heavy or traumatic memories may surface. The goal of this group is to look at the *themes* and *meaning* of our lives, not to process unhealed trauma.

Speak As we prepare to share, it's helpful to remember the distinction between a therapy group and a reflective story workshop. A therapy group is designed to dive deeply into unhealed wounds, trauma, or crisis to process them. Our circle is a reflective space meant to look at the broad landscape, patterns, and themes of our lives.

Because of that, I invite you to share the *chapters* of your story rather than the raw details of deep personal trauma. If a memory feels too raw, heavy, or unhealed to hold without clinical support, please protect yourself and others. Hold that piece close to your chest. We want to ensure this room remains a safe container for everyone to reflect without feeling overwhelmed.

4. Tool Integration: The Life Graph (30 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Transition to the life graph. Distribute the *Life Graph* template. It is assumed that these sessions will be tailored by the facilitator; variables such as the number of participants will affect timing and flow, and it is expected that this guide will be adapted as needed.

Allot 10 minutes in class to begin the graph. Note that it is not necessary to complete the entire graph during the session. The goal is simply to get an initial sense of the breadth of change, the highs, and the lows. You may want to suggest that participants pick 5–6 core life events in class and encourage them to complete the remaining decades at home.

Speak Over the next several sessions, we'll return to different periods of your life. The Life Graph offers a simple way to step back and see your life as a whole landscape. It invites you to mark your emotional highs and lows across time—not to analyze or judge them, but to begin noticing overarching patterns. Let's take 10 minutes to begin mapping those peaks and valleys now.

Inquiry Prompt

- Were you surprised by how much has actually happened over the course of your life?
- Were you surprised by any visual patterns you hadn't consciously seen before?
- Looking at your graph, choose one specific childhood moment or period that stands out to you: What draws your attention to it, and what feels important about it right now?

5. Closing & Looking Ahead (5 Minutes)

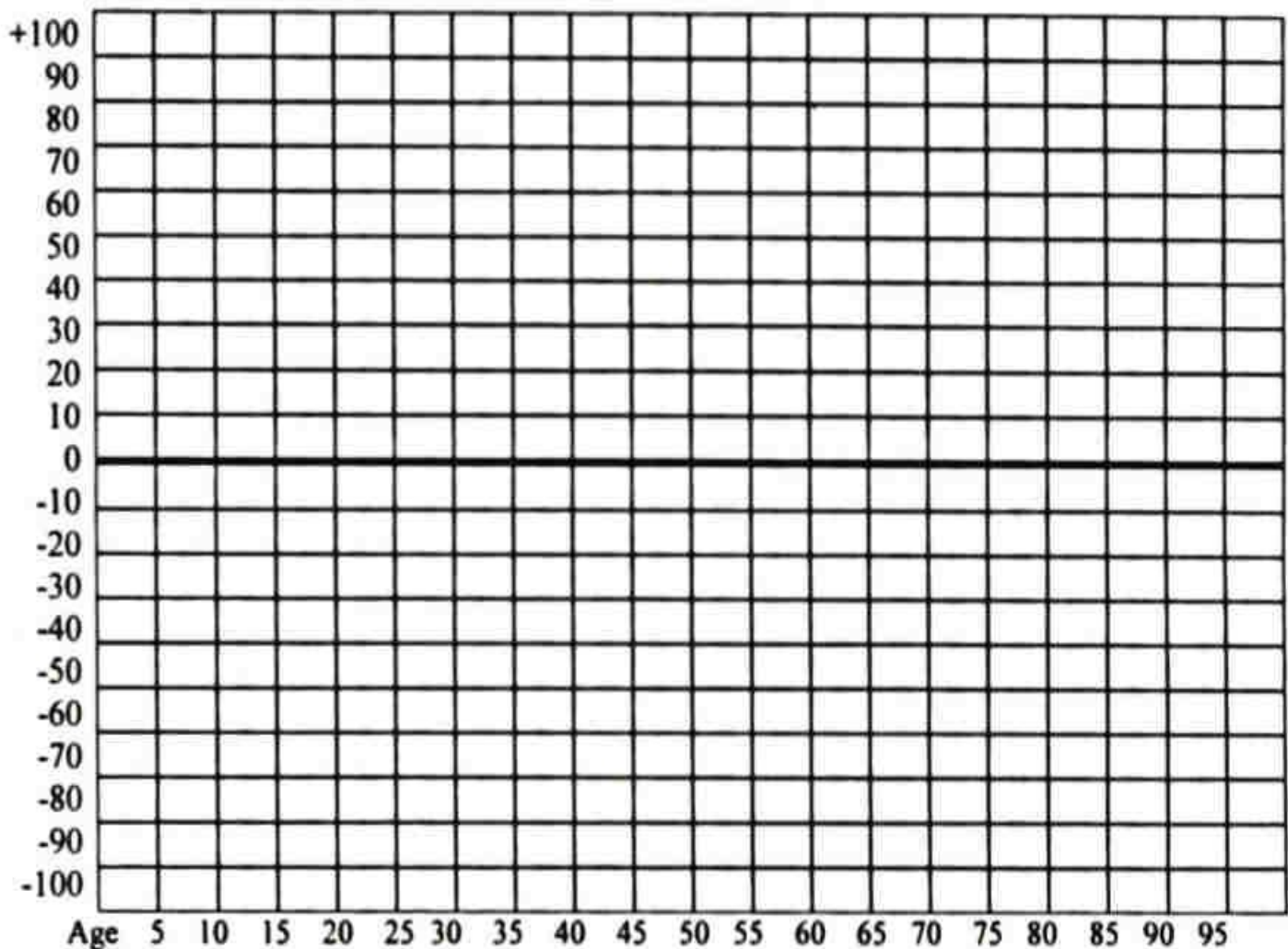
Facilitator Note Summarize the session arc and clearly outline the creative homework for next week.

Speak Today we began our journey by gathering threads—small moments, early impressions, and first glimpses of a larger life story. Over time, we will watch how these threads connect. Next session, we'll begin to revisit these early experiences from a different vantage point—exploring how meaning evolves as we step into the spiral of adolescence.

For our next session, I ask each of you to find and bring a photograph of yourself from your adolescence or early adulthood. For each of the next four sessions, we will be using a photo that corresponds directly to the life chapter we are discussing to help anchor our reflections. Thank you for your presence and your deep listening today.

Your Life Graph

On the graph, place a dot at your age for each major event or branching point in your life. Judge the event for the way you feel about it, plus or minus. How positive or negative do you feel about the event? Connect the dots representing major events in your life to create your lifeline. Draw a vertical line for your present age, and project your lifeline into the future. How long do you expect to live, and how do you expect to feel about the years ahead?



Developmental Features of Older Adulthood

Older adulthood is a distinct developmental stage marked by perspective, coherence, and meaning. While not formally named in developmental theory, this period often begins in the late sixties or early seventies. The features below describe common patterns that emerge as people enter this chapter of life.

Time & Perspective

- Reframing of time — a shift from “time since birth” to “time left to live,” heightening presence and intentionality.
- Integration of the long arc of life — seeing decades of experience as a coherent story rather than isolated chapters.
- Meaning that ripens over time — insights that become available only through accumulated experience and perspective.
- Capacity for life review — readiness to reflect, integrate, and make meaning of one’s story.
- A widening sense of meaning — connection to something larger: community, legacy, spirituality, or continuity across generations.

Identity, Agency & Inner Alignment

- Clarity about what matters — refined values and priorities that guide decision-making.
- Selective investment of energy — choosing relationships, commitments, and activities that feel purposeful rather than obligatory.
- Shift from striving to alignment — moving away from proving oneself toward living from one’s center.
- Identity grounded in essence, not roles — loosening identity tied to career, parenting, or external achievement.
- Renewed agency — a sense of authorship over the present chapter, even as circumstances shift.
- A grounded, confident voice — increased trust in one’s truth, boundaries, and perspective.

Emotional & Relational Maturity

- Emotional spaciousness — greater tolerance for ambiguity, nuance, and complexity; less reactivity.
- Acceptance of what cannot be changed — not resignation, but a mature realism that frees energy for what is possible.
- Reconciliation with earlier selves — tenderness toward past versions of oneself and a clearer sense of continuity.
- Deepened compassion — empathy shaped by lived experience, loss, and perspective.
- Orientation toward authenticity — a preference for relationships and environments that feel real, mutual, and nourishing.

Generativity & Contribution

- Desire to contribute — a generative impulse to share wisdom, mentor, or leave a legacy.
- Clarity about contribution — a sense of what one uniquely offers at this stage of life.

Continued Growth & Wisdom

- Continued neuroplasticity and learning — the brain's ongoing capacity to adapt, grow, and form new connections.
- Emergence of wisdom — the integration of knowledge, perspective, and compassion into a usable form.

Session 2 | Adolescence: Becoming & First Return

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To explore adolescence as a formative period of identity development and as the first major return
 - To introduce the Spiral as a way of understanding how meaning evolves over time
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Adolescence and identity formation
 - First reinterpretation of earlier experience
 - Emergence of self-awareness
 - Beginning of narrative reflection across time
- **Session Arc:** Adolescence → Identity → Spiral → Reflection
- **Materials Needed:** Participants' photographs from adolescence or early adulthood, copies of *The Spiral Integration Lifelong Path* and the **Spiral Integration Reflection tool**

1. The Welcome & Photograph Check-In (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Welcome participants back. This check-in uses the photo they were asked to bring to anchor the shift into adolescence.

Speak Welcome back everyone. For the next four sessions, we will be using the photographs you bring to connect directly with the time period we are discussing. Let's begin our group check-in using the photo you brought today.

Inquiry Prompt

Please share your photograph and offer 2–3 words that describe what that time of life felt like.

2. Adolescence as the First Point of Return (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Help the group notice how early threads evolve into questions, values, and tensions. Adolescence is the first major “return”—the first time we are able to reinterpret childhood from a new vantage point, and the first conscious use of symbols (music, aesthetics, journals, style) to shape an identity that is emotionally charged and personally defining.

Speak Adolescence is a time when many of the early threads of our identity begin to take shape. It is a critical period of identity formation marked by rapid physical, emotional, and social changes. At the time, we rarely understand how significant certain experiences will become, but later in life we can look back and see those moments differently.

Adolescence is often remembered as a time of change, exploration, and growing independence, but it is also often the first time we have experiences that echo across the decades. It is our first major 'returning' to our story. We see meaning now that may not have been visible then.

Adolescence and elderhood make a powerful pairing because they are both identity-forming stages, but in opposite directions: Adolescence asks, *'Who am I becoming?'* while Elderhood asks, *'Who have I become?'*

Inquiry Prompt

Think of a meaningful experience from your adolescence or early adulthood that has resurfaced at different points in your life.

- What happened?
- How did it affect you at the time?
- How do you understand it now?

3. Introduction to the Spiral Metaphor (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note The Spiral provides a visual metaphor for adult development. Rather than viewing life as a straight line of stages left behind, it suggests that individuals will revisit earlier questions and experiences with new awareness. Through reflection, earlier events take on new meaning, unresolved experiences become integrated, patterns across the lifespan become visible, and a deeper sense of coherence emerges.

Speak We often think of life as a straight line—moving forward from one stage to the next, much like the Life Graph we started last week. But human experience doesn't actually unfold that way. We return to earlier questions. We revisit earlier versions of ourselves. We reinterpret moments that once felt settled.

This is why the Spiral is such a powerful metaphor. The Spiral is not just a concept—it's a lived experience. We grow by circling back, we deepen by returning, and we evolve by revisiting the places that shaped us. You've already felt it

- when an old memory suddenly makes new sense
- when a childhood value reappears later in life
- when a long-held question resurfaces with new clarity
- or when you realize you've been circling around the same theme your whole life

Inquiry Prompt

Looking at the adolescent version of you in the photo:

- What is one thing you understand now that you couldn't have known then?
- What stands out to you as you look back on adolescence now?
- Do you see connections between your younger self and who you are today?

4. Adaptation, Integration, and the Reflection Tool (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note This process is not just about "telling your life story," but about "understanding how your life developed." Participants return to earlier experiences not to relive them, but to reinterpret them through the perspective of later life. This primes the core idea of the Spiral: continuity and change in motion and returning to earlier material with new capacities.

Speak The spiral reflects the ongoing process of adaptation and integration across our lifespan. Adaptation is a lifelong rhythm; we adapt, recalibrate, and reinterpret our experiences again and again. Three ideas help us understand this:

- *Life transitions are recursive:* We revisit earlier developmental tasks in new forms.
- *Meaning evolves:* What something meant at 20 may mean something entirely different at 70.
- *Identity is dynamic:* We are always in the process of becoming.

This is why later life is such a powerful time for reflection. We finally have the distance to see the long arc of our lives as a Spiral of return.

Inquiry Prompt

Reflect on one quality you possess that has remained consistent since adolescence, and one quality that has evolved significantly.

Facilitator Note Distribute the *Spiral Integration Lifelong Path* and *Spiral Integration Reflection Tool*. Explain that it is not an assessment, but a reflective tool to notice shifts. After each session, they should take a minute in a notebook or on a separate piece of paper to capture what surfaced, what is seen differently, their connections across time, and the perspective gained. Track what emerges. This will be helpful for the final Life Map we will do in session 6.

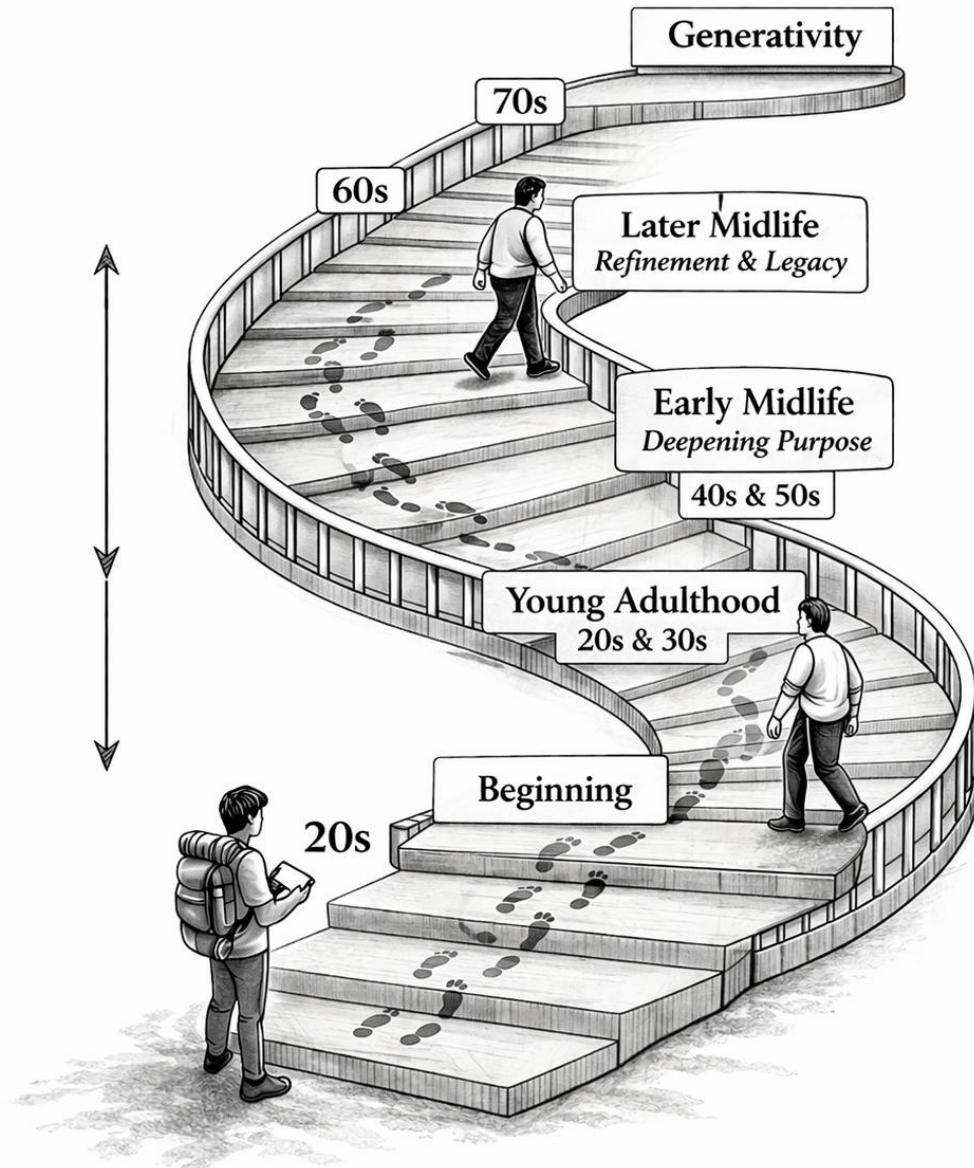
5. Closing (5 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Bring the session to a unified close, linking the work of Session 1 to today's work.

Speak In our first session, we were Gathering the Threads—noticing small but meaningful memories, images, or sounds that still shimmer after many years. Today, we officially entered the Spiral: Becoming. We began seeing the past through new eyes, revisiting earlier experiences from a later vantage point and noticing how meaning changes with time. As we look back at adolescence with this new perspective, we begin to uncover the patterns, turning points, and influences that were previously unavailable to us.

Spiral Integration

— *A Lifelong Path* —



Footsteps show progress and the natural pattern of returning.

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Spiral Integration Reflection Tool

Purpose

The Staircase Spiral is not an assessment, rather, it serves as a reflective tool—allowing you to notice shifts as you move through your life. After each session, take a minute to capture some of your reflections. Use a separate piece of paper for each session. At the end of the class, we will do a life map. These reflections will be helpful to refer back to.

Reflection Questions

Session Number _____

1. **Landmarks - What surfaced?** (e.g., a move, a career change, or a shift in a relationship)
Identify the moments, memories, thresholds, or “shimmers” that emerged during this session. Look at the photograph you brought. What moment in your life does it represent? What do you remember about who you were then?

2. **The Return (Seeing it differently)**
What do you notice now, with your present awareness, that you could not see at the time?

3. **The Thread (Connecting across the Spiral)**
Does this pattern appear elsewhere in your life? where?

4. **Narrative Maturity (The Vantage Point)**
What compassion, understanding, or wisdom can you offer your younger self from where you stand now?

Session 3 | Early Adulthood: Patterns & Themes

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To recognize how commitments and choices in young adulthood begin forming patterns, which later reveal deeper themes about identity and direction
 - To help participants recognize patterns and themes that emerged in early adulthood including using symbolic literacy
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Early adulthood (20s–30s)
 - Formation of roles and commitments
 - Emergence of patterns and themes
 - Movement from experience to meaning
- **Session Arc:** Revisit → Patterns → Themes → Meaning → Symbolic Awareness.
- **Materials Needed:** Participants' photographs from early adulthood (20s–30s), copies of the *Spiral of Integration* visual handout.

1. The Welcome & Photograph Check-In (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Welcome the group back. Use the photographs from early adulthood to instantly ground the group in the decade of their 20s and 30s.

Speak Welcome back everyone. Today we are moving into the chapter of early adulthood—our 20s and 30s. Let's open our circle today by looking at the photographs you brought from this time period.

Inquiry Prompt

Please share your photograph and offer 2–3 words that describe what that time of life felt like.

2. Early Adulthood: The Foundation of Choices (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Ground the discussion in the tension of this decade: while young adults often feel like they are starting fresh, they are subconsciously building on everything that came before. Many early choices are unconscious ways of adapting, belonging, and becoming.

Speak Last session we explored adolescence—a time of becoming and identity formation. Today we move into early adulthood—a time of choices, commitments, and direction. In our 20s and 30s, we often feel like we’re building a life completely from scratch. But in truth, we are building on foundations laid in our early years and our adolescence.

This stage reveals how our identity begins to take distinct shape through the commitments we make, the roles we step into, the relationships we form, and the directions we choose. Young adulthood is quietly shaped by the values we carried forward, the questions we inherited, the patterns we didn’t yet recognize, and the hopes we were testing.

Now, looking back with the distance of years, we can begin to see the deeper logic—the inner story—that was guiding us. This is often where the threads from early life begin to form recognizable patterns.

3. Patterns and Themes: Moving From Experience to Meaning (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Focus the group on the shift from remembering what happened to understanding what it means. Help them understand that patterns are not mistakes; they are signals of what mattered before they had the language for it.

Speak Patterns emerge when we step back and observe life over time. They may appear as repeated choices, recurring relationships, familiar tensions or longings, or values that continue to surface. At the time, these choices may have felt immediate or practical. But with the distance of years, we can see something more: we can begin to see patterns, and from those patterns, we begin to understand themes.

This is the critical shift: moving from simply *remembering* our lives to truly *understanding* them. A pattern is what repeats across your life, but a theme is what that pattern begins to reveal. Themes carry meaning, identity, intention, and emotional resonance. They answer the question: *'What does this pattern reveal about who I was becoming?'*

Inquiry Prompt (Identifying Patterns)

- What do you notice repeating in your early adulthood chapters?
- Where else does this pattern appear in your life?

Inquiry Prompt (Uncovering Themes)

- What patterns that you noticed turned into themes? What were those theme(s)?
- What direction was your life taking shape around, and what does it say about who you were becoming?

4. Introduction to Symbolic Literacy (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Introduce symbolic literacy as a clinical technology for meaning-making. These inner capacities naturally evolve over a lifespan, narrowing in busy periods and reopening in later life to help metabolize experience into wisdom rather than fragmentation.

Speak To help us connect these themes, we use what is called 'symbolic literacy. This is simply the capacity to recognize meaning through images, metaphors, patterns, and emotional resonance. It gives shape to deep experiences that are sometimes incredibly difficult to explain in ordinary, everyday language.

In later life, symbolic literacy becomes a meaning-making technology—a direct way to metabolize our lived experience into wisdom. We will return to this again in the last session when we build our life maps, but let's explore it today.

Inquiry Prompt

Choose one pattern from your life and ask yourself: If this pattern had a symbol, what would it be— what does that symbol reveal?

5. Tool Integration: The Spiral of Integration Handout (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Distribute the *Spiral of Integration* handout. Use this section to give a clear, unified overview of how the two core metaphors of spiral and staircase work together.

Speak I am passing around a handout called *The Spiral of Integration*. This image visually brings together the two primary metaphors of our course:

- **The Staircase (Time):** Reminds us that life moves forward step by step, across distinct chronological chapters.
- **The Spiral (Meaning):** Reminds us that psychological growth happens by circling back—returning to our experiences with new perspective.

Together, they show that a whole human life is both movement and return—forward and inward. We revisit experiences not because we are stuck, but because their meaning is still unfolding.

Inquiry Prompt

- What stands out to you as you look at this visual layout of the spiral?
- Where do you recognize a distinct sense of returning in your own life?

6. Closing (5 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Offer a grounding final thought that honors the order and intentionality that participants are starting to find in their personal histories.

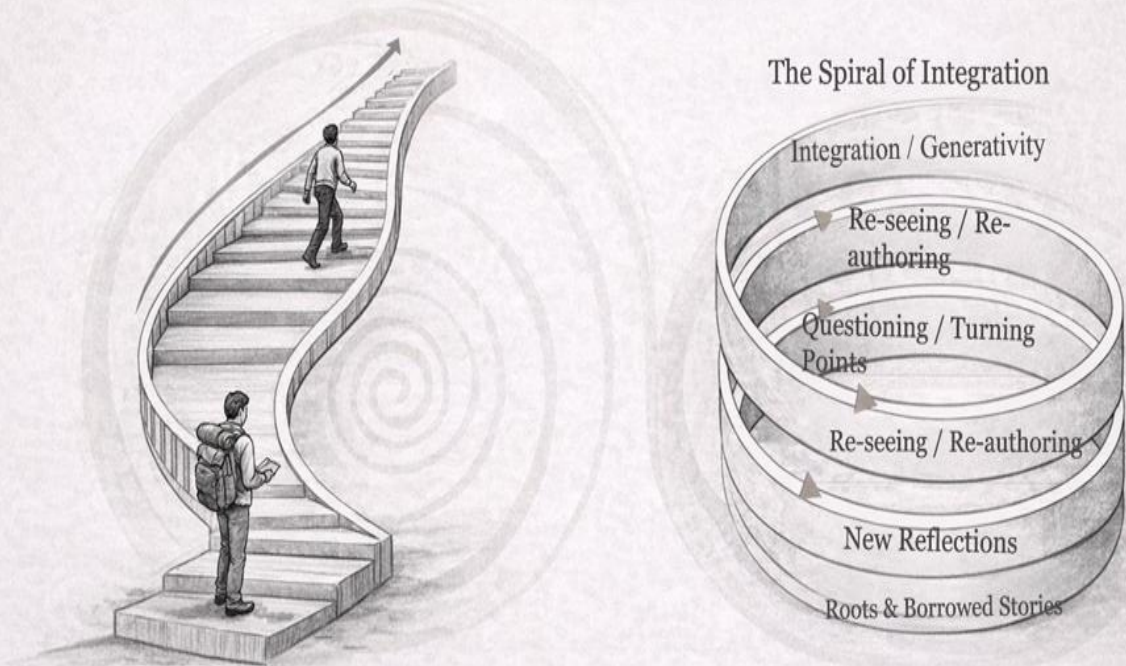
Speak Today marks a major shift in our workshop. We are beginning to see that our lives were not random sequences of events. They were patterned, shaped, and moving in intentional directions—even when we could not yet see it at the time. Thank you for your deep reflection today, and please remember to capture your notes on your reflection page this week

Thank you for your reflections today.

Handout

The Spiral of Integration

Life Lived Forward, Meaning Made Through Return



The staircase represents the forward movement of our life. The spiral shows how we come to understand our life.

Over time, identity becomes layered with meaning. The experiences we have and the choices we make begin to form the chapters in our life story, shaping how we understand ourselves.

The spiral reminds us that we not only move forward, we also return. We revisit experiences with new eyes and gradually integrate their meaning.

Session 4 | Turning Points & Disruptions

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To support participants in moving from noticing lifelong patterns to recognizing moments of disruption—times when life shifted direction.
 - To explore how chosen or imposed midlife turning points redirect the life story, particularly during an era when identity feels under pressure, responsibilities peak, and disruptions invite deep reevaluation.
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Approximately the 40s and 50s (though applicable across adulthood).
 - Disruption as a normative developmental process.
 - Identity under pressure, complexity, and shifting roles.
 - Emerging self-awareness, compassion, and narrative reevaluation.
- **Session Arc:** Pattern → Disruption → Reflection → Meaning.
- **Materials Needed:** Participants' photographs from midlife (40s–50s), copies of the *Whole Life Spiral* handout.

1. The Welcome & Photograph Check-In (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Welcome the group back. Midlife can be a tender and emotionally heavy era to revisit. Remind yourself to pace this opening check-in with immense gentleness, allowing space for whatever complexity arises.

Speak Welcome back, everyone. Today we enter the midlife transition—roughly the 40s and 50s. These are years often marked by intense complexity, competing responsibilities, and quiet transformation. Let's begin our check-in with the photographs you brought from this season of your life.

Inquiry Prompt

Please share your photograph and offer 2–3 words that describe what that time of life felt like for you.

2. The Midlife Transition: Carrying the Weight (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Frame midlife as a second major return to the Spiral, where earlier assumptions, values, and identities are reconsidered in light of lived experience. The goal here is to help participants offer their younger selves the compassion they didn't have access to at the time.

Speak In our 40s and 50s, life frequently shifts; it becomes less about outward building and much more about inward understanding. We begin to see the long arc of our choices, the patterns that shaped us, and the places where our story asks to be reframed.

When we look back, we often realize we were carrying far more than we understood at the time—heavy responsibilities, social expectations, invisible labor, and immense emotional weight. When we return to this era today, we aren't here to judge our younger selves. Instead, we have the opportunity to offer that younger self something they may not have had in the thick of it: deep compassion, understanding, and a much wider perspective.

3. Turning Points as Invitations & Redirections (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Differentiate between a pattern (continuity) and a turning point (redirection). Emphasize that turning points are not failures or random interruptions; they are moments where the path bends so something new can emerge. Research suggests most adults navigate 5–6 major turning points across a lifespan.

Speak If patterns show us the continuity of our story, turning points show us exactly where the story shifts. A turning point isn't always a massive, dramatic event. It is simply a moment when something inside us wakes up and says: *'This matters,' 'This cannot continue,' 'This is who I am,'* or *'This is who I am not.'*

Turning points may be chosen or imposed, deeply joyful or profoundly painful. But they all share one thing: they reveal who we were becoming. In a linear view of life, an unexpected turn feels like an interruption. But in a Spiral life, turning points are moments of redirection. We look back

at them not to judge, but to listen with curiosity and ask: *What was I trying to protect? What was I longing for? What was I learning to value?*

Inquiry Prompt

Looking back at your 40s, 50s, or any era where life took an unexpected turn:

- What happened?
- How did it change the direction of your life?
- What did it reveal about who you were at that time?

4. Normalizing Disruption as a Process of Reorganization (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Many turning points are intimately bound up with loss—the loss of a role, a relationship, a career direction, or a former version of oneself. Explicitly normalize that these periods are disorienting and can take *years*, not months, to fully integrate into a coherent identity.

Speak What you may have experienced during those years as deeply disorienting or difficult is actually a normal part of the adult journey. Most adults experience several major life disruptions across a lifetime. Some are chosen, but many are absolutely not.

Many of these turning points are deeply connected to loss—the loss of a role, a relationship, a clear direction, or even a past version of ourselves. In the moment, these experiences feel shattering. But in the Spiral, disruptions are not the end of your story; they are points of reorganization. They are places we return to again and again across a lifetime, each time bringing a little more perspective to bear on them.

Inquiry Prompt

- Consider a major turning point. How do you understand that specific turning point or disruption differently today?
- What perspective do you possess right now that you completely lacked back then?

5. Tool Integration: Looking at the Whole Life Spiral (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Distribute the *Whole Life Spiral* handout. Remind them that patterns, themes, and disruptions do not stay neatly boxed inside a single decade; they echo across our entire lives.

Speak I am passing around the *Whole Life Spiral* handout. Up to this point in our sessions, we've been focusing heavily on single, separate eras of your life. But your patterns and themes do not stay locked in the past; they unfold across your whole life.

This graphic brings together two beautiful ideas: life moves forward through time, and life returns, again and again, with new awareness. We revisit these earlier disruptions not because we are stuck or trapped in them, but because something in them is still unfolding. A life deepens not by leaving the past behind, but by returning to it with the wisdom you have today.

Inquiry Prompt

- As you look at the whole spiral layout, what are you beginning to see more clearly about your life landscape?
- Has anything shifted in how you fundamentally understand your past experiences?

6. Closing (5 Minutes)

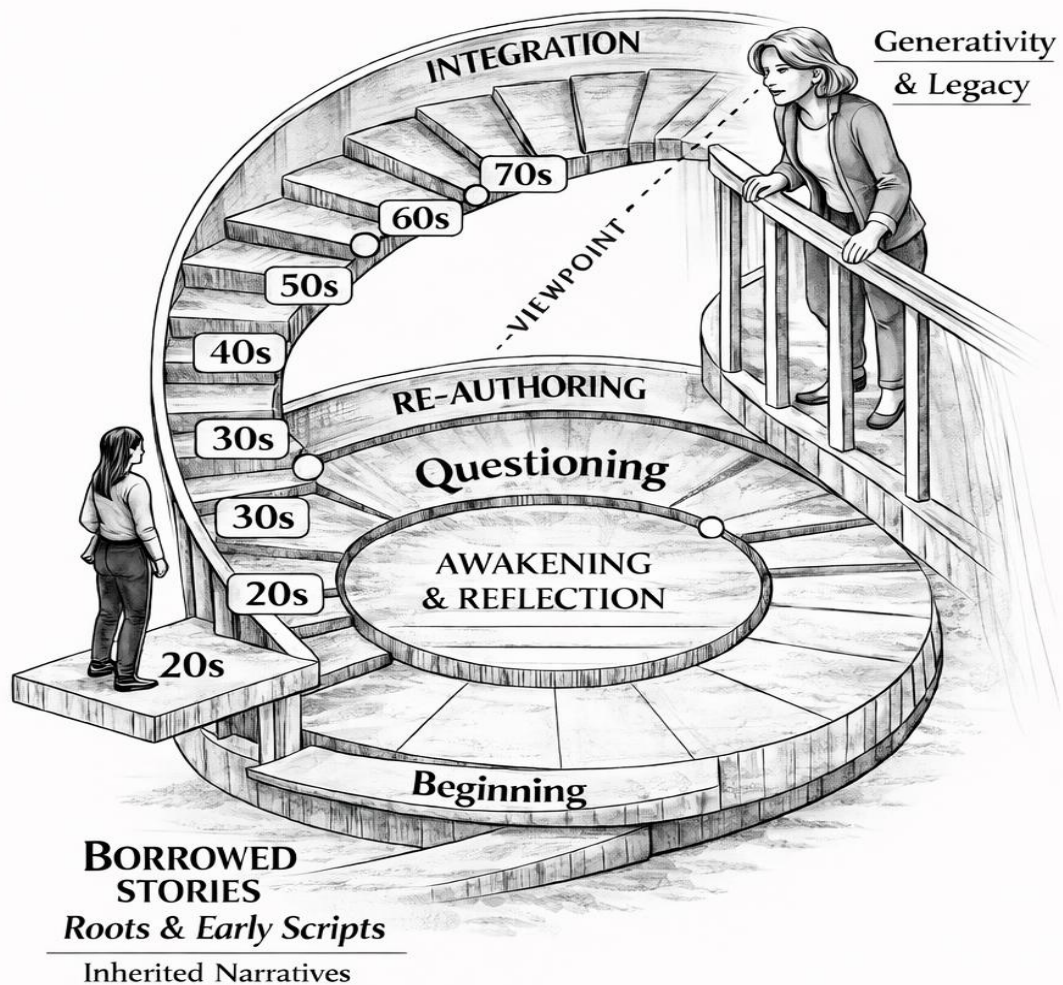
Facilitator Note Bring the session to a supportive close, validating the emotional courage it takes to look at disruptions.

Speak Thank you for the immense honesty and courage you brought to our circle today. Looking at the places where our paths fractured or bent is tender work, but it is exactly where our narrative maturity grows. Please take a few quiet moments this week to capture your thoughts on your Spiral Integration Reflection Page, and we will gather next week to look at the unique spaciousness of later adulthood.

For next week, consider bringing a photo that shares something important about who you are, regardless of the age you are in the picture.

A Whole Life Spiral

How We Return, Re-see, and Integrate Over Time



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A Whole Life Spiral

How We Return, Re-see, and Integrate Over Time

Up to this point, we've been looking at two important ideas. First, that life moves forward through time—like a staircase. And second, that we don't just move forward—we also return, like a spiral.

This image brings those two ideas together and places them across the span of a whole life.

Take a moment just to look at it. You'll see the decades moving upward—20s, 30s, 40s, and beyond. That represents the passage of time... the life you've lived.

But notice—this isn't just a straight staircase.

It curves. That curve is important because it suggests that as we move through life, we are also circling back—returning to earlier parts of our experience. At different points in life, something begins to happen.

We start to look back. We revisit earlier relationships, decisions, challenges, or moments that stayed with us. And when we return, we don't see them the same way.

We see them from a different place— with more experience, more context, sometimes more compassion.

We begin to see patterns. You might notice that certain themes show up more than once in your life. Not because you're stuck... but because something in those experiences is still unfolding.

We begin to connect parts of our life that once felt separate

This image isn't just about time passing. It's about how a life deepens. Not by leaving the past behind— but by returning to it with new awareness.

Session 5 | Later Adulthood: Integration & Coherence

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To recognize how later adulthood brings perspective, spaciousness, and coherence
 - To explore regret and other life experiences to be able to “come to terms” with past experiences
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Integration, acceptance, and coherence.
 - Reframing and narrative authorship.
 - Elder perspective.
- **Session Arc:** Threshold → Regret → Reframing → Acceptance.
- **Materials Needed:** Participants' photographs from later adulthood (60s/70s+), copies of the blank *Life Map* templates and *Mapping Your Journey Instructions* (printed clearly on legal cardstock).

1. The Welcome & Photograph Check-In (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Welcome the group back. This check-in uses the photographs from later adulthood to ground the space in their current or recent chapters of life.

Speak Welcome back, everyone. Today we enter the chapter of later adulthood—our late 60s, 70s, and beyond. This is a period often marked by a quiet transformation, where life becomes less about building external roles and more about finding internal coherence. Let's open our circle using the photographs you brought from this season of life.).

Inquiry Prompt

Please share the photograph you chose that shows something that is important to you. Spend a few minutes telling us what this means to you.

2. Later Adulthood as a New Threshold (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Frame these years as positive developmental readiness rather than a slowdown. It is the intentional work of life review: returning to earlier selves with gentleness and allowing meaning to fully ripen.

Speak As we step across the threshold into later adulthood, many of us experience a subtle but profound shift:

- From striving to understanding
- From achievement to alignment
- From proving to expressing
- From accumulation to clarity

This is the era when identity loosens from external roles, meaning ripens, and the long arc of life becomes visible as a whole—marking a profound shift from doing to being (retirement, shifting roles, and the early waves of narrative integration).

These years frequently bring a new kind of inner steadiness—a sense that life is no longer something to chase, but something to truly inhabit. This shift isn't about slowing down; it's about living from your center rather than the edges. When we look back from this vantage point, we can offer our younger selves something we didn't always have in the thick of it: compassion, understanding, forgiveness, and gratitude.

3. Regret as a Companion to a Life Fully Lived (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Introduce regret not as a failure, but as an inevitable psychological companion to a long, fully lived life. Normalize that regrets come in two forms (action vs. inaction) and that inaction regrets tend to linger longer and feel more fixed over time.

Speak Few of us reach later life without reflecting deeply on choices made—and choices not made. Even as we reshape our narratives, we cannot avoid the weight they may carry. Among the most persistent of these is regret. It can be an unwelcome guest, but it is also a powerful teacher. Regret often tells us less about failure and far more about what has mattered deeply to our hearts.

Psychologically, regret generally comes in two forms: regrets of *action* (things we wish we hadn't done) and regrets of *inaction* (paths we wish we had taken). While regrets of action can feel intense in the short term, they tend to fade. Regrets of inaction, however, tend to linger much longer and feel fixed over time. Let's look at these paths together with curiosity, rather than judgment.

Inquiry Prompt

- Was there a path you once considered, but didn't take? What was it, and what led you away from it?
- Standing where you are today, how have you come to terms with the choices you made, or didn't make?

4. Reframing, Renewal, and the Spiral (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Define reframing clearly: it is not rewriting history or ignoring loss; it is expanding what an event *means* by allowing success and sorrow to exist in one single, coherent story. This is the Spiral at work—reinterpreting rather than reliving.

Speak Regrets often soften as we age. What once felt incredibly raw can become muted or even reframed. We may find ourselves saying, '*It was the right decision at the time,*' even when the outcomes were highly imperfect. Meaning-making in later life involves transcending regret, not erasing it. We learn to live peacefully with what we did and did not do.

At this stage, we reach a choice point: to integrate and accept our life as a whole, or to remain caught in the loop of what 'might have been.' Reframing is not about rewriting the past or glorifying loss; it's about seeing the past with new understanding. We often discover that a painful moment held a hidden strength, a difficult choice was actually an act of courage, or a loss shaped our deepest values. This is the Spiral at work—returning to earlier chapters to reinterpret them through current wisdom.

Inquiry Prompt

Choose one major moment, challenge, or shift from your life. What new understanding or meaning emerges when you revisit it from where you stand today?

5. Acceptance, Coherence, and Narrative Integration (15 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Introduce the ultimate goal of life review: narrative integration. Reminiscence becomes reconciliation—making peace with oneself. Use the bulleted points below to summarize what the widening Spiral allows them to see.

Speak As we grow older, a quiet shift occurs. We begin to accept our life—exactly as it was, and as it is—with honesty, grace, and sometimes a surprising gratitude for the very things we once resisted. This kind of acceptance isn't about giving up; it's about releasing the struggle to rewrite the past. It's about owning your story. All of it. Especially the hard parts.

In this light, reminiscence becomes reconciliation. It is about making peace with yourself. For many, even the most difficult experiences become part of a redemptive arc where you can finally say: *'I made it through. I learned. I grew. I'm still here.'* This is narrative integration—a reweaving of memory and meaning that offers true emotional coherence.

As the long arc of our story becomes visible, the Spiral widens and we begin to see:

- How early values endured.
- How patterns evolved.
- How turning points shaped our path.
- How losses deepened our compassion.
- How choices revealed our character.

Integration is not about tying everything up neatly; it's about recognizing the coherence that was there all along.

Inquiry Prompt

What now makes sense in your life that once felt deeply unsettled?

- What patterns have finally softened into wisdom, and what themes do you want to carry forward into your legacy?

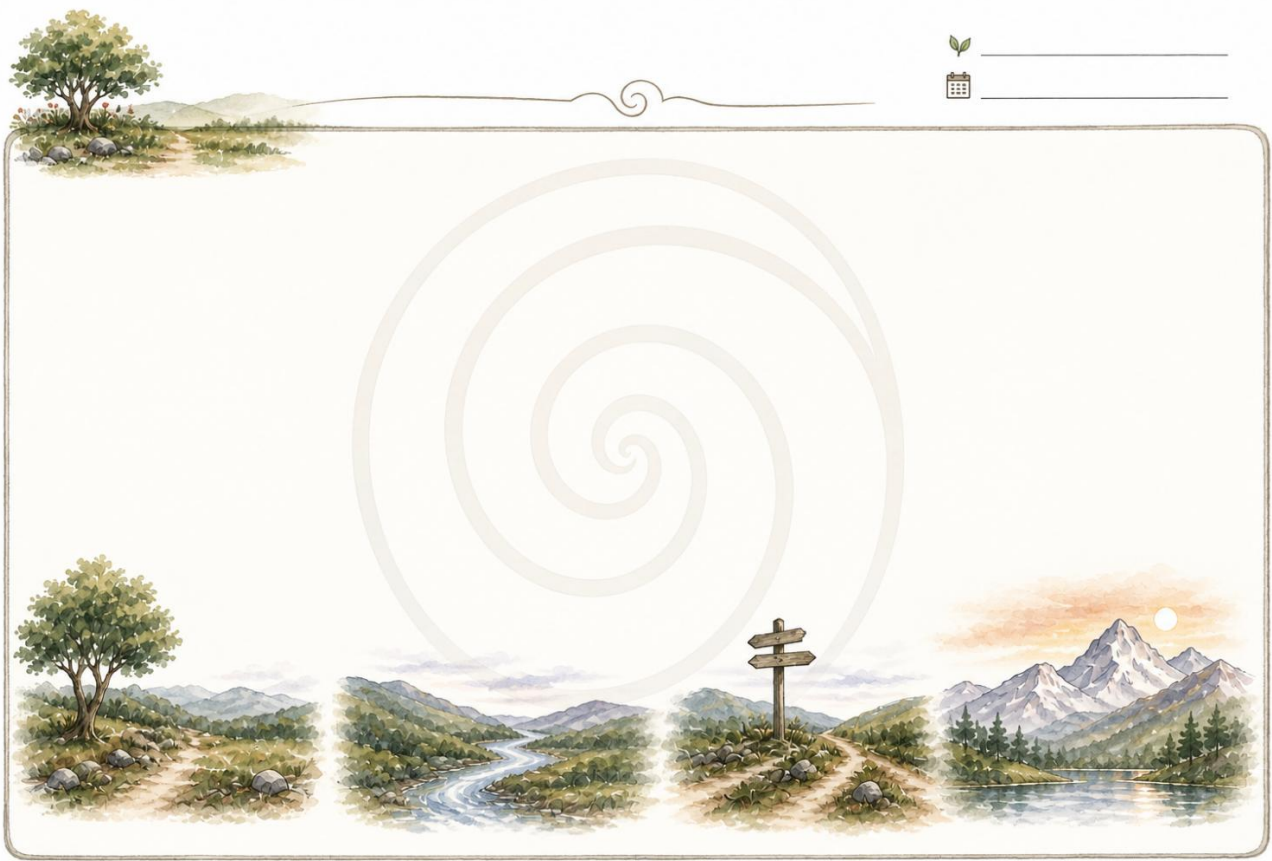
6. Closing & Distributing the Life Maps (5 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Hand out the blank *Life Map* templates and instructions. Ensure you give them clear permission that this is a meaningful, reflective exercise, not an artistic test.

Speak The years we have revisited today were part of a deepening—a time when your story begins to turn toward truth, authenticity, and renewal. We revisit those years not to judge them, but to honor the wisdom they seeded.

To prepare for our final session next week, I am distributing your blank Life Maps and the accompanying instructions. This mapping tool is a visual container for the threads, patterns, and crossroads we have uncovered over the last five weeks. Please take some quiet time at home this week to map your personal landscape and bring your completed map with you next time so we can witness our journeys together.

Life Map



Mapping Your Journey

This map is a memory field; a visual container for the stories, patterns, and themes you have explored throughout our sessions. It is not an artistic test, but a way to "re-see" the terrain of your life from your current vantage point.

Getting Started

You might begin at the beginning or you might start with a recent "Aha!" moment in the **Horizon** column and work backward. There is no wrong way to enter your own story.

Mapping Your Terrains

There are four unmarked sections/columns on the map that represent:

1. **Origins & Foundations:** Where your story begin? The early roots that shaped your initial view of the world. The foundations you built
2. **Building, Becoming & Flow:** What shaped your growth, movement and becoming? the education, roles, and relationships that moved you forward.
3. **Landmarks, Crossroads & Turning Points:** Where life asked you to choose or begin again. Mark the "Bridges" you crossed; the "Descents" and ascents that eventually led to new paths.
4. **Integration & Horizon:** What meaning emerges from here? Use this space to visualize the wisdom and perspective you hold today.

How to Use Symbols

As you reflect on a specific memory or life period, choose a symbol to anchor it on the map. Add a phrase or picture to represent the experience.

- **Foundations (Square, Triangle, Circle):** Use these for the "solid" parts of your life—A square represents stability and grounding. A triangle is a threshold you crossed or a turning point. A circle represents cycles you return to or whole ness
- **Flow (Waves, Lines, Bridges):** Use these to trace the movement of your life. Did a period feel like a steady current (Straight Line), or was it a time of significant change (Wind Lines)? Was it a period of pausing or rupture (Broken Line) Did you cross from one period to the next, making transitions or reconciliation (Bridge)?
- **Journey Markers (Flame, Cave, Star):** Mark the moments of internal work. Where did you find a spark of passion (Flame), a need for deep introspection (Cave), or a sudden moment of clarity (Star)? Use arrows to represent ascent ↑ or descent ↓

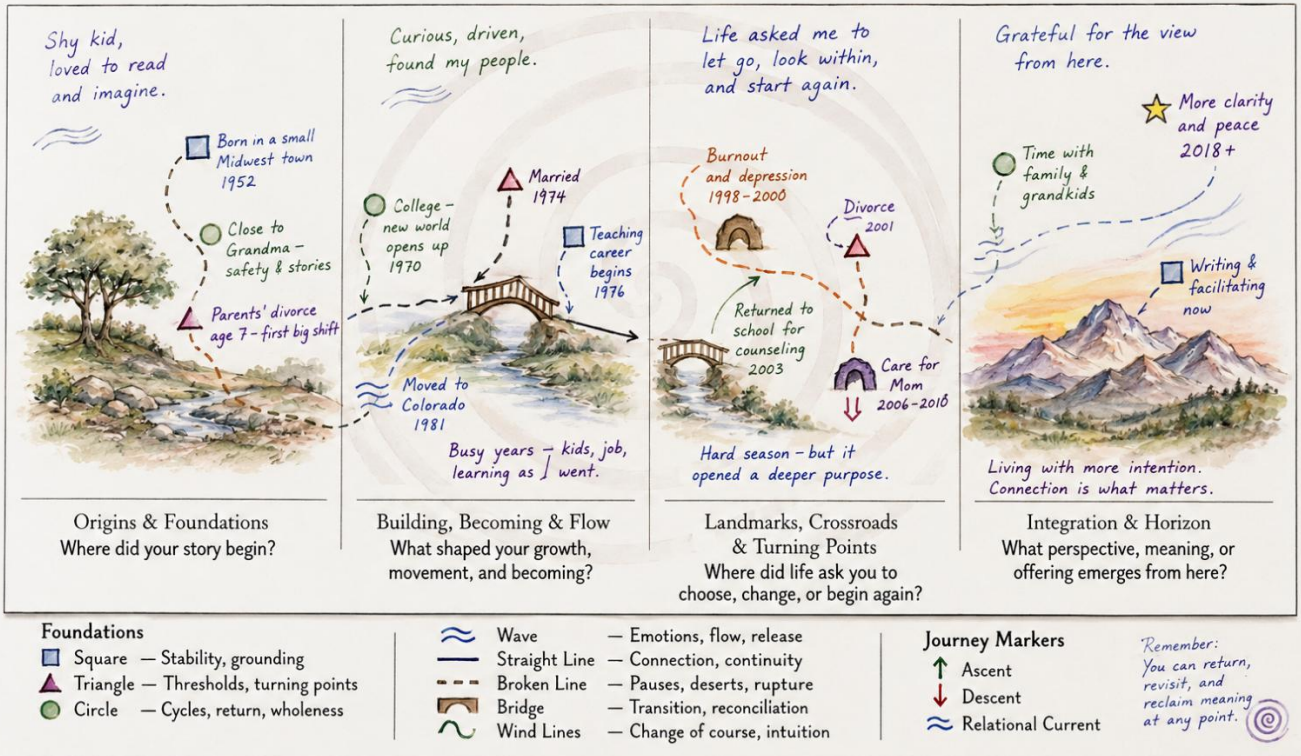
This map follows movement
across your life.
Begin at any point you feel called

Mapping the Journey of a Life

— SAMPLE —

Name: Sample Map

Date: May 18, 2025



Map Legend *A companion guide to your Life Story Map*

Use this space to briefly record the symbols, landmarks, crossings, and themes that appear on your map.

Your map is not meant to explain everything. It is a visual reflection of the experiences, patterns, meanings, and turning points that shaped your life. These brief notes can help anchor the symbols and images that matter most to you.

Symbol / Image	Age or Life Stage	Phrase or Title	Meaning / Why It Matters

Session 6 | Elderhood: Integration, Legacy & Carrying the Story Forward

The Container

- **Purpose:**
 - To support participants in integrating the larger themes of their lives into their personal understanding
 - To share completed Life Maps and consider how they wish to carry their stories and wisdom forward.
- **Developmental Focus:**
 - Narrative coherence,
 - Integration
 - Generativity
 - Legacy
- **Session Arc:** Integration → Collective Witnessing → Generativity → Closure.
- **Materials Needed:** Participants' completed *Life Maps*.

1. Welcome & Framing (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Acknowledge immediately that this is the final session. Ground the group in the purpose of the day: moving from individual reflection to shared witnessing.

Speak Welcome to our sixth and final session together. Over the past five weeks, we have gathered early threads, traced patterns, stood at crossroads, and looked at the long arc of our experiences. Today is about integration. It is an opportunity to see how those separate moments coalesce into a whole life landscape, and to witness one another's journeys.

2. Wisdom as a Dynamic Capacity (20 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Briefly introduce the concept of elder wisdom and generativity before moving into the map presentations. This frames their life maps not just as history, but as an active offering.

Speak We often talk about wisdom as if it arrives automatically with age, like a quiet inevitability. But wisdom is actually an active way of engaging with life—a mature integration of capacities like emotional balance, reflective judgment, and perspective-taking.

One of the quiet hallmarks of this stage is the generative impulse—the desire to offer our lived understanding forward to the present and future. The maps you created this week are a visual representation of that integrated self. As we share them, we practice the art of witnessing, holding space so that each story is simply seen and heard without judgment or a need to fix.

The impulse to contribute happens in many ways. It can appear in activism, in art, in community involvement, or in the simple act of showing up for someone who needs encouragement. Generativity is expansive. It finds its own channels. These shifts do not require perfect lives or heroic acts — only the willingness to see one’s life as part of something larger

Inquiry Prompt

How does generativity fit into your life?

3. The Map Integration Circle (40 Minutes)

Facilitator Note This is the heart of the final session. Protect this time fiercely. Depending on your group size, allocate roughly 5–7 minutes per person for sharing, followed by 1–2 minutes of resonance from the group.

- **The Map Presentation:** Invite each participant to share the terrain of their Life Map, highlighting the patterns, transitions, or symbols that feel most meaningful to them from their current vantage point.
- **The Witnessing Response:** After each participant finishes speaking, invite the group to offer brief, steady resonance. Instruct the group to use specific "witnessing starters" to ensure the feedback remains supportive and reflective rather than analytical.

Speak As we listen to each person share their map, remember that meaning develops not only from telling, but from being heard. When the teller is finished, I invite the rest of the group to respond directly to what moved you, using these specific phrases:

- *"What stayed with me was..."*
- *"I noticed..."*
- *"I heard themes of..."*
- *"I appreciated..."*

4. Closure and Ending (10 Minutes)

Facilitator Note Transition the group out of the sharing circle and into final closure. This brings a sense of completion to the six-week journey.

Speak We have reached the end of our six sessions together, but the spiral of integration does not stop here. The past experiences we have revisited meet our present wisdom right here, shaping how we continue to inhabit the chapters ahead.

Thank you for your vulnerability, your deep listening, and for accompanying one another in this profound work of reflection and meaning-making. Every life holds stories that deserve to be witnessed—thank you for honoring yours.

Thank You

Thank you for accompanying others in the work of reflection, meaning-making, and narrative integration.