**The Storied Self: A Narrative Approach to the Spiritual Care of the Aged** by [Bruce A. Stevens](https://www.amazon.co.uk/s/ref%3Ddp_byline_sr_book_1?ie=UTF8&field-author=Bruce+A.+Stevens&text=Bruce+A.+Stevens&sort=relevancerank&search-alias=books-uk), London Lexington/Fortress, 2019, 161+xvii pp., £65 (HBK). ISBN 978-1-9787-0273-8

**Reviewed by** James Woodward, Sarum College and the University of Winchester. UK jww@sarum.ac.uk

This volume stands in a tradition that has had an international influence on our understanding of the nature and practice of spiritual care in older age. The author succeeded Elizabeth MacKinlay as the second Wicking Professor of Ageing and Practical Theology and director of Colloquium for Ageing Perspectives and Spirituality (CPAS) at Charles Sturt University, Canberra. It is carefully written and meticulously researched drawing on the authors background in clinical and forensic psychology alongside his vocation as a Christian minister.

Despite the widespread use of the notion of the spiritual in human life and personhood it is a concept that can appear to be diffuse, contested and lying beyond a clear and coherent definition. Where does it land and what might it mean for those living with age in self and others? Stevens makes a significant contribution to the literature in this area particularly in his grasp on the nature of the psychological and psychoanalytical literature as it helps illuminate the complexity of what human flourishing might mean for us.

Narrative gerontology is a growing discipline shaped, for this reviewer, by the work of Dan McAdams (The redemptive self: Stories Americans live by) and Barbara Meyerhoff (Number our Days: Culture and Community among elderly Jews in an American Ghetto). Stevens adds significantly to the development of our understanding of story which should challenge the way we both think about practical theology and pastoral care.

At the heart of this book lies this proposition - the story is the primary form by which human experience is made meaningful. It follows therefore that it is through the sharing of the story that we listen to the inner experience of ageing. This is the essence of spiritual care. Stevens calls this the opportunity to ask the slow questions about life which requires a range of pastoral skills including an ability to recognise the nature of narrative. These chapters aspire to hope to offer the goal of a ‘deep story’ which can enrich and transform the way we understand age and the shape it takes in us.

Chapter One offers an overview of the deep story. In a carefully constructed text it discusses a number of reminiscence – described as integrative, instrumental, transmissive, escapist, obsessive and narrative. In this outline the purpose of reminiscence is described as helping to achieve ego integrity by revising negative schemas about the self. Spiritual experiences can be integrated through the medium of story – the aim is change and growth.

Chapter Two asks when stories begin – it explores the wordless learning that is hidden in infancy. It discusses concepts like Freudian unconscious, tacit knowledge, implicit learning, the cognitive unconscious, habitus, therapy and neurobiology and infant attachment styles. All these are offered as a framework within which we might understand the hidden story. Stevens argues a need for discovery. It is a journey into the familiar and unfamiliar. This is followed by chapter three which explores some of the unknowns in the life story. He argues that there are always gaps in all of our stories and so the challenge of discovery remains relevant and even central to the narrative approach. The Pastoral goal is the deep story – one that results in psychological and spiritual growth.

Chapter four (the God Story) moves the reader into theology as Stevens asks what does being spiritual mean and it is suggested that being spiritual represents the best in us. An awareness of the nonphysical dimension gives us a deeper apprehension of the meaning and purpose of life, a sense of synergy and connectivity, depth, and purposefulness. We are invited into exploring the nature of spiritual knowing means. Grounded in an awareness of human nature and our, sometimes, complicated relationship to perception chapters five and six discusses how we might test true and false stories. Stevens draws on Fowler and the stages of faith and makes an interesting and persuasive case for the difference between good religion and unhealthy religion. In the marketplace of ideas how far can we extend a testing process to somewhat intangible beliefs. What does it mean to discern truth from a Christian theological perspective? Stevens reminds us that we need to engage in a process of testing spiritual assertions and ultimately faith stories, which have a place in Pastoral care

In a challenging chapter Stevens invites us to explore stories which reflect the diversity of life but especially what he describes as our messy, problematic, body and dark stories. This leads into the possibilities of integration through story which are especially important for older people as they make sense of living and the way in which age has taken a particular shape in their lives and stories. We need to deal with memories and especially difficult ones of hurt and pain. Again the author is unashamed to bring into the psychological discussion integration the God story and our response to God in six stages – which is described as :recognition of God, a life of discipleship, a productive life, and journey inward,, a journey outward and a life of love. Is in the development of a deep story we need to have acceptance and coherent and the ready for providing space for growth and interconnection

The final two chapters look at where this journey of discovery and self-discovery might take an individual as we are invited into considering how we design a new story and perform it. Chapter ten includes an important section on generativity building on the work of Eric Erickson in asking what best can happen when human commitment is fired by spiritual imagination.

This is an important contribution to the literature in spirituality and old age. While the framework has been carefully argued the narrative is stronger in the area of psychology and psychotherapy than theology. The complexity of the framework does not easily lend itself into practice. As a theological educator I wonder what kind of formation and learning would be needed in order to empower individuals and groups to work with in such a framework

There might be some significant difficulties in the area of some of the exploration of self where there are painful and even traumatic wounds of knowledge and understanding. Can we ever know the totality of who we are and what has shaped us? What is the nature of change in human behaviour deeply embedded in habit and self-protection? Does religion help us to integrate, to tell the truth, to be set free from our lives and how we have lived? How much truth about the self can we bear to embrace? And what of those who cannot and will not tell the truth about themselves – whose lives (like ours perhaps) are much more fictional than we might think.

However Stevens is to be congratulated on a significant contribution to Pastoral and practical theology as an interdisciplinary discipline that invites learning from a number areas, particularly psychology, into a creative and generative dialogue.