Spiritual Testament of Polish Centenarians Addressed to Future Generations

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Abstract. The paper presents reflections of Polish centenarians about fundamental principles and values they would like to pass on to future generations. The research was conducted as a collective case study (Stake, 2009) with an in-depth interview (IDI). The study covered 18 cases of individuals aged 100-107. The most important message for future generations can be summed up as an encouragement to preserve basic values and a sense of moral responsibility for social inequalities in the world. In this intergenerational message, warnings about the future are very important: with war memories still in mind, centenarians oblige younger generations to live as history commands.

Not everyone will build a home that will serve next generations.
Not everyone will write a book...
But each of us can pass on to another person
what is the most human and divine...
Each of us can leave a testament of
noble patterns, ideas and values, that make people happier.
Antoni Bochniarz (Polish psychotherapist)

Introduction

Human civilization has survived and will last thanks to, among others, transmission of cultural heritage between generations. Throughout centuries, family/community members introduced those who entered into adulthood to the secrets of life and passed on to them the most important truths that ensured the sustainability of society[1]. Seniors are the ones who possess specific life wisdom resulting from their previous experiences, sense of distance towards the surrounding reality and reflections on what is the most important. This knowledge is unique and therefore should be preserved with proper care and passed on to the next generations. Its depositaries should be respected and listened to closely. An African proverb says that when an old man dies, a library burns to the ground [2]. When we think that this old man gathered his knowledge for more than a century, the loss is huge and irreparable.

This paper presents reflections of Polish centenarians about fundamental life principles and values they would like to pass on to future generations. This life credo let them survive through different, often very dramatic historical events and keep their dignity and unusual peace of the spirit that cannot be shaken by negative experiences or progressing physical limitations.

Role of the Old(est) People in Value Transfer

Systematic transfer of knowledge and values between generations is as old as mankind[3]. During thousands of years when cultures were shaped and passed on as legacy to younger generations, we can see tendencies to emphasize the meaning of ultimate values necessary to preserve life, sense of security and opportunities for ongoing development. Old(est) generations are the ones who play crucial role in transmission of culture that is a key component of our identity[4].

Among the values mentioned in this spiritual testament of mankind are: freedom, justice, peace, solidarity, safety. At present, they are part of the Convention of Human Rights. In this ongoing
process of generational exchange, culture but also guidelines for further development and progress are passed on[5].

When reflecting on cultural transmission, we need to remember that encounter with another person is always didactic in nature. It provides new experience and knowledge, both about oneself and the surrounding world. As noticed by J. Baniak, almost all forms of crisis experienced by contemporary people and the world originate from conscious avoiding a dialogue or even unwillingness to enter into it. Most often, these attitudes result from egocentrism or egoism. Absence of dialogue leads to pathologization[6]. According to Leila Shotton, we should strengthen position of older people so they—as individuals who possess unique wisdom—can play a role in our communities[7].

Potential of the elderly includes:

− *Life wisdom* (life-related knowledge and acquired competencies). Life wisdom of seniors is a product of their spiritual wealth (responsibility, caring attitude, prudence, emotional balance and empathy);
− *Social potential*, or relational potential, described as social capital (engagement in activities beneficial do the society, for example developing social bonds, restoring social relationships, volunteer activity)[8].

Inter-generational relations are a space where members of young generation develop and reach their maturity, whereas representatives of older generation orient and value their ageing. Quality of these relations also generates and shapes feelings, thoughts and actions towards others[9]. Older people may also become a kind of asylum stabilizing internal life of young people, showing them alternative to a negative view of reality. They are not afraid of confrontation and provide arguments, encourage critical attitudes and thus, enable resistance towards factors that destabilize inner control mechanisms. Therefore, there is a need for different initiatives promoting intergenerational dialogue[10] and integration, that would give young people a chance to get to know values cherished by seniors. In the Treaty of Lisbon signed on 13 December 2007, solidarity between generations is one of the priority objectives of European Union functioning[11] and the goal of European Day of Solidarity between Generations, established on 29 April, is to promote this idea. On this day, attention is drawn to a very important aspect of society building. Intergenerational meetings are organized in different institutions. 2012 was announced the European Year for Active Ageing and Solidarity between Generations[12] It was established to draw public opinion to the contribution older people bring to the development of societies.

Popes have been emphasizing the irreplaceable role of seniors in social life, both on macro- and micro-family level. John Paul II assigned mature individuals, including seniors, an extremely important role of *witnesses of the past and inspirers of wisdom for young people and the future*[13] He said that it is the oldest generation that helps to see events differently, through the lenses of gained experience and knowledge[14]. Elderly wisdom, understood as a sum of pragmatic and transcendent wisdom, becomes a source of answers to problems faced by young generation. In the world where there is nothing stable and sure, deprived of “face-to-face” relationships based on authentic meeting with another human, seniors are a refuge and depository of timeless, universal values of mankind. Despite their age and physical limitations, they still have a lot to offer to society, by sharing their wisdom and experience[15]. In Chinese/Taiwanese culture there are recommendable practices of granting centenarians a special status like ‘the patriarch of a five-generation family,’ ‘the treasure of the community,’ and ‘a good role model’, thanks to which they can feel appreciated[16].

Pope Francis assigns a huge educational role to the elderly. During a meeting with volunteers on the World Youth Day in Cracow, he called: ... *Talk to your parents, talk to older people. First of all, talk to your grandparents... If you want to be a hope for the future, you must receive this torch from your grandfather and your grandmother... and if they are gone already, will you talk to other older people? Will you .ask them? And ask, and ask some more? Ask them. They are pure wisdom*[17] Knowledge and experience of seniors are a spiritual treasure of societies because during their long life, these people *had a chance to observe many people and many events along
with their consequences. They can draw proper, useful conclusions, reflect deeply on those events, considering their reasons and effects[18].

Research Methodology

Social capital of seniors is more and more discussed in the present public discourse. In the reality of diluted values and norms, and cult of relativism life wisdom of older people, resulting from knowledge and experience they gained for years, is an underestimated treasure.

The objective of the study was to investigate and describe norms and values preferred by Polish centenarians, with consideration to their attitude towards widely understood human existence and responsibilities of future generations. The research question was the following: What spiritual testament would they like to leave future generations with?

Each individual case enriches our knowledge about the problem[19]. The research was conducted as a collective case study[20] with an in-depth interview. The study covered 18 cases of individuals living in Cracow and its surroundings.

The sample was selected purposefully. The study was conducted among centenarians aged 100-107, between June 2016 and July 2017 during individual meetings at their place of residence. Functional abilities of the respondents varied but all of them were in a good intellectual shape. Name and age of each respondent is provided with their statements. The names were changed to ensure anonymity.

Analysis of the Results

Attitude Towards Human Existence

With years of experience, centenarians can be spiritual guides for young generation. Having observed social life for decades, they can identify reasons of crises, consequences of wrong decisions and discontinuation thereof. They can warn against repeating the same mistakes and point to the ways they can be avoided[21]. Respondents were asked about the most important successes of mankind. Their reflections were ambivalent.

In general, I would evaluate mankind negatively. In the Middle Ages and earlier, in the ancient times, inhuman tortures like crucifixion or mounting on a pole were used. Has it changed much? End of the 20th century, what happened in the Balkans, e.g. in Serbia... What progress did humans make? Yes, technical progress is very high but ethical and moral development is relative. We have examples, thousands of positive examples, but even more negative ones. So I am a little skeptical towards the thesis that mankind has evolved [Leon, 100].

We live in a very interesting times. Many inventions, medical progress is immense. Plus, high level of socializing but we cannot control our own emotions [Klara, 102].

When you compare men to animals, you can see that four-legged creatures rather do not strive to destroy their own species. People fight not only with their adversaries. They can kill because of different religion or skin color. And they love to justify their behavior by saying they search for the truth, the one they deem legitimate [Stanislaw, 101].

Centenarians recognize huge technological progress but they say that, unfortunately, it does not occur together with emotional and social development of mankind. Changes in nature of interpersonal relationships—from face to face into face to screen, cult of individualism, egocentrism, consumerism (I possess therefore I am!) and requirement to be successful, result in giving way to primal instincts and selfish-hedonist motivations. It is disturbing that chasing contemporary treasured “goods”, we have lost the value of human life from sight.

We live in very interesting, although sometimes very hard times. I was born during the First World War, I have no memories of that time. But as a four-year-old kid, I listened my father reading breathtaking news from the Polish-Ukrainian front line. I asked my father naively: Why are they killing one another? Until now, almost a century later, no one has given me the right answer, even
though the question is still relevant. Maybe my great great grandchildren will not have to ask it. I wish they would not! [Stanislaw, 101].

Despite the passing of time, statements quoted above still correspond with words by Albert Schweitzer who said in 1952 when he received his Nobel Peace Prize: Man has become superman... However, the superman suffers from a fatal flaw. He has failed to rise to the level of superhuman reason which should match that of his superhuman strength...[22].

Preferred Values

For centuries, spiritual values were passed on to next generations as legends, stories and proverbs. Truths about universal principles and rules of life in these messages are timeless[23]. In present times, values are transmitted in a form of certain oral or written instructions (diaries, letters etc.). The respondents were asked what are the most important values in life, the values people should build their future on. On one hand, this question may be difficult, on the other, the answer seems to come easily. We need to remember that beautiful and wise life does not require higher education, wide horizons or great deeds, but moral principles, good will and honest work[24]. All respondents mentioned these fundamental principles. Truth, faith and work — these three values were mentioned the most often.

Young people have to be taught to tell the truth. Truth is the most important, it is a foundation. To tell the truth, be honest but not in a way that hurts others [Anna, 101].

I always tell them: speak the truth, then your conscience is at peace! [Adela, 100].

Credibility is very important for a man, to be trustworthy, not to lie. This human dignity is very important [Klara, 102].

Being reliable seems to be one of the most important messages centenarians have for young generation.

For decades, they have developed and practiced their religious wisdom which they can share with the younger generation in a very discrete and sensible way. It is possible, because it happens in their family environment[25]

Be strong in faith. Prayer and God [Klara, 102].

One needs to remember what is the most important, faith has helped me... [Róża, 100].

Gospel was always a reference point in my life [Rita, 100].

I listen to sermons and pray. It helps me a lot [Helena, 101].

The meaning of religion in the lives of centenarians (regardless of denomination) is confirmed by world-wide research[26]. The results show that strong religious attitude among the hundred-year-olds helps them in their general ability to cope with life and to see it in a positive way[27].

Despite many adversities and lacks, centenarians remained grateful to their fate/Providence for what they had. Sometimes it really was not much. They identified with the thought of unknown author: “What if you woke up today with only the things you thanked God for yesterday?”[28]

This may be a reason they find it so hard to understand discontentment of modern people.

You need to thank for each day lived, not complain. Days pass by like crazy. [Lidia, 101].

Poles like to complain... There is something I do not understand here: nobody dies of hunger in Poland, you can hardly see beggars on the streets today, women do not have to get up at 2 a.m. to stand in line to get some meat for soup, it is hard to find a parking place for your new car. And they keep on moaning [Stanislaw, 101].

Spiritual experience and religious knowledge of seniors are likely to be accepted by the young generation in two cases. If they would look for faith and guides who would help them to discover it or during a religious crisis. Thanks to complementing these two needs: of transfer of faith and religious values, and the need to find the meaning of life and authorities, older people often become first or the most important teachers of religious traditions, both in family[29] and local community.

Work is considered an autotelic and, at the same time, a heterotelic value because it paves a way to acquire other values... is an activity focused on creating certain utility and spiritual values[30]. It is one of the most important teachers in life, that tempers body and spirit. According to S. Kowalczyk, conscious resignation from work mutilates people and hinders their healthy
development. Without work, higher moral values such as: justice, love or peace become only fiction and verbalism[31]. By emphasizing the meaning of work, centenarians think of its inner aspect.

I always had to work hard, I had hard tasks but I always tried to complete them [Maria, 102].
I always kept telling them (children - authors’ note) they need to learn and work, with integrity [Zyta, 100].

Without work, man loses the meaning of life and gets older faster [Henryk, 106].
Work keeps a man alive, I loved to work my whole life. And this is what I taught my students [Daniela, 107].

We need to appreciate more the educational methods and values passed on by older generations. We need to remember that one generation’s gift to another is primary education[32]. And each civilization requires educational processes[33].

Responsibilities of Future Generations

The respondents were asked what challenges future generations should face. What do they believe is the most significant?

First of all, peace, that there are no wars as they are terrible things. How can you kill innocent people on such a scale? These are very dangerous things for the world [Klara, 102].

Other senior draws a very interesting vision of the future. He thinks globalization and migrations will lead to uniformization of societies. This will happen, of course, when we assume that future generations will cultivate the culture of peace[34].

I am sure that in 500, 1000 or so years (unless people would annihilate themselves through nuclear explosions) there will be no wars. Races and nations will mix, there will be one common language [Stanisław, 101].

Centenarians paid a lot attention to being responsible for the words we say. You cut bread with a knife but you can also use it to kill a man. The same with words; they can be a balm but also a terrible tool to initiate and spread hatred [Stanisław, 101].

People do not respect words today, they do not read... they only watch images on their TVs [Klara, 102].

I do not listen to radio or television anymore, it is only mumbling. A patchwork of words, without pauses, commas, periods, syllables swallowed. They focus on quantity, not quality [Jan, 100].

Another responsibility is to solve the problem of poverty and unequal access to education and goods in Third World countries. Centenarians often experienced hardships and poverty so they empathize with the ones who suffer from it now.

So much food is being thrown away, people do not respect bread, maybe a little poverty would humble them... To live more modestly, without spending money on luxuries. Much is spent now on unnecessary things [Helena, 101].

I just think that African countries used to be colonies, and these colonies were governed by civilized states... and they did nothing for these countries. These people cannot write, they suffer from poverty, it is said that there is a small group of people who live well but there is a huge group of those who do not. Maybe this will change one day...[Rita, 100].

It is worth to point out that seniors believe future generations can change the world for better. They only need to be willing and be able to draw conclusion from the history. Emilia mentions this condition.

I would tell young people to live as history commands [Emilia, 100].

Discussion and Summary

Respondents, who experienced two world wars, pointed out to great threats related to them and wanted to warn young people from repeating this terrible history.

The most important message they want to leave future generations with can be summed up as caring about the basic values like truth, faith and honest work. They play crucial role in moral and social development of mankind. Respect to every human being, sense of moral responsibility for those who suffer from hunger and poverty in different regions of the world and striving to eliminate
exploitation, violence and all discrimination from human relationships—these are the most important responsibilities and duties of future generations. The questions of social justice perfectly fit concepts of global education and sustainable development promoted today[35].

On one hand, value of this message is a priceless lesson that should be popularized. On the other hand, such messages should be transferred during live meetings in local communities. However, there are no signs of interest from local institutions. According to Peishan Yang “If the members of a society have more contacts and interactions with centenarians, the meanings of their lives become more abundant. On the contrary, if the centenarians are socially excluded, long life may be meaningless”[36]. The respondents recall a one-time interest of their local communities — on their hundredth birthday when representatives of local authorities visited them with wishes and congratulations. These events were covered by media (local or national). And then, everything went back to what it had been before the anniversary, until the next birthday. Failure to employ the potential of these unique individuals by educational institutions greatly impoverishes the educational process addressed to young generation.

To summarize, spiritual testament for future generations includes messages about the most important problems of mankind: suffering, social injustice and moral responsibility for evil in the world. The respondents believe it is important to live as history commands, so the history of atrocities would never happen again. For this to be possible, people need to live according to such fundamental values as truth, faith and honest work. Unfortunately, this precious message remains unused.

Acknowledgement

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References


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