

# **Proposal: Sequential Guided Autobiography Courses for Older Adults**

## **Overview**

This proposal outlines two separate Guided Autobiography courses designed for adults aged 50-90. Each course stands independently, allowing participants to choose one or both based on their interests and needs. While the courses are designed to be taken sequentially (Course 1 and then Course 2), both courses support the creation of personal narratives. Courses will be offered one per OLLI term.

Both courses are based on the Guided Autobiography process developed by Dr. Jim Birren and Dr. Cheryl Swenson at the Birren Center, a California non-profit. Dr. Orem has been certified by the Birren Center in 2024 to teach GAB courses.

## **Course 2: Deepening Your Narrative (4 Sessions)**

**Title: "Enriching Your Life Story: Exploring Dimensions of Experience"**

This course offers exploration of additional meaningful life themes selected from the curriculum:

### **Session 1: Health and Body**

Exploration of physical well-being throughout life, including significant health events and the changing relationship with one's body.

### **Session 2: Life and Death**

Reflections on mortality, loss, grief, and personal philosophies about life's meaning in the face of impermanence.

### **Session 3: Places of Significance**

Documentation of locations that have shaped identity and provided meaning throughout the lifespan.

### **Session 4: Memory and Wisdom**

Examination of how memory functions in constructing personal narrative, and the wisdom gained through lived experience.

## **Individual Course Structure**

**Format for Each Session:**

- Opening circle and check-in (15 minutes)
- Mini-lecture on theme with writing prompts (20 minutes)
- Small group sharing (45 minutes)
- Large group discussion and insights (25 minutes)
- Closing reflection and homework assignment (15 minutes)

**Session Length:** 2 hours

**Class limit:** 24

**Materials for Each Course:**

- Course-specific writing prompts for each theme
- Reading list with exemplary autobiographical excerpts
- Guidelines for respectful listening and sharing

## **Educational Approach**

Both courses are grounded in positive psychology principles, emphasizing:

- Meaning-making through narrative reflection
- Recognition of personal strengths and resilience
- Integration of life experiences into a coherent identity
- Cultivation of wisdom through life review
- Building community through shared stories

## **Participant Engagement**

Participants will be encouraged to:

- Attend both courses, but whichever course(s) appeal to their current interests and needs will be allowed.
- Continue their autobiographical writing journey by taking the second course if they find the process valuable
- Write 800-1000 words between sessions at home. Participants will be encouraged to read aloud each week on the topic for that week.
- Reading will be done in small groups of 6. Feedback from group members will focus on appreciation of experience and description of topic. Writing structure is not the focus of this class.
- Form informal writing groups after course completion to sustain their narrative work

## **Expected Outcomes for Each Course**

Participants will:

- Complete 4 autobiographical vignettes tied to important life themes
- Develop increased narrative coherence and life satisfaction
- Identify patterns, values, and wisdom in their life journey
- Experience social connection through shared reflection
- Create meaningful written legacy material for personal or family use

Each course is designed to be complete in itself while offering participants the option to continue their autobiographical exploration through the second course if they wish to expand their narrative work.

## **Instructor Bio- Sara Orem**

With over a decade of teaching experience at OLLI, Dr. Sara Orem brings both academic expertise and practical wisdom to the Guided Autobiography process. As the founder of Vital Aging, which began as an interest group in 2020 before becoming a core OLLI offering in 2022, she has helped countless adults discover the power of personal storytelling.

Sara holds a doctorate in human and organizational systems with a focus on positive psychology and is certified in the Guided Autobiography process. Her popular courses on writing, gratitude, finding joy, and mindfulness reflect her commitment to enhancing well-being through reflective practice.

This Guided Autobiography course welcomes all OLLI members interested in preserving their life stories—whether you're just beginning your storytelling journey or looking to enhance memoir writing already in progress. Join Sara for this transformative experience in capturing your unique legacy.