

Lily's Charted Life Span

Liliya Pantus

Alliance University

GCN603: Counseling and Human Development

Lesley Washington

April 4, 2023

Lily's Charted Life Span

I am the second oldest of five sisters born in 1988 in the Ukraine. This was also the year when the rise of mass mobilization began, and Ukraine was on its path to independence. I find this to be significant because it symbolizes the resilience, perseverance, determination, freedom, a passion for life, and grit that the Ukrainian people possess even today. These attributes are some of the traits that my close family and friends say that I possess also. While these attributes are positive, it always felt awkward to receive this feedback because I did not know what to do with it. It has been a struggle of mine for many years because I often thought that I was not good enough, and late on achieving life's milestones, and the endless pursuit of perfection, which I now know, is an impossible goal. Using Erik Erikson's stages of psychosocial development (Erford, 2010), allow me to journey back in time and unpack those milestones or lack thereof, which sharpened, pruned, and shaped the woman I am today.

Trust vs. Mistrust - Can I trust the world?

I was born crying and did not cease to cry for the first six months of my life. The doctors could not figure out what was wrong with me. During one of the doctors' visits a nurse pinched the skin on the back of my hand and told my mother that I would not survive. Supposedly, a colic baby was not understood, and parents were left to assume the worse, while hoping for the best. My father assumed much of the rocking and caregiving when I was not breastfeeding because my mother was experiencing what we know today to be post-partum depression. After six months the cries finally subsided, and I was on my way to achieve some developmental milestones. At only eight months old, I took my first step and was walking by nine months. At

eleven months, I began uttering demands and, according to my mother's recollection, they just intensified every day.

Autonomy vs. Shame/Doubt - Is it okay to be me?

While I exhibited a strong-will child who had much to blabber about, I also enjoyed breastfeeding well into two years old. It was not until my mother had to leave for seasonal work for a six-week period, that I was forcefully weaned off breastmilk. However, due in part to the nonexistent disposable diaper option, potty training began at eight months, and I was fully toilet trained at a year and a half.

Initiative vs. Guilt - Is it okay for me to do, move, and act?

When I asked of my parents to share a unique quality of each one of the children, non-stop talking was the unique dynamic that I brought into the family. My parents often sat and wondered what was transpiring in that little brain of mine. I was always on the move, daydreaming, and creating elaborate stories with an eagerness to share with anyone who would listen. Talking with and to myself kept me entertained for hours. Physically, I was an extremely active child who climbed windowsills and doorframes, often giving my parents near heart attacks. I was an explorer, a darer, a free-spirit child who thrived on being the center of attention. I enjoyed observing my father work as a shoemaker, and often roleplayed a shoemaker beside him. When we visited our grandparents at the village, I mischievously took my aunt's high heels, and walked around in them while playing with the farm animals. It was not until I broke one of the heels, that I was banned from touching another pair of shoes.

Industry vs. Inferiority - Can I make it in the world of people and things?

My education began in Ukraine I started first grade at the age of seven never to complete it due to our permanent departure to America. As a seven-year-old, I walked half a mile to and from school alone, because there were no school buses. I recall sitting in class but staring out the window anticipating the recess bell so I could go outside and play on the monkey bars. As a class we received a homework assignment to color zoo animals. The following day, the teacher graded our work, and I was given a two, which is equivalent to “D” in the United States. The lower grade was given because I chose an incorrect shade of gray for an elephant. I was learning to write in cursive using an ink cartridge pen and often I was scolded for pushing down too hard and releasing too much ink. Developing proper penmanship was of high regard any line that was too thick, outside, or past the dotted letter resulted in a lower grade. I recall on one occasion a classmate stole my pencil eraser and when I asked for it back, it disturbed the teacher. She walked over to my desk, told me to fix my posture, and hit my hand with her pointer stick. I did not enjoy being behind a desk and could not wait for that bell at the end of the school day. Instead of heading home as instructed by my mother, I ran straight to the monkey bars and stayed until I saw my mother coming with a belt in her hand. My parents most definitely employed the authoritarian parenting style, with an unhealthy mix of what we now would refer to as physical child abuse. There was no explanation for why I was being punished, nor was there an opportunity to defend my reasoning for why I did or said something. I recall telling myself that when I grow up, I will never hit my own children. I remember even at that young age, thinking that my parents just did not understand me. I was not intentionally misbehaving but was doing things that I found enjoyable.

My family migrated from the Ukraine when I was seven years old, and I continued my education in the United States. While the educational system in America is significantly more lenient in comparison to Ukraine, I still struggled in school. I often found myself daydreaming about what I would do after school. While I was not an exemplary student, I often struggled to keep my grades in passing range. Nonetheless, I was never held back a grade. I always managed to finagle an extra credit assignment so I could graduate.

Identity vs. Role Confusion – Who am I? Who can I be?

During my middle school years, my father's brother and his family immigrated to the United States. Initially, they moved in with our family to secure enough finances to afford separate housing. Shortly after moving in, my uncle began to touch and rub me inappropriately. I recall feeling ashamed, scared, and in fear of what my father would do to me if he found out. One evening while driving to pick up secondhand furniture for my uncle's family, he again started to touch my private area. I remember fearfully freezing and waiting for my father to stop him. I thought surely my father saw this and he would stop him. Unfortunately, he did not stop him, and I thought my father chose not to protect me. Eventually my uncle's family moved out, which ended the molestation. I remember feeling relieved, as though I could resume life as a normal teen again. I graduated middle school and went on to high school.

Throughout high school, I strongly desired to fit in as a normal Americanized teenager. This meant attending classmate birthday parties, school dances, and hanging out after school. However, due to my family's Christian upbringing, I was not allowed to because it was viewed to be worldly, sinful, and were activities that would corrupt us kids. My family belonged to a Pentecostal Slavic Church that was legalistic in nature. They enforced a strict dress code

requiring head covering for all women. I constantly struggled with keeping up and blending what I thought was a good Christian girl and an Americanized high schooler. At the age of fourteen I secured a babysitting job. Most of the time, I babysat on weekdays after school. The mother was the one who picked me up and dropped me off. After a few short weeks, I was asked to babysit on weekends and I was excited because it was time away from home and extra money. I enjoyed the family because it was different from mine. I was able to talk to the mother and often felt as though she was my cool American mom. Unfortunately, saga number two was brewing. During one of the weekend evenings, the couple returned home intoxicated from an outing. Due to the mother being too intoxicated to drive me home, the husband volunteered to take me. On the drive home, he began to rub my thigh. I pushed his hand off and he apologized but told me to not say anything to anyone. This occurred a couple of other times and I began to make excuses why I did not want to go babysit. I kept it a secret as I was terrified of what my mother would say or do. One day while I was babysitting, the mother told me about an upcoming trip she and the kids were taking to Florida. While they were gone, she asked if I could come help the husband clean the house if needed. I agreed but did not believe he would call requesting my help. But sure enough, the weekend came, and the telephone rang. My mother answered and told me that he was on his way to pick me up to help him clean. I burst into tears and ran into the bathroom. I remember looking out the window and seeing the minivan in the driveway. I watched as my mother walked over to the driver's side window, exchanged a few words, and then he drove off. I was terrified what my mother would say when she came back inside. Unfortunately, my mother resumed her kitchen duties, and we never spoke about it. I remember feeling uneasy for a week in my mother's presence as I anticipated her beginning a conversation, but to no avail. In retrospect, I'm not surprised because any topic surrounding sexuality was viewed as shameful,

thus talks about menstruation or boyfriends never occurred. We just knew that sex was for marriage and boyfriends were not allowed. I remember compartmentalizing what had occurred, and feelings of brokenness began to creep in. I yearned to be understood, seen, and loved. I was confused and felt as though something was wrong with me. I was tucking those feelings deeper in the attempt to forget it all. I recall asking God to please leave me alone and let me do life on my own, but still promising to come back to Him once I figured me out. As time passed, I could not wait to move out and be free. So, when a guy from the church youth group approached me, I thought it was my golden ticket to freedom. At the age of eighteen we were engaged, and shortly thereafter, I was graduating high school and planning a wedding. I envisioned getting married, having a home, and a family. It was as though God had come through and given me a new start.

Intimacy vs. Isolation - Can I love?

I graduated from High School in May, and few months later, in August of 2007 we were married. Two nineteen-year-old teenagers began the voyage from parents' care, to figuring out what adulthood was to bring. We were excited to be free. His upbringing was isolated and broken as well. We attended college. He studied accounting and I criminal justice. While obtaining our bachelor's degrees, we worked full time jobs. He worked in banking, his field of study, and I in social work helping refugee families gain self-sufficiency in America. I enjoyed the work I did as it was rewarding, and I saw the fruits of my efforts. But I also liked the thrill, and the field of law enforcement was a future dream. To save money for a down payment on a house, we moved in with his parents and spent our first year living with them. I recall feeling lost and ill equipped to be a wife. I did not know how to cook, and his father often nagged about miniscule things. One evening, his father made a rude comment to me, and I left the dining room embarrassed. My

husband did not stand up to his father nor stick up for me, and it hurt. Again, I felt unprotected and vulnerable. During our first year of marriage, I found out that my then husband had a fling with another woman during our engagement. Even though it was in the past, learning about it after the fact, sent me into sleepless nights, arguments, and feeling betrayed. Nonetheless, he apologized, and we celebrated our first anniversary. We found a home, put a down payment, and shortly thereafter began renovating it and trying for a baby. After three years of negative results, we went to infertility specialists. I blamed myself and thought back on my past. Something in me believed that our infertility was some sort of punishment from God. After waiting a week for test results and hoping to hear a solution to a minor resolvable issue, the call from the doctor's office finally came. He sat us down, and emotionlessly informed that natural conception was not in the cards for us. Additionally, conceiving at all was a slim to none chance due to low sperm count. I was dumbfounded, devastated, and yet put on a facade that I was ok. I believed God was going to come through, all the while feeling angry and asking why He gave my sister three babies, and me none. While I pushed further testing and researched homeopathic remedies my husband refocused his energy on work and other areas of interest. In retrospect, I now understand just how difficult it must have been for him to hear the news and dealt with it in his own way. But it made me angry because I was invested, and he seemed unconcerned.

In our culture, conception is often perceived to be the women's fault and while friends, family, and the church prayed for us, others did not shy to speak their minds. I received all sorts of ideas, advice, but most shocking was those who did not shy from telling me that it was time to stop living selfishly and start a family.

The internal turmoil of flooding emotions, depression, and feeling purposeless consumed me. I felt trapped yet scared to act because this was the path I had chosen; I wanted to be wife, a mother, and a homemaker and yet I was failing. I struggled with the idea of motherhood verses career, I could never marry the two and now that a family was not an option, I decided to focus on a career. Perhaps it was a way to sooth myself, but I took it as a redirection and ran with it.

We continued attending church, serving, keeping busy, and doing all the right things in the eyes of God, or so we thought, but to no avail. Emotions flared and doldrums set in as I suppressed my past and attempted to focus on the future. Attempting to find meaning for the inequities, brought up past traumas that I had buried deep down.

I finally unveiled the uncle and the father of the kids I babysat to my husband. I wanted the ebb and flow of the turmoil to cease once and for all. I asked my husband to bring me to see my uncle because I needed to confront him. He hesitated but agreed. At the age of twenty-five, I showed up at his doorsteps, knocked, and when he opened the door, and I broke down. With all my being, I looked him in the eyes and told him what he did was wrong, but it did not break me. Initially, he denied and minimized it, and told me I was overreacting, but a few moments later, apologized and asked me for forgiveness. As difficult as it was, I forgave him, not because he deserved it, but because I wanted closure and freedom.

Few months later, and in extreme discomfort, I approached my parents. I asked my father why he did not protect me; why he did not stop it. All this time, and he had no idea what had occurred. He apologized and then it was onto to the next, my mother. She apologized for not having enough will to say something. She did not know how to deal with it. Back then, things

like that were swept under never to be spoken of again. Also, the family was American, we were refugees and there was a language barrier. She did not know the laws and was afraid.

It felt like a weight was lifted and I was now able to move on. I continued in my role as a supportive wife, yet the feelings of worthlessness, being unloved, and unheard continued to creep in. After six years of marriage, and no children, we began drifting apart. Communication ceased to a minimum, and the dream of a family remained just a dream. He focused on higher education, work, and hobbies, while I drove deeper into confusion and numbness.

Shortly thereafter, a man at work began to show me attention. He was interested in my needs, wants, and desired a family like I did. Deep down I knew this was a path of no return, yet I so desperately wanted to be desired, loved, protected, and heard. While my then husband consumed himself with work, school, and life, I began an affair with another man. This man made me believe in myself, he challenged my weaknesses, and questioned my beliefs.

This brought newness and gave me the push to embark on that career change I have been contemplating. I applied to the FBI, and shortly thereafter, was selected for an interview and the tedious hiring process began. For a year, my husband had no idea about the affair which made me realize just how un-involved and absent we had become. It terrified me, yet the affair yielded deep conversations about religion, politics, career, and a possible future family. I felt challenged, important, heard, wanted, but also dirty, shameful, angry, and worthless.

Eventually, the affair came to light and my world fell apart. My husband and I separated. I brought shame to my family, hurt a man who loved me. I blamed God for everything. If only He had given me those children I so desperately desired, then none of this would have happened.

I fell into depression and could not find a place dark enough to hide my face. The hiring process for the FBI continued, and after a year, I received my adjudication and reported for training.

A ray of sunshine-is how it felt. My oldest, middle, and youngest sisters started their family, and I became mama 2.0 to seven incredible nieces and nephews. These little miracles brought down my baby fever and I hyper focused on my job with the FBI.

The work was exhilarating, stimulating, and felt fulfilling, until it did not. Year after year, it became less exciting and more routine. I questioned myself, the applied methods, and again the feeling of purposeless began to creep in. I fought my heart and mind, telling myself that the work I was doing was prestige, of high regard, and this is where life had led me. Month after month, year after year, that purpose became clouded and yet again I found myself drained, confused, and fighting against myself.

After months of separation my husband and I decided to work on our marriage again. We moved back in together and attempted to restore what was lost. To try to go back to what we had. Unfortunately, after fourteen years of fighting for each other, as well as, against each other, we decided it just would not work. I found myself on the floor feeling empty, broken, and drained. Given all these facts, among other things to remain unmentioned, in my eyes, I have sowed nothing. I had no family, and a job that felt directionless. I felt like a failure who had made too many wrong turns-of no return. This endless pursuit of what I thought I wanted, stripped me to bare bones. Out of pure exhaustion, I gave up. I stopped trying to fix and control everything out of my own understanding. I moved out on my own, quit the FBI, and entered the unknown and told God that I was done.

I could never have imagined myself here today; studying to become a counselor. However, I know without a shadow of a doubt, that this is where He needs me. All the peaks and valleys were a part of a greater plan, His perfect plan. Having suffered abuse, infertility, infidelity, loss, and depression was not in vain. An exhilarating career with the FBI was part of the plan too. With every season, I gain a deeper sense of humility, wisdom, strength, empathy, grace, care, and love towards those who are hurting. It was and continues to be preparation for something more.

I now comprehend that I'm perfectly imperfect, and my life may be a little off schedule, but it's on time - God's perfect time. All of life's peaks and valleys have played a significant role and purpose in shaping the woman that I am today. There is no such thing as wasted experiences with God. This new perspective of my life's journey is because I allowed myself to unpack, discover, and uncover the past. To view it through a lens of grace and not just self-criticism. My past is not a place of residence, but rather, a place a reference. I am no longer fixated on what did not go according to my plan and focus on the opportunities that I gained such as, personal, and professional growth that the unforeseen circumstances had yielded. While I acknowledge the privilege I had and continue to have as a white female in America. I also attribute my present moment to the resilience, perseverance, determination, a passion for life, and grit I possessed inside of me to get here. As well as the people that God so strategically placed in my path. Even those who were temporary, still left permanent lessons. I no longer allow the failures, mistakes, and setbacks to stagnant me. Quite the contrary, I use them to recalibrate and as a guide to redirect me. That is my secret code for continuous growth.

References

Erford, B. T. (2017). *An advanced lifespan odyssey for counseling professionals* (1st ed.).

Cengage Learning, Inc