ISSN 2634-8306

LIRIC

# The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

VOLUME **1** NUMBER **1** December **2020**

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

# About the Journal

The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community (LIRIC) Journal is an international, peer-reviewed, scholarly journal. It aims to provide a forum for contemporary critical debate on the relationship between the written (and spoken) word and (mental) health and well-being. This includes writing as a social practice.





liriceditor@lapidus.org.uk | liricproductioneditor@lapidus.org.uk

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

# Contents

Editor's Foreword 3
*Simon Poole*

Editorial 8
*LIRIC Board Members*

**Articles**

The Six-Part Story and the Potential for Conversational Artistry 17
*Barbara Bloomfield*

Narrative Renewal: Investigating the Practice of Writing a Grief Memoir Through the Lens of the Practitioner-as-Research 42
*Katrin Den Elzen*

Researching, Writing, and Publishing Trauma Stories: Learning from Practice 62
*Kim Etherington*

At the Intersection of Memory, History and Story: An Exploration of the Nostalgic Feelings Which Arose When Listening to Oral History Archives as an Inspiration for Novel-Writing 86
*Helen Louise Foster*

Launching the Creative Practices for Wellbeing Framework: An International Q&A 108
*Tony Wall & Henry Sidsaph*

Postcards from Here: Introducing Art Cards in the Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) Encounter to Support Access to Metaphor and Readiness for Poetic Techniques 126
*Claire Williamson*

**Innovations/Passions**

Words 160
*Laura Grace Simpkins*

**Reviews**

An Open Invitation to Review for *LIRIC* 164
*Jeannie* Wright

# Editor's Foreword

***Simon Poole***

**Senior Lecturer, Faculty of Education and Children's Services, University of Chester, UK**
**Senior Leader, Cultural Education and Research, Storyhouse**

Correspondence address: Simon.Poole@storyhouse.com.

2020: A year that I personally and professionally wish had resigned at least half-way through its tenure…

How would a handover of the reins prematurely to 2021, extending that year to 18 months, say, have helped though?

Well, it would have made a fine symbol of defiance, or resistance maybe, to the onslaught of difficulties and the desire to return to 'normal', or at the very least it might have provided a fresh start of sorts?

Perhaps this is all too facetious.

While 2020 has provided us all with enough challenge, doubt and uncertainty - things Wright (2020) highlights in her final short essay in this inaugural issue of LIRIC—it has also provided much solidarity, optimism and opportunity, alongside tragedy for many, with the persistence of COVID.

I hope I will be forgiven for using this Editor's Foreword not just to introduce the new journal, but to reflect on my time with Lapidus International, and think about the new directions that the organisation is bravely forging.

I wish to do this so that I might say thank you to all the brave pioneers, innovative thinkers, and thoughtful collaborators I have had the fortune to have worked with during my tenure. This includes my time on the Board as Director of Research, which was in itself a burgeoning role; and

then, latterly, for the small part I played in guiding this journal into being, with the incredible support of the Editorial Board—who, quite frankly, it must be said, are the people who have really made this first issue a reality.

Lapidus has been a family of sorts to me. Initial introductions were via Lisa Rossetti, who at the time was a serving Board member. Not long after a windswept meeting atop a hill, I received her kind request to give a keynote at the annual conference. We all sang 'Sparrows on the Roof' that day, and I have very fond memories of this. I was invited to write an article reflecting on the activity not long afterwards (Poole, 2016), and now find that my final engagement with the organisation has been to write a chapter with the previous Chair of the Board, Clare Scott (Poole & Scott, 2021, forthcoming). The initial article and the forthcoming chapter seem like neat bookends of my time with Lapidus; and, as reflections, they move from a very personal epiphany, through the creation of space for practice, to a policy review of wellbeing in the arts and cultural sector.

The pieces in Issue 1 of *LIRIC*, to extend a poor metaphor, could be the all-important row of books, each with a slightly different phronetic perspective of praxis, each telling an equally valid story, and each offering a potential way forward, new beginning, or possibility of practice in our field. They all deal with practice, in one way or another, and so offer the reader practical guidance through personally evaluated processes.

Of note are the professional reflections on the use of creative practices in many of the articles: Bloomfield (2020) uses art materials as a therapeutic vehicle in her work; Foster (2020) recognises and analyses the use of oral history archives; and Williamson (2020) offers consideration of using the art postcard/image as a creative writing tool. An interpretivist positionality, therefore, is apparent throughout the articles and, even more specifically, a paradigmatic stance that aligns with arts-based practice as research is deftly handled by the authors.

Simpkins' (2020) contribution highlights another key aspect of this volume, a particularly strong theme that features in most of the contributions too: that of an autoethnographic leaning. The work of Den Elzen (2020), Bloomfield (2020) and Etherington (2020) share similar methodological characteristics too, and while Bloomfield (2020) confirms from the onset an autoethnographic approach, Den Elzen (2020) prioritizes the practice-led nature of her work and Etherington (2020) the reflexive nature of narrative accounts.

In all, the work draws together numerous practices from disparate disciplines, and it is this that perhaps most wonderfully summarises why this journal and indeed why Lapidus is so relevant. While the membership of Lapidus is diverse, and our practices wide-ranging, we can nonetheless discern within our work underpinning theories and methodological standpoints that afford a sense of diverging, yet shared understanding. As such, the research here 'champions versatility, inter-epistemological acceptance, diversity of knowledge types, understandings and thus ways of reinterpreting "impact". Our metaphors of understanding are different and in accordance our expectations should also be' (Poole, 2017, p. 155).

Wall and Sidsaph's (2020) invited contribution marks a significant milestone for Lapidus too, as it supports the development of a structure for a step-change within the field. It was also launched contemporaneously with the new tagline of Lapidus, which reasserts the roots of Lapidus' work and focus in 'Writing for Wellbeing'. While, on the one hand, the new tagline could be perhaps ungenerously seen to narrow the scope of potential submissions to LIRIC, the organisation's repositioning as an inter-epistemologically accepting body, could on the other hand be viewed as a response that broadens the field's practitioner base by recognising that 'Writing for Wellbeing' is more than a reductive understanding of our members' work.

I wonder whether some of my own work with fellow Lapidusians that previously might not have been comfortably encompassed by 'writing' might now find a new home in our journal: work that looks at creative practices like Hip-Hop, such as that produced by Editorial Board member Kiz Bangerh for example, or the music-making through lyrics that I'm more concerned with (Poole & Solé, 2019); work regarding psychogeography, like that of Clare Scott's (Poole, Marichalar-Friexa, & Scott, 2019); or indeed the work co-authored with Prof. Wall and Dr. Mackenzie (2019), that outlines a notion of applied fantasy and wellbeing. These and many more avenues of research could have a home and justifiably sit within *LIRIC*'s remit, contributing to the canon of knowledge that Lapidus is forging. Furthermore because of Prof. Wall's work we have through dialogic approaches a framework that can guide practice as well. It is only fitting that this should feature therefore in this first issue of our publication.

So what follows is a multi-layered milestone. Personally, it marks for me the end of five years of working with Lapidus International. But, far more importantly, it is the first time that Lapidus has a peer-reviewed forum for its research community. It marks a positive and inclusive

shift in the organisation's grounding paradigm; a shift that invokes wider engagement, openness, progressive thinking, support, and opportunity.

I suppose every end is also a beginning.

**References**

Bloomfield, B. (2020). The six-part story and the potential for conversational artistry. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 17-41.

Den Elzen, K. (2020). Narrative renewal: Investigating the practice of writing a grief memoir through the lens of the practitioner-as-research. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 42-61.

Foster, H. L. (2020). At the intersection of memory, history and story: An exploration of the nostalgic feelings which arose when listening to oral history archives as an inspiration for novel-writing. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 86-107.

Mackenzie, A., Wall, T., & Poole, S. (2019). Applied fantasy and well-being. In W. Leal, P. G. Özuyar, P. Pace, U. Azeiteiro, & L. Brandli (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the sustainable development goals: Transforming the world we want*. Springer.

Poole, S. (2016). Kindly apparitions: Reflections upon reflections. *Lapidus Journal - 20th Anniversary Special Triple Edition Capturing the Collective and Connected Spirit of Writing for Wellbeing (Part 3 - Individuals Connecting to a Collective Spirit)*.

Poole, S. (2017). Re/searching for 'impact'. *Journal of Work Applied Management, 9*(2), 147-158. Retrieved from http://www.emeraldinsight.com/toc/jwam/9/2.

Poole, S., Marichalar-Friexa, E., & Scott, C. (2019). Psychogeography and well-Being. In W. Leal, P. G. Özuyar, P. Pace, U. Azeiteiro, & L. Brandli (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the sustainable development goals: Transforming the world we want*. Springer.

Poole, S., & Scott, C. (2021, forthcoming). National arts and wellbeing policies and implications for wellbeing in organisational life. In T. Wall, P. Brough, & S. C. Cooper (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Organisational Wellbeing*. Sage.

Poole, S., & Solé, L. (2019). Informal music-making and well-being. In W. Leal, P. G. Özuyar, P. Pace, U. Azeiteiro, & L. Brandli (Eds.), *Encyclopedia of the sustainable development goals: Transforming the world we want*. Springer.

Simpkins, L. G. (2020). Words. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 106-163.

Wall, T., & Sidsaph, H. (2020). Launching the creative practices for wellbeing framework. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 108-125.

Williamson, C. (2020). Postcards from here: Introducing art cards in the creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) encounter to support access to metaphor and readiness for poetic techniques. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 126-159.

Wright, J. (2020). An open invitation to review for *LIRIC*. *The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal, 1*(1), 164-168.

# Why Do We Need a New Journal About Writing for Wellbeing?

***LIRIC* Board Members**

**Editor's Note**

The following editorial comprises *LIRIC* board member responses to the question, 'Why do we need a new journal about writing for wellbeing?'

---

**Jeannie Wright**

Because the American-based *Journal of Poetry Therapy (JPT)*, wonderful though it is, might not reach the audience I'm after. Neither do the counselling and psychotherapy research journals. The focus isn't quite right because writing creatively is my passion, whereas for most (talking) therapists it's an adjunct or 'technique'. For the last few years, articles I've written about writing for therapeutic purposes and writing for wellbeing have had nowhere to go—and *LIRIC*, as an international journal with its roots in the traditions of Lapidus, fills that gap!

**Claire Williamson**

Having been actively involved in academia relating to writing for wellbeing for twenty years, and being the Director of Studies for the MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) at Metanoia Institute, I welcome any addition to the conversation about CWTP, and I too have always found the *JPT* a useful resource because it has been the only dedicated therapeutic writing journal available.

In the UK (and the wider Lapidus International Community) we have a strong contingent of well-trained, experienced practitioners and researchers with perspectives to offer. Some of these perspectives have been showcased at International Creative Bridges (a bi-annual

conference between Metanoia Institute and Lapidus). And it has been this wide range of perspectives that have characterised the writing for wellbeing movement in the UK, since discussion groups developed in different geographical pockets in the early nineties, some of which took place in London at the instigation of the Poetry Society. It would be a very interesting exercise to gather the accounts of the individuals involved in these various meetings, but from what I know, the people having these conversations were either practitioners already employing therapeutic writing in the community, or they were from the survivors' movement, particularly Survivors' Poetry. I wasn't personally at these meetings, but my understanding is that a strong message from Survivors' Poetry was that they didn't want writing to be taken away from them, re-packaged and delivered back to them as therapy. Lapidus (which grew out of this groundswell of discussion) has always taken this understanding forward in terms of the potential power dynamic, being welcoming to and aware of a membership that encompasses those who want to write, those who facilitate writing, and those whose curiosity sends them into research.

To this effect, Lapidus has slightly different beginnings than the National Association of Poetry Therapy in the US, where the concept of poetry therapy grew out of clinical perspectives (Mazza, 2005/2017) and the bibliotherapy movement (Hynes and Hynes-Berry, 2011). A comprehensive early history, crediting its many contributors can be found on the NAPT website.

Although both the US and UK movements have been open to a wide range of viewpoints from the outset, each have found a different pattern of growth in roots and shoots. For me, *LIRIC* is not a 'Brexit' or movement towards separation from our Atlantic counterpart, the *JPT*—it is the opposite: a vote of confidence in our international community for dialogue (cross-pollination, to extend the metaphor) with other relevant journals*;* the dialogic is so much part of CWTP, this feels important.

**Kiz Bangerh**

When I read the question: 'Why do we need a new journal about writing for wellbeing?', my first response is: 'Why not?'. I was one of the first cohorts of students to graduate from Metanoia's MSc CWTP. It was so hard to find an appropriate journal to publish my work in Therapeutic Hip Hop (a term I coined during my thesis) that I gave up. I wonder how many more people have felt the same. We, the Lapidus International community, offer a much-needed ray of light into the hearts and minds of many. I hope our new scholarly journal offers a beacon of light

to lead researchers, established and fledgling, in their journeys of discovery in our precious, collective field.

**Kim Etherington**

This new *LIRIC* journal feels to me like a 'coming of age' statement for the Lapidus International community. Jeannie says the articles she has written about writing for therapeutic purposes and words for wellbeing have had nowhere to go in the UK. Now we have a 'home' to call our own - one that feels 'just right', as Goldilocks said! Now we have a publishing home for the growing body of members who have undertaken research for Masters and Doctoral degrees, among others, which can contribute to the body of knowledge related to our field; for the many innovative practitioners who don't necessarily see themselves as researchers, even though they have introduced new and innovative practices in a variety of different settings that, when shared through publications and conference presentations, can enhance and extend the practice of others in the field; and for practitioners who have undertaken studies of their *own* practice that have clear implications for themselves *and* for others.

When those practitioner-researchers approach that work reflexively, we also learn about practitioner research itself: how they conducted that research and what they found out about this kind of research while doing it, and reflecting on that process. *LIRIC* is also a home for academics undertaking qualitative or quantitative research related to our field, whose papers are clearly focussed on practice. There are also practitioners who partner academics in their research, thereby utilising the knowledge and skills of both perspectives. As there is a limited literature in the field of writing for wellbeing at the moment we can gain a great deal from exploring the literature related to therapeutic disciplines such as counselling and psychotherapy (Bondi and Fewell 2016; McLeod 1999) to discover the knowledge we can transfer about practitioner-research for those engaged in writing for wellbeing.

Writing and publishing practical and theoretical ideas is a useful way to consolidate practice and integrate learning, bring clarity, insight, and confidence, and provides a focussed way of sharing sometimes complex processes with others in the field. Publishing in a peer reviewed journal, as well as enhancing a practitioner's credibility, demonstrates that individual's interest and expertise, which can attract the attention of those searching for new learning, workshops, groups or training, thereby enabling the practitioner to grow their practice and

advance their career development. As *LIRIC* is an Open Access journal that is freely available online to anyone interested in reading it, the potential readership will extend beyond Lapidus International membership, so who knows where someone's paper will end up…?

**Kate Thompson**

I have worked in the field of Counselling and Expressive Writing (the inclusive term I use to cover writing for wellbeing, writing as therapy, therapeutic writing, creative writing for therapeutic purposes (and by the way, I consider writing to be always both a therapeutic and creative act) for about 25 years, living in the UK and the US. Initially I introduced writing into my counselling work as a matter of conviction but without any professional backup. So I have felt the want of journal like this for almost all my career—a place where people can **write** about their work with authority, publish their research in a peer-reviewed journal and **read** what others are doing and discovering. That is my personal interest.

As a member of the Expressive Therapies community in the US, I have seen Writing treated as the youngest sibling by Music, Art, Dance/Movement and Wilderness Therapies. Often Writing is considered an adjunct rather than a full member of the family. *LIRIC*, this new peer-reviewed journal, is, as Kim says, a 'coming of age' statement for the Expressive Writing field, a home for all the exciting new work being done in academic graduate courses (I want to see my students and supervisees publish and share their research and practice) and by practitioners in a multitude of different settings in many different countries. The creation of a journal like this also shows how far we've come since the days when the 'Pennebaker Paradigm' was the only evidence anyone quoted to demonstrate the efficacy of Writing as a Way of Healing. It will bring credibility and a wider audience to the work that we have been doing in our own ways for so long.

**Simon Poole**

I used to smoke, when, as a younger musician, I lived in the countryside. It is due to this seemingly insignificant fact that I first came across the phenomenon that has yielded great metaphoricity in my work as a lyricist (concerned with techne), as an educator (concerned with praxis), and as a researcher (concerned with theoría).

I was outside once, smoking on the doorstep of a small house in Kelsall, at nighttime. When I noticed how, on the opposite side of the lane, the silver-birch twigs and sticks shone in

concentric circles, around the neon streetlight. As I marvelled at this moment's beauty my cigarette went out. I pulled the zippo from my pocket, and as I tilted my head to relight my cigarette, I again noticed illuminated concentric circles: this time though, their illumination was not bourn of silvered bark, it was instead, bourn of tiny scratches surrounding the reflection of the streetlight in the zippo's shiny, steel surface.

I learnt so much that night, but it was some years later, when I read Chapter 23 of Eliot's 'Middlemarch' (Eliot, 1994), and recalled the smoky, birched night, that I realised the significance of this phenomenon. In the first few pages, Eliot describes such light as our subjective consciousness; that it is a particular position or context that allows us to shed light upon, or reflect on, particular moments, that have grown because of, or been inculcated into us, by life. We can each recognise the particular twigs or scratches shining in concentric patterns by virtue of our own light.

There are, however, other twigs just as silvered, and countless scratches on the metal's surface all growing, or etched, in different directions, and they are just as strong or deep as those that are visible to us. Our particular experiences, contexts or positions do not light them up though. They may, nonetheless, be illuminated by another's particular experience, position, or context. If two sources of light simultaneously shone, we would begin to see the differing concentric circles, of another's perception of experience, yet more specifically how they relate to our own.

Writing from one's own position affords this insight: for me, *LIRIC*, our journal, serves as such a polished surface, or sylvan entanglement. It is a space, where interest in the craft of lyricism, poetry or writing; the practice of being a therapist, or educator; and the theorising of an academic or researcher, can all be reflected upon. From the shining of one's own light, near others who shine as brightly from their own context or positions, we can begin to share and possibly understand the experiences of others, for the benefit of all. It seems to me that the value of this journal, and the gap that has been, until now, largely unfilled is the potential for the Lapidus International community and others to shine, reflect and learn, in such a mutually beneficial way. Whether we be poets concerned with notions of wellbeing; writers, hip-hop artists, or songwriters working with the therapeutic aspects of writing in communities; therapists who recognise the worth of writing, and significance of reflection in their practice; or any

researcher interested in any of the above, this journal creates a space, where brave constellations of lights can shine, illuminate, dim, realign and shine anew with infinite potential.

**Esther Wafula**

In many cultures, including my own, names are important pointers to the meaning or purpose of a thing, a place, or a person. Four words in the name of this new journal signify, for me, the important role it will play in the field of writing for wellbeing. These are International, Research, Innovation and Community. As a Kenyan scholar interested in the therapeutic value of writing for wellbeing, I am delighted that this journal actively welcomes contributions from around the world. The journal's open access policy will undoubtedly facilitate an international readership as well. For the growing field of writing for wellbeing, the journal strikes the right note with its emphasis on research and innovation and by creating much needed space for scholars, researchers and practitioners in this field to share their findings and innovations. Last but not least, I appreciate the community spirit that this journal aims to foster among scholars, researchers, and practitioners who work with writing for wellbeing. Moreover, as Claire has said, the cross-pollination and dialogue that the *LIRIC* journal will engender with other relevant journals in the international community is also important and, I would add, necessary.

**Deborah Southwell**

CWTP is a wider field than poetry therapy alone, and a more specific field than creative writing alone. *LIRIC* aims to cover this breadth as well as the depth of CWTP. All forms of creative writing for the benefit of the individual and community are welcome, whether prose, fiction, journaling, poetry, or other forms of creative writing. All writing from the therapy to the therapeutic ends, from the mental health to the wellness ends of the spectrum are welcome. This first volume is the beginning of another conversation, one focused on what we know and what we learn from our research and our practice to progress our own growth and to develop further what we offer for the benefit of others.

**Jennifer Bertrand**

Creative writing was my refuge throughout the most challenging periods in my life. When I began my graduate degree at Athabasca University and learned about the field of writing for wellbeing, I discovered how my writing had contributed to my own healing journey and

transformations of self. My autoethnographic research on creative writing for adult survivors of childhood abuse is in process of being published and the sharing of my private writing with a broader audience brought closure to what had once been a profound hurt. The *LIRIC* Journal offers a dedicated space for this kind of research, learning, and transformation. I am honoured to serve on the board and to support the publication of the inaugural issue.

**Reinekke Lengelle**

I live and work in Edmonton, Canada and in 1996, I started teaching an adult non-credit course called 'Writing for the Heart' for the University of Alberta's extension department. Since childhood, writing has been my go-to process and I knew it 'worked' to bring clarity to any life struggle, most recently to spousal loss and bereavement (Lengelle, 2021). In 2002, I was asked by Athabasca University, Canada's Open University, to develop a graduate course in this area, that I called 'Writing the Self: The Experience and Potential of Writing for the Purpose of Personal Development'; it has been running now for 17 years. In order to develop it, I needed academic resources to support what I was already doing and saying in the classroom. I began looking for more theoretical and research-based material and in some back corner of a fluorescently lit library aisle with colossally tall shelves and no other soul to be seen, I came across the book 'Self on the Page' by Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson (1998). I remember holding that book and thinking, 'this is really important'.

On the back cover of this Jessica Kingsley volume, Lapidus was mentioned and within a year I was on a plane to the UK to meet my professional family. They welcomed me with kindness and surprise, 'you came all the way from Canada for our conference?!' Yes, that's right. The mother of a 5-year-old with only part-time work (our little family was living happily on a very tight budget); I remember wearing the same red fleece jacket to two Lapidus conferences. That first trip, I was bold enough to ask, Pam Thorne, a complete stranger who worked as administrator for Lapidus, to pick me up from Heathrow and host me. This was not just audacity; I had a genuine need; it was one of those moments in life where one goes forward because one is driven, and others met me with profound generosity in fulfilling the wish. This was a community where I didn't have to explain what I did in *adjusted* terms. At that first conference I met some of the founders of Lapidus, the 'core people' in the field, with whom I am still joyfully connected almost 20 years later. The *LIRIC* journal fills a gap in our field because it

offers a place to explore and articulate theory, research, and practice. *LIRIC* isn't limited to poetry; it makes room for all the writing forms and projects and it asks for academic rigour and not just feel-good stories. I have students in Canada and The Netherlands who are strongly drawn to the field and they too call Lapidus home; *LIRIC* will offer them professional growth opportunities, resources for their (future) work, and a community to call home.

**Deborah Lee**

The Editorial comes to me last as I'm the new Editor, taking on the role from Simon Poole, who has already written. I've taught sociology at UK universities for over 20 years, and in 2018 I qualified as a person-centred psychotherapist. Taking in psychotherapy - as art/magic in the therapy room and (intertwined) as an intellectual discipline - gave me a new lease of life as an academic: I wanted to connect psychotherapy with sociology; but it wasn't just that – I had/have a desire to write (sociologically-informed) psychotherapy in more unusual ways than most people do, to explore beyond the usual boundaries; and while, in time, I found some places to publish that sort of work, there wasn't a natural 'home' for it, there was nowhere that quite encouraged or enabled the expansive risk-taking that I want *LIRIC* to be offering.

Homecoming is a theme woven into this Editorial; we hope you'll feel our welcome and hear me saying that we will seek to be constructive as well as rigorous. I'm very pleased that *LIRIC* is to be online and open access: we'll be able to share people's work widely, see it appreciated, witness its influence. And I'm delighted that *LIRIC* will be encouraging (among many others) emerging voices. At *Psychotherapy and Politics International*, I am Editor of Notes from the Front Line (similar to *LIRIC's* Innovations/Passions): I know the power/potential of new writers seeing their work, their very selves, in print for the first time (a thrill that never fades). For me personally, writing embodies wellbeing – even when we're writing in 'sensitive' areas (some of my writing is about #MeToo, such as: Lee and Palmer (eds) 2020), where wellbeing is something to interrogate rather than assume (as Kim Etherington mentions in her article in this Issue). Writing can enable us—psychotherapists, counsellors, CWTP practitioners, creative writers, everyone—to find ourselves over and over again, to make connections with others, and to individually/collectively challenge what we feel needs to be changed in the world, as well as share sheer joy, the perfect pleasure of words (as Laura Grace Simpkins does in this Issue). What could be better than a journal that offers all that (and more)?

We'll be revealing developments at *LIRIC* over the next few months (keep an eye on the website and Lapidus International social media channels). The call for contributions for Issue 2 (December 2021) will open on 31st January 2021, so please do start considering what you might offer.

**References**

Bondi, L & Fewell, J. (eds.) (2016). *Practitioner research in counselling and psychotherapy: The power of example.* Palgrave.

Eliot, G. (1994). *Middlemarch*. Penguin Books.

Fox, J. (1995). *Finding what you didn't lose*. Tarcher.

Hynes, A and Hynes-Berry, M. (2011) *Biblio/poetry therapy*. North Star Press.

Lee, D. A. & Palmer, E. (eds.) (2020). *#MeToo: Counsellors and psychotherapists speak about sexual violence and abuse*. PCCS Books.

Mazza, N. (2003). *Poetry therapy: Theory and practice*. Brunner-Routledge.

Mazza, N. (2017). *Poetry therapy: Theory and practice* (2nd ed.). Brunner-Routledge.

McLeod, J. (1999). *Practitioner research in counselling*. Sage publications.

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# The Six-Part Story and the Potential for Conversational Artistry

**Barbara Bloomfield, MA**

**Creative Writer and Counsellor, Bristol, UK**

## Abstract

Barbara Bloomfield explores the landscape of creative counselling and asks whether using unfamiliar materials such as playdough, drawing and creative writing can generate unexpected and healing conversations. She explores whether such techniques call us to a poetic register rather than a problem-saturated register and whether they thereby can provide a healing reframe for some life problems. Processing data from a six-part story exercise with a colleague, given the pseudonym of Ray, Bloomfield discovers useful new material and gets unexpected answers as she reflects on her own abilities and limitations. This paper is an autoethnographic journey into a therapeutic experience that honours stories of pain or loss while challenging us to step out of our comfort zone to develop new ways of thinking.

***Keywords:*** Autoethnography, narrative therapy, counselling, writing for wellbeing, expressive arts

## Acknowledgments and Author Note

Thank you to 'Ray' for his time and honesty during the process of this exploration.
Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: barbara.bloomfield@icloud.com.

## Opening

As a relationship and family counsellor and supervisor for 25 years, I have had plenty of time to think about what constitutes a healing conversation.

At the first session of counselling, when I ask my clients what would be useful for them to talk about or how a positive change for them might come about as a result of spending time with a counsellor, they usually say 'I don't know.' Despite the not-knowing, I think it is valuable to plant a seed that the way we construct our conversations and what we choose to talk about or not talk about is important. It slows down, formalises, and encourages ownership and reflection on the whole process of discourse and on how we relate to each other as human beings. My aim in this paper is to reflect on the art of conversation and reflect on my abilities, biases and limitations as a counsellor who uses creative writing and storytelling in her work. This article started life as a piece of research into a six-part story exercise that I used with a colleague, but it has ended up being as much about me and my philosophy of enacting the role of counsellor, and my surprising journey of learning. It is an examination of a relatively new way of doing therapy: creative counselling.

It is often said that a piece of counselling work should be 'the difference that makes a difference' (Bateson, 1972, p. 459). If the counsellor's style is too different, the client will feel that we do not understand their problems. But if the questions and reflections on offer to the client are not different enough then the problem they bring remains unchallenged and is unlikely to change. I reflect on why storytelling can create a sweet spot, the right amount of difference to promote positive change with and for the client. I also make a case for the power of story to transform the way we think using metaphor, creating what I call a poetic register that helps to promote curiosity and open-mindedness. With polarising and intolerance of opinions being noted around today's public and political debate (Brooks, 2019), a different way of conversing and being in relationship with others, I argue, is truly needed.

Those who have read 'The Hero's Journey' will recognise the construction of the six-part story exercise which provides the familiar beginning - middle - end shape that is present in satisfying storytelling from all cultures (Campbell, 1968). The six-part story extends this storytelling shape to Opening - Development - Action - Advice - Resolution - Ending. In counselling moments when I feel there is mysterious or unexpressed material that is holding our

work in a stuck place, I often turn to structured stories to try to create a different frame for a problem.

I wish I could tell you what kind of researcher I am, but I do not yet know. I have never done research and have never written an academic paper until now. I would like to say I am a feminist researcher because I am interested in constructions and imbalances of power in our world. I feel close to the social constructionist approach to therapy as outlined by Michael White and David Epston (1990) in their book *Narrative Means to Therapeutic Ends*. I feel naive and tentative as a researcher and have needed to reflect on some of my own preferences and biases in the way I have worked with Ray.

In the last 15 years, after studying for a master's degree in creative writing (scriptwriting), and taking a diploma in systemic psychotherapy, I have developed my own creative counselling practice, working with individuals, couples and families in a slightly unusual way. Alongside the familiar skills of active listening, paraphrasing, reflecting back, and empathising, I offer an array of small figures, playdough, writing and drawing materials and then I try to weave conversational artistry around the stories that are prompted by these creative materials.

Why do I practice this way? I am not altogether sure but have some ideas and beliefs about the reasons my counselling practice has taken this particular turn. Firstly, the landscape and cultural contexts for counselling have changed greatly.

In 1994, setting out as a counsellor in Relate (the biggest relationship counselling organisation in the United Kingdom), all our training and beliefs about the way we would enact the role of counsellor were based on attempts to adapt psychotherapy to meet the needs of couples and families. Our trainers were well-known psychotherapists, but the therapy profession regarded our counselling work as 'therapy lite', cheaper, less intellectual, shorter, and snappier. We worked 'with' the transference, rather than 'in' the transference, and opinions were divided about whether short term counselling was really going to impact neurosis or distress.

The emphasis in some psychotherapy of 'expressing repressed emotions' has, I think, been overtaken by societal shifts in television and social media towards the 'individual confessional.' This partly led, we could say, to a rethink in terms of the balance between 'thinking' and 'feeling' for therapists, and a close look at the language of therapy. Systemic family therapy has a postmodern determination to place human thoughts and actions in contexts

of meaning, called 'the social ggrraaacceeesss' a shorthand for: Gender, Gender Identity, Geography, Generation, Race, Religion, Age, Ability, Appearance, Class, Culture, Caste, Education, Ethnicity, Economics, Spirituality, Sexuality, Sexual Orientation (Dallos & Draper, 2000). Since Michael White and other family therapists at the influential Dulwich Centre in Australia first articulated their narrative theories of counselling (White & Epston, 1990), family therapy has been trying to get the balance right between these highly intellectual social constructionist theories and the practical solutions that 'troubled' families are looking for.

Systemic Family Therapy rejects essentialist thinking and the kind of language that might seem to 'fix' the client into tramlines of thinking ('you're fragile', 'he's depressed,' 'I'm mentally ill,' etc.) and tries (some might say tries too hard!) to create new, tentative and provisional languages (Burnham, 2012). But systemic therapy has not had so much to say about the use of creativity and, with its sometimes convoluted discourse, comes across to many as 'too different'.

In terms of my own counselling style, I try to open a big, spacious field in which meanings can be generated, whether they be about feelings or thoughts. In the words of Native American poet, Joy Harjo, I see myself as working with 'makers and carriers of fresh meaning' (Harjo, 2015, introduction) and I believe the creative arts, including writing, offer a non-elite and democratic way in which we can make and remake fresh meaning. I want my clients to develop the capacity to connect outwards - with each other and with nature - rather than be stuck in their neuroses, looking inwards. I am influenced by the work of Mohsin Mohi Ud Din, an inspiring American who runs MeWeSyria, education and empowerment programmes with refugees and displaced persons. He makes a plea for story/narrative reframing to be a communal/societal action, not an individual one:

> MeWe's hypothesis is that an arrested narrative of oneself translates to an arrested development of the person and their community. A plural and resilient narrative of oneself can translate to unlocking the potential of the person and their community. ('What is #MEWEINTL', 2020)

## Development

When I was ten years old, my seven-year-old brother died very quietly over the course of an afternoon. One minute we were bickering and playing with our Christmas toys, the next minute, it seemed, he was in a coma and then dead of a cerebral haemorrhage. The fallout from this loss was awful, catastrophic for our family and for me personally. I could never make any sense of it until I wrote my full-length film script, 'Gray's Amazing Flea Circus' at the age of 50. This has been 'the gift that kept on giving' and has continued to provide new insights and new meanings to my life ever since. It reached a poetic place that therapy and counselling had never been able to reach. Perhaps that is why I believe in the power of story for my clients and encourage them to explore their own narratives in different ways. I only use these methods with people when there is a therapeutic 'opening' which suggests that they are curious and interested to operate in the register of story or the register of creative arts. I do not force this way of thinking on clients and always give them the opportunity to say 'no.'

Writing this paper has made me reflect on whether I have turned to children's toys and primitive, childlike drawings as a way of reclaiming part of a childhood that was stolen from me at the age of ten. As I write, I need to process whether this 'creative counselling' I'm so passionate about is serving my writing for wellbeing and my counselling clients as well as it serves me personally, or whether it could be a selfish way of working that meets my own needs for repair? As a person who has never written a research paper before, I am unsure how much of myself to put into this story and I am aware that I am exerting all sorts of control over Ray's story, in the way I shape and present it for you.

## Dialogue Between Barbara and Ray

As part of peer supervision with a colleague, I started the six-part story exercise with Ray in a two-hour session and then in four episodes of follow-up spread over six weeks. Ray is a 50-year-old white British man who is married with three teenage children. He experiences periods of depression, especially in the winter, and our first creative session was carried out in February 2020 during his bad season but just before Covid-19 arrived to turn the world upside down. This first session was followed up with three later conversations, spaced at two week intervals and conducted by email and in person. As the UK went into lockdown, we were forced to conduct our conversations online, but we also managed a face-to-face conversation while walking in the

woods. Ray works as a counsellor and I asked him to take part in this exercise because he is not professionally interested in writing or creative arts as a therapeutic tool. In fact, we had never used creative methods in any of our previous discussions.

It is outside the scope of this article to look at the haptic benefits of touching and moulding materials at the same time as writing and drawing, as ways to alleviate mental distress and promoting wellbeing. The benefits of 'fidget gadgets' and distractors are well documented, especially in family therapy (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018). Links are also made between the way that our hands, which convey so much expression when we touch, hug, write and gesture, bring sensations into the present moment and bring us back into our bodies (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2019). I think there is a link between the 'unusual situation' of using creative materials like plasticine and writing and the acceptance of ambiguity. Put simply, if you do not know what is the 'right answer' to a life problem and the stories you generate sneak past your frontal lobes to create unexpected narratives that come as a surprise even to their creator, then I believe this helps to develop a relationship with the state of not-knowing that creates a climate for interest and curiosity. Being in a place of not-knowing and being in a state where we encounter the world moment by moment and let it unfurl in front of us, is akin to a state of being in play. As a family counsellor, I know how to create a level playing field between children and adults who are having family issues, by using play techniques. If anything, using play techniques and materials can put adults who have become 'problem-saturated' at a disadvantage because they have 'forgotten how to play' (Bloomfield, 2013, p. 86). Developing a facility for being flexible, playful, and using humour are elements in developing greater resilience to life's problems, a significant factor in successful counselling work.

Why is play so valuable? When we play, we are ready to respond in certain ways, spontaneously, and we are extemporising in the moment of now (Michopoulou, 2019). Play is improvisation and improvisation is play. During a typical playtime that Michopoulou observed in a Greek park, the children showed an ability to embrace ambiguity and, she says, when we see ambiguity as a result of 'spontaneous participation in unique living situations', we are able to develop our ability to see difference in a positive way, instead of seeing sameness or tropes (Michopoulou, 2019, p. 20). Spontaneous participation leads to fresh sensory experiences, fresh mindfulness, and fresh ideas (Michopoulou, 2019, p. 20).

**Action**

I was struck by Wright and Chung's (2005) neat summing up of an ongoing debate in the western therapy world in terms of 'mastery or mystery'. This refers to the insistence that therapy should be able to evidence its benefits if it wants to be part of mainstream UK National Health Service (NHS) provision. Over the past 15 years there has been an avalanche of opinions on this subject. To some extent, the arts have pushed back against what some see as a sterile discussion about evidence. As a former counsellor with Improving Access to Psychological Therapies (IAPT)—mental health counselling paid for by the NHS—I'm glad I don't need to explore this here.

Influential in the pushback against statistics has been the All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing (APPG) (2017) whose report *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* seemed to capture a blossoming of new ways of doing therapeutic work which cuts across art forms. Dance for Parkinson's, singing for dementia, yoga with writing, and poetry therapy are just four examples of these blended art forms designed to improve physiological and psychological health. The word 'therapeutic' has increasingly been replaced by the word 'wellbeing' and this change seems to distance the practices from the 'mastery' camp and move them into the 'mystery' camp. The public sector is already starting to make creativity for wellbeing commonplace in many different contexts and settings, such as classrooms, workplaces, hospitals, hospices, community spaces, festivals, and even government (Wall & Axtell, 2020).

Rather than look at this piece of research as 'evidence' for the success or otherwise of creativity for wellbeing, I prefer to try and examine my practice within existing frameworks. My family counselling training draws on systemic and other counselling theories (Dallos & Draper, 2000; Rivett & Street. 2009; Armstrong, 2015; Dallos, 2006; White & Epston,1990). Karl Tomm's influential papers (1987a, 1987b, 1988) on interventive interviewing explain in detail how conversations can be used to promote healing. My writing for wellbeing work draws on a different body of writing on the healing potential of writing (Pennebaker, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2007; Etherington, 2020; Van Der Kolk, 2014; Wright & Thiara, 2019; Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018, 2019). Explorations of the role of play draw on a limited body of writing about using play and creative techniques with adult clients (Pawsey, 2015; Michopoulou, 2019; Colapinto, 1982; White & Epston, 1990; Bloomfield, 2013).

## The Six-Part Story Exercise

This exercise was developed by two Israeli family therapists, Ofra Ayalon and Mooli Lahad (Lahad, 1992), who proposed that the newly-created story demonstrates the way the client habitually perceives or reacts to the world and that this storytelling by metaphor is useful to therapy.

The exercise, as I have adapted it, starts with a pot of playdough and a sheet of A4 paper divided into six squares, numbered 1-6. I invited Ray to mould the playdough in his hands to warm it; to enjoy the sensation of squidginess and the almond scent of the playdough when he brought it up to his nose. I noticed that he looked a bit worried. He said he was worried he did not know what to do and I reflected inwardly that the six-part story exercise feels like play and, to an adult, play can be the scariest thing of all. I asked him to close his eyes and quickly mould the playdough into a shape. There would be no right or wrong and the first shape he made would probably be fine.

Then he opened his eyes and I asked: 'Can you give this character a name?'

Ray looked a bit surprised and, uncertainly, said: 'Table.'

***Figure 1***

Playdough 'Table'

I had also been moulding my own pot of playdough in a different colour and I created a shape and gave it a name, which was ‘Bimble.’

I invited Ray to draw (but not write) in the six boxes:

Box 1: To draw Table in the place where he/she/it lives

Box 2: To draw an issue that is preoccupying Table today

Box 3: To draw how others in Table’s community would respond to this issue

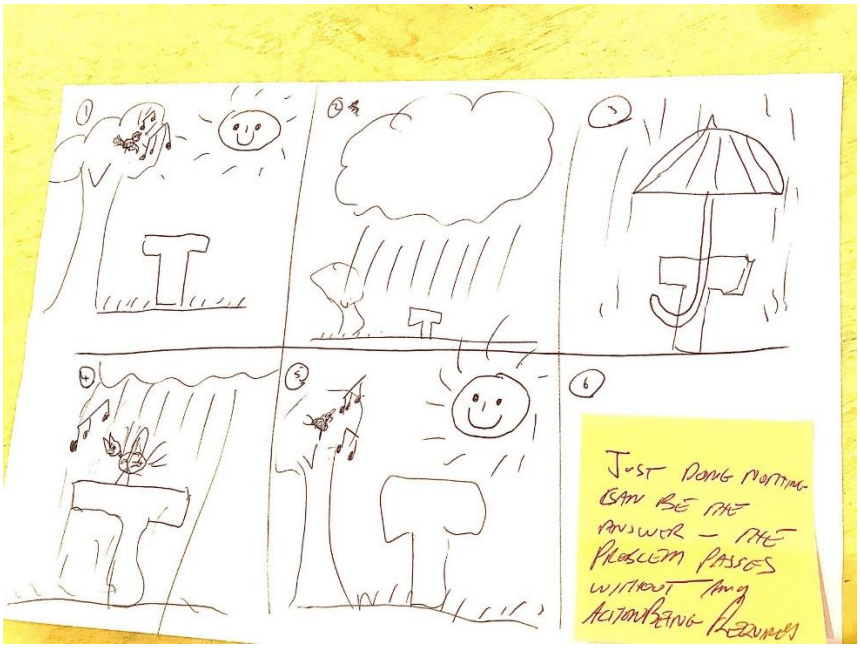
Box 4: To draw what advice Table’s best friend would give.

Box 5: To draw the resolution of the story

Box 6: To draw or write what is the moral of the story.

***Figure 2***

Ray’s drawing




Ray was able to create drawings quickly and he seemed to be ‘in flow’ (Csikszentmihalyi, 1992/2002). We each then wrote the stories of our character and their problem. In Ray’s story, Table was sitting in the sun under a tree listening to a bird singing.

Suddenly, the weather changed, and it started to beat down with rain. Other people saw the solution as to get an umbrella and protect yourself, but Table waited and waited and his friend the Bird came down onto his tabletop and splashed about while it rained. Finally, the sun came out and the Bird went back to his tree to sing again.

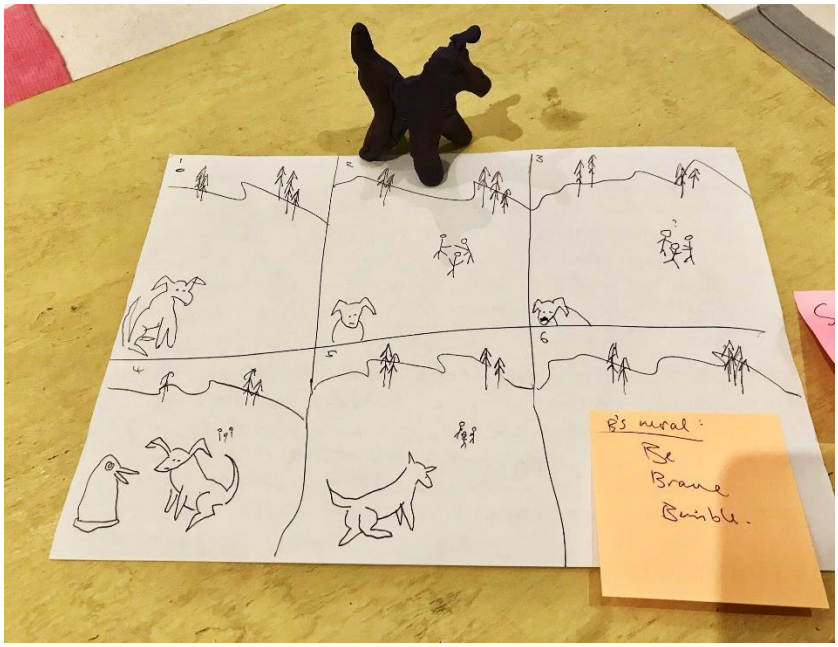
Ray wrote the moral of his story on a Post-it note: 'Just doing nothing can be the answer - the problem passes without any action being needed.' I asked Ray to comment on his story and drawings and he replied:

> Table is a wooden table, not very comfortable to hang out around. A picnic bench would have been better but too complicated to draw. I'm reading *The Overstory* by Richard Powers and that's about trees, or seeing trees as living things, and I'm finding this book very powerful and moving. A table is an abused and mutilated tree but it's a happy table, though I guess Table would rot if it came from a poor quality shop. It would rot within a year. I'm making an association of sitting round with friends in the sunshine, drinking beer. I see Table literally as a table, not as a person. He lives outdoors in a beer garden and it's all idyllic. The umbrella should be the kind you see in a pub garden. The bird is having a bath on the surface of the rainy table. Then the rain goes away, and the sun comes out again. If you can sit it out (rather than do something about it) it never rains forever. (2 February 2020)

I also did a six-part story with my character at the same time as Ray. In my story, the lonely dog, Bimble, lives in a wide meadow with some tall pine trees. Three kids were playing in the distance but Bimble feels too isolated to join in the game. His friend, Sandy, advises him to stop worrying and start acting 'brave' and eventually he goes over to join them and they welcome him. My moral was 'Be Brave, Bimble!'. I made my story into a short, animated film (Parkin, 2017).

***Figure 3***

Barbara's drawing




Looking at the strategies used by the two characters to resolve their different problems, Ray and I had a discussion which started face to face and continued over six weeks. When I thought about the different strategies for 'being' that Ray and I were adopting in our lives, I was amazed at how much had been revealed by this exercise. I also reflected that these different strategies had sometimes led to Ray and I getting into arguments and misunderstandings which were illuminated by our different life philosophies. I made contemporaneous notes in the two sessions that we did face to face about his six-part story and the other data below is the result of email correspondence. It would have been preferable to do all follow-up sessions face to face, but the COVID-19 lockdown precluded this.

> Barbara: What do you notice about the ways out characters resolved their problems?
>
> Ray: The difference that struck me was that being brave was quite a big thing and a bit YUCK, like a 70s motto: 'Feel the fear and do it anyway!' Whereas there is not a lot of bravery in being friendly.

Barbara: I actually feel resistant to the idea that Table gets such good results from doing nothing. Can this be a good way to set about life? Bimble is always out there, wagging his tail, and, yes, not always getting the results he hopes for. Maybe Table is better than Bimble at letting things wash through him?

Ray: I'm trying not to get bogged down with all the little crap. I am Table. It will all blow over. In your story I felt Bimble had the option of hiding 'cos he wasn't seen by the others. I saw Table as an inanimate object whereas yours is more of a live character which is quite a difference in our outlooks.

Barbara: Hiding!? No way! Bimble doesn't HIDE!

Ray: Well, no. But why not hide? It's another option.

Barbara: I see what you mean in the sense that Table is 'planted' in the earth and Bimble is running all over the place. How would it be different to keep this story in metaphor: i.e. only a story about Table and Bimble? Or does it feel more useful if it's about your story or my story?

Ray: At the risk of sitting on the fence, I think there are advantages to both. Keeping the story in metaphor would allow it to develop in more interesting/unexpected ways as I think it encourages a 'looser' brain to express itself. It could also, of course, lead to disappearance down a rabbit hole of nonsense! I think that allowing enough time for the metaphor to run is important (my sense is we did not have quite enough) and that ending by slowly moving into the personal experience of the creator and interpreter (me and you) is quite a nice way to end it. This was particularly interesting in the stories of Bimble and Table I thought: the different morals that arose out of broadly similar stories—brave(you)/friendly(me)! Comparisons with friendship (you)/do nothing (me!)—were fascinating and we could, perhaps, have reflected on these longer.

> Barbara: Did you feel that the story resonated with interests in your own life, or not?
>
> Ray: Not consciously at the time but upon examination I realised that my interest in wood/trees from reading *The Overstory* ran through a lot of it. Also, my generally depressed state at this time of year and my habit of hibernating (or 'doing nothing' as I framed it) as being a way of managing it. Also the power of being friendly (easier than being brave I think!) even when feeling awkward/shy/wanting to run for cover!
>
> Barbara: Did it further your thinking?
>
> Ray: It was an interesting perspective using Table and Bimble to tell the stories, particularly as I regarded Table as inanimate (and you didn't). Perhaps this was partly that I didn't know what was coming next but I suspect it also reflects my changing understanding around trees and wood. Also, how we both had quite a lot of common experiences/points of view in our respective stories and I thought the way we framed these differently said something about us as people, although I am not quite sure what. (10 February 2020)

The *leitmotif* from Ray of not having enough time is interesting and I definitely have the sense that I could have usefully extended the metaphor so that we both became more immersed in the story and in human relationships with trees. We followed up with an email exchange:

> Barbara: Have you had any further thoughts since we last spoke?
>
> Ray: I suppose I have developed my thoughts and ideas a bit while writing this email and I do think it is interesting how we value (or not) things. In this example, 'bravery' being generally seen as a positive attribute whilst largely ignoring the disaster/misery/pain that often results from it and 'doing nothing' being seen as lazy/suffering from inertia/fearful when it often allows space and reflection and strategising and enables better quality decisions to be made.

Barbara: On reflection, I'm feeling there is something both childlike and profound about the idea that 'just being friendly will make you happy.' I almost cannot believe I am saying this because it's so at odds with my action-facing nature. It has made me think about my life philosophy. How do you feel now about Table's motto?

Ray: I feel quite strongly about this as a positive thing in my life. The good stuff for each of us in life so often comes from an unexpected direction and by adopting a 'friendly' approach (a version of 'doing nothing' in my mind, incidentally) we can develop and generate these more easily.

Barbara: What is the relationship between 'doing nothing' and 'being brave''? What kind of relationship would you like to have with them?

Ray: I think the relationship between these two is largely a reflection or your and my perspectives on, well, everything, really. We each of us pulled out of the story what resonated with/made sense to us (do psychologists call this confirmation bias or something like it?). I suppose I see doing nothing as a wise, reflective observer type position (rather than the more popular 'inertia' one most people might see) and being brave as impetuous and foolish sometimes. If doing something is that brave, would it not make sense to reflect upon it a while rather than just launching straight into it?

The relationship I would like to have with these two things is probably not too far from the one I actually have. Whilst there is a tremendous need for being brave and taking action in the world, I do see much of what actually goes on as reactive instead and this is what fuels conflict, war, fear, Tories etc. This could be mitigated by a (temporary) 'doing nothing' approach to consider the possible outcomes before committing to a course of action. (28 February 2020)

On 10 March, we followed up by email as the UK was in Covid-19 lockdown at this point of 2020:

> Barbara: Reflecting on the six-part story, is there anything that strikes you now as interesting?
>
> Ray: I suppose the bit that jumps out at me is running out of time and how it would have been really interesting to have further developed/explored/reflected upon the stories of Bimble and Table, particularly with regard to the themes of bravery and doing nothing. I guess I have done this below really, but I think a face to face conversation with you would have been more interesting and, perhaps, moderated my thoughts and made them a bit less ranty! (although I think ranty has its place and gets an unfairly negative press generally!)
>
> Barbara: I was wondering whether it resonates with any previous story from your life in any way?
>
> Ray: Boarding school I suppose. All those willy-waving twats swaggering about and ending up in positions of power later in life and how their perceived 'bravery' is actually just psychopathy or similar that actually masks a deep existential loneliness and creates such massive problems in the world. Sorry to be a bit negative, but that's what popped into my head!
>
> Barbara: I'm struck by that Image of Table sitting there stolidly while he's being rained on. For you, does this sit with the word 'depression'?
>
> Ray: I would never had made the link. I saw Table as inanimate. I never made a conscious link.
>
> Barbara: Is there a link between acceptance (can I use the word 'passivity'?) and low mood?
>
> Ray: Possibly. I'm not convinced. I think the description of depression I like the most is that depression is internalised emotion.

Barbara: Say more...

Ray: Depression facilitates a lot. You get, at school, to opt out of anything such as games that you don't want to do. For me, it was concurrent at school with developing asthma. And, as an adult with depression, you can get out of things, a boring job, kids you can't stand. How lovely to retreat to bed. I enjoy retreating to bed once in a while.

Barbara: Does this link to your philosophy that 'it's enough just to be friendly'?

Ray: The friendly thing is more of a default potion than a philosophy. There is something I've developed over the years that others don't seem to have which is that I have no fear of rejection. I take a chance by smiling at strangers, but I don't fear rejection if they don't smile back.

Barbara: Do you think the difference in our philosophies has led us to clash at points in the past and misunderstand each other?

Ray: Yes, we do misunderstand each other quite a bit but we are good at checking out any misunderstandings. I think in this we differ from many people. Rejection is key here: most people don't check out their misunderstandings because they quickly go to a place of feeling rejected.

Barbara: Your story is so fresh for me. But am I right in sensing that maybe it's not so exciting for you? I'm excited by your beliefs and the way you go about life! Haha.

Ray: You were in charge of the exercise and therefore you attach more meaning to it than I did. Elements of it have stayed with me but not as much as for you. But I did enjoy the way it highlighted our very different philosophies of life.

One reader of this paper commented that some of my questions above are 'leading questions.' By this time in our conversation, I was feeling challenged by what I saw as Ray's

passive attitude to life. But at the same time, I felt he was saying something important and that I was beginning to understand his different way of looking at things much more clearly through the story of Table.

I also reflected on the fact that Ray saw me as 'being in charge' of the exercise rather than it being co-constructed. He seemed to be getting tired of being asked questions about the exercise and he might have felt I was pressurising him to say something different or pressurising him to 'have more reflections.' I felt uncomfortable because the discussion started to remind me of disagreements that Ray and I had had when it felt like I was the older sister to him as the younger brother and I was bossing him to behave differently. Poignantly, this is what I was doing as a ten-year-old girl to my brother when he went into a coma and died.

## Resolution

For the purposes of commenting on the data from the six-part story, I am going to use concepts outlined by one of the grandees of therapeutic writing, James Pennebaker, in his epilogue to *The Writing Cure* (Lepore & Smith, 2002).

> Journal writing creates a trustworthy setting for reflection. It forces us to stop what we are doing, briefly, and reflect on our lives. It's a chance to see where you have been and where you are going without having to please anyone. It encompasses theoretical stances associated with self-regulation, search for meaning; creation of coherent stories about one's life; habituation; emotional awareness and expression ... Emotional processing, creating a coherent story, post writing procession and a trustworthy setting are the most important elements of therapeutic writing. (Pennebaker, 2002, Epilogue)

Although Pennebaker is referring here to journaling, by taking three of these important elements, I can look at Ray's story through the lenses of the trustworthy setting, creating a coherent story and the post-writing procession.

### *A Trustworthy Setting*

As a counsellor working with couples, families, and individuals, I must wait for the sense that the time might be right during the counselling to introduce creative arts. I want to build up

trust with my clients beforehand by listening carefully and actively to their worries, their traumas, or their mental distress. The reason for this is not necessarily that I am a highly empathic or caring person. It's something to do with the expectations of clients that they will be able to express themselves fully by telling stories of hurt, abuse, or distress. Some systemic counsellors don't believe these sorts of stories are useful and tend not to listen very carefully to them. They believe that *changing* the stories we live by, through asking different and strange questions and developing a state of 'ambiguity and not knowing' in the discourse between client and counsellor, tends to soften 'problem-saturated narratives' and lead to a reduction in symptoms. It could be argued that systemic counsellors are more skilled at looking outwards and at connecting their clients to global and social justice concerns than they are at understanding that trauma and past hurts hold people back. But critics of the systemic way of working can call it 'uncaring' or 'overly intellectual' in its use of complex questions and language, and therefore inherently undemocratic to clients. Sometimes the questions can be so intellectual and so different that the client is turned off immediately and never returns.

That is why I have turned to creativity as a fresh route to help clients develop new ways of thinking that still honour their stories of pain or loss. Ray suggests that creative therapies can 'disappear down a rabbit-hole of nonsense' and that is certainly possible. However, if introduced with sensitivity, I believe that creative counselling is more accessible to a wide range of clients than the intellectualism of a lot of systemic therapy.

So how to introduce creative counselling? I usually signal my intentions with clients the week before we start, saying: 'Next week, how about we try something different, like writing or using small figures? Would you be interested in trying that?' Professor Rudi Dallos, cited in Bloomfield (2013, pp. 61-62), reflects that the process of contracting and negotiating in counselling is so important in constructing both a trustworthy setting and in setting a tone for self-regulation. Taking time to have these process conversations about what we are doing, why we are having THIS conversation and not THAT conversation, and what we want to achieve in our work together, is vital and often under-developed in the communications repertoires of individuals, couples or families with 'problems.' As an impatient person myself, I have had to learn the hard way to take a step back and deconstruct the communications in my family before they get snagged, circular, and repetitive!

But now we come to a very important factor. In today's world, we need to self-regulate: to be able to, in the Buddhist saying, 'slow down to the pace of wisdom.' Creativity helps us because it invites us to sit in the moment of NOW, to slow down our thought processes and then to *reflect* on them. We need to reflect on the good things of life: the joy, the achievements, the gratitude, and the love we experience. Neurobiologists tell us that our neural networks are primed to remember flight, fight, and frozen more quickly than joy, gratitude, and enjoyment. Many of us need to know how we can build a tolerance for joy and gratitude inside ourselves (Sunderland & Armstrong, 2018, 2019).

### *Creating a Coherent Story*

The purpose of using a six-part story during a counselling or writing for wellbeing session is to uncover hidden psychological material which may be of use both to the client and to the counsellor. As a counsellor and a writer of fiction, I tend to see links between metaphors, stories and psychological processes very quickly and this means that I can construct stories from other people's scribblings and drawings almost in the blink of an eye and faster than any pen can write. As a counsellor, I need to guard against this, to guard against turning other people's six-part stories into MY stories and over-privileging my own interpretations.

Complete stories with a beginning, middle and end are useful in several ways. Firstly, they call us to a poetic register rather than a problem-saturated register. We all tend to get wedded to the age-old tales we tell and re-tell about our own lives, especially the 'negative' stories that may have been generated in our early experiences, our families of origin or communities. I notice that some clients who have done many years of psychotherapy can get extremely fond of stories that keep them tied to the past. This may keep them stuck in a neurotic or ruminating place, rather than releasing them from pain or pressure. My belief is the stories which 'loosen' us are those that by-pass the frontal lobes and access unconscious material. To bypass gate-keeping mechanisms, we need to provide a setting that is relatively different and one where the client cannot 'guess' what answers are expected or desired. When he warmed his playdough in his hands, Ray could not have guessed that I would ask him to create a character and complete a whole story. This is why, I believe, Ray's story released some important and unconscious material that came as a surprise to him and, indeed, to me.

A second reason why complete conversations and stories are so useful is because, if we look at the psychotherapeutic three-stage model of counselling as Exploration - Understanding - Action (Egan, 2014), then the problem with many therapeutic encounters is that they never get to the action stage. Solutions-focused Counselling and Cognitive-Behavioural Therapy have become popular for this very reason, because they recognise the tendency of counsellors and clients to 'collude' in avoiding the change part of the work and get stuck in the more spacious, relaxing and comfortable arena of 'exploration.' Focusing on solutions also recognises a more mundane factor, that many clients will end their counselling before they get to the action stage. The six-part story, on the other hand, sneakily encourages the client to own their inner wisdom and their change agenda at an early stage by taking the observer/witness position in square four (what would a 'best friend' advise they should do?) and in squares five and six (by asking for the resolution to and the moral of the story).

Using story as a vehicle for exploring traumatic events and mental distress is an externalising device that lightens the telling of distressing material. When we tell the stories of Table or Bimble we create a story that exists outside the person of the teller. There is no longer 'THE truth,' there may be a variety of stories and several truths. It is easy to see the potential for reframing narratives and for developing preferred narratives which provide more hopeful or more balanced accounts of difficult experiences (Dallos, 2019).

### *Post-Writing Procession*

What Pennebaker (2002) calls the post-writing procession has been, for Ray and me, a period of several chances to reflect on our reflections which has ended up with me feeling like a dog with a bone (perhaps Bimble with his bone!) Like Bimble, I have become 'dogged' in my pursuit of answers with Ray but perhaps failed to be poetic and spacious enough in the exploration of Table's metaphors. I needed to give Ray a bit more space to feel comfortable.

Personally, I find that metaphor captures my imagination, leads me to have fresh thoughts and more positive thoughts. Fresh scenes and fresh ideas come into my mind. I think of different scenarios and answers to my worries. New colours, shapes and patterns come into my mind instead of the grey, colourless and shameful feelings I've sometimes experienced when bearing my soul in psychotherapy. What is the colour of shame, I wonder? When I speak about my own troubles using metaphor and story, I feel energised and fascinated by this new material. I

experience myself as outside my body and am able to take a curious and interested witness position rather than a shamed or vulnerable position. I still experience a sense of vulnerability when working in story, but the vulnerability seems connected and survivable because it is not inside me. Instead, it exists in a lighter form as a written or a filmed or voiced story over which I have control and which I could choose to share with, publish, and have witnessed by others.

Being involved in creating stories and metaphor about difficult stories feels, to me, like being part of a web of alternative possibilities, rather than being in a well of shameful vulnerability. I recognise that Ray possibly feels differently to me, though was too polite to say so. He did not feel as energised or interested in the six-part story as I did. I will be returning to ask him in six months' time whether he feels the same way, or differently? He told me his strategy for getting through 'depression' was to be able to phone one of a group of friends who also experience low moods and 'have a moan.' I would never think of doing this in a million years and respect Ray's way of handling his low moods. Ray and I both want to look outwards, but we do it in different ways. Whatever works, works, as they say!

In narrative therapy, there is debate about whether, or not, to stay in metaphor when working with story (Legowski & Brownlee, 2001). Psychodynamically-trained family therapists will come out of metaphor at the end of the storytelling ('So, how does Table's story chime with your experience?') whereas systemically-trained family therapists tend to stay in the story and keep the story/metaphor separate from the teller. As Ray himself said, there are advantages to both and it's a matter of judgment whether the storyteller would benefit from owning the links between their story and their own experiences. Perhaps most important of all is that using story is a way of widening a conversation so that the person is aware of their community context. In the west we have become so individualised and atomised that we tend to lose sight of our wider communities.

## Ending

The moral of this story is that, through using storytelling with Ray, he and I have learned new things about our philosophies of life. For my part, I am seeing Ray in a different way and I am going to use my own reflections to guide our future peer discussion. The attention I have given to writing this paper has been worthwhile and has started in me a real curiosity about research.

What would it be like if we lived in a world where the poetic register was admired? A place where curiosity and interest were stimulators of fresh conversation about difference and privilege? A place where problem-saturated conversations could be chunked down into smaller, more connected pieces? And a place where using story provided a useful and lighter way of surviving the sharing of painful experiences with others?

What would it mean to be a conversational artist? I think movements like MeWe International understand the decentralising power of conversational artistry and its potential to give voice to those who are under-heard. If we could take a curious and interested stance in the world, how would the registers of politics change? I can't be the only politically-engaged person who is bored stiff by the same old political tropes and discourses. Using story, as Ray and I did together, is a way to bring back curiosity and interest in different ways of approaching life and of valuing other people's experiences.

By decentralising the power of narrative, we speak truth to power and stop power defining our life stories for us. We start to positively redefine our stories and our role in society and rebuild an ecosystem in which we can organically work towards social change and personal growth.

> Bless the poets, the workers for justice, the dancers of ceremony, the singers of heartache, the visionaries, all makers and carriers of fresh meaning—We will all make it through, despite politics and wars, despite failures and misunderstandings. There is only love. (Harjo, 2015)

**References**

All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing. (2017). *Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing*. Retrieved May 24, 2020, from http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/.

Bateson, G. (2000). *Steps to an ecology of mind: Collected essays in anthropology, psychiatry, evolution, and epistemology*. University of Chicago Press.

Bloomfield, B. (2013). *Couple therapy: Dramas of love and sex*. Open University.

Brooks, A. C. (2019). *Love your enemies: How decent people can save America from the culture of contempt.* Broadside.

Burnham, J. (2012). Developments in Social GGRRAAACCEEESSS: Visible-invisible, voiced-unvoiced. In I. Krause (Ed.), *Cultural reflexivity in Systemic Psychotherapy* (pp. 139-162). Karnac. Note: For a short summary of the Social Graces, see https://www.counselling-directory.org.uk/memberarticles/summary-and-review-of-social-ggrraaacceeesss.

Campbell, J. (1968). *The hero with a thousand faces.* Princeton University Press.

Csiksgentmihalyi, M. (1992/2002). *Flow: The psychology of happiness*. Harper & Row/Random

Colapinto, J. (1982). *Structural family therapy*. Semantic Scholar. Retrieved from https://pdfs.semanticscholar.org/467c/aa4c52a03f1b42ff9db7d6f37c4498d36b3b.pdf.

Dallos, R., & Draper, R. (2000). *An introduction to family therapy: Systemic theory and practice*. Oxford University Press.

Dallos, R. (2006). *Attachment narrative therapy*. Oxford University Press/McGraw Hill Education.

Egan, G. (2014). *The skilled helper (*10th ed.). Brooks/Cole.

Etherington, K. (2020). Researching, writing, and publishing trauma stories: Learning from practice. *Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal*, *1*(1).

Harjo, J. (2015). *Conflict resolution for holy beings: Poems*. W.W. Norton and Co.

Lahad, M. (1992). Story-making in assessment method for coping with stress. In S. Jennings (Ed.), *Dramatherapy theory and practice 2* (pp. 150–163). Routledge.

Legowski, T., & Brownlee, K. (2001). Working with metaphor in narrative therapy. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy, 12*(1), 19-28.

Lepore, S. J., & Smyth, J. M. (Eds.) (2002). *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being.* American Psychological Association.

Michopoulou, J. (2019). Dare to play. *Murmurations: Journal of Transformative Systemic Practice*, *2*(2), 18-28.

Parkin, C. (Producer and Director). (2017). *Be brave, Bimble* [Video]. Growing Bolder Group. Retrieved October 7, 2020, from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=V15jTuphhxg.

Pawsey, K. (2015). *Exploring play through CWTP with adults*. [Master's thesis, Metanoia Institute].

Pennebaker, J. (2002). Epilogue. In S. J. Lepore, and J. M. Smyth (Eds.), *The writing cure: How expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being.* American Psychological Association.

Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2007). Expressive writing, emotional upheavals, and health. In H. S. Friedman & R. C. Silver (Eds.), *Foundations of health psychology* (pp. 263-284). Oxford University Press.

Rivett, M., & Street, E. (2009). *Family therapy: 100 key points and techniques*. Routledge.

Sunderland, M., & Armstrong, N. (2019). *Draw on your relationships: Creative ways to explore, understand and work through important relationship issues.* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Sunderland, M., & Armstrong, N. (2018) *Draw on your emotions* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

Tomm, K. (1987a) Part 1: Strategising as a fourth guideline for the therapist. *Family Process, 26*(1), 3-13.

Tomm, K. (1987b). Part II: Reflexive questioning as a means to enable self-healing, *Family Process, 26*(2), 167-183.

Tomm, K. (1988) Part III: Interventive interviewing: Intending to ask lineal, circular, strategic, or reflexive questions*? Family Process, 27*(1), 1-15.

Wall, T., & Axtell, R. (2019). *Creative practices for wellbeing framework consultation final report December 2019*. Lapidus International. http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11610.90567/1.

White, M. & Epston, D. (1990). *Narrative means to therapeutic ends*. W. W. Norton and Co.

Wright, J. K. & Chung, M. C. (2001). Mastery or mystery? Therapeutic writing: A review of the literature. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 29*(3), 277-291, https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880120073003.

Wright, J. K., & Thiara, R. K. (2019). Breaking the silence and shame of sexual abuse: creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP). *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 32*(1), 11-21.

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma.* Penguin.

What is #MEWEINTL? (2020). Retrieved from https://meweintl.org/actions/mewe/why-mewe-why-storytelling/.

***Barbara Bloomfield*** *worked as a journalist in radio and newspapers, including spells as a foreign correspondent in China and Central America. She gave that up to study at Ruskin College, the trades union college in Oxford where she deepened her interest in social justice and feminism. With two young children to care for, she made a move into relationship counselling with the organisation Relate and stayed 26 years, working as a counsellor, supervisor and trainer and writing four books and numerous booklets on relationships and social history. Her master's degree is in scriptwriting and she taught creative writing for several years at Bath Spa University. She is currently the Chair of Lapidus International, the writing for wellbeing organisation.* www.barbarabloomfield.com

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# Narrative Renewal: Investigating the Practice of Writing a Grief Memoir Through the Lens of the Practitioner-as-Researcher

**Katrin Den Elzen, PhD**

**Curtin University, Perth, Australia**

## Abstract

The existing scholarship surrounding grief memoirs is sparse compared to the substantial body of memoir scholarship (Birkerts, 2008; Couser, 2012; Gutkind, 2012; Rak, 2013). This paper investigates my practice of writing a young widow memoir from the perspective of practitioner-as-researcher, undertaken as part of a doctorate in creative writing. Creative practice itself can act as an engine for scholarly insight. The intention is to contribute knowledge to grief memoir practice and scholarship. I argue that memoir is a genre that is well-suited to the representation of grief and that a variety of research strategies, such as the role of the first draft, crafting, research, reading and ethical considerations are quintessential components of the creative process. This article investigates these strategies as part of my process of writing a grief memoir.

***Keywords:*** Practice-led research, grief memoir, memoir, grief, meaning-making

## Acknowledgements and Author Note

This article was supported by an Australian Government Research Training Program Scholarship. Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: katrin.denelzen@curtin.edu.au.

## Introduction

The genre of memoir has seen extensive scholarly investigation in the last few decades. By contrast, it is noteworthy that the existing scholarship surrounding grief memoirs is sparse compared to the substantial body of memoir scholarship (Birkerts, 2008; Couser, 2012; Gutkind, 2012, Rak, 2013). Thanatologist and literary analyst Kathleen Fowler's notion that the grief memoir, specifically women's grief memoir, is a 'relatively new literary form' (2007, p. 525) might explain why it has seen limited scholarly attention. I agree that it is a relatively new sub-genre and my research has shown that it is characterised by predominantly female authors. While the grief memoir has received limited scholarly attention, it has enjoyed noticeable popularity from the public (Brennan, 2012). This paper investigates my practice of writing a young widow memoir from the perspective of practitioner-as-researcher, undertaken as part of a doctorate in creative writing. The intention is to contribute knowledge to grief memoir practice and scholarship. Fowler contends that there is much 'to explore in the rich harvest of women's grief memoirs' (2007, p. 527). The notion of the rich harvest captures the impetus behind this article. I argue that memoir is a genre that is well-suited to the representation of grief and meaning-making. I wish to emphasise that I am suggesting that memoir *can* facilitate adaptation to grief, *not* that it inherently or necessarily will bring this about.

Further, I contend that a variety of research strategies, such as the first draft, crafting, research, reading, and ethical considerations are quintessential components of the creative process. This article investigates these strategies as part of my process of writing a grief memoir and analyses the stages involved in crafting a memoir. The scope of the practice-led-research which I am undertaking in regards to the writing of my memoir is extensive and goes beyond this paper. Ethical considerations in relation to writing a grief memoir, for example, are of paramount importance, and I have examined these in a book chapter entitled 'Investigating ethics in the young widow memoir' (Den Elzen, 2019). Another important focus for a paper would be the meaning-making processes that the memoir portrays.

The memoir '*My decision'* (Den Elzen, 2018) narrates my husband Mark's illness, during which he was locked in his body, fully paralysed, for a period of about eight months, in 2004, and his subsequent death. 'Locked-in-syndrome' describes a condition in which the sufferer is unable to move or speak yet is consciously present. The memoir depicts my adaptation to grief over the following decade and portrays the fragmented and complex nature of recovery from this

trauma, becoming a single mother, and reconstructing my identity. Further, the text conveys an inner struggle of coming to terms with multiple injustices within medical and legal institutions, specifically my husband's misdiagnosis by his General Practitioner (GP) and the resulting medical negligence trial, and my attempt to break free from these experiences without bitterness. The memoir presents two distinct experiences: first that of witnessing my husband's illness, and second my widowhood, each related in a unique voice. The first third of the book portrays Mark's illness up to his death, my experience of witnessing and being traumatised by his intense suffering, and becoming an advocate for his rights in a rigid medical system that sees an illness and not the whole person. The remainder of the memoir conveys my grief journey, processing of my trauma, single parenthood, a medical negligence trial, postgraduate studies, my research into trauma and bereavement theory, and the role of writing in the integration of my loss. I contend that my autobiographical writing facilitated my adaptation to grief and played a key role in the transformation of my trauma. However, this needs to be seen as a multi-layered, developmental process rather than a simplistic progression. This integration of grief and trauma was incremental and took place over a period of a decade.

In the writing of the illness story I drew on the extensive journals that I kept during that time. This was a crucial resource that included events and dates such as the multiple surgeries my husband underwent and discussions with medical staff, and also my emotional reactions and landscape. The names of medical staff have been anonymised. Further, I also drew on 450 pages of court transcripts in the narration of the medical negligence trial.

I have included an author's note in the beginning of the memoir to inform the reader to that effect:

> In writing this book, I drew upon my personal journals, my husband's medical notes, court transcripts and researched facts and called upon my own memory, in particular emotional memory, of these events. I have changed the names of medical staff and some individuals to protect their privacy (Den Elzen, 2018, p.3).

I chose the lens of practitioner-as-researcher because creative practice itself can act as an engine for scholarly insight. I concur with Donna-Lee Brien who argues that, in contrast to literary critics, who can only research creative works as a finished product, creative writers as researchers 'can productively reflect on the creative thinking that created such works' (2006, p.

53). The process is as worthy of scholarly attention as the final product. In the case of the grief memoir, authors can investigate the role that the writing process played for them in relation to various issues, such as meaning-making, rebuilding of identity, and ethical choices made in relation to the deceased other. Hazel Smith and Roger Dean state that 'creative practice – the training and specialised knowledge that creative practitioners have and the processes they engage in when they are making art – can lead to specialised research insights which can then be generalised and written up as research' (2009, p. 5). It is the practice itself then that drives the scholarly inquiry.

I conceptualise the genre of memoir as particularly well-suited to narrating grief. A memoir narrates a 'selected aspect of the writer's life' and, unlike autobiography, it does not recount a whole life in a linear manner (Murdock, 2010, p. 10). Vivian Gornick states that a memoir consists of two components: the situation, which is the description of events, and the story. Crafting a story out of a situation, Gornick suggests, requires a narrating voice that undergoes an inner journey, and reaches some realisation at the end: 'The story is the emotional experience that preoccupies the writer: the insight, the wisdom, the thing one has come to say' (2001, p. 13). It is the task of the memoirist to craft the story, and this depends upon the author's contemplation and reflection upon her experiences. Maureen Murdock concurs, positing that 'the art of memoir writing is the process of struggling for the emotional truth of the memory, finding perspective, and making meaning of that particular slice of a life. In that process, the writer's consciousness is changed' (2010, p.10).

Grief is one of the most powerful and difficult emotions we may experience in life, particularly in relation to premature loss: its intensity generally requires the person to undergo an inner journey in order to work through the distress and to adapt to and make sense of the loss. Memoir writing can aid in this process.

Another possible approach to narrating my story as a researcher might have been autoethnography. 'Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyse personal experience in order to understand cultural experience' (Ellis, Adams and Bochner, 2011, p. 273). I was never drawn to using autoethnography, which combines personal narrative with research, thus 'balance[ing] intellectual and methodological rigor, emotion, and creativity (Adams, Holman and Ellis, 2014, p. 2). Right from the outset I wanted to write a memoir that would be literary, aimed at a general readership, with the intention

to publish it commercially. My purpose has been manifold. I believe that the power of story to contribute to personal and social change and transformation is strong and unique. The purpose underlying the writing of my memoir is firstly to help readers who experience loss or adversity to come to know grief better and to draw inspiration for and a deeper understanding of their own lives. Further, grief is a taboo subject, and by writing a deeply personal account of grief, I intend to contribute to expanding the public dialogue on death, dying and grief and to help people in general, in addition to those who are grieving themselves, to deepen their understanding. Secondly, I want to contribute to what I see as much needed social change in regard to the rigidity of our medical institutions.

The close affinity of grief narrative to memoir is illuminated by the work of leading bereavement scholar and practicing clinician Robert Neimeyer (2019), who explains that in the context of grief counselling the narratives of our lives consist of three storylines. The first is the *external narrative*, which he defines as the objective story. Secondly, there is the *internal story*, which Neimeyer identifies as the emotion-focused story. The third strand relates to the *reflexive narrative*, which is the meaning-oriented story. Gornick's conceptualisation of the situation, the events, and the story aligns with Neimeyer's view of the three story-lines narrating grief. Her event story relates to Neimeyer's external narrative. It describes in vivid detail what happened. Gornick's interpretation of crafting the story combines Neimeyer's internal and reflexive narratives. It refers both to the internal, emotion-focused story, and the reflexive story. In my own writing, I can identify these three storylines. For example, in relation to depicting my husband's illness story, I had to write the external story in vivid detail first, as well as portraying the inner emotional story, before I could grasp and craft the reflexive, meaning-making story and find the emotional truth in the memories.

This interplay between the detailed description of events and a stepping back from the experience in order to contemplate it is foundational to memoir's function in mediating experience by making sense of it from the vantage of the present. As Sven Birkerts puts it, both the 'unprocessed feeling of the world' as it was experienced then '*and* a reflective vantage point' that contemplates the experience now and that realises that these events 'made a different kind of sense over time' lie at the heart of memoir (2008, p. 23, emphasis in original). For me as memoirist, this interplay formed the essence of my practice.

**Investigating my Practice of Writing a Grief Memoir**

This section researches the authorial decisions, narrative devices and writing processes such as drafting and crafting utilised in *My Decision* (Den Elzen, 2018), which I wrote in the context of a doctorate in creative writing. I started my PhD by writing the initial draft of my memoir. In view of my creative practice, I would argue that writing the first draft without consideration of editing, crafting or research is an especially useful approach when writing about grief and trauma. The first part of my memoir, which depicts my husband's extreme illness, had to be written in whatever way it needed to come onto the page. The initial draft that portrayed my husband's suffering did not include much reflection. Such reflection comes with hindsight and is one of the defining characteristics of memoir (Birkerts 2008, p. 23). By contrast, when I wrote the first draft of the narrative depicting my widowhood and adaptation to grief, reflection arose without prompting. By this I mean that reflection was already and naturally present in my first draft. I did not have to add it in later, as was the case with the illness narrative.

I only recognised the general absence of reflection in the illness narrative when I re-read the first draft. This was startling to me as I am reflective by nature, which is one of the reasons I was drawn to the genre of memoir. I contemplated this at length and came to understand that narrating my husband's illness and suffering represented my lived experience of being in crisis mode. Narrating the trauma evoked some re-living of the distressing experiences. Further, it mirrored that crisis mode, in which I focused in Birkerts' terms solely on my 'unprocessed feelings', and did not yet have access to and engage with the 'reflective vantage point' (2008, p.23) of the present. There was no room for reflection, either in the original experience, or in the process of translating my traumatic recollections into words in the first draft.

Patricia Hampl argues that it is vital for the creative writing process to let the first draft flow onto the pages without interference from outside sources, and without premature editing (1999, p. 28). A writing teacher who held a creative non-fiction course at the hospice where my husband had passed away had told us to 'just vomit [our experiences] onto the page'. This was always at the back of my mind during the initial drafting. Doctoral supervisor Sue Joseph gave similar advice to one of her PhD candidates who narrated personal trauma: 'just write, write it out of you … just write the poison out' (2019, p. 144). Here, both the metaphors of vomiting and poison convey the toxic nature of traumatic memory and the need to write it out, to externalise it. As such, the only way I could give voice to that experience initially was to pour

the 'situation' (in Gornick's terms) onto the page without any attempt at a shaping and narrating what Neimeyer refers to as the reflective story.

Reflexivity cannot be instantaneous at the same time as experiencing. It requires some degree of temporal distance (Knightley and Pickering, 2012, p. 19). Here is a paradox: though there was a significant temporal distance of many years between the lived traumatic experience and my conscious recall in the performative act of narrating it, the act of narrating evoked re-living in the present moment of writing to a degree that more or less excluded immediate reflexivity, because healing and transformation had not yet occurred. The narrative pattern only becomes visible in hindsight:

> it is as a result of such a pattern that we can then recognise experience and what is made of it as characterising the individual subject. … the subject remembered by the remembering subject alters and shifts from one period of his life to another, along with the meanings and values of autobiographical memories (Knightley and Pickering, 2012, p. 20).

Having said that re-living rendered initial reflexivity out of reach for me, I acknowledge that to narrate is to reconstruct. We grasp events, lived experience, 'through an act of representation, which is at the same time an act of re-creation' (Abbot, 2008, p. 37). I had to 'grasp the event first', experiences that were so extreme and distressing that I had no words for them. Whilst this act of giving voice evoked re-living, it also opened up the space for me to heal and to recognise the narrative patterns underlying my experiences.

The first draft was emotionally challenging. I do not remember exactly how long the re-living lasted, but once I took my attention off the writing, though the memories continued to echo for some time through my consciousness, when I engaged in other activities, the active re-living ceased. I had no experience as yet with self-care in the face of narratively evoked re-living, so I fumbled my way through it. In hindsight, it would have been vital to have self-care strategies in place and I would highly recommend this for others narrating grief and personal trauma. I would also suggest to have accountability processes regarding self-care strategies established, which could be with a supervisor, a writing associate or friend. I could have had access to counselling at my university.

Reflection requires agency, and I lacked agency in my experiences with Mark's doctors. According to Jerome Bruner, self is a concept defined by agency, and if agency is absent our memories refer to how we responded to the agency of another (1994, p. 41). I speculate that this lies at the heart of my inability to have been reflective in the first draft. Mark's illness in and of itself was outside my agency, as well as the actions of the hospital staff in their treatment of Mark and their conversations with me. It can be said then that there was a shift after the completion of the first draft, where I had poured my memories onto the page. The performative act of narrating and giving voice to my non-agentic, traumatic experiences evoked a shift towards regaining agency through the act of writing and of naming my experience, which was no longer voiceless, locked away internally.

There was a break of several months after I completed the first draft of the illness narrative until I re-read that part of the text and met with my supervisor to discuss it. During this time I began writing the next section of my memoir, portraying my experience of widowhood and grief. After discussing the first draft of the illness narrative with my supervisor, I recognised and acknowledged the general absence of reflection. Once I understood the exploratory nature of my first draft, I undertook a substantial redrafting within a short period of time. It is interesting to note that it took only this one major redrafting to shape the first draft into an aesthetic, literary text in accord with the conventions of the genre of memoir. I engaged in the interplay between the detailed description of events and a stepping back from the experience in order to contemplate it, thus adding in reflection from the vantage point of the present which is the hallmark of memoir. 'Discovering and constructing a sense of pattern and structure in our experience across time … is the work of the remembering subject' (Knightley and Pickering, 2012, p. 23). Later redrafts were only minor and specific to passages. In the reshaping, I did not significantly alter the initial representation of my lived experience of witnessing my husband's extreme illness. What I did do was to add in substantial passages of reflection. I also deliberately shaped the structure and rhythm of the text by alternating showing, some telling and reflection.

As mentioned, the first draft mirrored my lived experience of being in survival mode and I did not have access then to reflection. In the creative process of crafting the memoir I had more emotional distance from the 'situation' which I had given voice to in the first draft. In the performative act of redrafting, I added in reflections about the experience, in particular the hospital system. Here is one example:

> Looking back on that time, I don't know why I never confronted Dr Nemeth over his repeated assertions that there was no hope for recovery. Why had he pushed me to make a decision only a week into Mark's coma? This is not so much an existential why, as a logical why … The same day that Dr Mayer said we needed to wait for the swelling to go down, his boss, Dr Nemeth, told me that Mark had total brain-damage and urged me to withhold treatment in the same breath. It was not my nature to remain silent. But the senseless horror of having to make the decision to withhold treatment had rendered me mute. I could not find the words to give shape to what had happened. (2018, pp.18-19)

The additional reflections are an essential component of the crafting of the story. They can also be attributed to Neimeyer's reflexive narrative and meaning-making.

Re-reading my draft through the lens of memoirist was a vital part of the writing process. The author is the first reader of the narrative. 'Such reading must naturally be regarded as an integral part of the creation process' (Nahotko, 2015, p. 90). The reading of my own text was a vital part of the creative process in two ways: firstly, it was instrumental in paving the way for redrafting and crafting a recounting of the situation into a more reflexive memoir. Secondly, not only the writing of the text, but also re-reading it facilitated the processing of my trauma as well as fostering an understanding of the way I had been traumatised by the experiences. The initial draft of Mark's illness had narrated the internal and external stories. The redrafting drew on the interplay between the two in order to add the reflective, meaning-making story.

Research also played an important role in the redrafting process. Brien argues that a variety of research strategies are quintessential components of the whole creative process: 'reading, imaginative, speculative and reflective thinking, experimental and exploratory writing; rewriting and editing; and public circulation' (Brien, 2006, p. 57). Having written the first draft, I began to research theories of memoir and narrative psychology as well as published memoirs. Following theoretical engagement with memoir through critics such as Birkerts and Couser, I reworked my approach to the first part of my creative work and changed its structure by adding passages of reflection to the text. As such, an intimate interplay took place between the writing of my memoir and my exegesis, which is the theoretical part of the creative writing PhD, whereby the two informed each other.

Further, I undertook deliberate changes in structure as a result of having analysed six young widow memoirs as part of my doctorate and then applying the lens of reader to my own

work. After reading so-called '9/11' widow memoirs, I recognised the importance of occasionally shifting the focus from trauma onto more positive scenes. Having read and thought about providing a change of pace to the reader, I went back and reworked my earlier approach, which was to have flashbacks about the early life of my husband and myself, portraying happy times, as stand-alone chapters. Instead, I inserted shorter flashbacks throughout my chapters in order to provide a change of pace and perspective to the reader from the hospital scenes. Also, I decided to open my memoir with a poignant flashback of my first encounter with my future husband on a train in Egypt, in order to begin with a positive rather than traumatic scene. These decisions were based on aesthetics, pace, and the narrative arc in accord with the conventions of the genre of memoir.

**The Role of Narrative Devices and Strategies**

In this section I investigate some of the narrative devices and strategies I used in the practice of writing my grief memoir, in particular the role of dialogue and scene-setting. Unlike the utilisation of dialogue in fiction, which has been widely researched in the fields of literary analysis and creative writing (Fludernik, 2009; Rimmon-Kenan, 2005), the use of dialogue in memoir is under-researched. In fiction the research focus has been largely on categorisation of dialogue types, and the role of dialogue in furthering the plot and character development. In this paper, I focus upon issues related to dialogue that arise specifically in memoir, such as ethical considerations of truth. Nevertheless, the strategies and effects of dialogue in memoir often overlap with those of fiction, such as the illustration of character, as shall be seen.

Much has been written about the key role metaphor plays in the representation of trauma and grief and its ability to give expression to inexpressible experience (Bolton, 2010; Neimeyer, 2001b). Since the role of metaphor in expressing trauma has been so well documented, I will focus on two more scantily-documented narrative strategies in non-fiction that have contributed to the representation of and adaptation to grief: dialogue and scene-setting. The investigation of these narrative strategies has the potential to offer new knowledge in regards to the practice of writing a grief memoir.

In writing my memoir, I paid special attention to dialogue and detailed, vivid, and sensory narration and scene-setting, which allowed me to give voice to my experiences, that is the event story, the situation. According to Myers, scenes are the building blocks of narrative,

including memoir. She explains that scene-setting involves using a variety of elements: place, characters, dialogue, the situation, the action, and the time frame. Myers contends that memoir writers too often fail to use enough dialogue (2010, pp. 88-90). I concur with Myers regarding the importance of dialogue in autobiographical writing. It can be employed in a variety of ways. Firstly, it can be used to bring to life characters in the narrative. Characters reveal themselves through dialogue and action (Myers, 2010, p. 89). I used dialogue in particular in order to introduce Mark as a whole person to the reader, not just the sufferer of an extreme illness:

> 'Have you travelled much?' I make conversation. 'Well, I went to India for a month before Israel, but this is my first trip overseas,' he replies. My eyes widen in surprise. 'Really, you've never been overseas before, never left Australia until now?' 'Yep, that's about right.' 'And how long are you planning to travel this time?' 'About a year. After Egypt I'm off to Europe, I've got relatives in Holland…. I look forward to meeting them actually.' He puts his bread away into a crumpled paper bag. (2018, p.6)

This passage is designed to reveal Mark through his own words as a young man excited to explore the world. It also allowed me to show him to be characteristically Australian in his laid-back answers and language.

In fiction, direct speech can also represent a character's thoughts and consciousness (Fludernik, 2009). As a memoirist cannot convey the thoughts of characters other than themselves, direct speech becomes a crucial technique in conveying character voice, literally and metaphorically, attitudes, actions and thinking.

The dialogue and flashback scenes with Mark served another function. In reminding me of the healthy, happy Mark, it allowed me to reconnect with our love instead of getting mentally stuck with images of his illness. Bereavement theory refers to this as 'continuing bonds' (Neimeyer 2011, p. 375), which form part of the reflective and meaning-making story. Narrating happy times of our entire relationship together, depicted vividly and through sensory language, provided the space to reflect on events and view them from another perspective.

Similarly for readers, the flashbacks provide narrative and emotional space, a change of pace from the intense story of a fatal illness. Further, portraying our life together allows the reader to get to know my husband more fully as a person. Impressions of Mark were further deepened by dialogue, as he was unable to speak during his illness. Without these flashbacks,

Mark would be voiceless, his humanity diminished, in my memoir. I switched tenses between flashbacks, which I narrated in present tense, and the story, told in past tense. The use of present tense amplified the sense of a continuing connection to Mark as healthy, for me and the reader.

Secondly, dialogue was a useful tool to impart medical and legal information in a reader-friendly form. Specialist information can be quite hard for readers to digest. Dialogue, on the other hand, is generally easy to read and understand, and conveys at the same time psychological hints about the person represented as speaking. For example, I used dialogue to convey conversations with specialists and doctors in order to inform the readers about Mark's illness:

> He would need a so-called shunt. I had never heard of it. 'A shunt is a device that is surgically inserted into the brain and then tubing goes all the way down along the neck to the abdominal cavity to release the brain fluid there and to divert it into the abdomen,' Dr Mayer explained to me. 'And the shunt just stays there?' 'Yes, it does.' (2018, p.18)

The doctor's complex medical language, alienating the reader and the I-character at the same time, is rendered accessible through dialogue.

Thirdly, dialogue and scene-setting were vital, in terms of narrative device and structure, to portraying the court-case. I deliberated at length on how best to convey such a complex event, both legally and emotionally. I did not want the narrative to be too dry, a journalistic recounting. Further, I did not wish to give it too much space within the overall memoir, thus overshadowing the young widow story of recovery, which was my overarching intention of expanding reader understanding of grief and adaptation to grief. Helen Garner's description of transforming a barrister's submission at a murder trial into publishable narrative is salutary in this regard: 'I still had to make it sound like talking. Hardest work I've ever done. But it gave me a terrific sense of being in command' (Interview with Garner, McDonald, 2007, p. 163). I, too, found portraying a court-case challenging, both artistically and emotionally. With deliberate intent, I conveyed the court-case largely through dialogue and concrete evocation of setting. I purposely avoided 'telling' in relation to the court-case, which would be instructing the reader how to perceive the trial. Instead, I engaged dialogue and scene-setting to 'show' the events, giving readers the space to insert themselves interpretively into the text. Here is an excerpt in which the defence barrister questions the GP:

> 'When you were taking the history, what were you thinking?'

> 'I suppose ... well… he looked … I thought ... my index of suspicion was not as high because of the fact that he looked so well. He was well when he came to see me' ...
> I glanced at [my friend] Ina, barely moving my head, and saw the fire in her eyes.
> Dr Harris was still speaking. 'You're always looking for anything urgent, you see, any red flag signs that notify you that something is serious. I felt reassured by the fact that he looked so well. So yes, I was concerned but he looked well. It made me less worried about an urgent cause.' (2018, pp. 201-202)

Showing the court case allowed me to convey my feelings without, knowingly or unknowingly, indoctrinating the reader. Scenes allow the author to:

> 'show' the action as if on stage. These moments of 'being there', where the reader is brought into the story world, are created through the use of sensual details, dialogue, and description … As we experience the world of the scene, our senses are engaged. (Myers, 2010, p. 88)

As Garner explains, dialogue, and the portrayal of material objects and events are meant to do the 'heavy lifting', so I 'won't have to interpret or pontificate. I want to haul the readers right into the text. Push them right up against the people and the situation – make them feel and smell things so they will have to react' (Interview with Garner by McDonald, 2007, p. 163). Dialogue and detailed evocation of scene are engaged for just such 'heavy lifting' in my memoir. They show a scene to a reader and prompt them to react to it emotionally.

In addition, I utilised dialogue to narrate conversations with friends and family to convey medical and legal issues. Of course I could not cite conversations that occurred years earlier word-for-word, and initially this evoked ethical concerns for me, as I have been whole-heartedly committed to fulfilling the autobiographical pact (Lejeune, 1989) with the reader from the outset, the implied contract in autobiographical writing that assures the reader that the memoirist narrates events truthfully to the best of their ability. Writing about a deceased loved one 'poses a range of ethical questions and considerations' (Den Elzen, 2019, p.161). Dialogue was one of them for me. On the one hand, truth-telling was paramount. On the other hand, I knew that dialogue plays a vital role in relaying information in a digestible manner, in indicating character, and in rendering a text accessible to the reader. It is a valuable and crucial narrative device, and highly conducive to 'showing'. Lee Gutkind argues that the literary device of dialogue is as

indispensable in memoir as it is in fiction in order to narrate 'dramatic and cinematic scenes' (2012, pp.122-123).

As part of my doctorate, I had many discussions with my fellow PhD students on the issue of truth versus fiction and literary representation. I attended conferences both locally and internationally on life writing, such as *The International Auto/Biography Association* (IABA), where inevitably this much discussed and contested issue arose. Over time and as a result of deep engagement with the issue of truth and memory in autobiographical writing, I came to realise that the key to faithful dialogue in memoir was to present words that accurately reflected the personality, speech-patterns, and past actions of people I knew in place of by now hazy or forgotten specific utterances. These are truths that I remember acutely. Garner, who states that she loves dialogue, elaborates on the issue of writing it well: 'The art is in choice, but also a kind of inspired and totally legitimate mimicry. And there are times when you have to paraphrase, or the reader will die of boredom' (Interview with Garner by McDonald, 2007 p. 163). In terms of ethics, I have come to understand that it is not unethical that I cannot, with the exception of the court case, relay dialogue word for word so long as I adhere to the larger truth of the character and the situation.

At the same time, having highlighted the crucial role of dialogue and scene-setting, I became conscious of avoiding overuse of showing through my research and became aware that variation in narrative rhythm is important for the reader's engagement with the text. A lack of change in rhythm can alienate the reader. My research of young widow memoirs in particular prompted consideration about changes of pace in a text. As a reader, I found that the slow story progression in Marian Fontana's memoir *A Widow's Walk* (2005) owed much to its unchanging narrative tone. Fontana narrates her experience of being widowed as a result of 9/11 with an almost exclusive reliance on showing. Setting out dialogue and scenes in detail takes up a lot of textual space. The reader's attention narrows to a moment-by-moment focus, a valuable strategy for conveying important events but one ill-suited to portraying longer stretches of time. The fact that Fontana (2005) was well written on a sentence-level yet protracted on a larger structural scale highlighted to me the importance of the alternation of story pace. As a result of my reading as research I paid close attention to narrative construction and pace, ensuring that showing was interspersed with some telling.

**Memoir and Healing**

Gillie Bolton, author of eight books on the healing and personal development potential of creative writing, highlights that creative writers often use the initial stages of writing to help with self-understanding: 'we write before knowing what to say and how to say it, and in order to find out, if possible', and later such exploratory writings are redrafted and edited to create publishable material (2010, p. 111). Brien concurs with Bolton on the need for exploratory writing in the creative process (2006, p. 57). In agreement with Bolton and Brien, my initial representation of the illness story can be seen as exploratory writing that I later redrafted and shaped to literary standard. Without this exploratory writing I could not have produced that standard. I could not have given voice to the experience at all. It was an integral part of my writing process. Far from precluding me from writing a memoir, it enabled it.

A memoir may or may not be perceived by the author as healing. I contend that the process of writing and crafting *can* bring about a process of transformation, whereby the relationship of the writer to the traumatic life experience is changed. I agree with Bolton that authors depicting traumatic experiences may begin the writing process with exploratory writing for self-understanding, and subsequently craft this material into a creative text.

In terms of my personal practice, memoir writing has been instrumental in facilitating the transformation of my trauma to a level of inner peace that I did not consider possible. I am not suggesting that memoir writing offers an easy solution to the adaption to grief, far from it. Representing my lived experience of trauma has been the most taxing aspect of my writing journey.

One of the most emotionally challenging scenes in the writing of the memoir was describing Mark's extreme physical suffering, which the hospital failed to treat with proper pain management:

> I walked down the hospital corridor towards the High Dependency Unit. Lacklustre dark brown carpet squares doused in cold, bright neon lights. Before I reached the entrance to the HDU I heard a heart wrenching moaning. A sound so excruciatingly painful that I had to stop, to hold onto the wall to steady myself. I intuitively knew that this was Mark. As I entered the HDU I saw his body distorted with pain, his limbs contracted and shaking.

> Hearing his moaning and seeing his legs convulsing in pain propelled me to the limits of my endurance. My shock was magnified by the fact that I had not heard Mark's voice in months. The edges of my reality vanished. There was nothing to hold onto. I found myself standing on the threshold of an abyss, my toes edging forwards, curling around the cold rock (2018, p.63).

It took me several attempts over a period of months to write this scene. Initially, the experience of re-living the horror was so intense that I had to stop writing. Yet, as difficult and challenging as the writing of this particular scene was, it did have the effect of externalising my memories for me. Michael White and David Epston, who developed the concept of externalising in the context of narrative therapy, define it as the narrative process whereby 'the problem becomes a separate entity and thus external to the person' (1990, p. 38). I argue that the process of externalising is even more discernible in written narrative, which exists as an entity in its own right that can be read and redrafted. This reinforces the act of distancing from the grief experience, which can now be viewed from the outside. Consequently, a shift in perspective occurs from internalising the loss to perceiving it as external. When it came to crafting the situation into story, I had much more emotional distance compared to the initial drafting process and could shape details in the style of creative non-fiction, such as the carpet squares. By the time I had written and redrafted the entire memoir and worn the hat of 'editor' in the reading of my text, I had so much emotional distance that my recollection of the scene no longer prompted re-living. This left space for the perspective of the editor focused on the text to come to the forefront. The experience of final redrafting and editing my memoir allowed me to largely enjoy the creative process for the first time. I was engrossed in the creative act of shaping not only passages and metaphors, but even single words.

Writing the memoir was hard work: emotionally demanding and confrontational. Whilst crafting the story out of the situation was difficult, the emotional work required and navigating re-living was by far the most challenging aspect of writing. Bolton (2010) too asserts that writing of traumatic experiences is 'really hard work' (p. 80), and elaborates: 'The first hard (and brave) thing I did was to allow my hand freely to write images which were usually firmly and safely held within my body. I had to trust my writing hand' (p. 130). For me, trust in the writing process and its ultimate transformative power provided me with the courage to narrate traumatic scenes. A crucial factor in addressing the emotionally demanding nature of memoir writing was

time: I deliberately spaced out the re-drafting sessions in order to take care of myself. This also allowed me to contemplate scenes and their wider context, the situation, and the story.

In view of the many different processes involved in the production of a memoir, it was only when I got to the final reshaping and crafting that I felt artistic joy. This was an important moment, to have worked so hard over a period of years, to reach a point of finally being able to enjoy the craft for its own sake. This, to me, also became a marker for the vast emotional distance I had traversed in the process of my autobiographical writing. For the first time, the craft in its own right took front stage, unencumbered by the emotional landscape. I experienced a sense of freedom.

When I translated my most traumatic experiences into language, shaping them into full sentences and paragraphs, I was re-living the events. However, when I re-read the passages later on, I was no longer re-living the past, but engaging with it from the perspective of the editor. This change in perspective evoked a shift in my relationship with the experience of loss. The integration was incremental, not a giant leap, taking place over many years and throughout the different stages of writing and editing, a notion echoed by Joseph in her observation of her PhD student who wrote a personal trauma narrative. Joseph entitled her chapter 'Life writing and incremental healing: word by word, year by year' (2019).

In terms of narrative style, as an author I deliberately chose memoir from the beginning because I was drawn to its reflective characteristic, to the shaping of a story through an inner journey. I also took the implied autobiographical pact with the reader seriously: that is, I ensured my portrayal of events was as accurate as possible. As I drew on several folders of medical notes from the hospital, my own detailed journals written during my husband's illness, and over 450 pages of court transcripts, ethically, I feel confident, despite the fallible nature of memory, that I have accurately portrayed the facts of the events; accurate description of facts relating to medical and legal institutions matters to me. Most important, though, is the emotional truth of my inner journey.

## Conclusion

This article has employed the lens of practitioner-as-researcher to investigate my practice of writing a grief memoir in the context of a creative writing doctorate. The investigation of creative processes such as the first draft, crafting, narrative devices and research was intended to

identify strategies for memoirists narrating grief that may be replicable, thus adding knowledge to the practice of writing a [grief] memoir. I have focused particularly on the powerful narrative device of dialogue that I deliberately employed to navigate narrating the artistically and emotionally challenging scenes of medical and legal settings, as well as utilising it as a technique to characterise Mark as a full person beyond his illness. It literally gave Mark, who was fully paralysed throughout his illness and thus unable to speak, a voice. I have theorised the importance of a first draft in the writing of a grief memoir and highlighted that painful, intimate material needs to be allowed to flow onto the page without any pre-censoring. I concur with Brien (2006) that the production of a memoir encompasses a whole range of processes, including reading, research, experimental writing, and contemplation. However, researching memoir theory and reading other young widow memoirs, which played a crucial role in the later shaping of my text, would not have served me prior to the writing of the first draft. The only research I undertook for the first draft of the illness narrative was my own journals and medical notes I obtained.

Further, I have linked the bereavement theory concepts of the internal, external, and reflexive storylines with memoir theory. The central role afforded to meaning-making and the reflexive story by constructivist bereavement theory converges with the genre of memoir which is characterised by the reflexive inner journey of the author. Through personal practice and theorising of that practice I have suggested that memoir is a genre that is well-suited to narrating grief. Finally, while the grief memoir has been under-theorised to date, this is even more true for the practitioner-as-researcher lens. More practice-led research by other grief memoirists is needed in order to add knowledge to this sub-genre.

## References

Adams, T., Holman Jones, S., & Ellis, C. (2014). *Understanding qualitative research: Autoethnography.* Oxford University Press.

Birkerts, S. (2008). *The art of time in memoir: Then, again*. Graywolf.

Bolton, G. (2010). *Explorative and expressive writing for personal and professional development* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of East Anglia School of Medicine]. https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/19436/1/Gillie.pdf.

Brennan, B. (2012). Frameworks of grief: Narrative as an act of healing in contemporary memoir. *TEXT, 16*(1). http://www.textjournal.com.au/april12/brennan.htm

Bruner, J. (1994). The remembered self. In U. Neisser and R. Fivush (Eds.), *The remembering self. Construction and accuracy in the self-narrative* (pp. 41-54). Cambridge University Press.

Couser, G.T. (2012). *Memoir: An introduction*. Oxford University Press.

Den Elzen, K. (2018). *My decision: A memoir and the Young Widow Memoir: Grief and the rebuilding of fractured identity*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Curtin University]. http://hdl.handle.net/20.500.11937/70488.

Den Elzen, K. (2019) Investigating ethics in the Young Widow Memoir. In B. Avieson, F. Giles & S. Jospeh (Eds.). *Still here. Memoirs of trauma, illness, and loss.* New York: Routledge.

Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). Autoethnography: an overview. *Historical social research/Historische sozialforschung*, 273-290.

Fludernik, M. (2009). *An Introduction to narratology*. Routledge.

Fontana, M. (2005). *A widow's walk: A memoir of 9/11*. Simon & Schuster.

Fowler, K. (2007). 'So new, So new': Art and heart in women's grief memoirs. *Women's Studies*, 36 (7), 525-549.

Gornick, V. (2001). *The situation and the story: The art of personal narrative*. Farrar, Straus, and Giroux.

Gutkind, L. (2012). *You can't make this stuff up: The complete guide to writing creative nonfiction—from memoir to literary journalism and everything in between*. Da Capo Lifelong Books.

Hampl, P. (1999). *I could tell you stories: Sojourns in the land of memory*. WW Norton.

Joseph, S. (2013). The lonely girl: Investigating the scholarly nexus of trauma life-writing and process in tertiary institutions. *TEXT, 17*(1). http://www.textjournal.com.au/april13/joseph.htm

Joseph, S. (2019). Life writing and incremental healing: Word by word, year by year. In B. Avieson, F. Giles & S. Jospeh (Eds.), *Still here. Memoirs of trauma, illness, and loss.* Routledge.

Keighley, E. & Pickering, M. (2012). *The mnemonic imagination: Remembering as creative practice*. Palgrave Macmillan.

Lejeune, P. (1989). *On autobiography*. University of Minnesota Press.

McDonald, W. (2007). Examining our own lives. In S. Eisenhuth & W. McDonald (Eds.), *The writer's reader, understanding journalism and non-fiction* (pp. 148-172). Cambridge University Press.

Murdock, M. (2010). *Memoir as contemporary myth*. [Doctoral Dissertation, Pacifica Graduate Institute]. https://pqdtopen.proquest.com/doc/893006389.html?FMT=ABS

Myers, L. (2010). *The power of memoir: How to write your healing story*. John Wiley & Sons.

Nahotko, M. (2015). Transactional reading theory in information organization. *Zagadnienia Informacji Naukowej, 53*(2) 106.

Neimeyer, R.A. (2001a). *Meaning reconstruction and the experience of loss*. American Psychological Association.

Neimeyer, R.A. (2001b). Reauthoring life narratives: Grief therapy as meaning reconstruction. *Israel Journal of Psychiatry and Related Sciences, 38(3-4)*, 171-183.

Neimeyer, R.A. (2011). Reconstructing the self in the wake of loss: A dialogical contribution. In H.J.M. Hermans and T. Gieser (Eds.), *Handbook of dialogical self theory.* (pp. 374-389). Cambridge University Press.

Neimeyer, R.A. (2019). *Masterclass.* Cruse Bereavement Care. Cardiff, UK.

Rak, J. (2013). *Boom! Manufacturing memoir for the popular market*. Wilfrid Laurier University Press.

Rimmon-Kenan, S. (2005). *Narrative fiction: Contemporary poetics* (2nd ed). Routledge.

Smith, H., & Dean, R. (Eds.). (2009). *Practice-led research, research-led practice in the creative arts*. Edinburgh University Press.

***Katrin Den Elzen*** *holds a Doctorate and a Master's in Creative Writing. Her research focuses on the grief memoir, narrative psychology, and bereavement theory. As a component of her PhD Katrin has written a memoir about her experiences as a young widow. She has presented papers at various international Life Writing, autobiography, and narrative psychology conferences. She has published a book chapter in the edited book* Still There: Memoirs of Trauma, Illness and Loss *and has been published in the* British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, TEXT, The European Journal of Life Writing, Life Writing *and* The Journal of Constructivist Psychology. *She works as a sessional academic, lectures in writing as therapy for counselling and as a grief counsellor. Katrin's current research focuses on undertaking a participatory study that evaluates writing for wellbeing in the face of grief, in relation to bereavement as well as grief evoked by other non-death losses.*

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# Researching, Writing, and Publishing Trauma Stories: Learning from Practice

**Kim Etherington, PhD**

**Professor Emerita, University of Bristol, UK**

## Abstract

This paper is a reflexive narrative account of re-visiting a study in which 10 participants (including myself) authored stories of lived experience of childhood trauma, and a follow-up study of the impact on us of writing and publishing those stories. As a social constructionist I re-examine that work through the lenses of my current theoretical knowledge and experience, accumulated over the intervening years, against a societal backdrop that has shaped my understandings. The paper covers the ethical issues raised by this work and the contribution neuroscience has made to my understanding of writing and thinking about trauma, the body and transformation. My intention for this paper is to inform and educate those who encourage and facilitate people to write personal stories, and researchers in the field of writing for wellbeing who research those practices, whether that of other practitioners or their own.

***Keywords:*** Writing, trauma, the body, narrative inquiry, ethics, neuroscience

## Author Note

I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: kim@etherington.com.

## Introduction

This paper reflects upon a previous study of how childhood trauma was experienced in the body, and how individuals transformed the impact of those experiences. That study invited people to write and contribute storied accounts of their process of transformation for publication in a book: '*Trauma, the body and transformation'* (Etherington, 2003). A follow up study of co-authors' experiences of writing those stories was reported in a short article published in Lapidus Quarterly (Etherington, 2005c). Since undertaking that work I have continued to train and practise as a trauma therapist using Eye Movement Desensitisation and Reprocessing (EMDR) (Shapiro & Forrest, 2016), which has involved increasing my knowledge about how the brain functions neuroscientifically, the impact of trauma on this functioning, and on our ability to use words to relate trauma stories. In this paper my intention is to reflect on that earlier work in the light of my current understandings. Some of the issues covered here concern the ethical issues raised when we write and publish personal accounts, how trauma affects our ability to narrate lived experiences, and what we need to know when assisting others who want to write their own trauma stories.

As a psychotherapist and reflexive researcher, my interest in this topic stemmed primarily from a situated understanding of the complex relationship between my own childhood trauma and the illnesses and medical interventions I experienced during my lifetime, and the recognition of similar stories in the lives of some of my past and current counselling clients. By placing my own narrative alongside others, I hoped to continue my process of self- and professional development, and to become part of a community of voices that was rarely heard.

## Methodology

Writing our stories for research purposes and placing them within a social context has been described as autoethnography - a form of Narrative Inquiry that describes and analyses (graphy) a person's lived experience (auto) in order to understand how our culture and contexts shape those experiences (ethno) (Adams, 2017; Bochner and Ellis, 2016 ; Rambo, Presson, Gaines, and Barnes, 2019). This is considered a methodology that can be transformative for writer and reader/audience and lead to social change:

> the collective story overcomes some of the isolation and alienation of contemporary life. It provides a sociological community, the linking of separate individuals into a shared consciousness. Once linked, the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective is present, and, therewith, the possibility of social transformation. (Richardson, 1997, p. 33)

As a narrative inquirer influenced by postmodern, social constructionist and post-structuralist philosophies, I came to the study with a belief that individual stories of lived experience are socially and culturally contextualised and that my own stories alongside those of my participants might offer a new cultural narrative as an alternative to the dominant psychiatric discourses of 'somatisation' seen in DSM-5 (American Psychiatric Association, 2013). I wanted to inform therapists, medical practitioners, and other helping professionals about the range of alternative resources people could be referred to, or refer themselves to, and to challenge the idea that any one way is best. I wanted the published project to be a resource for practitioners and people affected by trauma, and to raise awareness about a little understood phenomenon.

### *What Do We Mean by Trauma?*

Societies' understanding of what we mean by 'trauma' has developed over time, particularly during recent decades. Trauma has been explained and defined in terms of neurology, pathology, psychophysiology, psychology and 'events' that cause it, and there has been a rapid growth in available literature that has enhanced our understanding of the long-term and multiple effects of trauma. These are all stories of their time: knowledge is only ever partial and built upon the culturally defined stocks of knowledge available to us at any given time in history, as highlighted by the Power Threat Meaning Framework (Johnstone et al., 2018).

Alongside those stories is a growing recognition and acceptance of the idea that what constitutes trauma is subjectively determined (Miliora, 1998). My invitation to co-authors therefore was to write about self-defined experiences of childhood trauma, the body and transformation for the purposes described above.

### *The Co-Authors*

The ten authors (including myself) were from a variety of cultural backgrounds: two men (the only men who responded to my invitation) and eight women, aged between 27 and 62 at that

time. These were people who had undertaken a variety of transformative therapies and/or activities to address the effects of their childhood trauma and were now at a stage where they had healed enough to have a reflective grasp on their lives, whilst also being able to re-locate themselves inside their stories without becoming overwhelmed. These were ethical *and* literary issues (Etherington, 2005a) as described below.

For the sake of overall narrative breadth, I wanted stories that covered a range of childhood traumas, bodily manifestations and resources used for healing and transformation. However, one of the main inclusion criteria was that participants were people who enjoyed writing!

## Ethical Considerations

As an experienced therapist working with traumatised clients, I was very aware of the need to tread carefully throughout this project to ensure that participants would not experience further harm. This meant engaging in a collaborative process of selecting and preparing them to undertake our shared task: checking their motivation and readiness for volunteering; engaging in ongoing dialogues concerning their wellbeing and continued consent; and offering support when needed. I also wanted to keep in mind the ethical principles of beneficence (a commitment to promoting the participant's wellbeing), non-maleficence (doing no harm), and autonomy (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), 2018).

### *Informed Consent*

Fully informed consent is, of course, not possible when we embark on research that involves unfolding processes. We must therefore rely on ensuring at every stage that participants are still willing to participate and reminding them of their right to withdraw (Finlay 2019; Etherington, 2000).

My co-authors needed to know that writing trauma stories had the potential to cause distress as well as benefits to their health and wellbeing. Pennebaker (1988) showed that although participants in his study eventually experienced their writing as beneficial, initially they were more disturbed: '…immediately after writing, trauma subjects reported more physical symptoms and negative moods' (p. 245). Unlike my co-authors, Pennebaker's participants were not writing with the intention of publishing. It seemed reasonable therefore to expect that the

impact on my co-authors might have even more negative effects, although they came to the task prepared and with experience of being engaged in previous healing practices.

***Confidentiality, Autonomy and Power***

The second major ethical issue concerned confidentiality and privacy. From the first contact, I urged potential authors to think about the possible effects on themselves and those close to them of having their stories in the public gaze. When writing our own stories, we are likely to include information about our families, friends, or colleagues. Perhaps the simplest way to provide anonymity for those involved in our stories (including ourselves) is for the author to use a pseudonym (Etherington, 2004). However, as a feminist narrative researcher I am also aware of the danger of ignoring the fact that research participants often hold and exercise their own power, agency, and autonomy in the choices they make (Speedy, 2008). Indeed, their prime motivation for writing their stories for publication might be underpinned by a desire to *perform* their powerful, agentic, and autonomous selves and identities through the telling of their stories. If we assume their need for our protection - without considering other possibilities - we could, instead, disempower storytellers. By engaging participants in 'the ebb and flow of dialogue' concerning potential risks and rewards, researchers can ensure that ideas about the use of pseudonyms - or not - can be fully explored (Helgeland, 2005, p. 554). However, there might be costs and consequences for authors who do use a pseudonym. For instance, academics using a pseudonym may not be able to claim their work as their own, thus potentially affecting their career progression. For one of my co-authors there were different and unexpected responses to using a pseudonym (see below).

Ethical considerations also included the need to be aware of and sensitive to, gender and cultural differences, bearing in mind the need to consider the rights, beliefs, and cultural contexts of the participants, as well as their position within patriarchal or hierarchical power relations, in society and in our research relationship (Cloke, Cooke, Cursons, Milbourne, and Widdowfield, 2000; Denzin, 1997; Etherington, 2007).

***Relational Ethics of Care***

Another important aspect of relational research is 'an ethic of care' which requires that we pay close attention to the manner in which we relate with our participants at every stage of

the research (Gilligan, 1982; Ellis, 2007, 2017). I view 'dutiful ethics' as an acceptable baseline for moral and ethical conduct - while 'care' requires that we act in ways that are additional and also, in my view, part of our duty (Ellis, 2017).

An ethic of care requires trust and openness in our research relationships: mutual and sincere collaboration, where we view research relationships as consultancy and our participants as the experts on their own lives; reflexive engagement throughout; and sharing ownership of data with participants - the storyteller having full voice, but the researcher's voice also there, to show how they have shaped the stories through their responses (Finlay, 2019; Etherington 2003).

Reflexive relational ethics pays attention to the balance required between our own needs as researchers and our obligations toward, care for, and connection with those who participate in our research (Gilligan, 1982; Etherington, 2007).

## Trauma Stories and Transformation

The connection between trauma stories and transformation is two-fold: firstly, *reading* trauma stories written by others can be an important step for people affected by trauma, and secondly, the power of *writing* our own trauma stories as a means of processing the trauma, and gaining agency and mastery over the trauma has been shown to have great healing potential (Bolton, 2003; Dickie, 2019; Pennebaker, 1997; Wright & Chung, 2001; Wright and Thiara, 2019).

### *Reading Trauma Stories*

The first approach recognises the value of *reading* trauma stories written by others. In a postmodern world there has been a proliferation of the everyday personal struggles of people 'who are trying to make moral sense of their own suffering and who are witnesses to suffering that goes beyond their own' (Frank, 1995, p.19 ). Survivors often want (and need) to tell their stories to construct new 'maps' and gain understandings of their relationships with themselves, the world and their past experiences (Etherington, 2000).

I have frequently heard from people who have experienced childhood trauma that they first became aware of the disconnected, traumatised part of themselves while reading stories written by other survivors, or when impacted by media output of such stories:  theatre, TV drama

or documentaries, chat shows, phone-ins with which people sometimes resonate at a tacit level of knowing. In my own case:

> I came into the room late one evening and glimpsed the [TV] from the corner of my eye… I stood staring at the screen, unable to avert my gaze. I knew intuitively that this story had found a place inside me of which I was not yet fully aware. (Etherington, 2003, p.184)

### *Writing Trauma Stories*

The second approach recognises the value of writing our own trauma stories. Creating a coherent story out of our childhood trauma can be difficult because trauma often disrupts our sense of a continuous existence. A person may disconnect/dissociate from aspects of their traumatic experiences in order to survive (Braun, 1988). Those aspects might involve feelings, sensations and/or memories that threaten to overwhelm, leaving gaps in their sense of self and identity.

It is now accepted that writing stories of traumatic experience under safe conditions can produce physiological and emotional changes that contribute to gains in health and feelings of wellness (Harber & Pennebaker, 1992; Lepore and Smyth, 2002; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Pennebaker, 1988, 1993, 1997; Petrie, Fontanilla, Thomas, Booth, Pennebaker, 2004; Rosenthal, 2003). This knowledge has made an important contribution to the field of creative writing for wellbeing.

In her seminal work *Trauma and Recovery* Judith Herman (1992) suggests that trauma can be transformed, both in emotional meaning and in its effects on the emotional brain (amygdala) if we can: a) create a safe environment in the present; b) gain some control over life; c) tell our stories in the harbour of a safe relationship; d) mourn the losses created by the trauma.

## How Does Trauma Affect the Brain?

The impact of trauma depends upon several factors including severity, age at which it occurs, frequency, how long it continues, and the responses of those around the traumatised person (Etherington, 2003).

Trauma impacts the brain in two important ways: firstly, the normal processing of memories is blocked, and secondly, core beliefs in the implicit self are shattered, resulting in loss of a sense of trust and safety (Dickie, 2019).

The more recently evolved parts of the brain include the pre-frontal cortex which is not fully developed until the age of 25. These parts create language and symbols that enable us to communicate our experiences (Broca's area). They are deactivated when we are traumatised. Traumatised people therefore have been said to suffer 'speechless terror' (Spear, 2014, p.62 ) The subcortical areas of the brain, the limbic system and brain stem, which are primitive, not under conscious control, and possessing no language, react to the threat in a different way (van der Kolk, 2002).

The dissociated parts of the traumatised person's experience are stored in the amygdala, a section of the limbic system that interprets the emotional significance of experience, and remain there as unprocessed emotions and sensory fragments of experience (van der Kolk, 2002; van der Kolk & van der Hart, 1995; Dickie, 2019). These fragments cannot be voluntarily recalled when unprocessed but can be triggered involuntarily as a 'flashback' in circumstances that remind the person of the original trauma. The sensory material is then experienced as if happening 'now'. For healing to occur, the trauma memories must become 'associated' or 'connected' with the adult person's updated understandings, and thereby transformed into language (Dickie, 2019).

The timing and pacing of telling and re-telling our stories can be crucial. If we go too quickly, we might become re-traumatised (van der Kolk, 2002). The *construction* of the trauma story allows the memory to be reclaimed gradually, along with the associated emotions. This is essential if the sufferer is to gain mastery over the trauma. The emotions are brought to conscious awareness and expressed through language. However, this approach to healing takes time and is never final or complete. For this reason, it is commonly the case that people who write about trauma do so in different ways, writing about different fragments of experience, at different times, sometimes over the life span, telling and re-telling their stories. Nevertheless, helping to shift even incomplete or partial traumatic memories from 'implicit memory' to 'explicit/narrative memory' enables the survivor to give more of their attention to the present and instils hope for the future.

## Reflecting on the Original Study in the Light of New Theoretical Understandings

As a social constructionist I believe that meaning and knowledge are socially created. Events from the past take on different meaning over time, depending on the increasing stocks of knowledge and experience we have available to us as we mature and learn. As I reflect back on my earlier work and re-tell those stories from a new position, I do so from a wider perspective than ever before: knowledge is cumulative and changes over time, so being able to think anew about my previous study allows me to appreciate and integrate new knowledge.

### *Childhood Trauma*

The specific focus for the original study was to discover what could be learned from the stories of people who had been unable to tell their stories of their childhood trauma directly and verbally, and whose bodies had carried the traumatic events of their lives. Bruner (1986) says that we can only know what we have language available for knowing. The pre-frontal cortex does not begin to develop until around the age of seven, so when traumatic events have been experienced before this time, the child stores those experiences in sensory and emotional forms. When we have dissociated aspects of our experience because we are too young to have a language or frame of reference for our experiences, or because adults' threats or refusal to hear has silenced us, no verbal link can exist between dissociated parts and we are helpless to communicate our experience to others.

When a child becomes overwhelmed by trauma, they might have little or no awareness of the body as a physical state and emotions are not expressed directly. However, the body 'continues to respond to the emotion, even though the mind refuses to acknowledge it' (Dubovsky, 1997, p. 47). The body may speak a language of its own, perhaps through illness, pain, compulsion, or addiction (van der Kolk, 2014). This is sometimes referred to as 'somatisation'.

### *The Body Tells the Story*

Somatic symptoms can be viewed as 'pre-narrative' or unformulated memories of traumatic experiences. The link between bodily symptoms and psychological trauma was made by Freud (1962) when he described what he called 'hysterical conversion symptoms' as the outcome of people's attempts to defend themselves against traumatic childhood experiences,

although his understanding of the mechanisms were unclear. Freud viewed these symptoms as fragments of a partly or fully dissociated story of a patient's lived experience - 'what we might now call an incoherent narrative of that experience' (Waitzkin and Magana 1997, p. 814) and suggested that recovery depended upon gradually enabling the patient to make unconscious meanings conscious through the creation of a narrative. Herman (1992) suggests that the *process of building* a narrative becomes the cornerstone for transforming the symptoms, rather than actually *having* a coherent narrative per se.

### *The Process of Writing a Healing Narrative*

Writing trauma stories has been described as 'a mode of writing the unspeakable' (Smith and Watson, 2001, p. 206). Coherent stories written or told in the present usually include a remembered past and lead to an imagined future (Frank, 1995). This may not be possible to achieve when writing trauma stories. Writing stimulates and facilitates the motor *and* sensory regions of the brain and can help us recover and integrate additional fragments of trauma. Tentatively known aspects of our experiences can be accessed through the images and metaphors we use as we 'reach intuitively into some part of ourselves that is outside our notice - still unnamed but there' (Penn, 2001, p. 45). However, as noted by Pennebaker (1988), this might come at some cost.

Bearing in mind that my co-authors and I had begun to process our experiences of trauma before engaging in the task of writing our stories for the original study, everybody involved still found this a difficult process. As stated above, healing takes time and is never final or complete. Instead it is an ongoing process over time that requires us to create a post-trauma self, a transformed self that transcends the trauma (Spear, 2014).

## The Beginning

For the follow up study (and further papers) I gained additional permission from my co-authors to use their email communications with me during the time we had been engaged on the task of producing the stories for the study/book. They also sent me further reflections after the book had been published which have been included in later publications and in this paper (Etherington, 2005a, 2005b). In order to create a sufficiently coherent story here, I am focussing

on what I experienced myself at different stages of those earlier studies: the beginning, the middle and afterwards, supplemented by some of the material sent to me by co-authors.

***Relational Ethics***

Judith Herman (1992) suggests that to write or speak trauma stories we need to create a safe environment in the present. From my first contact with co-authors, usually by email or phone, my first task was to build a relationship to provide 'a safe harbour' in which those stories could be told. Many of my co-authors were people I had never met (and indeed, never would meet face to face) so the importance of 'relational ethics' was paramount. I needed to remain vigilant to ensure that no harm would come to them, or myself, from being involved in this project.

***Writing My Own Story***

Comments co-authors made at the beginning of the process showed how agreeing to do something and actually sitting down to do it was sometimes very different. One author, who later dropped out, wrote: 'At the moment it all seems a little incomprehensible, even to myself … a feeling of knowing this recovery has occurred … and yet still some confusion as to 'how' [that happened].'

I responded: 'Yes …I am hearing that many people are finding it very hard … I'm not sure if I haven't set an impossible task for all of us right now.'

To find out if that was true, I needed to write my own story of how I'd made sense and meaning of the links between the childhood trauma and the ill health I had suffered. Having written versions of my life experiences before, I was surprised at how difficult I found it to engage with this new task.

As I thought about writing my story, I began to experience dreams full of anxiety, so I decided to simply sit down and write. I began with a dialogue between myself and an imagined person about how difficult it was to sit down and write. As the dialogue continued, I became more and more curious about the identity of the person I was 'conversing' with. She (it was certainly a female) seemed to know me very well indeed, and I knew, but I did not know how I knew, that our relationship went back right to the beginning.

Gradually, I realised that this person was my 'guardian angel'- my childhood protector. Knowing this, my writing began to flow, and within days, a first draft of my story was written. I knew then that it was not an impossible task and that each of us had to find our safest way of doing it.

By writing in the third person I had allowed my guardian angel to continue her protective role - keeping me at a narrative distance by using her voice, whilst also allowing me to write from inside my story.

The academic community has traditionally discouraged the inclusion of our selves in our writing, so academic writers can feel uncomfortably exposed when trying to write from the first person. Even though I had for years been using 'I' in my writing for academic and other purposes, it felt a step too far when writing my trauma stories: however, writing from the 'I' of an 'other' part of myself allowed me to get inside my story while remaining at a safe distance. Celia Hunt (2000) describes this as 'free indirect discourse' or 'dual voice': creating a 'narrative persona' who takes a position as an observer rather than the one who experiences (p. 101), although I didn't know that at the time.

When authors get inside their writing they are better able to connect with feelings and sensory memories and '*show'* us their experiences, rather than writing from the sidelines, '*telling*' us about their lives. (A concept often attributed to the Russian playwright Anton Chekhov who is reputed to have said 'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass'.) This kind of writing is usually vivid, detailed, accessible, and engaging. However, it requires an ability to connect with our emotions and senses, which may not be possible for people who have learned to cope with trauma by disconnecting from their memories, feelings, and their bodies.

Conversely, when writing trauma stories, emotions and bodily senses might be triggered all too easily and threaten to overwhelm those who have kept disconnected parts of themselves at bay in order to survive. When this happens, the writing can be *too* heavily layered with emotion and leave the writer (or the reader) anxious or re-traumatised. We need to stay within our 'window of tolerance' (Gill, 2017), somewhere between both polarities. Celia Hunt (2000) suggests that finding that balance can be profoundly therapeutic, as writers gain insight into themselves and their lives, and develop a clearer sense of their identity.

**The Middle**

Co-authors told me of their experiences of writing their stories, showing in some cases how the writing was enabling the process of 'associating', or 'connecting up' previously disconnected aspects of their experiences with current, updated understandings. One person told me:

> It was more of a struggle than I anticipated. … You were right about the effect of going over all this stuff again. I keep having dreams and waking in the night going through what I have written. … Each day some new memory occurs, and I think: wow, I've learned something else.

Another person described how, through the writing, she was: 'drawing things together and making sense of the links between my personal life and career and between my past self and present self'. The process of writing can enable us to foster the necessary connections with the part of our brain that analyses experience and associates it with other knowledge through the act of constructing a story. This enables us to break free of the intrusive ruminations more typical of the kind of thinking traumatised people experience (Spear, 2014). Others demonstrated their wisdom in knowing how to pace themselves:

> I couldn't write it all at once, which is usually how I work. I could only write a few pages and then I needed time to cry, rest and recover from it. I was very surprised at just how re-traumatised I felt at stages.

Another told me of their need for support: 'if I were to do this again; I would definitely have planned some weeks of counselling to support myself.'

In the spirit of collaboration, I asked my co-authors whether they would like to read my story and give me feedback. I had hoped this suggestion for sharing might reduce any sense of isolation and alienation they might feel: something that is often found in people who have experienced trauma. At the same time, I asked permission to send *their* chapters around the group for others to read and provide feedback, and maybe share some ideas about content, making it clear that this was not a requirement but simply an invitation for them to consider. I

had hoped to raise their awareness that by bringing our stories together between the covers of a book, we could feel part of a shared community. Herman (1992) tells us:

> those who have survived learn that their sense of self, of worth, of humanity depends upon a feeling of connection to others... Trauma isolates; the group re-creates a sense of belonging. Trauma shames and stigmatises; the group bears witness and affirms. (p. 214)

At that time, I had not considered that what I was suggesting would also enable us to engage with the potential power of 'witness and testimony'. By suggesting we share our stories I was going beyond the concept of 'the writer as reader' and moving toward Arthur Frank's notion of 'reciprocity':

> In the reciprocity that is storytelling, the teller offers herself as guide to the other's self-formation. The other's receipt of that guidance not only recognizes but **values** the teller. The moral genius of storytelling is that each, teller and listener, enters the space of the story **for** the other…. Telling stories…attempts to change one's own life by affecting the lives of others. Thus all stories have an element of **testimony**… (Frank, 1995, p.18)

One co-author responded: 'I loved reading about your guardian angel - it was a very moving story. It has also given me lots of food for thought'. Another author told me that the fact that I struggled had encouraged him to 'get cracking on trying to edit mine now'. However, what helps one person might hinder another: another co-author wrote:

> I was struggling … you forwarded me a few stories that had been completed. Fortunately, I didn't read them. Retrospectively I know that had I done so at the time I would have 'thrown in the towel'. I would have told myself that I was not … good enough.

After this, the pace seemed to quicken, and I received drafts from most of the contributors. Some chose to keep the chapter to themselves until it was as close as possible to completion before allowing it to be read by anybody else. With others I entered a phase of active co-construction. Not only was this a way of thickening the story (Geertz, 1973), it also helped to meet the criteria for autoethnography by focusing my questions on the interaction between the

storyteller and their social and cultural contexts (ethno) and well as their internal experiences (auto) (Etherington, 2020).

Alongside all of this, I was engaging with some authors in crafting their stories, editing for flow, structure, and punctuation (Le Guin, 2015). I was aware that the art of crafting involved engaging the thinking part of the brain which would balance the emotional writing with the cognitive functions required for this part of the writing task. Celia Hunt (2000) sees crafting as creating:

> an object which is both contained, in the sense that it is an aesthetic rendering of self or self-experience, which can be deeply satisfying and increase self-esteem, and containing, in the sense that it is an external repository of feelings about the self or the past, which makes them safe (p.174).

There is an inevitable power inequality between participants and researchers, and it would be disingenuous to deny that, even though in working collaboratively I had done what I could in my attempt to reduce that inequality. Although my own story was included, my dual role as researcher/editor inevitably raised issues concerning power and inequality. For some people, there were unconscious dynamics at play – of which neither of us was aware at the time. One author told me later that he had felt angry with me, seeing my attempts to help him craft his story as 'criticism'. However, as a fellow therapist, he had been sufficiently aware to recognise this might have been due to 'transference and projection (mostly). You became my mother at one point: telling me to 'do it again' and questioning my skills. At times I felt de-skilled and unworthy'.

I was working very hard to keep people on board, balancing the needs of the 'product' with the 'process': the authors' need to freely express themselves and my need to meet the standards required for publication. I sought supervision from a colleague who was an experienced professional editor, and expressed the discomfort I was feeling sometimes about my sense of 'power *over*' rather than 'power *with*' my co-authors, but as well as being a co- author I was also editor and that role gave me different responsibilities. Maggie pointed out:

> I think your task as 'experienced editor' is to know how the reader will get the most out of what they are reading. This means that you must have the right to edit the chapters, however much this goes against your instincts as a therapist.

Maggie's feedback allowed me to step back, examine which role had informed my responses, and feel more secure in that knowledge. With hindsight I have learned that I should have explained to my co-authors what my role as editor would require of me and the potential complications of having a dual role. I had held a taken-for-granted assumption that it was enough for co-authors to know this was an edited book, and that I was both editor and co-author.

## The Value and Impact of Trauma Stories

As Arthur Frank (1995) suggests that stories are for others as much as they are for those who write them. The focus for the field of 'writing for wellbeing' is on the healing power of stories, for those who perform or write them, and for those who receive them. When viewed through a healing lens, we are not required to have a complete or coherent story. It is the process of creating the stories that enables healing and allows for author to recognise themselves as 'a wounded healer'. Although trauma can be transformed it never truly goes away. At best, it can become a memory of something that happened in the past that no longer causes the distress or reactions that unprocessed trauma can create. Nouwen (1972, cited in Spear, 2014, p.xiv) defines a 'wounded healer' as one 'who makes his [or her] own wounds available as a source of healing'. As stated earlier, these stories have the potential to open readers to the opportunity to work through their own trauma. We are part of a shared human community. We all have wounds and we can all be healers.

### *After Publication – Giving Testimony and Bearing Witness*

I have written elsewhere about authors' reactions to receiving the published book with many finding that very difficult initially (Etherington, 2005a, 2005b). Having written the testimonies, having shared them within the group in some cases, those stories were now being shared with the wider community, open to the public gaze. This was a huge step for many, some of whom who had borne their suffering alone or shared their stories in private with carefully chosen people up until this point. Many people who have experienced trauma protect themselves

by minimising or denying (at least part of) their experiences to survive. Seeing their trauma stories printed on the pages of a book means they can no longer be denied. One author told me:

> I couldn't open the book when it arrived … receiving the book was a shock. I stuffed it on a bookshelf not wanting to know it was there.

Another told me:

> People have asked to read my chapter and I have not wanted them to. … I don't want them to trivialise it in any way and I need them to respond empathically - I'm not sure that some people would be able to do that.

Many of these immediate reactions reflect the fears that traditionally silence many trauma survivors: fear of self-exposure, of others' minimisation or denial of their realities, of hurting others, of being criticised, rejected, or disbelieved. However, these feelings were mediated as time went by, particularly once we began to receive feedback from outside witnesses. One man who had initially dismissed his own chapter as 'drivel' told me:

> Then a friend who had read it rang me crying 'That book is so healing - thank you'. I asked myself what I was missing, so I read it again. Then I cried… I realised …that the first time I read it I had …all my defences right in place. Nothing was going to touch me - I made sure of that!!

A woman who initially felt 'trembly about the level of self-exposure' wrote to me later that:

> I've received feedback from others, including my youngest brother. I'm feeling more confident about it ... lots of people have given me positive feedback. …Writing the chapter hasn't made as much of a [negative] impact on my life as I had feared.

One person who used a pseudonym had a complicated reaction:

> The book looks fine but it's difficult to describe my feelings when I opened it. I knew I wasn't looking forward to it…. I think I'm disappointed because I didn't use my real name…especially when I saw everyone else had used their real names. It was like it didn't belong to me anymore.

I responded by suggesting that she might want to use her real name if there was a second printing of the book. This led to a different response:

> your offer to include my name for a second printing surprised me and helped me to be in touch with other feelings: fear about standing out, of being front of stage. Not sure I could take it on.

Several months later, this co-author attended the book launch alongside some of the other storytellers, introduced herself to the 'audience' using her real name and spoke about her process, including what it had meant to use a pseudonym. In the re-printed version of the book her real name is written beneath the title of her story. She then went on to say: 'I have to write the rest of my story - if only for my children.'

***The Power of Witness and Testimony***

As time went by, I began to receive emails from readers which provided us with a view of the power and impact of those stories. I sent all feedback to my co-authors who, in turn, shared with me their own responses, one co-author saying:

> WOW!! Thanks for that - it really helps to hear someone's reaction to the book. Still just carrying it around with me but not daring to look too much.

Another responded:

> Thank you for forwarding this touching tribute. Does make it feel as if it has hit home and justifies the risks I have taken! Somehow knowing that it can have this kind of impact does make it worthwhile.

It has been recognised that the safe and supportive presence of others as witnesses and dialogue partners is crucial for advancing the process of reinterpreting traumatic experiences (Frechette & Boase, 2016). Indeed, the opportunity to have our experiences validated by those who understand often makes an important contribution to the process of building resilience (Feldman & Kravetz, 2014) and creating healing in the post-trauma identity.

***What it has Meant to Write these Stories***

In response to me asking co-authors what it had meant to write and publish their stories there were a range of different responses: '… finishing unfinished business … putting things in the boxes where they belong, rather than oozing and squirming over all the rest of my life…'.

A woman who had arrived in the UK as a seven year-old on the Kindertransport, nine months before the outbreak of the second World War had not considered, before writing her story, how her experiences had impacted on her body. She told me:

> …being involved in the book made connections for me - breaking through the sense of isolation and alienation that was always lurking in the background.

A comment from another participant illustrates the delicate balance we tread when re-visiting trauma stories for the purposes of research:

> Yes, it brought up a lot of stuff which was disturbing - but also helpful. And you warned us all along that this might happen. We had the opportunity to withdraw at any time. I can only speak for myself. It was a learning experience.
>
> P.S. By the by - I have just been accepted to do the Women's Studies Course at university. I had always put off applying because of my fear of essays. My writing for the book has given me confidence.

**And Finally…**

As I end this paper and read back over it, I realise this has become yet another kind of trauma story. Once again, I have revisited my own and other peoples' stories to see what can be learned from them at this stage of my life, six months after my eightieth birthday in the extraordinary circumstances created by the COVID-19 pandemic.

I have spent much of my life trying to tell and re-tell my own stories, in several different ways: through my body, by writing poems and stories as a child and adult, using talking and body therapies, EMDR with parts work, and by writing and re-presenting other peoples' trauma stories for research. But this is the first time I have written a story about writing trauma stories that has encompassed stories of neuroscience, the brain, personal experiences, and theories

related to writing itself. I have been surprised by the degree of disturbance this has created in me, as my body, mind and emotions have connected with these topics and created difficulties in organising and crafting this text, paralleling, I believe, some of what I have been writing about. My hope is that readers will take from this paper what is useful for them in their own lives and contexts and use it, however they can. For those who enable others to write their own trauma stories, perhaps as members of Lapidus, my hope is that you will use it to build gentle, safe and supportive environments in which those stories can be written, bearing in mind the need for readiness, pacing, and understanding of the pitfalls, healing potential and posttraumatic growth this process can involve (Calhoun and Tedeschi**,** 2014).

**References**

Adams, T. E. (2017). Autoethnographic responsibilities. *International Review of Qualitative Research, 10*(1), 62-66. https://doi.org/10.1525/irqr.2017.10.1.62

American Psychiatric Association (2013). *Diagnostic and statistical manual of mental disorders* (5th ed.). American Psychiatric Publishing.

Bochner, A. P., & Ellis, C. (2016). *Evocative autoethnography: Writing lives and telling stories.* Routledge.

Bolton, G. (2003). Around the slices of herself. In K. Etherington, (Ed.), *Trauma, the body and transformation: A narrative inquiry* (pp. 121-137). Jessica Kingsley.

Bolton, G. (2010). *Explorative and expressive writing for personal and professional development*. [Doctoral Dissertation, University of East Anglia School of Medicine]. https://ueaeprints.uea.ac.uk/id/eprint/19436/1/Gillie.pdf.

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP). (2018). *Ethical framework for the counselling professions.* Retrieved from https://www.bacp.co.uk/media/3103/bacp-ethical-framework-for- the-counselling-professions-2018.pdf.

Braun, B. G. (1988). The BASK model of dissociation. *Dissociation: Progress in the Dissociative Disorders, 1*(1), 4–23.

Bruner, J.S. (1986). *Actual minds, possible worlds*. Harvard University Press.

Calhoun, L. G., & Tedeschi, R. G. (2014) (Eds.) *Handbook of posttraumatic growth: research and practice.* Psychology Press, Taylor and Francis.

Cloke, P., Cooke, P., Cursons, J., Milbourne, P., & Widdowfield, R. (2000). Ethics, reflexivity, and research: Encounters with homeless people. *Ethics Place and Environment*, *3*(2), 133–154.

Denzin, N. K. (1997). *Interpretive ethnography: Ethnographic practices for the 21st century*. Sage.

Dickie, J. F. (2019). The intersection of biblical lament and psychotherapy in the healing of trauma memories. *Old Testament Essays 32*(3), 885 – 907. https://doi. org/10.17159/2312-3621/2019/v32n3a7.

Dubovsky, S. L. (1997). *Mind-body deceptions: The psychosomatics of everyday life*. Norton.

Ellis, C. (2007). Telling secrets, revealing lives: relational ethics in research with intimate others. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 13, 3-29.

Ellis, C. (2017). Compassionate research: Interviewing and storytelling from a relational ethics of care. In I. Goodson (Ed.), *The Routledge international handbook on narrative and life history* (pp. 431-445). Routledge.

Etherington K. (2000). *Narrative approaches to working with adult male survivors of childhood sexual abuse: The clients', the counsellor's, and the researcher's story'*. Jessica Kingsley.

Etherington K (Ed.) (2003). *Trauma, the body, and transformation: A narrative inquiry.* Jessica Kingsley.

Etherington, K. (2004). *Becoming a reflexive researcher: Using our selves in research.* Jessica Kingsley.

Etherington, K. (2005a). Writing trauma stories for research. *Lapidus Quarterly*, *1*(2), 25-31.

Etherington, K. (2005b). Researching trauma, the body and transformation: A situated account of creating safety in unsafe places. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, *33* (3), 299-313.

Etherington, K. (2007). Etherington, K. (2007c) Ethical research in reflexive relationships. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *13*(7), 599-616.

Etherington, K. (2021) Becoming a narrative inquirer. In S. Bager-Charleson & A. McBeath (Eds.), *Enjoying research in counselling and psychotherapy: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods research*. Palgrave MacMillan.

Feldman, D. B., & Kravetz, L. D. (2014). *Supersurvivors: the surprising link between suffering and success*. HarperCollins/HarperWave.

Finlay, L. (2019). *Practical ethics in counselling and psychotherapy: A relational approach.* Sage Publications.

Frank, A. W. (1995). *The wounded storyteller: Body, illness, and ethics.* University of Chicago Press.

Frechette, C. G. & Boase, E. (2016). Defining 'trauma' as a useful lens for Biblical interpretation. In E. Boase, & C. G. Frechette, (Eds.), *Bible through the lens of trauma*. SBL Press. https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1h1htfd.4

Freud, S. (1962). *Three essays on the theory of sexuality* (J. Strachey, Trans.). Basic Books.

Geertz, C. (1973). *The interpretation of cultures*. Basic Books.

Gill, L. (2017). *Understanding and working with the window of tolerance.* Retrieved October 16, 2020, from https://www.attachment-and-trauma-treatment-centre-for-healing.com/blogs/understanding-and-working-with-the-window-of-tolerance.

Gilligan, C. (1982). *In a different voice*. Harvard University Press.

Harber, K. D., & Pennebaker, J. W. (1992). Overcoming traumatic memories. In S.Å. Christianson (Ed.), *The handbook of emotion and memory: Research and theory* (pp. 359–387). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.

Helgeland, I. M. (2005) 'Catch 22' of research ethics: Ethical dilemmas in follow-up studies of marginal groups. *Qualitative Inquiry*, 11, 549–569.

Herman, J. (1992). *Trauma and recovery*. Basic Books.

Hunt, C. (2000). *Therapeutic dimensions of autobiography in creative writing.* Jessica Kingsley Pubs.

Johnstone, L., & Boyle, M. with Cromby, J., Dillon, J., Harper, D., Kinderman, P., Longden, E., Pilgrim, D., & Read, J. (2018). *The power threat meaning framework: Towards the identification of patterns in emotional distress, unusual experiences and troubled or troubling behaviour, as an alternative to functional psychiatric diagnosis.* British Psychological Society.

Le Guin, U. K. (2015) *Steering the craft*: *A twenty-first-century guide to sailing the sea of story.* Mariner Books, Houghton Mifflin, Harcourt.

Lepore, S. J., & Smyth, J. M. (Eds.) (2002). *The writing cure: how expressive writing promotes health and emotional well-being.* American Psychological Association.

Miliora, M. T. (1998). Trauma, dissociation, and somatization: A self-psychological perspective. *Journal of the American Academy of Psychoanalysis, 26*(2), 273-293. https://doi.org/10.1521/jaap.1.1998.26.2.273

Penn, P. (2001). Chronic illness: trauma, language, and writing: Breaking the silence. *Family Process, 40*(1), 33-52.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1988). Confiding traumatic experiences and health. In S. Fisher & J. Reason (Eds.), *Handbook of life stress, cognition, and health*. Wiley.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1993). Putting stress into words: health, linguistic and therapeutic implications. *Behaviour Research and Therapy*, 31, 539-48.

Pennebaker, J. W. (1997). Writing about emotional experiences as a therapeutic process. *Psychological Science, 8*(3), 162- 166. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-9280.1997.tb00403.x

Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2011). *Expressive writing: Connections to physical and mental health.* In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *Oxford library of psychology. The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (p. 417–437). Oxford University Press.

Petrie, K., Fontanilla, I., & Pennebaker, J.W. (2004). Effect of written emotional expression on immune function in patients with human immunodeficiency virus infection: A randomized trial. *Psychosomatic Medicine, 66*(2), 272-275.

Rambo, C., Presson, B., Gaines, V., & Barnes, B. (2019). Autoethnography as a research method in the study of social problems. In J. Trevino & A. Marvasti (Eds.), *Research methods in social problems* (pp. 122-139). Routledge/Taylor and Francis Group.

Richardson, L. (1997). *Fields of play: Constructing an academic life*. Rutgers University Press.

Rosenthal, G. (2003). The healing effects of storytelling on the conditions of curative storytelling in the context of research and counselling. *Qualitative Inquiry, 9*(6), 895-915.

Shapiro, F., & Forrest, M.S. (2016). *EMDR: The breakthrough therapy for overcoming anxiety, stress, and trauma Paperback* (2nd edition). Basic Books.

Smith, S., & Watson, J. (2001). *Reading autobiography: A guide for interpreting life narratives*. University of Minnesota Press.

Spear, R.N. (2014). 'Let me tell you a story': On teaching trauma narratives, writing, and healing. *Pedagogy, 14* (1), 53–79.

Speedy, J. (2008). *Narrative inquiry and psychotherapy.* Palgrave Macmillan.

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2002*). In terror's grip*: *Healing the ravages of trauma*. The Dana Foundation. Retrieved from https://www.dana.org/article/in-terrors-grip/,

Van der Kolk, B. A., & van der Hart, O. (1995). The intrusive past: The flexibility of memory and the engraving of trauma. In C. Caruth (Ed.), *Trauma: explorations in memory* (pp. 158-182). John Hopkins University Press.

Van der Kolk, B. A. (2014). *The body keeps the score: Brain, mind, and body in the healing of trauma*. Viking.

Waitzkin, H., & Magaña, H. (1997). The black box in somatization: Unexplained physical symptoms, culture, and narratives of trauma. *Social Science & Medicine, 45*(6), 811-825.

Wright, J. K., & Chung, M. C. (2001). Mastery or mystery? Therapeutic writing: A review of the literature. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 29*(3), 277-291. https://doi.org/10.1080/03069880120073003

Wright, J. K., & Thiara, R. K. (2019). Breaking the silence and shame of sexual abuse: Creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP). *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 32*(1), 11-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/08893675.2019.1548925

***Kim Etherington*** *PhD is Professor Emerita at the University of Bristol, Fellow of BACP, BACP senior accredited counsellor and supervisor, and accredited EMDR practitioner in private practice. She integrates writing into her therapeutic practices and supports herself personally and professionally through writing. Kim is a Lapidus Director of Research and board member of* LIRIC.

*Kim's books and peer reviewed journal papers reflect her passion for linking practice with research, and her intention to write with an emancipatory purpose, using a style of writing that is accessible by academics, practitioners and clients, as well the public in general. Areas of interest: creative, reflexive, collaborative, arts-based and narrative methodologies underpinned by postmodern, social constructionist/post structuralist philosophies. Details at:* http://kim.etherington.com.

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# At the Intersection of Memory, History and Story: An Exploration of the Nostalgic Feelings Which Arose When Listening to Oral History Archives as an Inspiration for Novel-Writing

**Helen Louise Foster, PhD**

**University of Leicester, UK**

**Abstract**

When I decided to write a historical novel about women based in my native East Midlands and set in the early twentieth century, I turned to oral history archives for inspiration. The subsequent listening process triggered strong feelings of nostalgia. This paper considers how I made personal connections with the oral histories that I listened to about women working in the local machine-lace industry. It looks at how I underwent a form of 'imaginative reminiscence', bringing together my past and the imagined pasts of my ancestors living and working in the East Midlands to inspire new writing. It explores the nostalgic feelings that arose, particularly for family members and places from my childhood; how triggered sensory responses shaped authenticity and imagery in my fiction writing; and how this led me to fictionalise gaps in my own family's stories. The paper investigates aspects of my listening and writing processes and the transformation of spoken text into prose. It also sets out my ethical approach in balancing my roles as fiction writer and oral historian when working with other people's memories.

***Keywords:*** Nostalgia, fiction, creative writing, oral history, family history, place, reminiscence, memory

**Author Note**

Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: fosterhl@yahoo.co.uk**.**

**Personal Heritage**

I grew up in a village that once boasted its own lace factory, although by the time I was born in the late 1960s it had become an engineering works. The nearest city, Nottingham, was known as the home of machine-lace-making. In the nineteenth century, manufacturing spread out from the city and lace-making towns sprung up along the Erewash Valley, cutting across the three counties of Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, and Derbyshire. Although the industry had diminished considerably by the 1970s, it was still a vivid part of the physical and mental landscape of my childhood. My memories of that time are set against rich industrial architecture, brick factories and tall blackened chimneys; they are peopled by strong female characters who worked in local textile manufacture; they are brought to life by anecdotes of these industrial times passed down to me by my Nottingham-born paternal grandparents.

Today, this crucial part of the region's identity has all but gone. Pattern books and lace samples have been removed to archives; a few are housed in the odd glass case in a local museum. The lace machines have fallen silent. The factories emptied. The workforces dispersed.

These memories remained with me and decades later, I embarked on a practice-led PhD in Creative Writing with the intention of reimagining, through fiction, the physical and mental landscapes that I grew up with. I chose the machine-lace industry as the historical backdrop for my novel, *The Queen of the Midlands*, which explores the relationship between two female characters from different lace-making families in a fictional East Midlands lace town. It opens in 1911, with the protagonists as childhood enemies. We meet them again in 1918 as young women, still in their close-knit community, and see the feud between them heal as they form a bond in challenging circumstances. In the final part of the novel, set in the 1970s, the women, now close friends, reflect on their lives and the changes that have taken place.

Oral history, the recording of people's first-hand memories, makes a valuable contribution to the machine-lace industry's social and historical legacy. With this in mind, I drew on oral history archives of accounts of former lace workers to help me reimagine an East Midlands lace town and, in turn, create a fictional one. What I had not anticipated was the heightened sense of nostalgia that would arise from this process.

Van Tilburg, Sedikides and Wildschut define nostalgia as 'a sentimental longing, or wistful affection for the past' (2015, p. 1). Overwhelming feelings of nostalgia have traditional associations with medical illness and psychiatric disorder, but in more recent years, nostalgia has

come to be perceived by some researchers, such as Sedikides and Wildschut, as a positive emotion that 'increases self-esteem' (2016, p. 320). It has been linked to creativity for millennia; in the 3,000-year-old epic poem The Odyssey, for example, Homer relates a nostalgic yearning for homeland and family (2016, p. 319). As I listened to the oral testimonies, so reminiscent of my own ancestors' voices, I experienced my own sense of yearning for places from my childhood, the declining industrial landscapes and the rural fringes of my home village, a sadness at what and who was no longer here in the present. This motivated me to reimagine these missing elements and to bring them back into being through my writing.

**Using Oral History to Fire My Imagination**

Oral history is a complex practice. The term itself needs to be broken down into its constituent parts: the practice of oral history brings together a process—oral history interviewing—and a product—the resulting oral history interview or the audio recording. I have worked as an oral history archivist for many years and remain fascinated by this historical source: drawn to the vividness of its storytelling, the personal meanings that lie, sometimes hidden, within the interviewee's testimony. Oral history resists order and structure. As an interviewer, when you enter the interview situation, there is emptiness, until that space is filled with recollections. As narratives, these recollections can be random and unpredictable, 'messy, non-linear and multi-layered' (Andrews, 2009, p. 155). The multi-layered nature of oral testimonies makes them a highly subjective source. They are incredibly rich and valuable sources for a writer looking to connect with lived human experience.

I identified a small collection of interviews to work with, carried out in the 1980s with people who had a connection with the local machine-lace industry and recorded on to cassette tapes. They were housed at a local studies library and I arranged a number of visits to listen to them. The interviewees recorded on the tapes were near-contemporaries of my own paternal grandparents – who were born in 1902 and 1905; they both died in the 1990s. Many of the testimonies in the collection capture the same broad Nottingham accents that my grandparents had and are peppered with local cultural references and dialect that they used: the tea was 'mashed', never brewed and sweets were known as 'tuffies' (Scollins & Titford, 2000, pp. 91-95).

The local studies library offers typewritten transcripts alongside the audio recordings. However, it was important to my creative practice that I bypassed these and engaged directly with the spoken text. The transcript, defined by MacKay as 'a verbatim version of the spoken word' (2007, p. 49), provides the traditional route into interrogation of the oral history interview and often becomes the main source, particularly if original recordings are held in unstable or obsolete analogue formats. Portelli points out that '[s]cholars are willing to admit that the actual document is the recorded tape; but almost all go on to work on the transcripts, and it is only transcripts that are published' (1981, p. 97). However, a printed textual representation of an interview can be problematic. MacKay considers that '[m]uch is lost in transferring a unique voice and speaking style to the flatness of print on a page' (2007, p. 49); this flattening out can obliterate seams of vernacular that run through locally recorded oral histories in the form of accent and dialect.

In each oral history interview that I listened to, it was important for me to feel as close as possible to the original interview situation and the interviewee, to remove any existing interpretations of the interview before making my own interpretations of the speech act.

**Eavesdropping**

Norkunas considers listening to be 'critical to the oral history process' and 'a very active process that deeply impacts the content, performance, and emotional tone of the narration' (2011, p. 1). This was key to my listening process. I applied the term 'eavesdropping' to this process to indicate my distance from the original interview situation between interviewer and interviewee, with me as an outsider.

Over time, my sense of being an outsider diminished and I began to approach the act of listening as more of a private encounter between the interviewee and me. I only listened to the recordings when I was alone and felt privy to the interviewee's spoken memories. I was aware that these recordings were rarely accessed and that the interviewee was no longer alive. I was listening to their long-dead voices in the present moment.

In the early stages of my eavesdropping, I found myself focusing in on material that specifically referenced the historical context of my novel; the industrial landscape and social historical details of machine-lace and its impacts on lives. I began to find this approach too narrow and developed a process of open listening; rather than approaching a spoken text with

expectations, I allowed a space to develop between my expectations and the listening, ready to embrace any fragment or trigger that sparked potential for experimentation in writing, whatever its content. The more the historical context subsided, the more I felt a sense of connection with what, and who, I was listening to and began to experience nostalgic feelings.

**Transformation: Reaching Prose Through Poetry**

The requirement for me to pin spoken words to the page and transform them into prose fiction is a process worth exploring. I recognised the poetic nature of the spoken voice in oral histories (Tedlock, 1983, p. 8). I found the voices I listened to lending themselves very much to poetic transcription and have used this technique when transcribing extracts from oral history in this paper. The rhythm and immediacy of poetry provided an ideal form to work with in the initial stages of creative exploration of form. As Bolton says:

> Poetry is very like string. Its comparative thinness and quickness enables it to reach the parts that prose cannot, leaping straight to the heart of the matter, whether anguish or joy. Poetry is an exploration of our deepest and most intimate experiences, thoughts, feelings, ideas, and insights […]. Poetry is also lyrical: the absorption required, listening with the mind's ear is healing (1999, pp. 98-99).

From poetry, I moved through prose poetry and shaped my work into fiction. Fiction allowed me the opportunity to develop a narrative and my nostalgic journey had fuelled me with an emotional energy that I was able to weave into this. Hunt recognises the role of fictional techniques:

> [T]he requirement that we should 'show' rather than 'tell' means that we are forced to enter into our own feelings and emotions in a way which we may not be able to do simply by writing about the facts of our lives (1998, pp. 32-33).

**Authenticity**

Oral history offers a personal perspective on the past and as I reimagined this context, I sought out authenticity above historical accuracy. Hunt's commentary on writing about the past for personal development resonates with this aspect of my own writing. For Hunt:

> [t]he point of the exercise is not to find the truth of the past with a capital 'T'. After all, from research on memory we know that, whilst autobiographical memories contain a high degree of self-reference, they are never true in the sense of being literal representations of events (1998, p. 22).

For me, beyond historical accuracy, authenticity lies in the lived personal experience that the listener encounters or 'eavesdrops' when they listen to a recorded oral history. Eye-witness accounts, embodied in spoken histories, offer us a plurality of viewpoints. They emphasise the fact that we all experience history differently, remember it differently, retell it differently and that is what makes us all different and human. In striving for authenticity in my writing, my research seeks out the individual human experiences in the archives. Oral histories are often catalogued as part of larger national histories, found under the umbrella headings of World Wars, Industrial Unrest, Political Upheavals, but within these larger stories, the interviewee often anchors their personal stories in their family and their community. There is opportunity to listen to personal reactions to events at a local level rather than simply the facts of the events themselves.

This collection of oral history interviews offers a series of doorways, documenting the past as much as documenting the cultural moment in which they were produced (Pieters, 2005, p. 3). An interview recorded in the 1980s connects with my own teenage years; I remember the sense of unrest at the strikes and mass unemployment of the Thatcher years. Stories from the 1920s connect with anecdotes told by my grandparents of their teenage years: their courting days, cycling out on their tandem along car-free country lanes and taking the long-abandoned ferry across the River Trent; evenings out at cinemas that are now bingo halls and drinks at Nottingham's now defunct Yates' Wine Lodge. Using writing techniques to work with this sense of nostalgia enables 'access to feelings and emotions. […] we are forced to enter into our own feelings and emotions in a way which we may not be able to do simply by writing about the facts of our lives' (Hunt, 1998, pp. 32-33).

When I listened to an interview, I would imagine myself sitting in on it; as I heard an anecdote, I would walk into its setting and observe. This level of immersion led me to undertake a form of emotion-memory exercise, drawing on real-life emotions and memories to form authentic foundations for fiction. Within a performative context, John Hodgson suggests that 'we are concerned not with what actually takes place, but with what could happen […] a kind of

investigation into how a human being would react if the circumstances were real. What gives it truth is imaginative reality' (1972, p. 92).

**Imagery**

As I explored images created by the interviewees in their spoken testimonies, I found an emotional depth lying beneath the words they chose to describe their memories of the past. Take this example from an oral history of a lady born in Nottingham in the early 1900s:

> I can always remember this
> velvet frock she bought me
> and I'd be about seven
> brown dark brown velvet frock
> with
> motifs
> on the front
> and that went to the pawn shop
> never saw it again
> that really broke my heart then you know cause
> all my life I've
> thought of this frock
> you know
> it's funny how little things (A85a)

Words and phrases, or 'nuggets', from this extract leapt out at me. The 'velvet frock' lies at its heart. Unlike the 'shoes' and the 'vest', the 'velvet frock' is foregrounded by the interviewee and she embellishes it, remembering it being made from 'brown dark brown velvet' with 'motifs / on the front'. There is an emotional punch to it as she recalls how it 'broke my heart' when it was pawned and it is a memory that hasn't faded for her: 'all my life / I've thought of this frock'.

This attachment to the dress triggered my own memories of childhood clothing. I remembered a yellow dress with gold piping that my mother's friend had given me, a gift from a trip to Hong Kong. And a pair of pyjamas in a yellow-flowered pattern that my mother had bought me from a local factory outlet shop in the 1970s. This evoked my childhood passion for

the colour yellow. A long-forgotten passion. The dress was kept for best and rarely worn; a memory of it hanging in a tall, musty wardrobe. The pyjamas anchored me to home. They were taken on an overnight school trip and I remember the homesickness I felt as a child and the sensory memory of the scorched smell the pyjamas gave off when they were warmed in front of the gas fire on bath night. This process aligns with Bolton's assertion that:

> The image is unimportant in itself but is a vital element in the process. Its vitality lies in it being accessible. The image cannot describe – it is not the emotion, feeling or experience – it can only give access to it. This transference from abstract emotion to concrete image takes place in order to give us something graspable and relatively safe to work with (1999, p. 65).

**Place**

A sense of place cuts across all the interviews that I listened to and a partly-fictionalised version of this lies at the heart of the novel which came out of this project. My personal connections with the East Midlands seep into the novel from the start. As Margaret Atwood asserts: '[w]e have to write out of who and where and when we are, whether we like it or not, and disguise it how we may' (1998, p. 1504).

As a native of the East Midlands with ancestors who worked in the machine-lace industry, listening to oral histories about this industrial heritage and its landscapes, I experienced a sense of connectedness; I felt a closeness to it despite my direct links with the industry being more than a generation removed. I realised during the writing process that fictional place-making was coming not just from the oral histories themselves, but from beyond them, from my own personal experiences, from the voices I carried in my head as memories, transmitted inter-generationally throughout my childhood from older family members.

In the archives, I listened to interviewees rooting themselves geographically in their narratives, verbally sketching out maps for the listener. According to Lynn Abrams, the purpose of memory is that it functions as 'a roadmap: it tells us where we have been and aids us finding where we want to go'. Oral testimonies draw on what she calls 'semantic' memories where interviewees vocalise 'a kind of reference book for names, places and facts rather than emotions' (2010, pp. 82-83). I found examples of this kind of listing in the oral history archives:

> and I can
> almost remember all the names
> who I played with
> there was
> the first house was name of Bothams
> which was later in our town
> was a butchers
> as I got older
> and next door
> was a family named Roses
> their name was Roses
> [...]
> and the boy Harry
> the boys we used to play with
> as we grew up [...]
> and then there was a
> a somebody named Charles
> which I played with
> played with them
> oh they'd a very big family
> and the top was
> was named Burns (A4c)

This mirrors how I mapped out my own world as a child and how I often still think of it as an adult; I knew the names of all the families in our street, house by house. And this is echoed in my novel, as my protagonist introduces her fictional world with a semantic memory list, defining characters and orientating the reader:

> She knows the names of all the families in this street and counts them off as she passes their front doors: the Barkers are all lace workers and so are the Tappers and the Hoopers next to them. A few doors further down lives Mrs Brown and her two daughters, who are brass bobbin winders (Foster, 2019, p. 10).

Langellier and Peterson liken this building of place through narrative to 'beaten paths between homes, the specificity of geographic detail and sedimented patterns of movement anchor characters in place'. They recognise these maps that we create in our memories, built out of remembered people and features, as something belonging to 'a bygone life, a form of heritage and nostalgia' (2004, p. 43).

The oral history archives are rich with descriptions of home and in turn domestic settings provide a foundation stone in the novel. Symbols of domesticity appear across oral history narratives. The symbol of the net curtain is one: signalling privacy and respectability on the surface and offering a veneer of secrecy, 'hanging in the […] space between the public and the private' (Quarini, 2015, p. 2). I remember net curtains hanging at my grandparents' windows, always freshly bleached, or 'blued', and pressed, dappled daylight shining through, dust motes dancing in the air. I depict a modern house in the novel which 'has a wide-eyed look about it' as the protagonist realises, 'it's because its curtains are wide open and it has no nets up. Nothing to stop people from looking in' (Foster, 2019, p. 221).

Oral testimonies about place are often charged with sadness caused by changes to places over time. Returning to once familiar landscapes that have changed or disappeared altogether prove devastating for some interviewees:

> I had to go to Shire hall last week [...]
> didn't know where I was
> I didn't know where I was I couldn't tell 'em where
> changed
> it has changed
> I was lost (A81b)

I conducted a number of field visits to lace towns where former factory sites have been cleared or redeveloped for residential and leisure purposes. Finding once-familiar places changed evoked feelings of nostalgia. Again, this provided a series of doorways into the past: these fresh encounters with former industrial landscapes overlay recollections from my childhood of declining, but still operating, factories; these were in turn layered over the busy sites of industry that my grandparents told me about. I felt haunted by what psycho-geographer Merlin Coverley

calls ‘the histories of previous inhabitants’ (2010, p. 33) and drew on this concept in my writing, reanimating imagined characters from the past in the form of fictional characters in my novel.

In the archives, the industrial landscape of the East Midlands often features places where urban spaces meet rural spaces. Testimonies describe them as places to break free from the constraints of the industrial environment; one interviewee recounts how it felt like ‘an escape for us’ (A17a). These memories are often situated in childhood accounts which depict these spaces as playgrounds:

> there’s a field
> as they used to call Milling
> well we used to live again the Milling
> we used to get through the boards fencing like
> and we used to go and play (A80a)

This brought to mind my own playground as a child that lay at the fringes of the village; the den I created with my best friend in a thick hedge in a nearby field; further out, where farmland met the river, paddling at a spot shallow enough to ford the water and which stood in the shadows of a large coal-fired power station. These ‘edgelands’, a term introduced by Shoard (2002) to describe areas where urban landscapes meet rural landscapes, can be found in the work of other writers, such as Farley and Symmons Roberts. They consider them ‘a complex landscape, a debatable zone, constantly reinventing themselves’ and more intriguingly as ‘places of possibility, mystery, beauty’ (Farley & Symmons Roberts, 2012, p. 6). The archives capture the sensual nature of the ‘edgelands’; one interviewee recalls how on visits to the countryside at the edge of the town ‘as children you know / we always used to be eating the currants’ (A17a). My own memories are of the sting of nettles and the earthy smell of dock leaves. This is reflected in the novel where my protagonist’s sensory experiences of playing at the river as a child become heightened and in one episode she longs to become one with the landscape: ‘she’ll wish she could turn into mud and melt into the very river itself’ (Foster 2019, p. 56). I recognised, as I read this back to myself, my longing to be part of my own childhood landscape again.

**Filling the Silences**

The silences and gaps that lie in oral testimonies in the archives provide a springboard for story-making and I reimagined what might lie in these silences on the tapes. Pauses in testimonies may indicate a forgotten memory, an uncertainty about sharing a story, a hesitation, a moment of reflection. If those silences are left unfilled what might be left unsaid.

In this interview extract, the interviewee talks about having had an illegitimate child at the age of seventeen:

> course our mother brought her up
> my mother brought her up with the others
> [...]
> and then when I left
> went to come and
> live up Radford
> our mother had our Rose and wouldn't part wi'y'er
> and I used to give her
> the five shillings
> every week
> [...]
> to bring Rose up
> [...]
> and you still kept in contact with your baby then did you
> I never used to bother about her cos
> my mother never bothered about us
> she always thought
> me sisters and brothers
> was her sisters and brothers
> and just loved her
> as much as they did
> one another (A81b)

There are clearly gaps in the interviewee's narrative about her daughter Rose. Earlier in the interview, she refers to the father of her child as 'a soldier'; he is an unformed character in her narrative. This informed my treatment of the issue of illegitimacy which appears in my novel. I deliberately left gaps: the absence of a mother after her child is born and uncertainty regarding the father. I developed a number of shadowy characters, vital to the story, but unrounded, always on the fringes of the narrative, mentioned, but hiding in the silences, characters we only see through other characters' interactions with them. It could be argued that Rose's mother's forthrightness masks an emotional response; it offers possibilities for the writer to anonymise this narrative, think about the fictional possibilities that lie behind the forthrightness and reimagine the narrative.

These spaces in narratives are recognised by other writers who work with oral history as a source. Ariella Van Luyn suggests that they offer the writer 'a space to explore subjective experience' (2012, p. 65). They shift the focus away from historical fact towards 'the experiential aspects of the interview, in order to imbue [...] works with a deeper emotional and thematic authenticity' (2012, p. 63).

In my own family stories there are gaps, particularly in the time before I was born, and I insert my own imagined past into these gaps. Maybe this is a yearning for this past, to be part of it again. Margaret Atwood also suggests that beyond simply creating a past for ourselves, we sometimes insert ourselves as a character into a past that we were never a part of. She cites an interview with a man in the United States in which he talks about a rebellion that took place many years before he was born, 'recalling [it] as a personal experience' even though it was 'an event at which he had not been present in the flesh'. Atwood calls this an intersection of memory, history, and story, suggesting 'it would take only one step more to bring all of them into the realm of fiction' (1998, p. 1505). This 'one step more' for me involved bringing voices from oral history archives into the creative process alongside remembered family voices and other imagined voices.

## Family Stories

What began as a historical fiction, based in a location familiar to me, set against an industrial backdrop, which fascinated me, began to entwine with my own family history. Familial stories are fundamental to the way in which humans interpret the world: they 'circulate

in families acting as the glue that maintains relationships' (Abrams, 2010, p. 106). Writing this fiction awoke personal memories and created fictional memories. It became an opportunity to explore long-dormant aspects of my identity. My feelings resonate with Hunt's assertion that: 'for many people, writing fictional autobiography [has] a significant and positive impact on their self-understanding and sense of identity' (1998, p. 21).

The interviews contained in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection follow the Western Life Story model of oral history interviewing, described by Abrams as:

> a narrative device used by an individual to make sense of a life or experiences in the past. A life story is not a telling of a life as it was but a creative version of a life which has been interpreted and reinterpreted over time (2010, p. 176).

In this approach, framed by the interviewer's questions, the interviewee situates their narrative in time and uses 'staging posts' to highlight life events. The interviewee populates their narrative with characters whom Finnegan suggests are mainly family members (1998, p. 100). My novel echoes this; rites of passage, such as deaths and births, and events, including the First World War, a factory fire, birthdays, and holidays feature prominently and form pivotal points in the narrative arc.

With few exceptions, many of the domestic narratives I listened to about lace-making communities came from women: 11 of the 19 machine-made lace interviews in the Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection are with female interviewees. It could be suggested that within lace-making families and their wider communities, women became the storytellers. They engaged in what Langellier and Peterson describe as 'narrative labour' (2004, p. 84), shouldering the responsibility of transmitting stories through family networks. They also facilitate the 'telling of stories', often returning to what Abrams calls the 'kernel story', a recurring narrative, retold as a way of reinforcing family ties (2010, p.119).

Within my own family network, I am the youngest child. I am the one who does the family history research, the keeper of the family archive. I do not come from what I would consider a family of storytellers in the traditional sense. My family members chat and gossip, but many family secrets and skeletons have been passed down in hushed whispers. Divorce and second marriages; illegitimacy; suicide; mental illness; drinking and violence; all feature in my family history, but none were openly talked about.

Langellier and Peterson recognise that 'The past was not all innocent and good'. They suggest that families undergo a process of 'content-ordering', editing out 'scandals and secrets' (2004, p. 49). However, my inspiration was fired by these secrets, intrigued by what lay in the gaps left by this editing out. I drew on my own family taboos, using motifs of an illegitimate child, drink-fuelled violence, and depressive illness to form critical conflicts or fictional trigger points in my novel.

**Imaginative Reminiscence**

Trevor Pateman talks about fiction writing as an opportunity for the writer to 'chance upon moments of self-discovery'. This is what I experienced, that feeling that 'we suddenly remember something about our lives that we had not thought about for so long that it appears to us as lost and forgotten' (1998, p. 154). Although these fragments of memory or flashbulb moments in many cases were not altogether lost to me, I recalled them with a clarity and sensory detail that gave them new currency and brought them to life again, I re-experienced them as an adult. In recalling these personal memories, I experienced a heightened 'sense of identity', a deeper feeling for where I come from and for my own 'personal history' (Rathbone, Moulin & Conway, 2008, p. 1403).

I liken this process of self-reflection through memory triggers to a form of reminiscence. The nostalgic feelings that arose were associated with my childhood and early adolescence, a time-frame fitting 'the reminiscence bump', the years from age ten to age 30 which, according to Rathbone et al, is 'the period from which, in a free recall task, people produce the most memories.' They go on, 'this period is permeated by novel experiences and it is this novelty, preserved in memory in some way, that ensures their enduring memorability' (2008, p. 1403). Not all of my nostalgic moments arose from novel memories, however. Memories associated with my childhood often recall a routine, semantic place-holders of memory: weekly visits to my grandparents, shopping trips to the city or the nearby market town, sausage and chips every Friday from the chip shop down the road.

As a child, I was shielded from traumatic events by adults: the death of my father when I was four was ever-present and yet kept on the periphery of conversations when I was in the room. My grandmother's illegitimacy was never discussed until I was old enough to understand and only then talked of in hushed terms. Maybe I was unknowingly listening out for darker

narratives in my eavesdropping in the oral history archives, the secrets lingering behind the net curtains, looking out for parallels with my own life history and expressing a desire to explore these through my writing. My novel does explore the impact of the death of a father on a family and the repercussions of an illegitimate birth.

## Liminal Space

As I shaped my imaginative responses to voices from the archives into something more tangible through creative writing, I considered the space that exists between listening and writing and began to consider it as a liminal space. Hirshfield describes the liminal space as 'a point of transition, entered briefly, at a particular time, in passage toward something else' (1996, p. 32). For me, this space is where my triggered responses to listening fuse creatively with my own memory; a point soaked in nostalgia and embellished with imagination; a point just before pen hits paper and writing begins; a space where possibilities can be explored. It is a place where I let go of my need for order, which at times stifles my creativity, 'leaving behind that which is known and being open to the 'chaos' of the liminal space' (Govan and Munt, 2003, p. 6).

This for me defines my ultimate creative process; one where I set aside my organised workspace and self-imposed deadlines and simply write for the sake of writing. Govan and Munt reference anthropologist Victor Turner's description of liminality as a ''time out of time' where the usual social rules and roles are disbanded.' They go on that 'the opportunity for 'time out of time' within safe boundaries seems to be important in the facilitation of creativity' (2003, p. 7). Working within this creative space, inspired by words drawn from the spoken testimonies of people from the past, I was able to experience what Hirshfield describes as 'writing lit by a liminal consciousness, [in which] the most common words take on the sheen of treasure' (1997, p. 209).

## The Benefits of Nostalgia

Aside from my belief that the nostalgic feelings I experienced contributed towards authenticity in my writing, it is worth considering whether other benefits to wellbeing emerged from this process. Sedikides and Wildschut explore nostalgia as a positive state of mind. In a self-study of nostalgia and homesickness, Sedikides found that these feelings:

> could be triggered unexpectedly and flood his sense with sounds and smells. The thing was, though, these memories did not […] make him feel unhappy […] – far from it. They […] made him feel good about himself, helped to make sense of his journey. They were a profoundly rooting experience of some kind. This nostalgia did not seem a malady but a powerful stimulant to feel optimistic about the future (2014, para.4).

Any sadness that I felt when oral histories triggered memories of childhood places was replaced by a purposefulness I felt in reimagining these places through my writing. It could be argued that, rather than feelings of sadness:

> nostalgia spontaneously rushes in and counteracts those things. It elevates meaningfulness, connectedness, and continuity in the past. It is like a vitamin and an antidote to those states. It serves to promote emotional equilibrium (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2014, para.9).

Another benefit of nostalgia is its inspiration for creativity. One study which examined the creative writing capabilities of a group of subjects found that the sample who had been induced with feelings of nostalgia, showed significantly more creativity in their writing (using a coded system) than those who did not experience nostalgia. The study went on to herald nostalgia as a valuable and purposeful emotion, 'a deposit in the bank of memory to be retrieved for future use' (Sedikides & Wildschut, 2016, pp. 320-321).

Harnessing nostalgia is important. In my case, I used this emotion purposefully; working through a semi-structured creative process, working to deadlines and targets. I treated it carefully and recognised the emotion as it arose; I was able to draw on self-care strategies to deal with emerging feelings in a positive way. I certainly found, in my research that:

> The past can help us understand where we are in the present and, when used with sensitivity and creativity, can give us strategies, tools, and ideas to face the present (Chaudhury, 1999, p. 232).

## Ethics

The creative re-use of oral history archives raises ethical considerations. My approach has been to 'eavesdrop' without judgement, with 'the need to be aware, always of our

responsibilities to the voices we represent in our fiction' (Rose 2011, p. 1). I pick out words and phrases, the bones of anecdotes and stories, without lifting full characters and entire monologues from the archives. I am fully aware of the process and that I am working with stories which are not my own.

The notion of the writer's self-awareness when handling oral history is echoed by the writer Dorothy Alexander who feels that using oral history archives to cherry-pick elements of character, phrases, anecdotes and images and to reimagine them, 'inhabits the realms of inspiration and intertextuality as opposed to plagiarism or any other nefarious purpose' (2018, personal interview).

For me, there was a process of transformation: the raw material from the archives was turned into a creative product, which at times bore little relation to its origins. As my writing developed, so the industrial landscape against which my novel is set eventually became a backdrop to my fictional world; the personal testimonies that sparked my imagination became whispers in the background as my fictional characters developed their own voices. I was not repurposing oral histories. I was simply using them for inspiration in the same way that overheard conversations on buses can often become part of the writer's toolkit.

The Oral History Society provide comprehensive guidelines in oral history practice but the ethics of re-using oral histories for creative purposes remains a grey area. In the absence of clear guidelines for writers working in this area, Rose suggests that writers themselves need to demonstrate an awareness of the sensitive nature of oral testimony: 'each one of us must judge if we have done enough to bridge the divide between what is and what ought to be' (2011, p. 7).

I have followed a clear code of ethics in anonymising any phrases drawn from the archives. I have also felt a responsibility to honouring the testimonies: by accessing them and taking the time to listen to them and to respond sensitively to them.

## Conclusions

The opportunity to listen to voices in the oral history archives to inform and inspire my creative writing was a privilege. The testimonies of these real Victorians and Edwardians provide the lifeblood that courses through the veins of my novel.

My own heritage has also become part of the novel, with voices in the archives triggering a nostalgia for my own past. Sensory memories and reminiscences of my own connections with

the heritage and landscapes of the East Midlands and its machine-made lace industry imbue my writing with authenticity. Through my writing, I found myself at times at the intersection of memory, history, and story, particularly in the final section of my novel, set in the 1970s, the decade of my own childhood.

Place remained key throughout the project, offering a stage on which to play out memories, create maps of the past through words, acknowledge changes to landscapes and buildings and empty spaces in the present. As my writing progressed, the machine-made lace industry slowly fell away from the foreground and became instead a vital backdrop for the characters and their lives both in and out of 'the lace'. I aim to have drawn on this rich historical context as a way to re-present a vanished world; to celebrate the textile at the heart of the industry and once so deeply embedded in people's lives; to create my own piece of lace from the threads that I teased out of the archives; to put the language I heard in the archives back into the context out of which it grew.

I made connections with a past that I knew was still in my memories. As well as listening to oral testimonies, I was also prompted to review photographs of my childhood and of my grandparents that I had not looked at for years. I retraced my childhood steps and went back to visit the house that my grandparents had lived in when I was much younger. I visited old factories which, once busy with activity, have in recent decades been repurposed as restaurants and bars.

Nostalgia for family, long-gone grandparents, a missing father, enabled me to reflect and identify gaps in my family's stories. I relished opportunities to reimagine what might lie in these gaps. As Hunt says: 'Thus fictionalising from ourselves and finding a satisfactory form for our fiction helps us to engage more deeply with our inner life, opening up possibilities for greater insight and self-understanding' (1998, pp. 32-33).

Pulling out motifs recurring in both oral history archives and in my own family stories – death, divorce, illegitimacy – demonstrates how nostalgia touches on the darkness in memories as well as uplifting moments in the past. I recognised that my response to nostalgic feelings that arose during this process was cathartic; a coming together of real memory and imagined memory which provided fuel for my creativity and gave me a purpose to write. I found sanctuary in the liminal space within which I worked to make these memories into tangible written artefacts; a safe space, set aside from the everyday and the organised. A place in which I allowed myself

permission to be chaotic and break my self-imposed rules of time and order in my writing practice.

This writing project ultimately offered a reconnection with who I was as a child and who I am now. It took me full circle, back to where I came from. It brought me a sense of inner and outer home.

## References

### *Primary Sources*

Alexander, Dorothy. Personal interview. 2018.

Nottinghamshire Oral History Collection, Nottingham City Library:

Interview with Edna H (b.1912), recorded 1984 (A85a).

Interview with Nancy C (b.1896), recorded 1982 (A4c).

Interview with Alice (b.1891), recorded 1984, (A81b).

Interview with George S (b.1917), recorded 1982, (A17a).

Interview with Mary S (b.1906), recorded 1984, (A80a).

### *Secondary Sources*

Abrams, L. (2010). *Oral history theory.* Routledge.

Andrews, C. (2009). Heritage ethnography as a specialised craft: Grasping maritime heritage in Bermuda. In M.L.S. Sorensen & J. Carman (Eds.), *Heritage studies: Methods and approaches* (pp. 140-163). Routledge.

Atwood, M. (1998, December). In search of Alias Grace: On writing Canadian historical fiction. *The American Historical Review, 103*(5), 1503-1516.

Bolton, G. (1999). *The therapeutic potential of creative writing: Writing myself*. Jessica Kingsley.

Chaudhury, H. (1999). Self and reminiscence of place: A conceptual study. *Journal of Aging & Identity*, 4, 231.

Coverley, M. (2010). *Psychogeography*. Pocket Essentials.

Farley, P. and Symmons Roberts, M. (2012). *The edgelands: Journeys into England's true wilderness*. Virago.

Finnegan, R. (1998). *Tales of the city: A study of narrative and urban life*. Cambridge University Press.

Foster, H. L. (2019). *Reimagining a lace town.* [Doctoral Dissertation, University of Strathclyde]. Unpublished.

Govan, E. and Munt, D. (2003). *The crisis of creativity: Liminality and the creative grown-up*. Retrieved from https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/dramaandtheatre/documents/pdf/creativityandhealth/paper-crisisofcreativity.pdf.

Hirshfield, J. (1996). Komanchi on the stoop: Writing and the threshold of life. American Poetry Review, *25*(5), 29-38.

Hirshfield, J. (1997). *Nine gates: Entering the mind of poetry*. Harper Collins.

Hodgson, J. (1972). Emotional involvement in acting: Constantin Stanislavski. In J. Hodgson (Ed.), *The uses of drama: Acting as a social and educational force* (pp. 11-16). Methuen.

Hunt, C. (1998). Writing with the voice of the child: Fictional autobiography and personal development. In C. Hunt and F. Sampson (Eds.), *The self on the page: Theory and practice of creative writing in personal development* (pp. 21-34). Jessica Kingsley.

Langellier, K. M. & Peterson, E. E. (2004). *Performing narrative: Storytelling in daily life.* Temple University Press.

MacKay, N. (2007). *Curating oral histories: From interview to archive.* Left Coast Press.

Norkunas, M. (2011). Teaching to listen: Listening exercises and self-reflexive journals. *The Oral History Review*, *38*(1), 63-108.

Pateman, T. (1998). The empty word and the full word: The emergence of truth in writing. In C. Hunt & F. Sampson (Eds.), *The self on the page: Theory and practice of creative writing in personal development* (pp. 153-163). Jessica Kingsley.

Pieters, J. (2005). *Speaking with the dead: Explorations in literature and history.* Edinburgh University Press.

Portelli, A. (1981, Autumn). The peculiarities of oral history. *History Workshop Journal*, *12*(1), 96-107.

Quarini, C. A. (2015). *The domestic veil: Exploring the net curtain through the uncanny and the gothic.* {Doctoral Dissertation, University of Brighton]. Unpublished.

Rathbone, C. J., Moulin, C. J. A. and Conway, M. J. (2008). Self-centred memories: The reminiscence bump and the self. *Memory & Cognition, 36*(8), 1403-1414.

Rose, J. (2011). Theft is theft: The ethics of telling other people's stories. In J. Conway-Heron, M. Costello, and L. Hawryluk (Eds.), *Ethical imaginations: The 16th Annual Australasian Association of Writing Programs Conference, Southern Cross University, New South Wales.* Retrieved from http://www.aawp.dreamhosters.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/Rose_0.pdf.

Sedikides, C. and Wildschut, T. (2014, November 9). Look back in joy: The power of nostalgia: Interview with C. Sedikides and T. Wildschut (interviewed by Tim Adams for *The Guardian*). Retrieved from https://theguardian.com.

Sedikides, C. and Wildschut, T. (2016, May). Past forward: Nostalgia as a motivational force. *Trends in Cognitive Sciences, 20*(5), 319-321.

Scollins, R. and Titford, J. (2000). *Ey up mi duck! Dialect of Derbyshire and the East Midlands*. Countryside Books.

Tedlock, D. (1983). *The spoken word and the work of interpretation.* University of Pennsylvania Press.

Van Luyn, A. (2012). Jogging alongside or bumping off? Fiction and oral history in dialogue. *Oral History Association of Australia Journal, 34*(1), 62-70.

Van Tilburg, W. A. P., Sedikides, C. and Wildschut, T. (2015). The mnemonic muse: nostalgia fosters creativity through openness to experience. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology,* 59, 1-7.

***Dr. Helen Louise Foster*** *is a writer, researcher, tutor, and oral historian. She runs the East Midlands Oral History Archive at the University of Leicester. She also teaches Creative Writing within adult learning and is a Writing for Wellbeing practitioner. She holds a degree in Drama & English (Roehampton), a Masters in Heritage & Identity (Birmingham), and a PhD in Creative Writing (Strathclyde). Dr. Foster's research interests lie in the relationship between creative writing, the spoken word, and wellbeing. Her short fiction has been published in* Mslexia *and performed at the Edinburgh International Book Festival. She lives in rural Leicestershire with her husband and two greyhounds and is currently studying for an MSc in Mindfulness Studies.*

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# Launching the Creative Practices for Wellbeing Framework: An International Q&A

**Tony Wall, EdD, University of Chester, UK**

**Henry Sidsaph, PhD, University of Chester, UK**

## Abstract

This article is an edited transcript from the launch event of the Creative Practices for Wellbeing Framework in 2020 (Wall and Axtell, 2020). The guidance is now free to download in 20 languages, including in English, Welsh, Chinese, and Russian.

**Key words:** creative practices for wellbeing, arts for health, safeguarding, safety

## Acknowledgements and Author Note

This project, coordinated by Lapidus International, was made possible by the support of the TS Eliot Foundation, The Old Possum's Practical Trust, and the University of Chester.
Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: t.wall@chester.ac.uk.

## Introduction

*Barbara Bloomfield (Chair of Lapidus):* Welcome to the launch of our new creative practices for wellbeing framework, a two–year study. We are delighted to have the people who carried it out, Professor Tony Wall from the University of Chester, and our own Lapidus Coordinator Richard Axtell here today. I am Barbara Bloomfield and the Acting Chair of

Lapidus. Let's start by a general question. Can you give us some sort of overview of what the consultation was all about, what you were setting out to achieve?

*Tony Wall (Professor at University of Chester):* This started around two and a half years ago when the discussion about safe and effective practices had already been lingering for some time. At conferences we were seeing and hearing about practices that we wouldn't have necessarily have used ourselves. We could see that even though certain organisations, like Metanoia Institute, were dealing with these sorts of practices on a daily basis, a lot of practitioners and researchers were not talking about the sorts of arrangements that trained practitioners were putting in place. For example, using a simple ground rules acronym tool at the start of an activity is actually quite a sophisticated way to put boundaries about around what's about to happen for the participants. So the project came from a space where we thought that there were gaps in the ways a wide range of people were using creative processes, specifically, for the outcome of wellbeing.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I know you've looked at different frameworks but what were the boundaries of that? Because how can you compare an art therapist with a counsellor, or somebody who works in a hospice with somebody who works on a boat? So how did you mediate that?

*Tony Wall:* One of the other things we noticed was the diversity of people who were utilising these sorts of tools and practices. If you look at Lapidus membership, you can see a huge diversity of people using techniques, from marketeers using activities to gain a profit, through to therapeutic work in a hospital or psychiatric wards.

One of the things we realised early on was that nobody actually owns these practices - these are practices that come through lots of different routes; if you're a poet you might be working in the community with certain tools, if you're a teacher, you might be developing certain activities, yet neither of them might even call them 'creative' or realise their impact on 'wellbeing'.

With this in mind, the boundary was set around professional organisations that have a history of using creative practices in their different forms. We had to acknowledge that

even if you are a dance practitioner, some of the processes are still words-based, so this sort of intersectional crossover work is something that we couldn't ignore. So the boundary that informed us in terms of an initial framework were the professional bodies' own practice or ethical frameworks as a guide, to then take to the diversity of people who use them, to refine or redevelop into something that would be more applicable and relevant to the people who actually engaged with the practices across different settings.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* So did you find a lot of crossover in the different areas such as art, music, writing, therapy, did you find a lot of crossovers in terms of attitudes to safeguarding supervision that kind of rule–based side of things?

*Tony Wall:* Yes, there were some commonalities; the initial framework was 20 statements which were common to most if not all frameworks; statements that we thought, if implemented, would enable the practices to be implemented safely and effectively. However, when we took these statements into the diversity of people using these tools and practices, through the consultation, that was whittled down to 10 (see the guidance here, including in English, Welsh, Chinese, and Russian).

However, there were also divergences: views about practice could be seen in two main extremes; one absolutely and unambiguously saying that the more precision we could get the better – and the other saying that 'I am not a medical professional…I am using these tools for my personal interest so I don't need to consider 20 or 10 things when I just want to write a poem for myself'. Linked to this was the notion of *scale*. If you're doing an activity for 10 minutes as a teacher, and after that ten minutes they don't consider anything else across the academic year, then, the considerations for safe and effective practice will be different to somebody using these processes for psychiatric purposes with people with dementia and using it as an enabler for memory or other aspects of wellbeing.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I just wanted to pick that up because I wonder how we can establish guidelines in a world where people are operating in such new fields, 'so I might do a session writing for wellbeing with Yoga next week', it is almost like anything goes. Whereas frameworks for counsellors are pretty well established because most counsellors

do similar kinds of things. So, what's the answer to that, how prescriptive do we need to be with our people?

*Tony Wall:* We have taken this into account in the way we have written the guidance; these are ten pragmatic practical reflective prompts. In other words, this isn't an instruction, these are almost domains of reflection to think about: rather pragmatically, 'do I need insurance to engage with this activity that I am about to engage with?' Actually many people who were consulted told us they hadn't given it thought, but as soon as it was mentioned in the consultation, actually practitioners did consider it. It highlights a view that 'for the protection for everyone, I need a number of different types of insurance and that is fundamental'. Another key point from the 10 prompts is consideration of the actual creative activities used forms only *one* part of the whole set of considerations when designing for safe and effective practice. I think that was one of the big points for many people who attended the consultations; that moment when people said 'oh yes I hadn't thought about that'.

One of these, for example, related to whether or not we think about what happens to our participants *after* our sessions. Some had a view that 'well that's not my responsibility', others said 'how are you checking that you have not created some harm?', and others reframed the issue as 'well, how do you know what impact you have created?'.

The intention was to create a set of prompts to feed into whatever frameworks they currently work in, bearing in mind some of the people will already have very prescriptive frameworks. For example, one framework had a definition of an apology, how to do an apology, and that an apology should not imply liability – a very detailed and prescriptive policy and procedure. But you can still operate our ten guidance points within a reflective process alongside that level of detail. In that sense, the 10 point reflective prompts create some structure without being overly instrumental and stifling in practice. It is meant to be light in that sense but structured enough to have some sort of meaning and guidance for those who do not have that.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Yes, thank you. We are riding this wave of interest in creative practices, I'm amazed by it and delighted, but why now, what is it in the Zeitgeist that makes this something that people can resonate with?

*Tony Wall:* I think there are a number of things going on; I think *more* of us are *more* aware of the people around us becoming *more* ill. Illness and health have become much more part everyday language and in the things we see around us such as products and adverts. Health and wellbeing have become part of the sort of daily narrative.

I also think that formal systems are recognising creativity as a pathway to wellbeing. The All Party Parliamentary Group report that was published in 2017 (APPG, 2017) was quite a moment as it recognised that creativity and creative practices were no longer hidden in certain areas of practice. The report was good at exposing the diversity of creative practices and their link with wellbeing. There is still a lot of work to be done in the area, like evaluation work, but it really raised the profile of art and health within the UK. But I also think there is something about more of us are wanting more meaning in our life, amidst high levels of stress in society and at work. I think that arts and aesthetics are particularly strong at providing a route to something more meaningful in life.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I agree and I think it is the poetic register that words for wellbeing, for example, can give, and other creative practices can give as well. It is a poetic register, a transcending register. There is something extraordinarily valuable about the poetic register as a way of bringing ambivalence into our life, and not being absolutely sure. It is what I think a lot of people are resonating with, it is an antidote to what is going on in our news programmes and a lot of the fear that we feel about the future of the world.

*Tony Wall:* Yes, it is interesting because this is not new, it hasn't just been invented, there has been some seminal work in the 90s. I always remember Yiannis Gabriel (2000), an ethnographer and narrative researcher, explaining that stories and organisations are there to help with the trauma of being in an organisation. I think this is really interesting. I was in an organisation recently co-creating a collective story, but the amount of trauma that presented itself was noticeable - not that the story was designed to reveal the trauma or do anything with it, but the amount of trauma that was presented in that sort of team was so

interesting. It wasn't as if any effort was required to reveal it, it was like people were needing some sort of channel to deal with what it means to work in an organisation today.

*Jeannie Wright (Lapidus Board):* Thanks Tony and Barbara. It's a fascinating conversation so far. One of the things I would like to ask about is the future for an organisation like Lapidus. If I put myself in the shoes of a member who's perhaps relatively new, perhaps comes from a creative writing background, and has discovered Lapidus, where would you say this report takes us for the membership, for this new member I am imagining?

*Tony Wall:* I think that one of the things we have talked about for some time, in various forms, is the notion of some sort of recognition or accreditation in a broad, fuzzy sense. I need to be very clear that there was no strong appetite for an instrumental form of accreditation. I think it's associated with prescription, and prescription goes against - to some extent - creativity, but I do think it masks those two extremes where, as a member, I might place myself. One extreme is that I, as a member, am engaging with Lapidus because I want to meet other people who are interested in talking about creativity or writing together, and that is fine. At the other end of the extreme, we have practitioners who are working in hospitals, hospices, or homes, who are perhaps more medically or health orientated in their work context. I think there is a stronger appetite, amongst these practitioners, for some sort of system that recognises the competence that they have built.

Overall, there wasn't a strong appetite for accreditation as a prescriptive thing. I think there was more of an appetite for recognition of capability. So for example, where the ten guidance prompts in the framework are used to evidence capability in a variety of ways, without a precise 'one answer fits all'. A form which seeks a demonstration that you've: clearly reflected on certain aspects of practice; reflected on which aspects of your context make certain prompts more important than others; and reflected on the level and depth that has informed your thinking and practice about effectiveness and safety. So, I think there is a possibility for the notion of recognition of achievement and demonstration of the thinking around an activity that somebody engages in.

*Jeannie Wright:* Well, I have to say that I am relieved about that, and it brings up another question about a very practical choice I have to make. I have been invited to run a short

writing activity for a workshop next week. My habit is long standing: I negotiate guidelines, based on safety. Then I go to a pub where they run Poetry Slams on a Monday evening and most people start out by saying what their psychiatric diagnosis is to a room full of strangers. To me it's kind of shock 'gasp' but clearly there is a whole new practice afoot and that's great, I welcome the energy of it and how the people reading are taking control. I just don't quite know as a practitioner what to recommend, so I would really like to know how you would play it? I'm going into this room full of people I won't know next week, do I follow my usual practice, which is about safe-guarding and confidentiality to some extent, or forget that and go with what happens down the pub with the Poetry Slam?

*Tony Wall:* So, it's really interesting because it reminds me of one of the groups that we engaged with during the consultation. This group has been established for some time, they meet fairly regularly. It's not a particularly large group, less than half a dozen, and sometimes it's the same group, sometimes it differs. The group has fairly few explicit rules, ways of working, confidential agreements, it's non–explicit, but when you dig into it, the backgrounds of these peoples are very similar and they have a shared understanding when they come to the table or come to the room. This means they have a common and shared background with commonly shared notions of what safeguarding is, what confidentiality is, what consent is.

I asked members of the group, 'how does it work when there are new members?' It was interesting that members were *selected*; it is not as if somebody asks 'oh can I join your group?'. I think that this is part of the way that the group maintains a consensus of certain implicit rules because I, as a member of the group, am only going to invite you because I know about you, I trust you.

I also asked members of the group 'what happens when a member does something which doesn't fit your group?'. Interestingly, they couldn't remember a time when that had happened. Now isn't that interesting? So for me, a prescriptive approach would make sure X, Y and Z were in place before you did anything, but we found that there were also other ways of doing things.

One of the contexts that came out of the consultation was where you are joining an established group, a space where the group has a long–standing etiquette, ways of operating, and that they've all agreed to that. I think this is an ethical practice, when anyone is parachuted into an existing group with a history, a tradition, a heritage, to do some situational knowledge gathering rather than imposing your own views. There might be exceptions to that, but you might ask: How does it work? Do we already have ground rules and what are those? How do you deal with confidentiality? How do you deal with consent?

It sounds like a lot of questions but you can quite quickly get a feel for what you may need to do, and equally if there is something that you need for your own wellbeing as the facilitator of that group, that needs to be part of that initial conversation. I think we have all seen for example, the importance of initial framing of a session can be done quite quickly without intimidating or making people feel uncomfortable.

So for me, in this particular context where there is an established group who have been doing it for some time, they have their preferred way of working, where they have agreed to certain ways of working, whether it is implicit or explicit. Just doing that checking, 'well how do you do this?', and even at the start, doing a quick situation check-in, 'what do we do about this?', it might take a few minutes but at least you have placed your boundaries, at least for you.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* You're making me think that the empowerment movement for people with mental health difficulties or for people with autism relies on people breaking the old rules. If I want to tell people about my autism, I am going to do it and I will shout it throughout the Twitter stream. I would say as a long–standing practitioner if you set up safe rules at the beginning then you're setting a platform where people can express themselves and that's my belief. I work quite a bit with Claire Williamson who is here today, and she always does that really well, and really clearly, quite formally, and I really appreciate it. Whereas at the moment I must say that a huge number of events recently where there is no setting up of any boundary whatsoever and when I come away from it I

think, is that private what that person said or not, am I allowed to talk about it or not because it hasn't been set up.

*Claire Williamson (Programme Leader - MSc Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes, Metanoia Institute):* Well, it brought up that question really: who is taking responsibility. I think when you're facilitating a group, as a facilitator you are taking responsibility. Perhaps when you're organising the event down the pub, you're taking some responsibility, although it is a bit looser, isn't it? I did run Poetry Slams for years and it was very much on the basis of self–empowerment, people decided on what they were going to say and they said it, the only real boundaries were the time limit and it was very infrequently that issues arose. However, occasionally an issue would arise. Say, for example, somebody performed a poem that offended a particular group of people. Suddenly, as an organiser you're thinking, 'Oh, I need to stand up for this and say it's something we don't agree with, as organisers' or something like that. So, I think there may be a case even, you know, in a very casual environment like a pub, to maybe have a disclaimer at the beginning about what the organiser's role is.

So yes, that sense of responsibility, and I was also interested in what Tony was saying earlier around the idea of recognition for individuals. What popped into my head was the Higher Education Academy (now Advance HE), which is huge now, it's a very big organisation but what it is doing is accrediting academics who are already in practice, via a kind of appraisal system where they have to produce certain pieces of writing and references, which is something that Lapidus had many years ago. Yes, so a fairly simple structure perhaps, I guess the difficulty, which has always been the same, is if somebody is practising without the education you'd hoped they'd have and it is putting people in harm's way, how do we support those people or how do we support the people they are working with if something goes wrong? I know that's not Lapidus' remit at the moment, but there isn't a body that's doing that as far as I know.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* So, what do you think Tony, should there be some kind of accountability framework for Lapidus?

*Tony Wall:* My comment about recognition is really in relation to accreditation in terms of a different notion of reward for demonstrating achievement, but absolutely, underpinning it need to be opportunities to develop that knowledge, rather than assuming that people can demonstrate it. Let's say that someone who has been a marketeer, they wouldn't necessarily have had the counselling or therapeutic training. To expect somebody to achieve the ten points without some form of development is a tall ask and unfair. There are also areas which are not necessarily easily accessible in terms of training or development.

The other things for me about the report - and the consultation process – are the *transition* processes, between groups of participants. So you may be using creative practices for wellbeing work with friends and family and then you decide, 'I'm so good at this, I'd like to work with people with dementia' or 'I want to work with young children'. Actually, there is some quite specialist knowledge and requirements to work with all of these groups and to assume that people have that level of understanding without some development is problematic. Transition spaces, where you move from maybe generic, less risky, and less vulnerable groups to vulnerable groups, that's just an example.

The other aspect I think is important, because it was quite widespread in the consultation, relates to understandings of *consent*; we noticed discussions about what consent means, the nuances of what we meant by *informed* and *valid* consent, and why we would need to ask for it as a practitioner. The idea of everybody signing a form when they go into the session seemed fairly straightforward for most, but what was new for some - but familiar to those in some health fields - was whether a person had the capacity to give their consent. For example, if somebody is medicated and you're asking for their consent for something, do they understand what the consequences are of what you are asking them to do? This isn't to say that this is really niche and this isn't important, I think that awareness is fundamental if you're doing this kind of work with people.

It is knowing about the people who are in *your* space, the space you do have a responsibility for. If you aren't collecting information when participants join something that you're facilitating, how do you know that somebody *should* be in the room? What

signs are you looking for, as there can be very subtle signs. I joined a session recently and someone's eyes were quite wide for the entire session. I checked with the session organiser afterwards to see if that person was okay; they confirmed that that person was not in a good place. This led to a conversation and mitigations with the organiser, but my point relates to the knowledge and awareness - by somebody's eyes - that's a subtle thing which has probably come from some element of training somewhere in my history.

So, I think any recognition scheme needs to be underpinned by key areas. Practitioners may already know some of this, they may know it intuitively or implicitly, and many practitioners are aware of these practices to be effective and safe. So, recognition is not just about 'we'll train you to get this qualification', it's about demonstrating achievement through experiential learning or through some training.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Thank you that's great Tony, can we bring in Nikki, would you like to ask a question from Australia?

*Nikki (Lapidus Member):* A couple of things. I noticed a comment about a ground rules framework. In Australia we don't have any at all, which is shocking; there are few opportunities for tertiary training for anyone interested in writing as a modality of any form of therapy. Although there are other therapies that are being very well catered for, writing does not exist beyond one centre over in Western Australia. So all the work that I have been doing is based on my teaching experience, my mental health qualification, and essentially intuitive. So in effect, I've been self–taught from reading books like Gillie Bolton and Nicholas Mazza and just getting my hands–on bits and pieces to pull it all together. I know that what I am doing is reaching people and connecting, but I feel insecure because here in Australia everything is about, at this stage, the medical model and if I want to work within say a health system, or more broadly in the community.

If I am not an art therapist, I won't get much kudos. I need something that recognises that the way that I am working is actually creating value, adding value into people's lives, even simply as a self–care tool. The idea of having a ground rules framework is really helpful for someone in my situation.

Also, I am an affiliate member of Anzacata, which is the art therapy body for Australia, New Zealand, and Asia. When I first joined I was a student member because I was an enrolled in the GradCert in Mental Health which was the foundational part of the master of mental health art therapy, but they since changed their structure so I don't qualify as a member or a student member, because I am no longer a student. I am an affiliate member which means I am not 'a professional'. I don't have the level of training that the art therapists do but I do have some recognition within that structure, so I don't know whether the conversation before about whether there can be a stepped approach to the membership so that everyone is catered for, and when people are coming to Lapidus saying 'I want someone who wants to do writing therapeutically' they can choose what level of expertise they want, based on the client population.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Yes, well if I could just say something from the point of view of the Lapidus Board, it is something that regularly gets talked about. We have a practical problem because a stepped approach to membership requires us to put into place checks and balances, and at the moment, we can't make that work as we don't really have enough members who would make it worth employing somebody to do the work. That's one element of it. Another element is the stuff that Tony has been talking about, which is how light or heavy do we wish regulation to be and what form do we wish it to take? There is a lot of disagreement among the members about this question as exemplified by Tony's consultation framework.

*Jeannie Wright:* My somewhat bitter experience in the psychotherapy and counselling field years ago was really such a waste of time. All that work that went into working towards accreditation and then regulation and it has left us with something that is still very loose - there is still no regulation of the talking therapies. Something called accreditation, which if you're applying for a job would mostly stand you in good stead, is one step forward. I would go so far as to say that, if I were looking for a new therapist, accreditation would give me a sense that they weren't just putting up the brass plaque having done a ten–day, online course.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I agree, but I have to say, in 25 years of being a counsellor I have never been asked what my qualifications are. Never, once. I don't think the general public is as interested as we are in this subject.

*Jeannie Wright:* Well I am not sure, because I think the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy has found otherwise when they publish their list of accredited practitioners, I think those lists might be heavily used when people are looking for a therapist.

*Tony Wall:* One of the findings from the consultation was about the diversity of who engages with creative practices and talking, word–based activities; you have people who do it out of personal interest and people who are doing this full–time and would perhaps need some sort of credibility through some sort of recognition. There is definitely a group of people that want and feel they need that. I think the other reflection is whether there are enough people outside of that group to justify its existence; is there enough demand internationally for that sort of scheme? As I say, I think there is a group. It might be small, but even if it's small there may be enough people involved to use a peer–review approach to the recognition scheme, rather than it being fully managed by a body in particular. So it could be the host or the organisers with a nominal charge in putting reviewers in touch with each other.

There is also a strong appetite for a peer–review form of supervision and it became particularly interesting during the process of translating the guidance. For example, what is ‘supervision’ in Poland? Well, we don't really have that notion, but we do have something that might be called ‘expert counsel’. To us it might essentially be supervision, but I think supervision affords us a layer of security and credibility that may be linked with recognition; to say that you have full supervision is one element of credibility for paying audiences.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Yes, Claire Williamson has just mentioned CPD; CPD is something that we can offer, Nikki, which might be of use to you. CPD is an important aspect of writing for wellbeing education. We can do that easily, what's not quite so easy is this question of

how to make a framework that is meaningful that confers recognition of experience and helps people to get more work and feel more confident about what they are doing.

*Nikki:* Yes, that's great, it is linked to that, isn't it, because if you get the recognition then it will lead to work and ultimately anyone who is working in this field wants to be able to share the good that comes from it by working. The more work you do the more recognition there is for everyone in the field and it will have a ripple effect. I love the idea of supervision, I don't know if there is someone here in Australia, we don't have any connections at the moment, we have the seeds of things happening. For me to say I could easily find someone who could supervise me for the work I do, is not so easy.

And how do I solve the issue of that person's time. Do they simply have to donate it to me, there are all these sorts of other things that come up because, here in Australia, it is pioneering work. I know it is happening in lots of different little pockets, but all the threads have not come together yet and it's ironic that we're coming to the UK to tie up our parcel nicely, hopefully into the future.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I really hope we will be able to offer you something that will be useful. It is not quite there yet but we're certainly working on it.

*Tony Wall:* I think that would be really helpful. Linked with that is that a sustainable model is developed. I remember distinctly that there were one or two practitioners who absolutely believed ‘if I have to pay for supervision, I won't make any money from this’. Now, this poses ethical questions as it is like saying ‘I am not going to pay for supervision to secure myself and the people I am working with because I won't make money from it if I do that’. I think that is a problematic attitude and it's raising the value and function of supervision. There are so many different models of supervision, not all costing money. Maybe that is another role that Lapidus can offer, and it might be part of this stepped relationship model; for a particular membership, you have access to one hour of supervision, integrated it into the membership so that actually there is a sustainability to it.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Again, we are showing members the value of supervision. People who may not have had or experienced conversational supervision before. I would like to mention that a group that meets in the Somerset, Wiltshire area have a great model for peer–supervision, they build into every single meeting about 45 minutes for a practice issue, they do a writing exercise, they do a check–in, they cover all the basics. I am so impressed by the way that they do that; it is a very safe setting and it is a very enriching model that they have got, that perhaps, Nikki, there are people who you could bring into your world, counsellors perhaps, art therapists, whatever. You would get a lot of support from a group like that.

*Tony Wall:* Just to answer Claire's question, we've not yet found a peer–recognition model, we've seen peer–to–peer supervision type models but not recognition models.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I have a question from Lisa Rosetti, 'what are the current fields where creative practices are having the greatest impact, Tony?'

*Tony Wall:* That's partly challenging to answer because a lot of the work is still hidden. I mentioned before that the all–party parliamentary group exposed practices on a national level. So I can't claim that we know about the biggest *impact*, but what we are aware of is how more social systems like local government organisations are engaging with creative practices for wellbeing, which has become perhaps the biggest *movement* that we have seen. In terms of the impact, it is hard to tell because a lot of the other stuff that falls outside of that system isn't necessarily shared or recognised beyond the local impact. So, we know there is work in tackling poverty, we know there is work in relation to people with dementia, we know there is work in libraries.

Even though we now have more evidence from the all–party parliamentary group, one of the big criticisms is the quality of the research that's being done to measure impact, and that might be an area for further development again for Lapidus. It certainly came out in the consultation; there were, in some areas, some notable voices which said that research was not really the remit of what 'we do', and in some ways, it was a reliance on an intuitive feel that 'oh yes that was a good session, that worked well'. But perhaps we need to expand on how we are making judgements on evaluation and research because a

session may have had a reverse effect to what we had intended. So, yes, for me it is about raising the profile of evaluation and research to be able to demonstrate that impact.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* We had a question about ground rules for creative practices. I don't know if you feel you have answered that?

*Tony Wall:* It seems to me that this is one way of using the ten points in the guidance framework; in setting up sessions, designing sessions, designing interventions over longer periods of time. The intention was that the ten points could be used as ways of designing and sharing that design with others should it be a collaborative effort. Indeed, some of the points are about ensuring that there is collaboration in different contexts, in agreeing the ground rules.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* I have a question from Lisa; 'what are the future challenges for writing for wellbeing as a professional and do you have any potential strategies to address those challenges'?

*Tony Wall:* I am not sure if I would call it a profession yet because of the diversity of people who use creative practices and in fact, I avoided calling it a profession. I suspect there is a group of people who identify strongly as a writing for wellbeing practitioner, or creative writing for therapeutic practice practitioner. I think one of the future challenges is how you position Lapidus against, with, or alongside, other arts–based interventions. Some of these fields do have a very strong profile, like art therapy, and have regulated, well–articulated competences and, the perceived credibility of somebody who is qualified as an arts therapist. Equally, the art therapy world is such a small profession and, in some ways, that's an implication of regulating something so much. By the very nature of regulation, it is exclusive; it intentionally excludes. So, one of the challenges will be how to position with, alongside, or against those therapies, and the implications of that.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Okay, we have a question from Geoff Mead (Lapidus Member):

'I am a current year two CWTP MSc student, I carry a continuing question about the balance between formalising practice to safeguard clients on the one hand and unhelpful pathologising of the human condition on the other. I think the guidelines manage to steer

a useful and balanced course for non–clinical practitioners, thank you for a fascinating discussion'.

This is the question that we face as Lapidus, if you had to sum up in a sentence or two, Tony, for the Board of Lapidus, what should we be doing in 2020 to make writing for wellbeing a success, what is the first thing we should do?

*Tony Wall:* I think part of it is providing a structure in place for a step–change. Part of it is a structure around CPD and linking that to mechanisms for supervision. That might be stage two, but certainly, we now know some areas where we can say there are gaps, and Lapidus could help link CPD in some way to supervision in this next year. I think that that would build credibility, build confidence, and build a way forward for the next step which might be more formalised processes.

*Barbara Bloomfield:* Yes, I think we would probably all agree with that. Well, I have really enjoyed it and I hope you have all really enjoyed the discussion too. This video link will be on the Lapidus website and on Facebook pages, so you are very welcome to re–listen to it. Thank you, really well done to Tony and Richard for all your hard work, you've done an incredible job. I think it has taken us forward definitely.

**References**

APPG (All-Party Parliamentary Group on Arts, Health and Wellbeing), (2017), *Creative health: The arts for health and wellbeing*. Retrieved May 24, 2020, from http://www.artshealthandwellbeing.org.uk/appg-inquiry/.

Gabriel, Y. (2000). *Storytelling in organizations: Facts, fictions, and fantasies*. Oxford University Press. doi:10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198290957.001.0001

Wall, T. and Axtell, R. (2020) *Creative practices for wellbeing: Practice guidance*. Lapidus International. Retrieved May 24, 2020, from http://dx.doi.org/10.13140/RG.2.2.11610.90567/1

---

***Professor Tony Wall*** *is Founder and Head of the International Centre for Thriving, a global scale collaboration between business, arts, health, and education to deliver sustainable transformation. He has published 200+ works, including articles in quarterly journals such as*

The International Journal of Human Resource Management, Journal of Cleaner Production, *and* Vocations & Learning, *as well as global policy reports for the European Mentoring & Coaching Council in Brussels and Lapidus International which have been translated into 20 languages. His academic leadership and impact has attracted prestigious recognition through The Advance–HE National Teaching Fellowship (awarded to less than 0.2% of the sector) and multiple Santander International Research Excellence Awards. He actively collaborates and consults with large organisations and is developing licenses to enable wider global impact of this work.*

---

***Dr Henry Sidsaph*** *is a Visiting Lecturer in the International Centre for Thriving at the University of Chester. He has expertise in social network analysis in the context of sustainable development, particularly within Alternative Food Networks. Henry also works in a consultative capacity as Head of Research for an internationally operating Executive Search company, Hybrid Search, where he leads research projects for multinational companies across various sectors. Henry has experience of working on several European Commission level research projects including the European Guide Dog Federation and ERDF projects, has published in peer–reviewed journal articles and presented at international conferences. He is also an Associate Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.*

---

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Article*

# Postcards from Here: Introducing Art Cards in the Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes (CWTP) Encounter to Support Access to Metaphor and Readiness for Poetic Techniques

**Claire Williamson, MA**

**Metanoia Institute, London**

**Abstract**

This article explores the art postcard/image as a creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP) tool to support access to metaphor and readiness for employing poetic techniques in creative writing. It explores: the existing use of the image/object in CWTP; the tradition of using mental imagery in talking therapy; access to metaphor and stimulation of aesthetics in preparation for writing; some suggestions for CWTP practice; a small narrative reflexive self-study demonstrating this practice and some evaluative thoughts from practice participants.

***Keywords:*** Creative writing, therapeutic, postcards, imagery, mental imagery, neurophysiology, access

**Author Note**

Claire Williamson, ORCID ID https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5327-377X. I have no conflicts of interest to disclose. Correspondence concerning this article should be emailed to: info@clairewilliamson.co.uk.

**Permissions and Acknowledgements**

Table 1: Adapted and reprinted from Munden, P. (2014). *Positioning poetry*: A maverick framework for the curious and bold. Middlesex University: Institute for Work Based Learning, p. 9.

Figure 1. Kanizsa's Triangle. Reprinted from "Margini quasi-percettivi in campi con stimolazione omogenea", G. Kanizsa, (1955), *Rivista di Psicologia*, *49*(1), 7–30. Permission granted by the copyright holder.

Figure 2. Example of art cards displayed in a welcoming environment [photograph]. Author's photograph.

Figure 3. Ship Mind Map. Reprinted and adapted from "The Queen Victoria Visits Auckland, New Zealand" [pen and ink]. M. Dewhurst, (2015). In G. Campanario, *Urban Sketching: 100 postcards: 100 beautiful location sketches from around the world cards*. Indiana: Quarry Books. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

Figure 4. A scene on the ice near a town [Oil on panel]. (Avercamp, c1615). We are unable to reprint. Please access the image from *The National Gallery*, 1998, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-avercamp-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-a-town.

Figure 5. Rabbit Knight Mind Map. Reprinted and adapted from Le Lapin Chevalier by M. Cardouat, 2008, playing card In Roubira, J-L. (2008). *Dixit*. Poitiers, France Libellud.

Reprinted and adapted with permission.

Acknowledgement is due to the editors (Matthew Barton, David Briggs, and Dominic Fisher) of *Raceme* in which the poem 'A Scene on the Ice Near a Town' first appeared in issue 9, spring/summer 2020.

## Introduction

I have been working using creative writing therapeutically in groups for over twenty years. This work has ranged from communities responding creatively to place, to working in addiction recovery settings at a pivotal point in people's lives. I also work in academia, as Programme Leader for Metanoia Institute's Master of Science (MSc) in creative writing for therapeutic purposes (CWTP).

This paper particularly explores my own motivations and interest in bringing postcards and other art images into the creative writing room.

The purpose of this article is to explore the history and potential of using art images in a creative writing setting and develops a rationale for how looking at art can support the aesthetics of creative writing from a neurophysiological perspective.

The aim of my work (e.g., in cancer care or bereavement settings) is to provide a tool for processing experience, as opposed to the sessions particularly being 'Creative Writing', although attention is given to noticing writing techniques. Some participants have not written creatively since leaving school and many people feel nervous about the prospect of writing exercises.

For the past couple of years, I have actively introduced art postcards/imagery into the CWTP space, both as a 'checking in/warm up' tool, and as a prompt for creative writing. Originally, my main motivation was as support for participants' stories; to hold up an image, even if one has no words, is participation and promotes inclusion.

I acknowledge that this topic of using images could expand to the size of a doctorate, so where do I draw the line between postcards, images in general, tangible objects, natural materials, metaphors, and mental imagery? There is inevitable cross-over with all these areas of interest, some of which I'll explore. However, I will mainly focus on the practice of using art cards that can be purchased in handy sets as tools for CWTP practitioners and processes that can be replicated in practice.

In the light of my own experience of using images (Boast, 2013; King, 2016; Williamson, 2016, 2018), I have experienced this method as gifting metaphors that are surprising and non-habitual, and which give rise to insight for wellbeing, or offer the basis of a crafted piece. To demonstrate, I have included a narrative self-study and methods that can be taken forward by CWTP practitioners. I have also included some evaluative comments from participants to return this topic to practice with others.

The researcher/writer in me felt I could not dive into the action of practice without setting the scene. I was curious:

- What is the history of using objects and images in CWTP?
- What is therapy's relationship with mental imagery?
- How might images support the creative writing process?

**What is the History of Using Objects and Images in CWTP?**

The use of images and objects is well documented in CWTP literature. Some examples are recounted below with moments of commentary on practice.

In Bolton's (2011) 'Write yourself: Creative writing and personal development' suggestions are made for using clothing, containers and tools and buttons 'to represent someone or something in each of our lives' (pp. 30, 57-61).

A chapter of 'Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities' (Bolton, Field and Thompson, 2006) is devoted to using objects, as Gillie Bolton summarises in the introduction to 'Writing from Objects':

> Fiona Hamilton brought plasticine, Glynis Charlton an empty box, and Angela Stoner stones. They might be brought by the writers, as Angela Stoner's group brought their personal 'talismans' to write about, Geraldine Green's feathers and stones, and Fiona Hamilton's brought 'objects that were important to them. (Bolton, 2006, p. 74)

In the accounts that follow this introduction, items are used variously to feel, mould, imagine, ventriloquise, empathise, juxtapose with here-and-now feelings, contain difficult emotions, and also for dressing-up, handling, reflection and as dialogue partners. Angela Stoner comments on how participants can 'project onto objects aspects of ourselves which we cannot ordinarily recognise, or find difficult to acknowledge' (Stoner, 2006, p. 77).

Gillie Bolton recounts two exercises where objects are chosen for participants by the facilitators, about which one of the facilitators, Robert Hamberger, comments:

> Unknown to the workshop leader, an object may spark associations for a writer that are distressing, and the workshop leader must be ready to support the

> writer with making a shape and a sense of that distress, if possible. (Bolton, Byron & Hamberger, 2006 p. 95)

For these same reasons, I have always preferred providing an element of possibility and choice with the proviso (named in the group guidelines) to move away from thoughts/writing that could become overwhelming. However, there is never a guarantee that participants won't become triggered by something which suddenly links an emotion with an object or image.

In counsellor Kate Thomson's 'Therapeutic Journal Writing' (2011, pp. 117-118) she tells of utilising photographs and particularly the prompts that may accompany an exercise with personal (or other) images:

> Who's missing?
> What does s/he want from you?
> What wisdom/ advice can you offer him/her?

Thompson (2011) describes how photographs of places, such as homes, can bring back vivid memories, quoting participant, Louise:

> I can feel the black cat-shaped bootscraper by the door, I expect Gran to open the black front door in her flower pinny, I can hear her say 'come on duck,' and I can smell the beeswax and roasting meat and know what's behind the door. (pp.119-120)

Photographs are deeply personal and evocative and I would want to know a group well before asking them to bring in their personal photographs. Unlike Kate I'm not a therapist, so I'm conscious of keeping the process therapeutic, as opposed to entering the territory of the therapy. In her book 'Storytelling and the Art of Imagination', Nancy Mellon (1992) explores how fictional objects hold power and protection like the boots in 'Puss in Boots', crowns, gowns, mantles, golden objects, bowls, weapons, touchstones, talismans, seeds and nuts. Items can contain properties such as magic, capacity for transformation, revelation, mending, nurture, gifting and being lost and found. These archetypal objects are also found in artworks, such as eggs in Still Life to represent offspring, or artists who draw on myth and fairytale. Cards, such as those supplied with the board game 'Dixit' (Roubira, 2008) concentrate on archetypal objects, or

a twist on well-known stories where objects have significance. I will discuss the use of these cards later.

On the theme of cards, as an outcome of her doctorate, writing for wellbeing practitioner, Reinekke Lengelle, developed a set of career cards to 'help you develop a warm inner compass... on the way towards felt self-insight and inspired action' (Lengelle and Sellen, 2015, pamphlet). On one side of the cards are the images, on the other writing prompts, encouraging reflection. Lengelle and Meijers's (2009) model cycles between first and second stories of reflection within a boundary experience (i.e. when the individual's usual coping mechanisms are challenged or are insufficient), with some of the reflective phases interspersed with dialogues (with self and other): sensing, observing, sifting, focusing, understanding.

The many dialogues in CWTP between the visual and the written word led me to wonder how the therapy world treated images in talking therapies.

**What is Therapy's Relationship with Mental Images?**

As many CWTP practitioners are aware, using mental imagery builds on a range of traditions in therapy (Freud 1899/1955; Jung, 1996/2003), shamanism and dreamwork.

I was interested to discover the work of psychotherapist, Valerie Thomas, who has written extensively on the topic of using mental imagery in therapy (Thomas, 2016). In the same way that CWTP transcends everyday rationality, Thomas makes a distinction between the 'rational perspective' (e.g., literal, empirical, linear etc) and the 'imaginal perspective (e.g., symbolic, non-linear, emotional, intuitive)' (p.4), terms inspired by James Hillman (1975).

Thomas makes the case for the efficacy of mental imagery as a healing modality. In her research, embodied responses to the imaginal perspective are acknowledged and backed up by recent cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT practices, for example to process negative affect (Holmes and Matthews, 2010) with mental imagery supporting access to non-conscious processes.

Other work that supports how concepts are experienced in the body has been carried out by Lakoff and Johnson's (2003) work on Conceptual Metaphor, which describes how concepts are 'physically embodied' and 'sensory' (p.252), linking linguistic metaphors and mental imagery, and found across cultures.

Thomas (2016) has categorised different functions of using mental imagery: *diagnostic* concerning the presenting issue, *monitoring* demonstrating change over time and *processing* with the release of repressed material. She observes a potential for imagery to repair psychological conditions, support a therapeutic process and to create generic templates for therapeutic work, which Thomas goes on to explore.

In CWTP, we don't diagnose participants, but we might be interested in supporting people to monitor their own change over time through chosen imagery, or to process experiences that may not yet have found voice (or paper).

**Why Introduce Tools to Support the Creative Writing Process?**

I have a sense of why I felt motivated to bring props along to help participants make the transition between 'everyday life' and the workshop setting.

Several years ago I was struck by a quote from Ken Robinson, the educational advocate, who during a talk for The University of Florida in 2008, stated the statistics provided in Table 1 on how divergent thinking diminishes as we progress through education. He called it 'the decline of genius' (cited in Munden, 2014, p. 76).

***Table 1***

The decline of genius: how divergent thinking diminishes as we progress through education

| Age (years) | Capability |
|---|---|
| 3-5 | 98% |
| 8-10 | 32% |
| 13-15 | 10% |
| 25+ | 2% |

*Note:* Adapted from Munden, 2014.

These statistics point at creativity being like a muscle and of the old adage 'if you don't use it, you lose it.' It also reminds me of the Gestalt idea of a correlation between challenge and support (Parlett, 1991). If I'm asking people who have 2% capability for divergent thinking to think creatively and employ metaphor and imagery to support their wellbeing, then this is a

challenge and I need to increase the support to help participants to meet this challenge and to increase skills for their independent use.

Another article which supports the use of 'concrete words' is by another Robinson, Mark Robinson (2000) at University of Durham explores concrete words (such as banana, apple) which are proposed as more 'referentially stimulating' than higher order words, such as fruit, food, or abstract concepts such as nurture, sustenance. Robinson refers to Wilma Bucci's (1997) referential cycle and how the reformulation and insight moments come from the study of images, rewriting and reflection (Robinson, 2000).

From my own experience, as a writer, I can be aware of a feeling, such as being trapped, or feeling ashamed, but adding images and ideas to these sensations can bring something new. For example when writing my book 'Visiting the Minotaur' (Williamson, 2018), as I explored more deeply the character of the Minotaur in the labyrinth, and also reflecting on some of Picasso's Minotaur inspired art, Minoan art and other bull imagery, I wrote the lines:

> no need for a door
> to this maze
> shame has been my gatekeeper
>
> (Williamson, 2018, p.14)

What struck me about this image was that it was my sense of shame that made me feel trapped, I was not physically incarcerated; I was free to cross the threshold of my imaginary prison.

It feels, therefore, a responsibility to support participants' access to images and metaphor particularly with its notable efficacy, coming from a range of theoretical contexts. I was excited that exploring this topic, led me to Ramachandran and Hirstein's (1999) paper which has helped me identify more specifically how looking at art can stimulate aesthetics in preparation for creative writing from a neurophysiological perspective.

## How Looking at Art Images Stimulates Aesthetics in Preparation for Creative Writing from a Neurophysiological Perspective

In their paper 'The Science of Art', V.S. Ramachandran and William Hirstein (1999) identify 'eight laws' of aesthetic experience. In brief they suggest that artists' works employ heuristics that 'optimally titillate the visual areas of the brain' (p.17), using the following

definitions: peak shift, grouping, contrast, isolation, perceptual problem solving, symmetry, abhorrence of coincidence/generic view point, repetition, rhythm and orderliness, balance, metaphor.

Optimal titillation refers to the ability of art to stimulate the visual areas of the brain more strongly than natural stimuli and points to evolutionary developments in the human ability to make links between, for example, form, contrast, symmetry, balance, repetition, and identifying 'clusters' that directly connect to the limbic system. This is where the therapeutic aspect is evoked; the limbic system (including the amygdala, hippocampus, thalamus, hypothalamus) controls emotional behaviour, motivation, long-term memory, sexual arousal, and smell. Stimulating this part of the brain has been associated with a decrease in depressive states and is undergoing further research (Noda et al, 2015).

Criticism of the paper has mainly come from the art field, John Hyman (2006) takes exception to Ramachandran and Hirstein's 'dazzling boldness' (p.45) and particularly the idea that 'all art is caricature' (p.45). Hyman believes that Ramachandran misses the point that the ability of art to convey feelings relies on the artist's choice of tools, materials, and techniques. It is true that some elements, such as image texture, artist's materials and technique are lost in viewing art on a postcard, as opposed to in person. However, this hasn't seemed to have been a barrier to accessing the aesthetic benefits of viewing art in the workshops I facilitate.

Below I have extracted a range of parallels between these 'optimally titillated' areas and techniques in writing creatively, particularly exemplified through poetic writing:

### *Peak Shift*

Peak Shift refers to arts' ability to take the 'suchness' of things (form, colour, depth, motion) and exaggerate them for easy recognition, the way that the bright blue-ness of the sky may be emphasised in Matisse's cut-outs. This is exaggeration or hyperbole in poetry (often employed comically), such as James Tate's (1991) line: *she scorched you with her radiance*.

### *Grouping*

Grouping refers to our ability to create unitary objects by discovering correlations, such as our ability to see faces in Picasso's noisier cubist works. In poetry we notice through-metaphor, making sense of the whole. An example might be Shakespeare's use of the theatre as a

metaphor for life in 'As You Like It': 'All the world's a stage, And all the men and women merely players' (Shakespeare, 1599/1992, p. 227). We delight in binding these metaphorical aspects together, reinforcing our sense of orientation and recognition of the world around us. Clusters are used in therapeutic journaling as a technique, where ideas gravitate together, for example in a mind map or list, allowing the 'capture of a lot of information quickly and visually' (Thompson, 2011, p.95).

### *Contrast and Isolation*

Contrast and isolation play their part in grouping, where even diffuse edges are noticed, such as in Monet's (1903-4) 'The Houses of Parliament' (Effect of Fog) in which the interest in the edges of colour boundaries reward with the familiar shape of the government buildings. Isolation is the capacity to be with a particular element and to store it, whilst building a sense of the whole, such as noticing independently the stars, the moon, the village and trees in Van Gogh's (1889) 'The Starry Night', then we are rewarded when the whole scene clicks into place. Poetry exemplifies this well with its delineated verses and particularly perhaps the sonnet form, where the first two sets of four lines present the content of each stanza (room in Italian) in distinct sets; the third has a thematic turn and the final couplet a summation. 'Remember' by Christina Rossetti (1849/2001) is a good example. The first two stanzas begin with 'Remember me', the third has the turn: 'Yet if you should forget me for a while' The final couplet brings the proceeding lines together:

> Better by far you should forget and smile
> Than that you should remember and be sad.
>
> (Rosetti, 1849/2001, p.31)

### *Perceptual Problem Solving and Metaphor*

Sarah Lucas's (1992) image 'Two fried eggs and a kebab' plays to the ideas of **Perceptual Problem Solving** and **Metaphor.** The eye prefers the challenge of interpretation of the fried eggs as breasts and the kebab as a vagina to an image of complete nudity, where the reducted 'object' (quite literally meant in Lucas' political artwork) found following effort, is more pleasing than one that is instantly obvious. In poetry this is the work of interpretation, or

deconstruction. A poetic example is 'Diving into the wreck' by Adrienne Rich (1973), where the diving expedition reveals what is not included in the stories told about women and particularly black women, who may also be lesbians, mothers and poets. The reader is invited to accompany Rich on her dive literally below the surface story of the wreck to see its reality. The allegory of the layered dive appeals to what Okanski and Gibbs (2019) describe as the 'allegorical impulse', where non-habitual literary readers and readers who were encouraged to read the poem literally as a scuba dive identified symbolically with the poem.

### *Symmetry, Repetition and Balance*

Symmetry is both the topic and the experience of Leonardo da Vinci's (1490) '*Vitruvian Man'*. It represents 'ideal' human body proportions in a diagrammatical way, whilst also depicting the man with asymmetrical legs and feet. As humans we are drawn to symmetry as a sign of both balance and a quality of prey and predators that have symmetrical features. In poetry, symmetry is represented in, for example, a mirror poem, or by bookending like in Blake's (1794) 'The Tyger', in concrete form, or more subtly in rhyme scheme or rhythm. Similarly repetition and balance are at play in these examples, as in an artwork such as Andy Warhol's (1962) 'Marilyn Diptych', or M.C. Escher's (1939) tessellating lizards in 'Lizards no.124'.

### *Abhorrence of Coincidence/Generic Point of View*

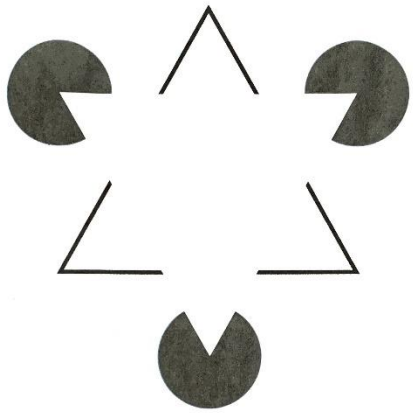
Abhorrence of coincidence/generic viewpoint is an interesting provocation in both art and poetry. Ramachandran and Hirstein (1999) describe this as:

> your visual system abhors interpretations which rely on a unique vantage point and favours a generic one, or more generally, it abhors suspicious coincidences. (p.30)

Our brain uses prior knowledge to predict where some information is missing (Stone, 2013). In Figure 1, we can identify a triangle facing down that intersects the 'circles' or 'pac man' figures and what looks like an occluded triangle but could be some chevrons.

***Figure 1***

Kanizsa's Triangle



Our experience of shapes and how overlays work influences our perception. There are a range of ways to perceive this image, as there are many ways to perceive a poem, such as the variety of readings of Robert Frost's (1923) 'Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening'. Another example might be the words that could be argued as 'missing', following the last line of Mary Oliver's 'The Journey':

> determined to save
> the only life you could save.
>
> (Oliver, 1986, p.38)

The inferred words are: 'which was your own.'

Abhorrence of coincidence would be an aversion to an obvious 'trick' by the writer, such as exploiting the multiple rhymes with '- ation'(e.g. station, generation, rumination, substantiation); it may briefly amuse but soon becomes predictable. The generic viewpoint would be a poem with only one point of entry, or that insists upon a particular reading. As language is so multiplicitous and experience so various, even the simplest or shortest of poems can give rise to discussion and CWTP facilitators are encouraged to allow these varied viewpoints.

***Rhythm***

Rhythm in art suggests movement or action, such as Katsushika Hokusai's (c.1830-1832) 'Under the Wave off Kanagawa', whose tendrils of water pounce like a tiger. Poems are

inherently rhythmic, whether they are formed as free-verse or in a sonnet.

By using images to stimulate aspects of neurophysiology, some of the overlapping terms between art and literature naturally form part of conversation; a door is opened to the metaphorical, allegorical and symbolic world and the possibility of understanding one another on a deeper level.

**The Art Box, Urban Sketching and Dixit Cards: Pros and Cons**

Two sets of postcards that I have found very useful are 'The Art Box' (Phaidon Editors, 2012) and 'Urban Sketching' (Campanario, 2015). Both these sets of postcards contain a hundred different images. Dixit cards accompany a board game and are archetypal images that borrow from fairytale, myth and storytelling (Roubira, 2008).

'The Art Box' contains a mixture of images mainly from the 19th and 20th Century, with a few from the 1400s. Some will be recognisible to many participants, such as famous works by Leonard da Vinci, Picasso, Degas, Miro, and many more. Figurative, landscape, sculptural and abstract images are included and there is a moment of recognition between person and image as having met before, meaning that as soon as participants enter the room, they are finding familiarity with what they already know, but also curiosity about what else can be discovered.

A sense of elitism could be attributed to 'The Art Box' cards, the knowledge that may come with an art history education, or the sense of entitlement, or finance, to enter an art gallery. This has never been reported by participants, whilst at the same time, I'm aware that some of the images are largely, although not exclusively, Eurocentric, white, male-dominated and comprise part of the Western art history canon.

For the above reasons I have spent time looking for images that were more global, local to the artists, and not necessarily from classically trained artists, to use alongside 'The Art Box'. I was delighted to find 'Urban Sketching', described as 'exquisite location drawings from around the world, which were created by a roster of international artists with a gift for discovering inspiration within the cities where they live and travel' (Campanario, 2015). These images are sometimes recognisable as specific city locations, such as San Francisco, Sydney, Stockholm, Hong Kong, whilst others are of 'happenings': a sports event in the Dominican Republic, a beach scene from Israel, a man sleeping in a cafe in Turkey, a barber's shop in UAE, and a bakery in a

Mauritanian market. Some of the sketches are annotated, encouraging a cross-over between art and words and a sense of scrap-booking. The provisional and instant nature of sketches supports the philosophy of CWTP where fragments are viable, pieces are not necessarily complete or polished, and there is room for change within and beyond the first draft. Some of the images include the situation from which the artist viewed their main subject, for example a car dashboard, or table and some are clearly created across the centre-fold of a notebook or sketchbook.

The 'Urban Sketching' images are evocative of place. This can be both transporting for the imagination, but also have the possibility of taking participants vividly to a memory of specific locations, over which they have no control, so there is a potential trigger. As one of Kate Thompson's participants commented on one of her workshops, 'I came across it quite unexpectedly and suddenly I was there' (Thompson, 2011, p.119). However, my experience is that people who have found places they have visited before can find themselves reunited and bathed in a memory brought back to life. After a traumatic experience such as a cancer diagnosis or bereavement, reconnecting to the time prior to the trauma can have a unifying affect, a visit to a different world that Hilary Mantel describes as:

> Your former life still seems to exist somewhere, but you can't get back to it; there is a glimpse in dreams of those peacock lawns and fountains, but you're fenced out, and each morning you wake up to the loss over again. (Mantel, 2014, p. 63)

There can be respite in memories and revisiting specific places in our minds and if participants find themselves suddenly emotionally connected to a loved one, or a nostalgic time of their lives through place, there can be the opportunity to explore this with others in the supportive setting of the group.

The Dixit cards have an archetypal quality, feeding into Nancy Mellon's idea that objects hold power; there are different extension sets named: Origins, Memories, Quest, Revelations, Harmonies, Daydreams, Odyssey, Journey.

These cards evoke and acknowledge both personal and common experience, traditional and mythical tales. Examples include: a compass laid out on a cloth map; a table after a feast; a doll's house; images captured in droplets of rain/tears; an older person made of autumnal leaves;

a child barricaded in with play bricks; a small child with a sword facing a large dragon; scales weighing money and a feather; someone finding a rose in a frozen landscape.

The cards are not straightforward and there are layers of meaning to be uncovered, alongside multiple interpretations. For this reason I am careful about introducing these cards to a group I don't know well, because although they can be taken on face value, it is difficult to avoid experiencing resonance from their references that may arise from close inspection or discussion.

## Guidelines for Using Art Cards for Practitioners

### *Preparing the Room*

I usually lay out the cards in advance somewhere in the room. For warm-ups, I place them on the main table, and for an exercise, onto a side table.

Cards are usually displayed non-reverentially, so although neatly laid out, each card is not given its own space; there is overlap with other cards and a sense that they can be touched without spoiling any kind of display. See figure 2 for an example.

Where space is limited, I might make small piles of the cards, enough for each individual to have a choice. I encourage participants to swap piles if they don't find anything suitable.

***Figure 2***

Example of art cards displayed in a welcoming environment [photograph]

### *Warming-up*

When people enter the room, they often comment on the cards. I introduce how we are going to use them to help us think about the day's topic, e.g., hopes and fears for the first session, or a specific theme. The card selection gives participants something to do while they are waiting for a group to gather and usually act as a conversation starter.

I make it clear that participants may just be drawn to a small aspect of the image: it could be a colour, or an atmosphere that the image emanates. I explain that participants do not have to know anything about the images, or the artist; the important part is that it has a quality which can support their response to the topic.

As the group settles, and if the group is large, I might begin with participants talking with a neighbour, so that people are not daunted by speaking to an audience. If it is a small group, I invite someone to start and we will move around in a circle giving each person a chance to say something about their card and relationship with the topic. This also gives an opportunity for the speaker to avoid being the focus of attention at what can be a tense time of 'breaking the ice', allowing other participants to look at the card, as opposed to the speaker.

By the time we have finished this round, there is a sense of connection to one another, to the images and some of the aesthetic attributes and vocabulary have entered the room, setting the scene for the creative writing to follow.

### *Mind Mapping Exercise*

There are overlaps with this exercise and Stepping Stones (Progoff, 1992) and Clustering (Thompson, 2011) where a number of ideas centre around a topic. In Stepping Stones, for example, the writer might be encouraged to think of seven books they have read, or five homes they have inhabited.

I encourage participants to choose a card they are drawn towards, fostering a sense of positivity towards their choice.

With an A4 or A3 piece of paper, participants are invited to place the card in the centre and lightly draw around it, See figures 3-5 for examples).

Using freely drawn lines leading out from the image, I ask participants to: 'Write what you see. Do this quickly and in repeated cycles, so that each sweep produces more ideas.'

Tools such as isolating windows or magnifiers can be introduced to encourage close engagement with the image.

I suggest adding an emotional quality or memory to each of the ideas, skipping over any that feel too provocative for that day, or words that don't suggest any further connections.

I then suggest the participants choose one idea that feels meaningful, but not overwhelming, and free-write for five minutes on the topic to see where it takes them. William Storr (2019) affirms that the brain is more drawn to meaning than objects that stand out.

A choice can be made by the facilitator, or the participants, as to what to share: the card, the mind map, the free writing, or the process.

I propose to participants that they can continue to shape the free-writing at home, and/or move around their mind map responding in writing to each of their separate notes. I advise that they do not write for more than 10-15 minutes at a time.

### *Gift Giving*

Participants are invited to keep their cards. Having a memento from the workshop can increase the longevity of its benefit when the participant re-finds the image at a later date and remembers, hopefully fondly, the group and their writing. In some groups I provide a 'scrap-book', so the journey of the series can be recorded. This allows individuals to have a place at home in which to reconnect with their workshop experience.

### *Thoughts on Access*

Some of the societal barriers to access, such as education and cultural perspectives, are discussed above. Although visual prompts are not accessible to visually impaired people, ‘Living paintings’ provide tactile and audio books that give access to a wide range of classic and contemporary art images in their ‘Touch to see’ range (The Living Paintings Trust, 2020).

Using images offers support to people who experience aphantasia, the inability to conjure images in the mind’s eye, but who can relate to given images.

## A Short Narrative Self-Study: 3 Cards; 3 Mind Maps; 3 Poems; 3 Commentaries

### *Methodology*

A narrative self-study has five characteristics, according to LaBoskey (2004). They are self-initiated, interactive, aim for improvement, qualitative and exemplar based. This study is self-initiated; it interacts via its reflexive elements. In my examples, a reflexive lens on my narration fills the gaps implied within the poetic text and situates experience in a wider cultural environment. The 'aim for improvement' is personal development through insight. It is qualitative (not quantitative) and provides examples from a range of writing experiences.

A critical realist perspective recognises a correlation between the complexities of storying people's lives and the reality of the world and experiences. Narrating a life requires 'emplotment', a process by which we organise experience with causal factors (Mattingly, 1998). My study organises my personal experiences in relation to using imagery, creative synthesis and my own insights; there is a beginning (mind mapping), middle (poem) and end (reflections), which form a story arc for each example.

Narrative knowing expands our experience of being human, by attending to individual narrations, set against a backdrop of grand narratives (Polkinghorne, 1988). By writing, particularly in a short form such as poetry, meaning and causality is condensed into a small space (Prendergast, Leggo, and Sameshima, 2009).

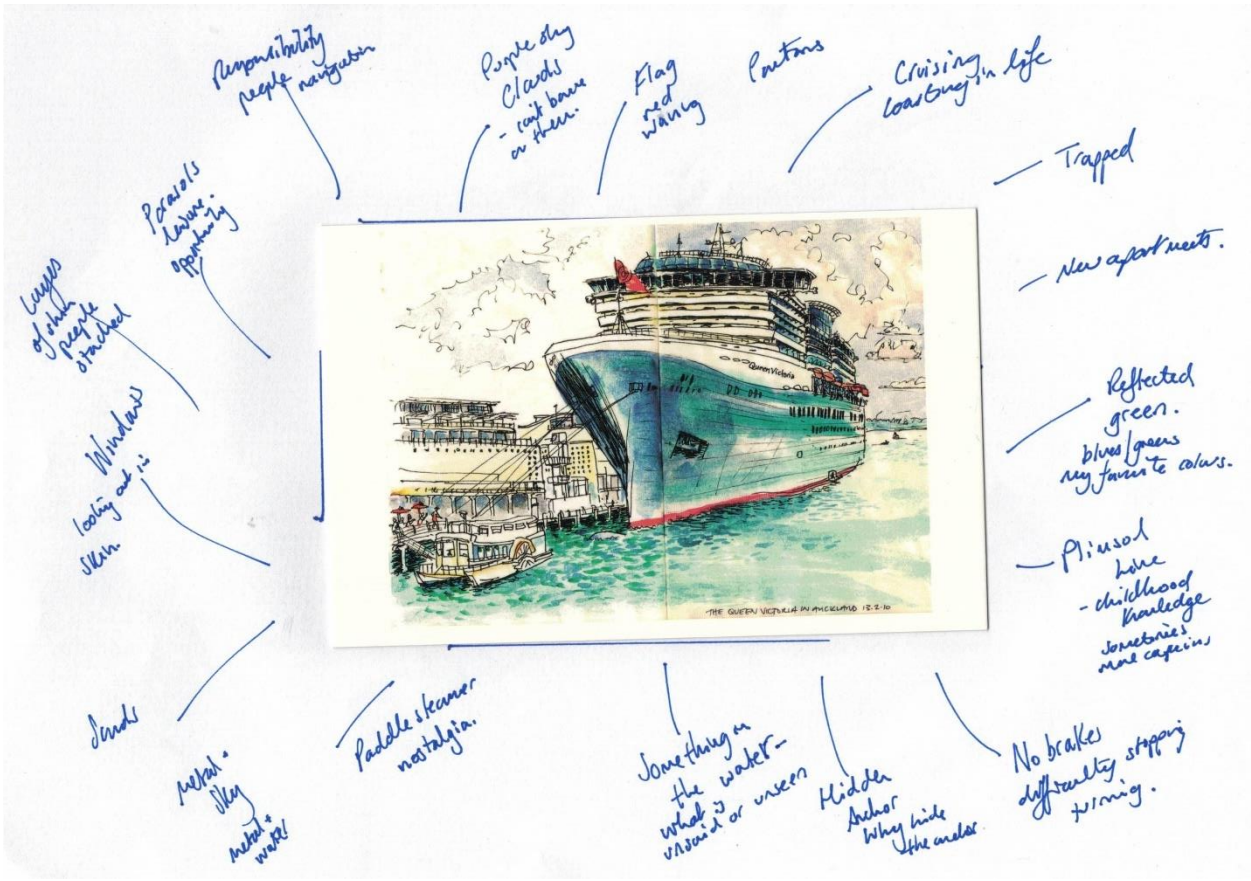
To triangulate this narrative self-study I have included evaluative feedback from workshop participants.

### *Method*

Over a period of three weeks, I picked three cards (one from 'Urban Sketching'; one from 'The Art Box' and one from Dixit). I created a mind map for each and using these notes as a basis, created a poem. For the purposes of this study, I wrote a commentary, including reflexivity, drawing on 1) access to metaphor 2) stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing and 3) personal insights

***Figure 3***

Postcard Mind Map: Ship




***Poem: Academic***

Ships know about sinking,
running aground —
ballast, masts
tilting away from the horizon,
anchors tucked up
in their chests on chains
coiled tight,
link on link.
The logic of stopping is lost
to the confusion of water,
a green sky reflected

and nothing to grip those steely sides;
the shadow of something askew,
bothering the back of the mind
whilst floating impossibly
above the Plimpsoll line.
The relentless screw-prop
of calendars, papers, intakes,
the weight of responsibility.
She turned towards the light
the sky tipping, hinged
on a flurry of cloud.

***Commentary***

**Access to metaphor.** Having spent the last two years reflecting on working in academia, I have written a lot on this topic and wasn't surprised to see it 'resurface'. However, I wouldn't have found the details in this 'ship' metaphor without the postcard. It occurred to me that ships don't have brakes like a car or a train and this was the hook for me into the topic of 'running aground'. It brought to mind recent news stories about academics taking their own lives due to overwhelm at work (BBC News, 2019; Times Higher Education, 2018). In an academic role which encourages self-care for students, it is important for me to 'practice what I preach'; congruence is lost if I find myself 'out of my depth', or nearing it and don't respond with self-care.

The poem exercised a sense of an unstoppable machine, which can be the experience of working in academia, with the annual rotation of tasks and intakes, and a sense of there being no way to stop this cycle. This vigorous and often energising rotation of duties is very much reflected in the lines:

The logic of stopping is lost
to the confusion of water

The physical tension of ‘holding’ or ‘holding back’ was depicted by the:

> anchors tucked up
> in their chests on chains

This was perhaps the most important line to me personally, that the capability of stopping is there, but sometimes people are unable to employ their resources and autonomy under pressure, even though it is there at their disposal.

Another important couplet for me was:

> whilst floating impossibly
> above the Plimpsoll line.

which reflects how often academics are willing, or expected, to fulfil impossible tasks that do not fit into the hours paid, and sometimes not even into waking hours. The image of the impossibility of floating is that ships seem top-heavy and workload outweighs support.

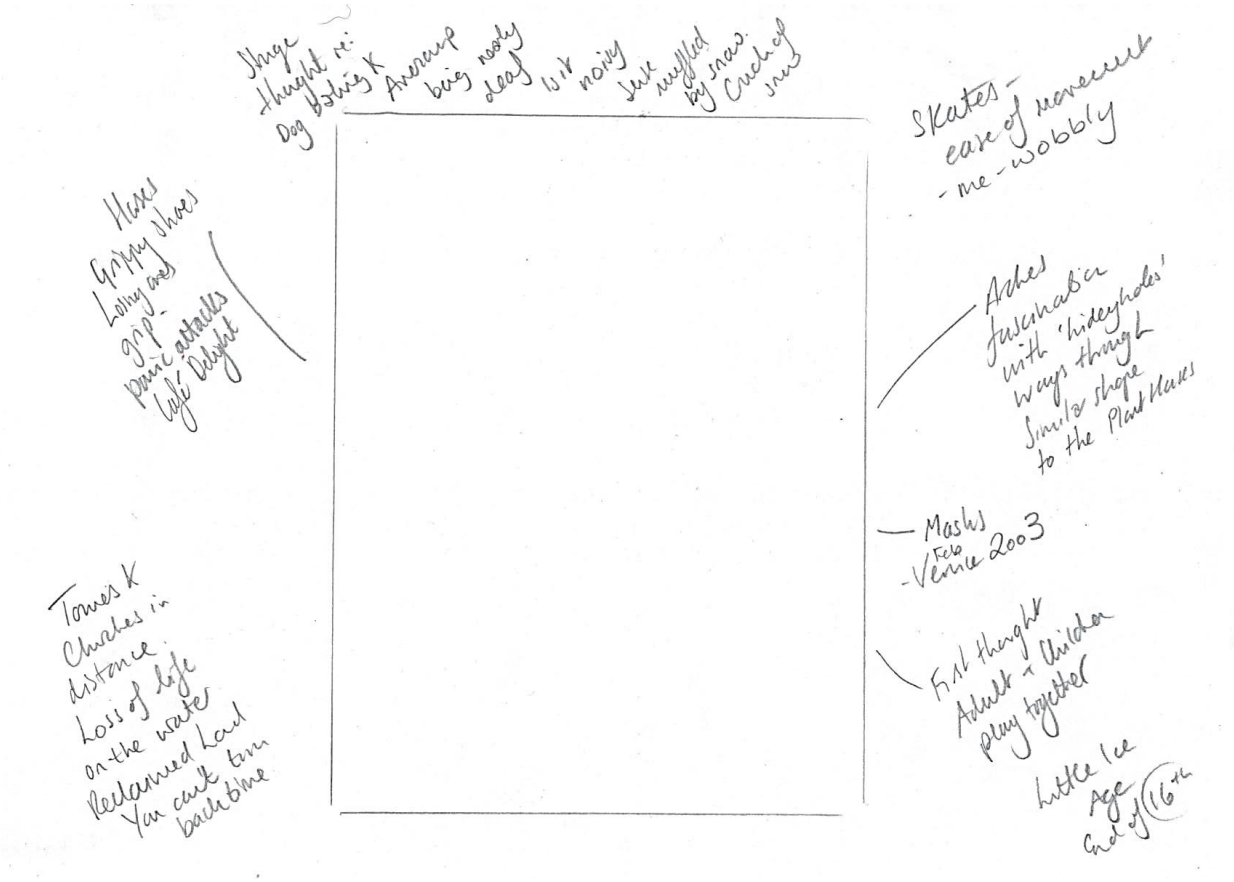
**Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing.** The ‘peak shift’ in the image is the exaggeration of the red Plimsoll line, which probably drew my attention to the ‘top heavy’ vessel. The mind mapping enabled ‘grouping’ and ‘isolation’, as my ideas clustered around the whole (the ship) and the parts (e.g., chains, anchor, cloud) of the image. These parts provided a word hoard and vocabulary to aid expression. The symmetry, repetition and rhythm came through the image to give the poem its poised pairs of lines, even in the ‘falling’ of the academic, there is this sense that the rhythm isn’t interrupted, it was indeed unstoppable.

**Personal insights.** On a positive note, I could take lessons from this imagery and ‘cautionary tale’: to start stopping in good time, to use my available resources, and to acknowledge that I’d chosen a very strong and capable vessel to represent the role of academic. However, it does not matter how strong and capable you are, it becomes meaningless if you end up:

> sinking,
> running aground —

***Figure 4***

Postcard Mind Map: A Scene on the Ice Near a Town




*Note:* We are unable to reprint. Please access the image from *The National Gallery*, 1998, https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-avercamp-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-a-town.

***Poem: A Scene on the Ice Near a Town (Hendrick Avercamp*, c1615)***

I saw the dog running,
her excitement sliding on ice,
sporting a smile, a shadow
and the thought of a bark
echoing like a skidding pebble.

How silent the scene,
where merriment and music

should be, the volume of
my brush switched off.

I paint as I experience:
the unjingling decorated
sleigh-horse;

silent flurry of fallen skirts,
ignored by skaters
and their soundless blades;

masked revellers -
mime artists sharing
symbolic gestures;

the church tower
rising tall without
the weight of bells;

the cold russet clouds
opening like a hole in the lake,
draining out all sound.

*Avercamp was a non-verbal (and probably deaf) artist, known as 'the mute of Kampen' (de stom van Campen)

(Williamson, 2020)

***Commentary***

**Access to metaphor.** I looked very closely at this image and used a magnifier to see some of its more obscure details. There was something about this very 'noisy' scene juxtaposed with my silent meditation on the image. I was particularly drawn to the horse and wondered whether it had 'grippy shoes'. This took me to the phrase 'losing one's grip' and things 'slipping'. I was surprised to turn the postcard over and discover that Avercamp was deaf,

perhaps amplifying his visual perceptiveness. I too have found hearing more of a challenge of late and recently had my ears tested, fearing my own ability to hear was slipping. It wasn't.

Given historical information about Avercamp's hearing, it was possible for me to 'ventriloquise', which is both an ekphrastic and writing for wellbeing technique (Bolton et al., 2006). The depiction of this silent world, also highlighted something for me personally, which is the experience of not being heard, which remains an issue for women (Kushner, 2019; Solnit, 2019), where my own sounds are not reflected back, described in Avercamp's 'stifled' paintbrush.

I began to notice silent potential in the image, such as mime artists and the church without bells in the distance. I would never have arrived at these ideas without the image, which becomes a vehicle for my own experience of the world. It provoked consideration of what I choose to 'hold back' and what I put out that is not heard:

> The russet cold clouds
> opening like a hole in the lake,
> sucking out all sound.

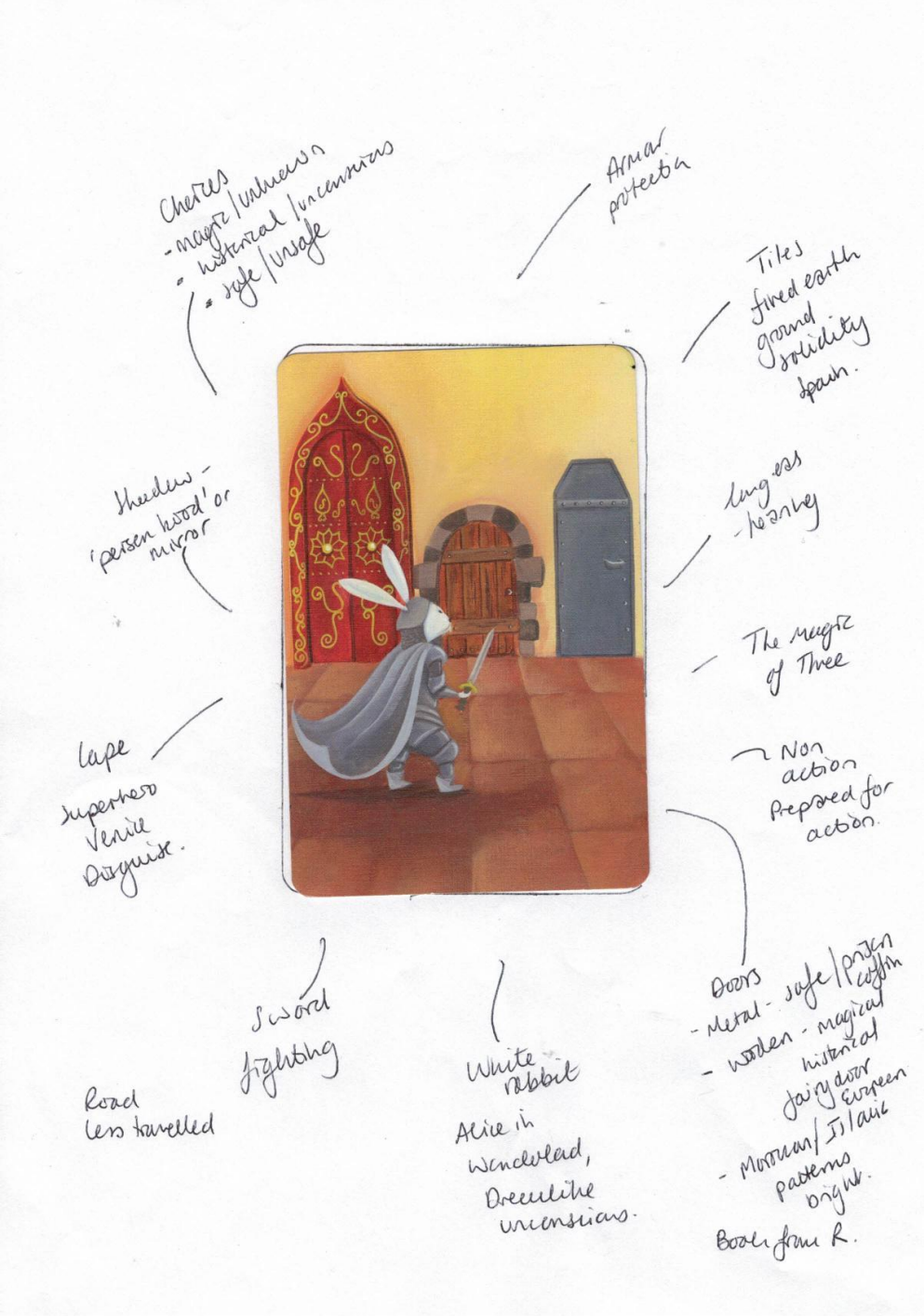
**Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing.** It was the clouds, perhaps painted to 'balance' the image that struck me. They became a counterpoint to the whole busy scene, as if, like the lake, they could drain the whole picture of its life. There are many 'viewpoints' within the image, encouraging my close reading of it and leading me to try the painter's viewpoint to support my own words and ideas. The 'layers' of creativity are built up, the images, the voice of the artist and my voice as writer.

**Personal Insights.** Bringing up two children, being an academic and a freelancer means that there is a lot of busy-ness in my life, and there is the tendency to be silent and stoic about very long days and work pressures. There is also the experience of struggling to have my voice heard in academia and beyond, the idea of 'lip service' paid to struggles on the front line, particularly an incongruence between what we teach and larger systems within which we work, both in higher education and outside where governments sweep aside facts, statistics and 'expertise' (currently notable around climate change). What I will take away from this exercise is the need to amplify what I do. Without amplification, one takes on more and more without recognising its value or beauty, as in the painting's plethora of activity. I recognise areas where I

have assimilated to this silent world, where, metaphorically speaking, I do not expect church bells to ring, or playful success to be noisy.

***Figure 5***

Postcard Mind Map: The Knight Rabbit



***Poem: Down the Rabbit Hole***

onto that tiled floor
you draw your sword,
but pause to notice
the shadow of your personhood.

Hesitate before the doors,
put on your armour,
your cape, prick up your ears –
ready for anything.

Ready for nothing –
bathe in the possibility
of a range of actions
not yet taken, of doors:

prison-like, steely
offering safety,
or a coffin
riveted closed

wooden, familiar
from fairy tales – the past
with its secrets, insights,
or old worn ways

ornate, sumptuous,
curiously luxuriant
in gold and scarlet
and possibly deceptive

and be with that
middle ground,

still as a hare sniffing
for signs of yourself.

***Commentary***

**Access to metaphor.** A choice of doors is archetypally about a crossroads in life; 'falling down the rabbit hole' from Alice in Wonderland (couldn, 1865) has become synonymous with finding oneself in an unexpected place and a choice to make. So, this card brought both an image and a story. It also provided objects of power (Mellon, 1992): a sword, armour, a cape.

I could relate to having a difficult choice to make (around next steps in career), having powerful tools (representing experience), and also stopping to consider the right decision. As a working mother, balancing parenthood, career, and finances is a constant circus trick (Hackman, 2015).

The rabbit's shadow gives it a reality that is often overlooked when rushing and emphasised for me that sense of hesitation. He doesn't look 'late' in this image; there is time.

**Stimulating aesthetics in preparation for writing.** Rhythm is notable in this image with the three doors, which are literally replicated in the poem, with the 'magic of three' rule applied. There is a possibility of a generic viewpoint being evoked, that the rabbit has to choose one of the doors. However, there may be other doors out of scene, or a corridor to follow, and this is where the poem leads to a fourth possibility of not choosing a door. The grouping of the rabbit and doors, less so the objects, suggested Lewis Carroll's story to me.

**Personal Insights.** Next steps in my career have been on my agenda for about two years now and has been the topic of a proper enquiry involving lots of writing, psychotherapy, and supervision. Like in the image, I have gathered my resources and potential together and there are choices ahead. However, I have, for now, decided to watch and see what unfolds. I'm attracted to, and suspicious of, all the doors and have moved through a period of 'freezing' to a sense of pausing to observe, which feels empowering, reflected in the poem. What is new is recognising a sense of 'personhood', a more solid sense of self and a range of resources and choices.

## Qualitative Responses from Workshop Participants

Bringing the responses of participants to this practice is important to me; I value their feedback and, as you will note below, the fresh perspectives they bring to this topic.

I asked a group of participants, from a hospital setting with whom I had worked for at least six weeks, about their experience of using postcard images to assist a verbal opening round prior to creative writing. Permission was sought from all participants to include their responses.

I have particularly drawn on their use of metaphor to describe the postcard uses. For one participant, the idea of the postcards as an 'anchor' arose as if there was something grounding and steadying; the anchor image was followed by the 'spark'ing of 'further ideas'. The two images contrast: the anchor is perhaps the ground from which the 'spark' of inspiration can fly off in all directions, rather like my mind map's lines above.

Another participant used the image of a 'hook' on which their writing could hang 'be it literally or metaphorically'. It is interesting to note that a hook and an anchor can have a similar shape, but a different function: one secures and the other, if you are lucky, generally catches. The hook relates to well-known imagery used by writers to describe the creative process: Ted Hughes (1967) with the metaphor of fishing, and Jeanette Winterson when interviewed by Miller (2005), with the metaphor of a bucket dipped into a well. The same participant described a concern pre-attendance of having 'no idea how I would ever begin to write' and the pressure to 'make it up'. They described how: 'the art cards opened the door into my own imagination', which has a sense of possibilities, and reminds me of Miroslav Holub's poem 'The Door' (Astley, 2002) and its invitation to: *Go and open the door*.

A third participant, described: 'I have been writing poetry for many years and have tended to get inspiration from a variety of places, but have never thought of using image.' They noted: 'a sense of place and the way the artist has responded emotionally to that and what else does poetry do if not that?' They also described their intention to visit an art exhibition by William Blake, a poet and an artist. I resonated with engaging with images leading to pilgrimages to see artist's work face-to-face, or to research their images further.

A fourth participant described: 'I really enjoy using images, they free my thoughts and enable me to tap into ideas that I was otherwise unaware of'.

There is some resonance here with other quotes. The word 'tap' reminds me of the unlocked potential of the 'hook' and Winterson's bucket down the well. The same participant

used the word ‘trigger’ in relation to working with images in a group, ’trigger’, like ‘spark’, is a fiery and explosive word, which on this occasion was applied to the group work and how collective creativity can make it ‘easier to share your feeling and emotions’.

The group sharing was mentioned by another participant describing how the process was ‘enhanced by listening to other participants talking about the images they had chosen and then listening to their writing stimulated by those images.’ I recognise how this dialogical work was missing from my reflexive self-study, although I experienced a dialogic relationship with the images.

A fifth participant responded to the image work by recounting: ‘a reminder of place, time, feeling or emotion might creep in, which enables you to untangle how you feel’; this prompts me to the think of the ‘figure-ground’ perception in Gestalt (Cherry, 2020) and the ‘Grouping’ element described above. It also portrays how I experienced Figures 3-5. This participant also brings forward a thread metaphor, one of ‘untangling’.

I was startled by the quotes from participants which arrived with me just as I was finishing the paper. It has provided me with a new vocabulary as a practitioner with which to describe the process of using the postcards to: anchor, hook, focus, spark, and untangle. Also, how one might connect with the artist as a fellow artist in the creative process, and how the group lends their lenses, to create a collaborative process.

## Conclusion

Mirroring a path many of our Master’s students take, I set out with curiosity about the practice I have developed, regularly bringing postcards into the CWTP encounter. What I have discovered is a rich history of practice using image amongst CWTP facilitators, a tradition in talking therapies, a rationale for this tool, and how this process works on a neurophysiological level. I have also enriched my personal practice, reflections, and insights, and found new vocabulary and ways of thinking about this process through workshop participants’ feedback. I hope that other practitioners can find inspiration in this article to take some of the practice suggestions forward with confidence. There is also potential for more in-depth research on this topic.

## References

Astley, N. (Ed.) (2002). *Staying alive: Real poems for unreal times.* Bloodaxe Books.

Avercamp, H. (1998) (c1615). A scene on the ice near a town [Oil on panel]. *The National Gallery*. Retrieved from https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/hendrick-avercamp-a-scene-on-the-ice-near-a-town.

BBC News. (2018). Under pressure: Cardiff University lecturer fell to death. Retrieved from https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-wales-south-east-wales-44389004.

Blake, W. (1794) The tyger. Retrieved from https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger.

Boast, R. (2013). *The echoing gallery*. Redcliffe Press.

Bolton, G, Byron, C, Hamberger, R. 'Feeling, smelling, hearing, tasting perhaps, but not seeing' in Writing from Objects. In G. Bolton, V. Field, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities* (pp. 91-95). Jessica Kingsley.

Bolton, G. (2006). Writing from objects. In G. Bolton, V. Field, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities* (pp. 74-96). Jessica Kingsley.

Bolton, G. (2011). *Write yourself: Creative writing and personal development.* Jessica Kingsley.

Bolton G., Field, V., & Thompson, K. (Eds.) (2006). *Writing works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities.* Jessica Kingsley.

Bucci, W. (1997). Symptoms and symbols: A multiple code theory of somatization. *Psychoanalytic Inquiry*, *17*(2), 151-172. https://doi.org/10.1080/07351699709534117.

Cardouat, M. (2008). *Le lapin chevalier* playing card. In Roubira, J-L. *Dixit*. Libellud.

Carroll, L. (1865/1994). Alice in wonderland. Puffin Classics

Cherry, K. (2020). *Figure-ground perception in psychology*. Retrieved from https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-figure-ground-perception-2795195.

da Vinci, L. (1492). *The* v*itruvian man* [Pen and ink with wash over metalpoint on paper]. Retrieved from https://mymodernmet.com/leonardo-da-vinci-vitruvian-man/.

Dewhurst, M. (2015). The queen Victoria visits Auckland, New Zealand. [pen and ink]. In G. Campanario, *100 postcards: 100 beautiful location sketches from around the world cards*. Quarry Books.

Escher, M.C. (1965). *Lizards (No.124)* [Ink]. Retrieved from https://collectionerus.ru/collections/pussycat/5/.

Freud, S. (1899/1955). *The interpretation of dreams*. Strachey (Ed.). Basic Books.

Frost, R. (1923). Stopping by woods on a snowy evening. In E. C. Lathem (Ed.), (1969), *The poetry of Robert Frost*. Henry Holt & Co.

Hackman, R. (2015). *Superboss: six women on juggling motherhood and work*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2015/sep/15/women-leaders-maternity-leave-work-career.

Hillman, J. (1975). *Re-visioning psychology.* Harper & Row.

Hokusai, K. (c.1830-32). *Under the wave off Kanagawa*. [Woodblock print; ink and colour on paper] Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/60013238.

Holmes, E.A., & Matthews, A. (2010). Mental imagery in emotion and emotional disorders. *Clinical Psychology Review*, 30, 349-362.

Hughes, T. (1967). *Poetry in the making: A handbook for writing and teaching.* Faber.

Hyman, J. (2006). In search of the big picture. *New Scientist, 191*(2563), 44-45.

Jung, C.G. (1966/2003). *Jung: The spirit in man, art, and literature*. Routledge.

Kanizsa, G. (1955). Margini quasi-percettivi in campi con stimolazione omogenea. *Rivista di Psicologia*, *49*(1), 7–30.

King, F-A. (Ed.) (2016). *From palette to pen*. Holburne Museum.

Kushner, D.M. (2019). *Women and silence: Is your voice being heard?* Retrieved from https://www.psychologytoday.com/gb/blog/transcending-the-past/201907/women-and-silence-is-your-voice-being-heard.

LaBoskey, V. (2004). The methodology of self-study and its theoretical underpinnings. In J. Loughran, M. L. Hamilton, V. LaBoskey, & T. Russell (Eds.), *International handbook of self study of teaching and teacher education practices* (pp. 817-869). Kluwer Academic Publishing.

Lakoff, G., & Johnson, M. (2003). *Metaphors we live by.* Harper & Row.

Lengelle, R., & Meijers, F. (2009). Mystery to mastery: An exploration of what happens in the black box of writing and healing. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 22*(2), 57-75.

Lengelle, R., & Sellen, D. (2015). *Career cards: A tool for surviving and thriving in the 21st century*. Black Tulip Press.

Lucas, S. (1992). *Two fried eggs and a kebab*. [Food and wooden table] Retrieved from https://www.saatchigallery.com/artists/artpages/sarah_lucas_2.htm.

Mantel, H. (2014). *Hilary Mantel on grief*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/dec/27/hilary-mantel-rereading-cs-lewis-a-grief-observed.

Mattingly, C. (1998). *Healing dramas and clinical plots: The narrative structure of experience*. Cambridge University Press.

Mellon, N. (1992). *Storytelling and the art of imagination*. Yellow Moon Press.

Miller, L. (2005). *A mind of one's own*. Retrieved from https://www.theguardian.com/books/2005/oct/22/fiction.jeanettewinterson.

Monet, C. (1903-4). *The houses of parliament (Effect of fog)* [Oil on Canvas]. Retrieved from https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/437128.

Munden, P. (2014). *Positioning poetry*: A maverick framework for the curious and bold. Middlesex University: Institute for Work Based Learning

Noda, Y., Silverstein, W., Barr, M., Vila-Rodriguez, F., Downar, J., Rajji, T., & Blumberger, D. (2015). Neurobiological mechanisms of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation of the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex in depression: A systematic review. *Psychological Medicine*, *45*(16), 3411-3432. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0033291715001609.

Okanski, L., & Gibbs, R.W. (2019). Diving into the wreck: Can people resist allegorical meaning? *Journal of Pragmatics*, 141, 28-43. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pragma.2018.12.014.

Oliver, M. (1986). *The dream work.* The Atlantic Monthly Press.

Parlett, M. (1991). Reflections on field theory. *The British Gestalt Journal*, 1, 68-91.

Phaidon Editors (Eds.) (2012). *The art box*. Phaidon Press.

Polkinghorne, D. (1988). *Narrative knowing and the human sciences*. State University of New York Press.

Prendergast, M., Leggo, C., & Sameshima, P. (2009). *Poetic inquiry: Vibrant voices in the social sciences*. Sense.

Progoff, I. (1992). *At a journal workshop* (Revised edition). Tarcher.

Ramachandran, V.S., & Hirstein, W. (1999). The science of art: A neurological theory of aesthetic experience. *Journal of Consciousness Studies, 6*(6-7), 15-51.

Rich, A. (1973). *Diving into the wreck*: *Poems 1971-1972.* W.W.Norton.

Robinson, M. (2000). Writing well: Health and the power to make images. *Medical Humanities* 26, 79-84.

Rosetti, C. (1849/2001). Remember me. In *Cristina Rosetti*: *The complete poems*. Penguin Books.

Roubira, J-L. (2008). *Dixit*. Libellud.

Shakespeare, W. (1599/1992). As you like it (Act II Sc VII) In *The complete works of William Shakespear*e (p. 227).

Solnit, R. (2019). *Whose story is this?* Granta.

Stone, J.V. (2013). *Bayes' rule: A tutorial introduction to Bayesian analysis.* Sebtel Press.

Stoner, A. (2006). Singing baked bean tins and other talismanic objects. In G. Bolton, V. Field, & K. Thompson (Eds.), *Writing Works: A resource handbook for therapeutic writing workshops and activities* (pp. 75-79). Jessica Kingsley.

Storr, W. (2019). *The science of storytelling.* Harper Collins.

Tate, J. (1991). Poems to some of my recent poems. In *James Tate* s*elected poems:* Wesleyan University Press.

Times Higher Education (2018). Lecturer's suicide a 'wake-up call' on overworking in academia. Retrieved from https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/lecturers-suicide-wake-call-overworking-academia.

The Living Paintings Trust (2020). *Living paintings*. Retrieved from https://livingpaintings.org/.

Thomas, V. (2016). *Using mental imagery in counselling and psychotherapy.* Routledge.

Thompson, K. (2011). *Therapeutic journal writing*. Jessica Kingsley.

van Gogh, V. (1889) *The starry night.* [Oil on Canvas] Retrieved from https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79802.

Various Artists (2015) In G. Campanario, *Urban Sketching: 100 postcards: 100 beautiful location sketches from around the world cards*. Quarry Books

Warhol, A (1962) *Marilyn Diptych.* [Acrylic paint on canvas]. Retrieved from https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/warhol-marilyn-diptych-t03093.

Williamson, C. (2016). *Split ends.* Eyewear.

Williamson, C. (2018). *Visiting the minotaur.* Seren.

Williamson, C. (2020). A scene on the ice near a town. *Raceme* 9, 19.

***Claire Williamson*** *is Director of Studies of the MSc in Creative Writing for Therapeutic Purposes at Metanoia Institute. She's a doctoral candidate at Cardiff University, exploring 'Writing the 21st Century Grief Novel'. Claire is an award-winning poet; her latest collection* Visiting the Minotaur *(Seren, 2018) was a National Poetry Day choice for book groups. Writing for performance is a passion; Claire has written many song cycles for Welsh National Opera involving far-ranging communities and has written texts to be incorporated into plays for Firebird Theatre. Mentoring writers, with a focus on the creative process and one's relationship with the text, is a growing aspect of Claire's practice.*

# Words

**Laura Grace Simpkins**

**Author Note**

Correspondence concerning this essay should be emailed to: lauragsimpkins@gmail.com.

I collect words like a friend of mine collects Facebook and Twitter and Instagram followers: I have lists and lists of them on my computer, mind-map after mind-map of them in my notebooks. I take pleasure in their tastes and textures; the initial presence of a word in my mouth, how it rebounds through my body, moves in and out of me. I love how 'linguistic', 'semantic', and 'semiotic' roll off my tongue, shimmy through my shoulders and gyrate at my hips, round and round. There's a special kind of sexiness, I think, reserved for 'pedantic'.

Some evenings I obsessively scroll through my spreadsheets or flick through my notebooks, admiring my word collection—as I imagine my friend does her statistics across her social media. 'You do it for enjoyment and validation,' my therapist had surmised when I confessed to such a compulsion, 'but also, I imagine, for a sense of ownership, a sense of control.'

I had ended up as an outpatient of a crisis team, again. I had been referred to them after breaking down at the doctor. There I had sobbed, retched, and recoiled at my intrusive thoughts on numbers, time, and death. I remember saying that I wanted to kill myself on my birthday because I liked the symmetry. A couple of months after that and I was apparently suitable for discharge from the team. I'd arrived at the final assessment with a psychologist, having spent the previous weeks reformulating my diagnoses with countless others.

This psychologist was explaining that I needed to build up my portfolio of mental health conditions. It would be like having a whole other CV: 'So, there's the bipolar that runs through the middle, up and down like a wave on a graph. Underneath that, there are all of your comorbid

anxieties. And even further below those, there's your death anxiety, a foundation of sorts. Your underlying death anxiety makes you try to control the things you can't by trying to control the things you think you can, producing your obsessive-compulsive disorder as well as your sensory processing disorder (though I appreciate that's formally undiagnosed). Your comorbid anxieties exacerbate your mood disorder, which, in turn, heightens your OCD and SPD.'

There he had it. Bipolar, comorbid anxieties, death anxiety, OCD, SPD. Messy, multiplicitous words. I was aiming for something neater, more compact: a single answer, one word. I was searching for a grand unified theory of my mental health. A theory of—a word for—everything. An elegant and exhaustive and increasingly unlikely solution. The psychologist was sitting there, smugly, as if he had completed a particularly challenging cryptic crossword without checking the cheats. I knew he was as distracted as all the others. While they assessed, classified, taxonimised, diagnosed, they were always looking the other way to whatever it was I was trying to articulate, which would recede and then withdraw out of sight, under words upon words upon words, remaining un-deciphered code.

Some words, like 'calculate', 'enumerate', 'formulate', I drool over. Others I cannot stomach. Numbers affect me the most severely, both positively and negatively. A few months before the breakdown at the doctor's—and the subsequent referral to the crisis team—I was advised to have assessments for autism spectrum condition (ASC). I moved back to my parents' house from university and completed my postgraduate degree from there.

The word 'autism' was promising. I thought it might contain the answer; finally, a something for everything. The assessment results came through the post. The letter read, 'You have a dislike for even numbers. You love your birth date as it is all odd numbers. Odd and even numbers are associated with colours. For example, odd numbers are yellow, black, and red. Even numbers are pink and green.' The association of words (or numbers) with colours is known as grapheme-colour synaesthesia, one of the most common types. I picked my GCSE and A-Level subjects, as well as my undergrad and postgrad modules, based on how I saw them as colours. My interest in the topics themselves was irrelevant. The letter continued: 'You described panicking about shapes, colours, objects, and textures, and there are many things you find sensorially offensive.' Like the poor grammar in this letter, I fumed as I read it, which I couldn't not correct.

'They don't think I have Asperger's,' I said, sitting down with my parents. I had gone to my room to read the letter on my own.

'Why not?' said mum, eyebrows raised. We were all surprised.

'They said I demonstrate many characteristics of high-functioning autism, but not all of them. There's a suggestion that it might be more "sensory processing disorder" (amongst other things), but there would have to be more tests and more waiting lists for that to be confirmed.'

'Are there any suggestions as to where to go from here?' mum asked. She should have known better.

'No,' I replied, looking down at the letter. 'Not really.'

'So that's it,' she concluded, trying to contain her anger, presumably for my sake. 'No more help offered. Thank god you didn't spend all your savings on those private assessments.'

I nodded. Then I had to go back inside because she had cleared her throat in the way that made me want to strangle her. Dad hadn't said anything throughout. We were all disappointed.

The autism assessments had left me deeply embarrassed. Not for the first time, I felt accused of making it all up—like I had been looking for attention, as several of my friends thought. One of them had told me, in no uncertain terms, that 'those who chase diagnoses get diagnoses.' I waited until after I was discharged from the crisis team—all those months after the autism assessment results—to contact them. I wrote, 'It's not about me "chasing" a diagnosis or wanting to add another string to my bow. Unfortunately, I operate in a system which will not help me unless I am diagnosed with something. It is not about whether you or I think I have Asperger's, it is about listening to your friend, understanding their concerns, and offering your opinion if they ask for it.' We made up after that.

'Sorry I was overly-sensitive,' I said later, on the phone.

'Sorry I wasn't sensitive enough,' was the reply.

I had been applying for a PhD in Film Studies and had written a proposal on cinema and autism. I'd met with potential supervisors and funding for the three years would have been in place. After I had the assessment results back, however, it was as though I had lost any potential authority on the topic. I no longer thought I had a claim to 'autism': I felt that I would have been appropriating and exploiting the condition. All of the words I had been reading and writing and collecting for that project slowly faded into the distance and out of legitimate use.

I was deeply embarrassed because I *had* been chasing a diagnosis; I *had* wanted to add another string to my bow. I thought that one word—'autism'—might contain the answer in a way that two or three or the twenty or so words I ended up with simply wouldn't.

I knew all along that a diagnosis is inherently arbitrary. That it is just one word or, perhaps, several. It doesn't prove, nor disprove, lived reality, not really. For me though, 'autism' was a claim to legitimacy, a much-needed key to unlocking help, an explanation for family and friends. Even if I had been diagnosed with 'autism', I doubt it would have changed my identity, treatment, or relationships. Most likely, I'd have come to the same conclusion via different workings: the realisation that psychiatric language is random, vague, and often misleading—on both sides of the diagnostic line. The conditions systematised in the DSM-5 are made from a number of letters just like all the other words: signs and signifiers, nothing more.

My one-word hypothesis had fallen through. Soon after I worked out one word wouldn't do, I knew that neither would two nor three nor twenty. I needed hundreds, thousands, hundreds of thousands. I needed all the words in my spreadsheets and notebooks and more. I needed to reclaim the language of my mental health, away from the psychiatric and towards the personal. It didn't have to be one or the other, I'd already decided that, so much as a combination of the two. I'd take all my medications, check in with my therapist and the doctors when I was required to, have my blood tests on time, and fill in the never-ending questionnaires. I'd do all the things I'm supposed to do, but also, I'd write.

I needed my own words, not just those given to me. I needed words I could use to express myself with, to have fun with, to hit the target rather than miss: I needed (and I wanted) to play with language, grammar, and syntax. It wouldn't be enough to simply read and write and collect anymore; I wanted to neologise, coin, invent, create. I turned my back on academic writing (I dropped the PhD applications altogether at the end of that year) and gave creative nonfiction a go.

***Laura Grace Simpkins*** *is a creative nonfiction writer whose personal essays describe her mental health using colours, shapes, and patterns. Her work has been published by The Guardian, Yoga International, and The Polyphony, and has been broadcast on BBC Radio Bristol. Simpkins is currently collaborating with the Wellcome Collection on a research project about medication and the environment, and is developing her first book, Lithification. Her website is at* lauragsimpkins.com.

LIRIC
The Lapidus International Research and Innovation Community Journal

*Review*

# An Open Invitation to Review for *LIRIC*

**Jeannie Wright, PhD**

**Visiting Professor, University of Malta, MT**

**Author Note**

Correspondence should be emailed to *LIRIC* Reviews Editor: Deborah.Southwell@outlook.com.

## Introduction

> *The white policeman who shot the Black child and was acquitted… I was really sickened with fury, and I decided to pull over and just jot some things down in my notebook… And that poem came out, without craft. (Lorde, 1984/2007, pp. 106-107)*

Audre Lorde's words from decades ago could have been written yesterday. Racial injustice and police brutality are not new, and this year's outrages have brought protests, such as Black Lives Matter, to the fore.

COVID-19, now a global pandemic, and its economic impact, environmental catastrophe—and actions around anti-racism—have certainly got me out on the streets again, face covered and socially distanced.

As well as reading and writing, I have found radio and podcasts a calming way to take part in different 'conversations.' Here I plan to share some of these audio treats, and one video party, with *LIRIC* readers.

In the references at the end of this short essay, I have listed some poets, memoirists and essayists whose work might be new to you: Angela Davis (1971), Jackie Kay (1998), Audre

Lorde (1984/2007), Natasha Trethewey (2020), and Louise Fazackerley (2020). Some of it was new to me. I have now incorporated some of these creative resources into writing workshops and research.

> **Critical voice:** Huh, I don't know who you think they are, these people who might be the *LIRIC* readers?
>
> **Me:** Shhhhh

Growing up, BBC Radio 3 was not family listening in our house. One friend said that our mix of singalong and pop was 'low brow.' These days, listening to more radio and podcasts from BBC Radio 3 maybe means I am going more 'hi brow.' I think it is more that their spoken word programmes and presenters have changed—and for the better. There is something about a voice in your kitchen, your home, taking that voice out with you on 'allowed' walks during these very strange months. A voice that has been very important to me is Jackie Kay's.

### *'Maw Broon Visits a Therapist,'* and More…

When the Scottish Makar (the national poet or laureate for Scotland) and activist Jackie Kay (1998) writes satirically about therapy in the poem, 'Maw Broon visits a Therapist,' a lot of the students where I have taught counselling and psychotherapy do not get the references. Kay mocks the therapy industry's rituals, the clock, and 'the wee box of tissues' (p. 47) from the point of view of Maw Broon, a cartoon character who wears a headscarf, and carries a shopping bag as battered as she is, or more usually, a mop and bucket. Maw Broon is a Scottish comic icon from 'The Broons' in the *Sunday Post*. The dialect is thick and it does not take long to 'translate' but that is not the point. How welcome would Maw Broon, or any woman of her age and class, feel in your writing groups? How have you achieved that?

Louise Fazackerley, a performance poet from Wigan, facilitates writing groups in places where Maw Broon might feel at home. Fazackerley calls them 'a United Nations of women' around a table in a women's refuge in the North of England. In a YouTube clip she performs her spoken word poem, 'Writer's Group at the Women's Refuge' (Fazackerley, 2020, pp. 47-49). Her other recent print collection *The Lolitas* (2019) also featured on the *The Verb* (BBC Radio 3), in an outstanding episode this summer.

*The Verb* is unusual. Hosted by Ian McMillan, the Bard of Barnsley, the accents are Northern British, Caribbean, and South Asian. It is full of humour, where appropriate. In July, one episode focused on 'Domestic Violence in Language, Myths and Fairy Stories.'

The episode was so good I have listened to it twice now, not at 10 o'clock on Friday night when it is broadcast in the UK, but on BBC Sounds. Listening on demand at any time of day is a particularly good thing. In addition to introducing me to Louise Fazackerley, I had also never heard Natasha Trethewey read before. In a low voice, Trethewey chose extracts from her new book, *Memorial Drive: A Daughter's Memoir* (2020). She is a former United States Poet Laureate and Pulitzer Prize winner and, in keeping with the focus of this episode of *The Verb*, her mother was murdered by her stepfather.

Debbie Cameron, meanwhile, a feminist linguist who describes herself on Twitter as 'word spinster', pointed out how abuses of language, particularly the way violence against women is reported in the media, needs to be challenged, very urgently.

And finally, Kathryn Williams used song lyrics to tell very personal stories.

*The Verb* is always worth listening to by anyone who loves language, but this episode highlighted the power of words to change the writer, the reader, the listener and even the world. How are you working with these moments and movements in your writing, listening, and reading?

**Words Transforming the World**

As a teenager, apart from reading the Broons, Jackie Kay grew up with a picture of the imprisoned black American activist, Angela Davis, on her bedroom wall. She laughed about it when they were filmed recently, talking together about racism, universities, misogynist violence, and feminist sons (Cambridge Sociology, 2019).

Part of the Black Power movement in the 1960s, and accused of being accessory to armed robbery, Angela Davis was known worldwide and campaigned for, as a political prisoner, before she was acquitted on all charges. She edited *If they Come in the Morning: Voices of Resistanc*e, soon after her release, and it was published in the UK in 1971 (Davis, 1971).

Angela Davis talks about being a witness to a historical moment when many people did not expect to survive. The depth, humour and warmth of this conversation bears multiple viewings. Both Jackie Kay and Angela Davis have written autobiographies, under some duress

from publishers in Davis' case, and this programme caused me to wonder if their writing was a therapeutic process or more like twisting knives in wounds? You might want to ask yourself about that.

Angela Davis and Audre Lorde are American activists, poets, and essayists. Audre Lorde, whose work forms a trajectory from the early 1970s poems, speeches, and essays, in *Sister Outsider*, re-issued in 2007, to the *Cancer Journals*, published in 1980 and now a Penguin Classic, died in 1992. Self-described 'black, lesbian, mother, warrior, poet,' Lorde's work has resurged again in writing workshops and research. If you have not come across any of Lorde's work, you have a treat in store, starting with an episode of *Free Thinking*, another BBC Radio 3 programme.

I love being read to, and when poems are spoken out loud, they come alive. In this programme, Audre Lorde's children read from some of her poetry. Jackie Kay reads from letters she'd received after meeting Audre at the first Women's Book Fair in London in the 1980s. Hearing their voices read, their comments on what reading the words mean to them, is a powerful and moving experience. The performance artist, Selina Thompson, comments in the same programme on how Audre Lorde's writing is her legacy for young black activists *now* as well as in earlier movements.

> **Critical Voice**: This is hardly a review is it? You have enthused, no critical thinking at all.
>
> **Me**: Shhhhhh. There's no need for all reviews to be 'critical.'

Angela Davis (1971), Jackie Kay (1998), Audre Lorde (1984/2007), Natasha Trethewey (2020), Louise Fazackerley (2020). Would you like to review any of these authors' works, with their latest books ranging from memoir to poems? Do you have your own list of great works and would like to review one of those? We would love to hear from you.

## References

Bari, S. (2020). Landmark: Audre Lorde. *Free Thinking.* BBC Radio 3. Retrieved October 6, 2020, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0004my0.

Macmillan, I. (2020). Domestic violence in language, myths, and fairy stories. *The Verb*. BBC Radio 3. Retrieved October 6, 2020, from https://www.bbc.co.uk/sounds/play/m000kpz1 Accessed: 6/10/2020.

Davis, A. Y. (Ed.). (1971). *If they come in the morning: voices of resistance.* Women's Press.

Decolonise Sociology (2019). *Angela Davis in conversation with Jackie Kay*, introduced by Monica Moreno Figueroa [Video]. Retrieved October 6, 2020, from https://www.sociology.cam.ac.uk/news/davisandkay. (*NB: one of only five academic staff at the University of Cambridge who self-identify as Black.*)

Fazackerley, L. (2019). *The Lolitas.* Verve Poetry Press.

Fazackerley, L. (2020). *Bird street.* The Secret Writers' Club..

Kay, J. (1998). *Maw Broon visits a therapist.* In J. Kay (Ed.), *Off colour.* Bloodaxe Books.

Lorde, A. (1980). *The cancer journals.* Inkster Press.

Lorde, A. (1984/2007). *Sister outsider: Essays and speeches.* Ten Speed Press.

Trethewey, N. (2020). *Memorial drive: a daughter's memoir*. Bloomsbury.

***Jeannie Wright*** *PhD has been a member of Lapidus almost since its beginnings. She has taught and researched in several universities and practised writing for wellbeing in community agencies internationally. She has been a reviewer and editorial board member of journals mostly connected to talking therapies and is delighted to be part of the new Lapidus journal,* LIRIC. *Reflective writing in counselling and psychotherapy' is now in a 2nd edition with Sage. Editing books like* Writing Cures *and producing other publications that show how fantastically useful creative writing is will continue and she is now writing more poetry and fiction.*

# 2021 Creative Bridges Conference Announcement

# **Bridging the World with Words**

## A Follow-the-Sun International eConference

## 18th – 19th September, 2021

**Our vision – Our challenge**
Broaden the learning opportunities
Encourage interactive and engaging experiences
Improve access for participants around the world
Nurture vital conversations
Performances, plenaries, and breakout sessions easily accessible on-demand
Interactive exhibition features
Build research-practice collaborations
Content delivered in digestible segments
Facilitate international networking
Plentiful opportunities for sponsorship exposure

**Our Aim**
A 24/7 follow-the-sun fully-online agenda that kicks off at the international date line and circles the globe twice without you needing to miss your sleep or the great experiences and learning available.

**Get Ready**
Add the date to your diary 18th–19th September, 2021
Follow us here for conference updates
https://creativebridgesbristol.com/conference-updates/