

If We Don't Tell Our Stories We Disappear; The connections between creative storytelling, aging, health and well being.

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Resident artist in the Arts Health and Seniors Project

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The *Arts Health and Seniors Project* initiated in 2006 in Vancouver, B.C. Canada, was created with the intention to contribute to the existing knowledge surrounding the connections between health and well being and creativity with older adults. This three-year community engaged arts research project was initially inspired by the findings of *The Creativity and Aging Study* Cohen (2006). The findings of this research project were based on the controlled study in three American cities with older persons who were living independently. It concluded that quality programming in the arts has a significant impact on maintaining and in some cases improving older person's physical, mental, and social health, even when compared to recreational programming in a similar context. Key aspects of this research study suggested the older adults who participated in the community engaged arts programs revealed a positive impact on maintaining independence and on reducing dependency and suggested older persons involved in artistic practice in community appear to enjoy a greater sense of independence. This shift

in identity that results in a stronger sense of independence, the report concludes, may indicate a reduction in the need for future long-term care.

Inspired by *The Creativity and Aging Study* Cohen (2006) the Vancouver Coastal Health Authority through the Smart Fund and Vancouver Parks and Recreation's Cultural Office committed themselves to launching a three year project which sought to focus its efforts on community engaged arts practice with older persons with the aim of adding to existing knowledge that could improve health promotion to vulnerable older adults and to improving programming for older adults in the Vancouver-area.

The Silver Harbour Digital Storytelling Group was one of the four sites in the Arts Health and Seniors Project. Corin Browne and I, Patti Fraser, were engaged to work as media artists at the Silver Harbour Centre. Both of us have worked with and been a part of the founding of the nationally recognized Summer Visions Film Institute for Youth (www.cinematheque.bc.ca). Through this work and other projects we have mentored hundreds of youth produced media projects.

Now as the resident artists at Silver Harbour Centre, we were working with a group of older adults for the first time. They were aged 67 to 87. Some of whom had never turned on a computer or held a camera before.

For next three years we will mentor older adults in digital video production in order for them to create stories that have meaning will be our task. This task and the people I have come to know and work with has led me as an artist/researcher into considering the ways in which autobiography and the re-telling of stories from our lived experiences can and does affect our health and well being.

Silver Harbour Digital Storytelling Group

Many things happened to the participants over the course of these three years. Some older adults in their eighties who worked with us the first year did not have the desire or felt the need to master the required digital technologies to produce stories. These participants worked with youth video mentors to realize their memoirs. The stories in this first year stories were based on reminiscences of living through the great depression in Saskatchewan, of the care and demand of living with a beloved husband who succumbs to Alzheimer's, of childhood journeys of adventure across frozen lakes to a candy store, and a vision a newcomer to Canada has on the first day of her arrival.



Youth video mentor Sophia Moulton with Edythe Haack & Bessie Hammond

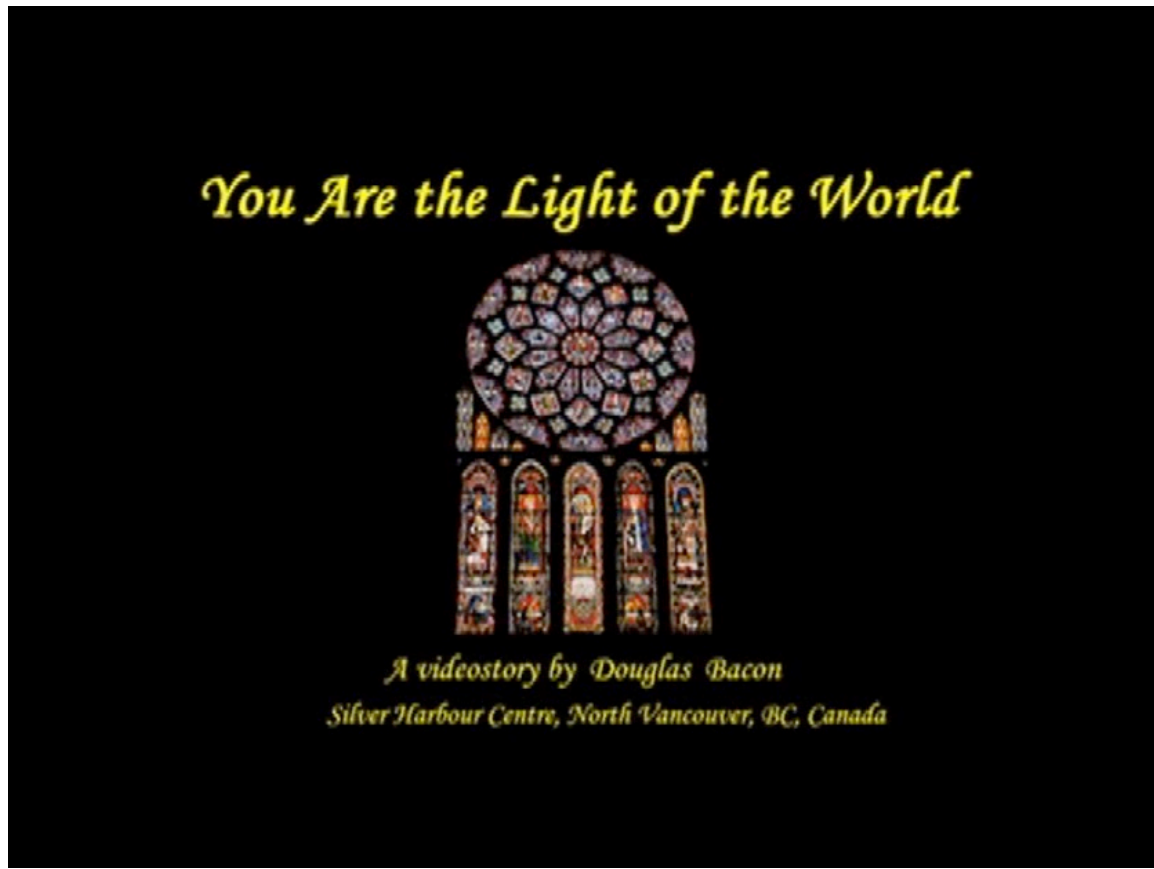
There were, however a number of younger members of the group, who once initiated into the process of acquiring the digital technical skills of video production continued in the project for three years and we are still working with this group and meeting together. As

time went this group viewed the acquisition of media production skills as a way of not only recording their own reminiscences but as a way to record and preserve the stories of an older generation.



Una and Jergen Bruhn's Documentary on North Vancouver community activist John Braithwaite.

One of the digital storytelling participants has gone on to enroll in a local university's media production course. Another participant in the group screened his first digital video at the 2007 Vancouver Queer Film Festival.



Video by Douglas Bacon

The culmination of three years work was a collective installation, The Digital Shrine featured as a primary artistic installation at Vancouver's citywide public event honouring the dead at Mountainview Cemetery's Night for All Souls 2008.



Digital Shrine; Night for All Souls, image from Shirl Lytle's *The young Acadian met the city girl*. Vancouver 2008

These productions and achievements represent only some of the work to have emerged out our collaborations with the participants from the Silver Harbour Digital Storytelling Group.

What remains as the one of the most abiding legacies of the project was not only way the older adults were able to adapt and learn new technologies and the ways in which they were able to create meaningful documents of their lives for themselves, their families, and communities. But the way in which they came to view the importance of telling their stories. And the knowledge produced by the participating older adults in a peer inquiry into the connection between the creative 'act' of telling their stories and their health and wellbeing.

The Peer Inquiry Documentary and Research Project.

When communities gather to create meaning through an artistic practice, it has been observed that self-esteem is enhanced; feelings of isolation and alienation are temporarily relieved. According to *The Creativity and Aging Study; The Impact of Professionally Conducted Cultural Programs on Older Adults* (Cohen 2006), drug use is reduced, falls are less frequent, and depression is relieved. These benefits can easily be defined as creating a greater sense of well being. What may be worth noting, however, is how little qualitative research has been done on making the connections between creative practice and the health and wellbeing of older persons.

In addition to the overall quantitative research being conducted in *The Arts Health and Seniors Project* by the University of British Columbia School of Nursing, the Canadian Public Health Agency funded a small research project with the digital storytellers at Silver Harbour. I was engaged as the artist/researcher to facilitate this project. Corin Browne participated in this research project by helping the participants to realize the overall production the Documentary Video titled *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.

Denise Weber, a community outreach programmer with Canadian Public Health Agency and I as an artist/researcher were interested in supporting a collectively produced digital video made by the participants that recorded their observations as subjects of this study. We wanted to discover in what observations and insights the older participants may have witnessed relating to their creativity to aging. In addition to this research, we were interested in how a video production that documented the project *produced by the participants themselves* might serve as a different way to evaluate an arts based research project.

The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity was screened at for the Canadian Public Health Association's 2009 National Conference.



Some members of the Peer Inquiry Research Project & Documentary production team: Suzanne Humphries (aged 69), Douglas Bacon (aged 64), John Speers (aged 65), Alice Davies (aged 67), Juergen Bruhns (aged 68), Shirl Lytle (aged 78).

Research Methodology

The narratives that form the bases of *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity* were realized through a facilitated peer research inquiry into the connection these participants made between their health and creativity. These facilitated and collective dialogues took place once a week for three hours for six weeks in 2009 at Silver Harbour Centre in North Vancouver.

This peer research inquiry was modeled on the principles and methodology that is characterized in Lather (1986) as an emancipatory research site. The position taken in this arts based research methodology stems from a shared belief (Finley, 2005) that

purposeful social science research has to be action oriented and useful to the community where the research originates. (Denzin, Lincoln, Eds. 1994). The goals of this research methodology is to ‘encourage self-reflection and deeper understanding on the part of the persons being researched as much as it is to generate empirically grounded theoretical knowledge.’ (Finley, 2005 pp 263). Our aim was to discover and to theorize together what might be the connections between our health and our creativity grounded in the lived experience of the participants. All of us participants and artists had been working together as a group for at least two and for some of us, three years.

The participants in this digital storytelling group also agreed, as a part of participating in the larger *Arts Health and Seniors Project*, to respond to a series of research questions from the University of British Columbia School of Nursing at the beginning of the project and at various points throughout the three years. All of the participants in the digital storytelling group were unanimous in their criticisms of the questions that formed the bases of the research in the questionnaire. In essence, these criticisms stemmed from the biased cultural assumption that viewed characteristics of illness in mental or physical health and as aspects aging as the same phenomena. In the participating older adults’ opinion the questionnaire inadvertently perpetuated a cultural view of old age as synonymous with disease and depression. (Fry, 1981; von Mering, 1969)

We viewed this peer inquiry research as an opportunity to expand our understanding from the grass roots level of what health and well being might include and find a way to respond to the prevailing hegemonic cultural view of aging. This collaborative inquiry sought, in other words, to frame its inquiry in ways that would contribute to the field of socially responsible and locally useful research methodologies.



“We started by defining health not just as the absence of disease but as physical, spiritual and mental health.” (definition from Deepak Chopra)

The meanings implicit in the concept of ‘health’ are particularly potent when we consider the social and economic marginalization of the elderly and the cultural view that sees illness and aging as synonymous. Not only have the expected behaviors of the healthy aged become those of the sick, but the symbols of aging have been equated with disease and abnormality in contemporary society’ (Arluke & Peterson, 1981).



Alice Davies

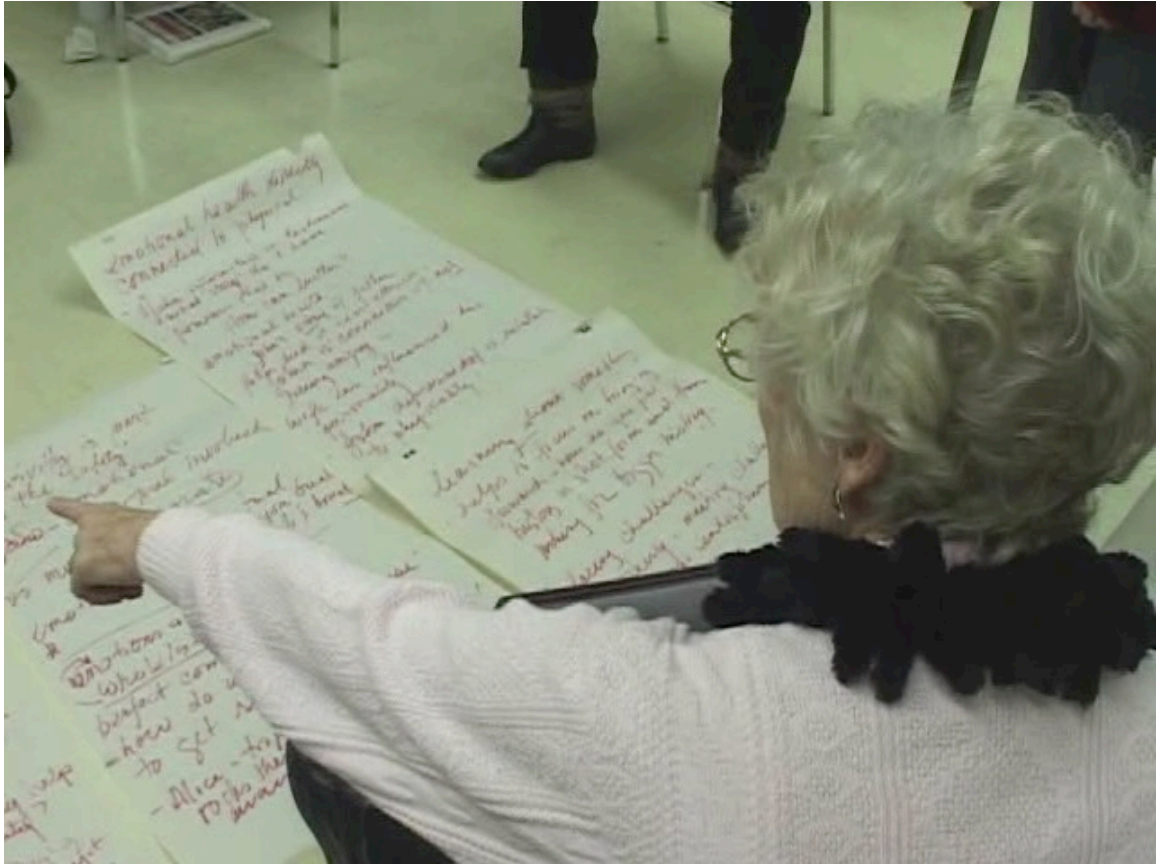
“As seniors in a research project we’ve been asked questions that do not reflect our reality. I want to challenge stereotypes associated with aging.” Alice Davies.

Our research was initially an open-ended dialogue. This open-ended dialogue created meaning for the participants from their lived experience and questioned the struggles they were now facing in the light of the stereotypes around health and aging. As well as dialoguing we started working on producing media on our research questions as well. The same skills the participants had acquired or refined in the creative work of digital storytelling was now used to tackle the peer research inquiry. Imagination, perception, and interpretation all qualities used in creative and artistic work, were directed towards the collective consideration of the research question. ‘Is there a relationship between my health and well being and my creative work as a digital storyteller’?



ALICE DAVIES, CORIN BROWNE, SHIRL LYTLE

By engaging in a peer inquiry research project the research methodology was providing conditions under which the subjects themselves enhance their capacities to acquire and generate new knowledge. The action of research becomes the catalyst for change. (Eisner (1998); Finley (2005); Lather (1981)).



Alice Davies with flip charts recording open-ended dialogue.

“My health and well being is directly connected to my creativity.” Alice Davies.

These observations and insights from the group dialogue were then taken away and synthesized by members of the group.



Shirl Lytle, Juergen Bruhns, and John Speers

The peer inquiry research dialogues were video recorded by members of the research group as Corin and I continued to mentor the research participants in capacity building in digital video production skills as the research progressed. This creative and technical capacity building contributed to knowledge creation within the research group. One of the basic underpinnings of arts based research asserts that an inquiry becomes more informed as the humans involved in the research increase the range of ways in which they describe, interpret, and evaluate the world (Eisner, 1998).

As the participating researcher/artist I helped to facilitate the dialogues within the group and recorded on a flip chart what was being said. It was our intention that we would develop from these collective conversations narratives that would inform the collectively produced documentary on the project.



Patti Fraser talking to Peer Inquiry Research Group. (taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity.*)

The Research Findings:

Our collective dialoguing created the following statements are a synthesis of what this peer research inquiry observed in relationship to their health and well being and their creativity.



Shirl Lytle and Douglas Bacon (photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity.*)

1. Physical activity enhances the creative work. Creative work enhances physical activity the pursuit and demands of producing creative work inspired some of the older adults to actively engage in physical exercises that would help ensure their capacities to continue to work creatively at the computers.



Alice Davies and John Speers (photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

2. Their growing abilities to master digital technologies and to creatively engage with these technologies enhanced their self-esteem and revitalized their relationships with family members. Their enhanced self-esteem contributed to their mental well being, a key component in their understanding of health.



Shirl Lytle and her grand daughters.

“It’s empowering to learn skills even my children and grandchildren have not acquired and be able to share with them” Shirl Lytle

3. What started out, as purely personal preoccupations of individual storytellers became over the years a collective undertaking. The demands and stresses of producing personal stories for public viewing contributed to the older persons sense of well being and their health was supported by the active engagement with each other and the participating artists. The more stressful the undertaking, the greater the sense of risk taking, the stronger the bonds were that formed in the group. The group clearly equated a strong sense of community as fundamental to their health and well being in this work.



Douglas Bacon's photo (taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

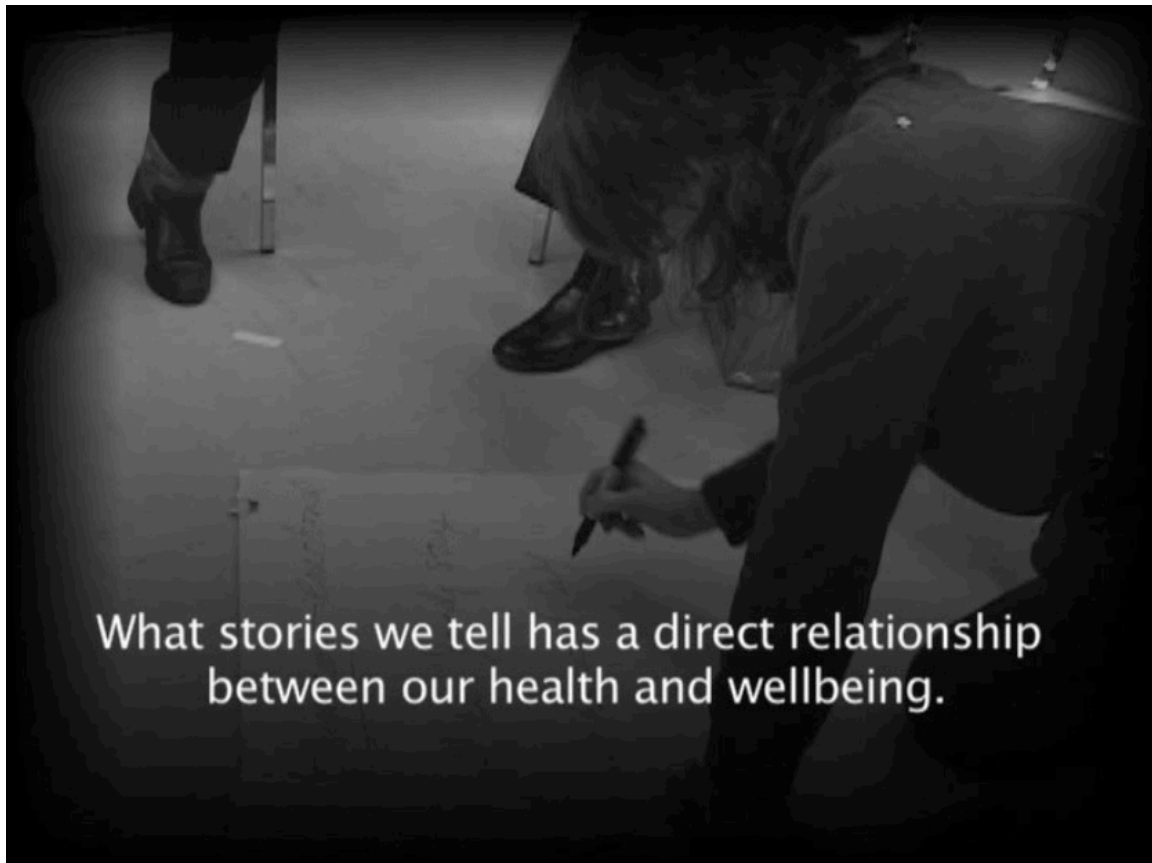
“ Fortunately the grey matter still works, and you can learn and learn very well at 65 years and older. The more difficult issue for me was learning to trust the stories that were coming out of me.” Douglas Bacon (quote from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

Current research on the plasticity of the brain and memory clearly indicate that not only are aging people capable of learning new technologies it is good for their health. We know exercise and mental activity in animals generate and sustain more brain cells ((Doidge, 2007) and studies that are looking at the more we participate in mentally stimulating activities that demand focus and learning the less likely one is to get Alzheimer's disease or dementia. (Doidge, 2007, R. Cabeza, 2002)

We also know that learning of digital technologies is greatly accelerated when the context for learning these technologies resides in the ability to shape and tell a personal story.

(Lambert, 2002).

The Search of Meaning through Story & A Pathway to Health and Well being?



(Photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity.*)

If we don't tell these stories we disappear. Suzanne Humphries

It has been argued the only way to know someone is through story.

As the participating artist and the 'story mentor' in the Silver Harbour Centre Digital Storytelling Group I have for close to two decades worked with diverse communities to help them to realize through the theatre, the written word, or in digital media, stories from their lives. I have become attuned to resonances that reverberate through groups of people when an idea or theme is expressed that speaks *energetically* to what we may be engaged in uncovering or expressing collectively as a group.

The peer inquiry research statement was ‘*what stories we tell has a direct relationship between our health and well being*’ created that kind of energetic resonance.

It was initiated by a participant’s observation that his story lived in the tension he experienced between an outer version of a portrait of a successful life and an inner ‘authentic’ story.

The observation that identifies a story as ‘authentic’ deserves further unpacking. It may offer some understandings for why we need to be involved in creative practices that challenge our own identities through our stories of ourselves as we age.

In the practice of everyday life, Michel de Certeau (1998) discusses narrative’s primary function as one of ‘authorizing, founding, and setting in place ways of experiencing the world.’

We know the past can be retrieved and essentially relived in the present. Through the medium of digital video, the ‘retrieving of the past’ one has the ability to create contextual representations that quickly evoke ‘life’ like representations of a lived experience. Verisimilitude can be created through digital images and sound. The ‘storyteller’ can be virtually represented through sound and image. These mediated representations produced by the storyteller can explain identities to the other and they can be used to change former identities into other ones. These digital constructs from the images of the past and memory produced in the present have the capacity to portray intimate and profound portraits.

Revising and reinterpreting our lived experiences through creative engagement with images of our past and ourselves opens up the possibilities of re-interpreting our lives.



John Speers as a young member of the RCAF from his Digital Story 'Life Lessons'.

“ Life teaches you lessons you need to learn and here are some of the lessons I have learned. The military had deliberately mislead me. I was young, naive, and angry. As my disappointment and anger subsided I came to regard this as one of life’s lessons. People and institutions are not always truthful with you.” John Speers (from his digital story titled *Life’s Lessons*)

The participants clearly spoke about the impact producing the stories from their lived experience had on their wellbeing after they had been worked and reworked.



Suzanne Humphries

“For some of us there was a letting go of emotional histories that existed between family members. Our videos directly impacted our families.” Research participant

The peer inquiry research statement referring to ‘what’ stories we tell having a direct relationship between our health and well being is furthered by a participant’s observation that working on stories and images from the past had repercussions in the present. In one participant’s experience the images had looked ‘perfect’ to her at one time now no longer did. When she created a digital postcard for the Digital Shrine about a relative that had passed away another family member challenged her reminiscences. The ensuing debates between her sibling and herself based on her storytelling allowed her to have to “let go of an old sense of perfection and let it still be alright.”(Participant).

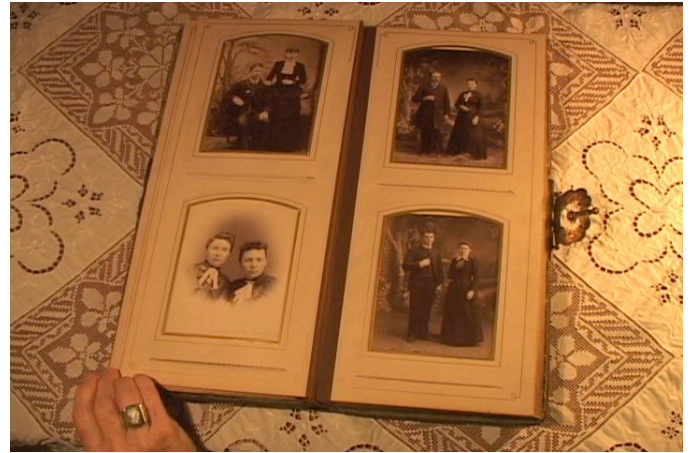
Another health outcome of this participant’s story was the decision she made to accept treatment for a medical condition that up until now she had not. This came about through the realization she experienced when working on images of her deceased relatives. She

saw how many of these family members had died as a result of a related health condition. In retrospect she described the act of producing this digital story and its repercussions as ‘multidimensional’ in its health outcomes.

This work of re-membering, bringing to surface that which has not been spoken or written, forgotten and suppressed brings selves and identities forward that asks the ‘re-memberer’ to look at what might be at work in their lives. (Chambers Jet 14:4) When these tensions are worked with creatively the possibilities for renewed identities and revitalized identities become possible. In terms of redefining our research through the selection of a creative form, in this case, the digital story, the world represented not only influences what we might realize or come to know, it also influences what we are likely to experience. (Eisner, 1998).

Family Tree

*A genogram,
or family diagram,
is a pictorial representation
of the facts of a family system
for at least three generations.*



Images from Alice Davies' digital video titled *Family Secrets*

“Family secrets, transparent indiscretions long undercover, misunderstandings, root of cruel disclosures, tarnished memories, scattered family, memories without stories, secrets stay secret.” Alice Davies

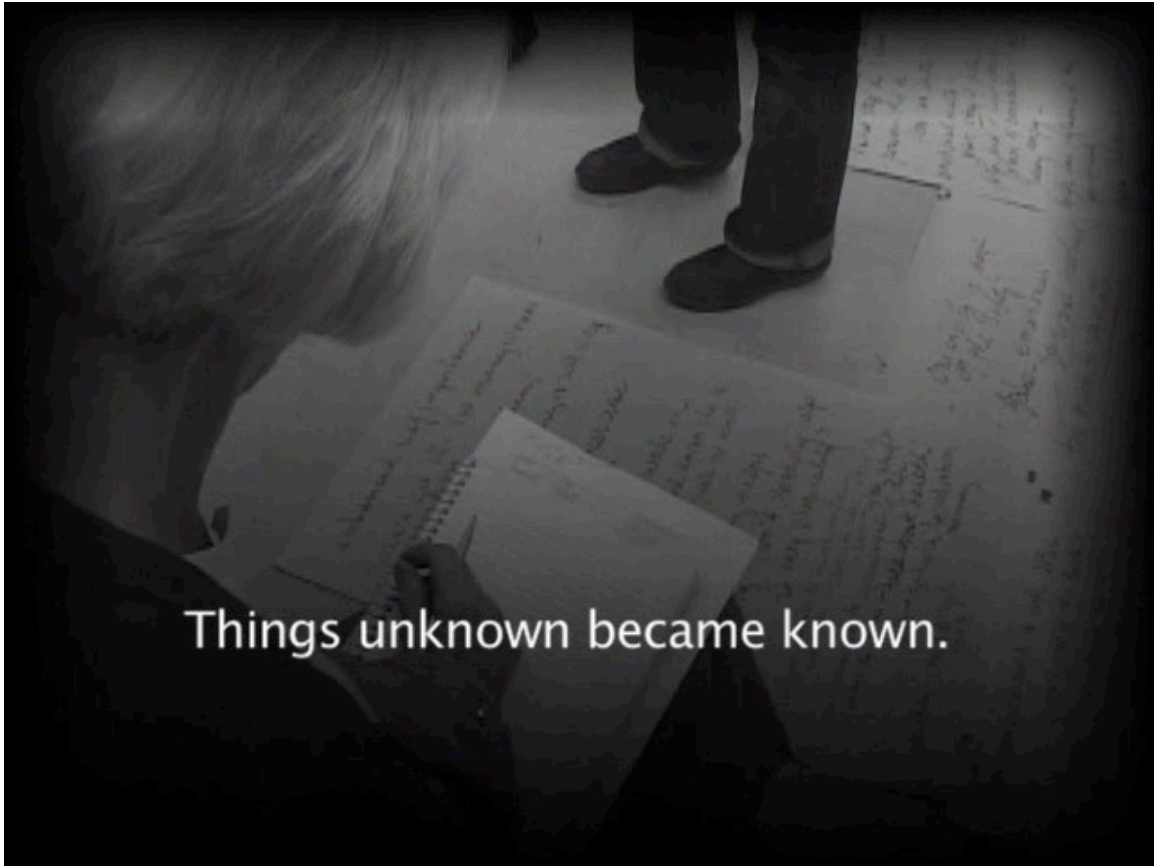
Autobiography is the highest and most instructive form in which the understanding of life is confronting us. (Dilthey, quoted in Richardson 1997.) When given the opportunity to skillfully challenge one's given autobiography and to expose the tensions that lie within our life experiences we are seeking meaning in the present and in the relationship between the known and the unknown. It is at this intersection an authentic story emerges that has a 'life' of its own. In other words the 'life' of the story is born from the pursuit of authentic encounters with one's past life.



Jergen Bruhns (photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

“ Over time our computer screen took on a life of its own.” Jergen Bruhns

For those who actively engage in the pursuit of a story that has in it the demands of the ‘authentic’, uncovering the tension between what is known and unknown are in essence creating a new metaphorical ‘life’. These acts of creativity are engaged in producing something that exists on it its own. These are the stories were reassuring to their creators that they ‘won’t disappear’. These are the stories that although sometimes difficult to bring forth can create a revitalized sense of wellbeing. (Pennebaker, 1997).



(Photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

The endeavor that lies behind the ‘creativity’ of producing an ‘authentic’ story, is ultimately an attempt to engage with the ‘other’. Something that has a ‘life of its own’ has freed itself from the personal preoccupations of its creator. It is free from practical concerns and is no longer only a container only for the edification of the self. Fulfilling a fundamental impulse of the elder to have some kind of record of their lived experience that truly speaks to the other. Not as a record of experience but as a resurrection of an experience.



photo taken from Shirl Lytles' *Listen to the Stories*.

This kind of story's ultimate intention is transformational. As our creative capacities are enhanced there is a richer and more complex ability to 'represent' a lived experience. This in turn influences what the storyteller is able to say about their lived experiences. (Eisner 1998).

The creative pursuit of an authentic story becomes a continuing transformation of the storyteller's identity and the storyteller's relationship to their past. This interpretation and re-interpretation could be a source or a 'well' spring of a continuous generation of 'self' meaning. The connection between 'well being' and the development of stories of 'authenticity' could be understood by considering one of our basic qualities of humanness; our search for meaning.

We might begin to seek a connection between the pursuit of an 'authentic' story, a story that has a 'life' of its own as the primary source of meaning making in the world. Bruner (1986) asserts that people understand or apprehend the world narratively. People tell

about the world narratively. We create meaning between each other when we create authentic stories that speak to the other.

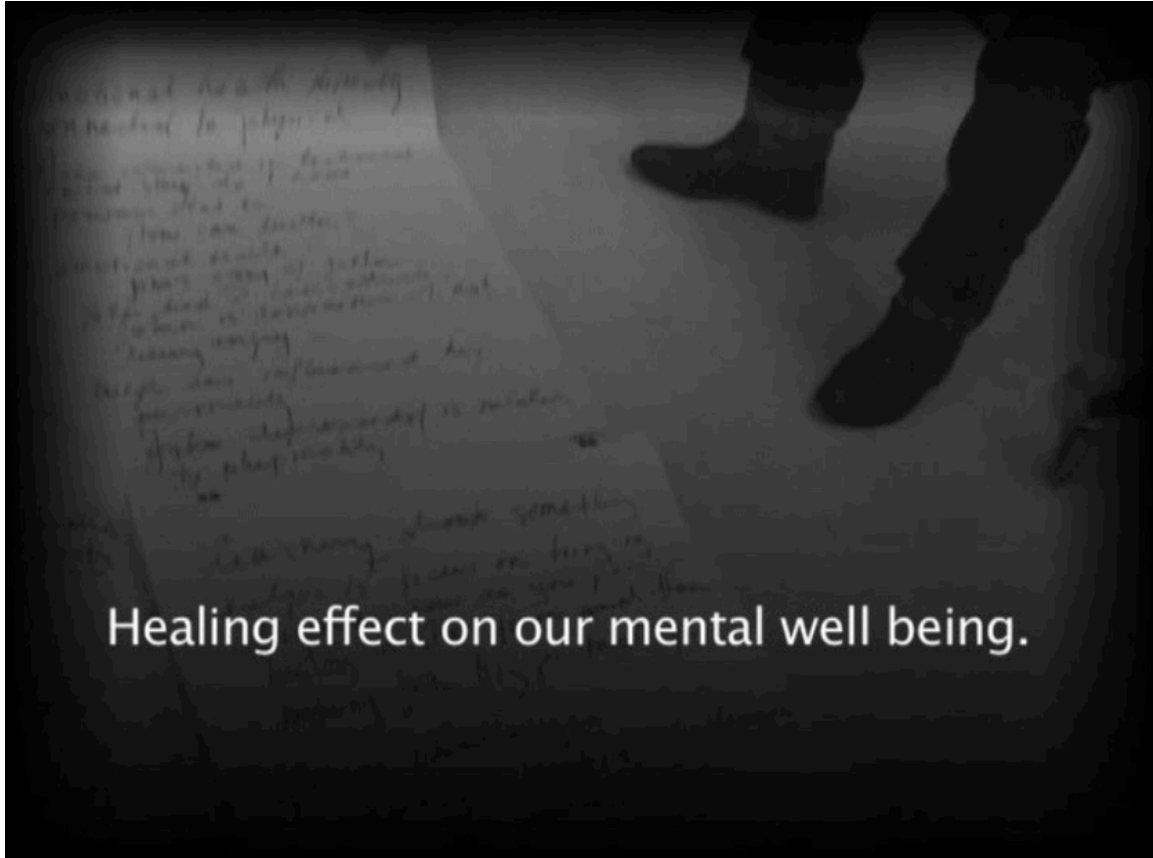
In Bruner's essay *Life as Narrative* (1987) he quotes Henry James 'stories happen to people who know how to tell them. It is only through imaginative acts can we *tell* our life.' In Bruner's opinion the story is a cognitive act. And this narrative act, has the power to ultimately structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to purposefully build the 'events' of a life.'



Photo from *The Piano* by Suzanne Humphries

If authentic stories about ourselves, ones that creatively represent the tensions in our lives between the known and the unknown, if these re-interpretations of our lived experiences act to structure our perceptual experience can they determine how we experience our health and well being? Bruner's observations on the narrative act as having the capacity to structure perceptual experience echoes Eisner (1998) in the assertion that human

knowledge is a constructed form of experience, a reflection of the mind. This observation offers insight into a possible meaning behind the peer inquiry research statement “what stories we tell has a direct impact on our health and well being.”

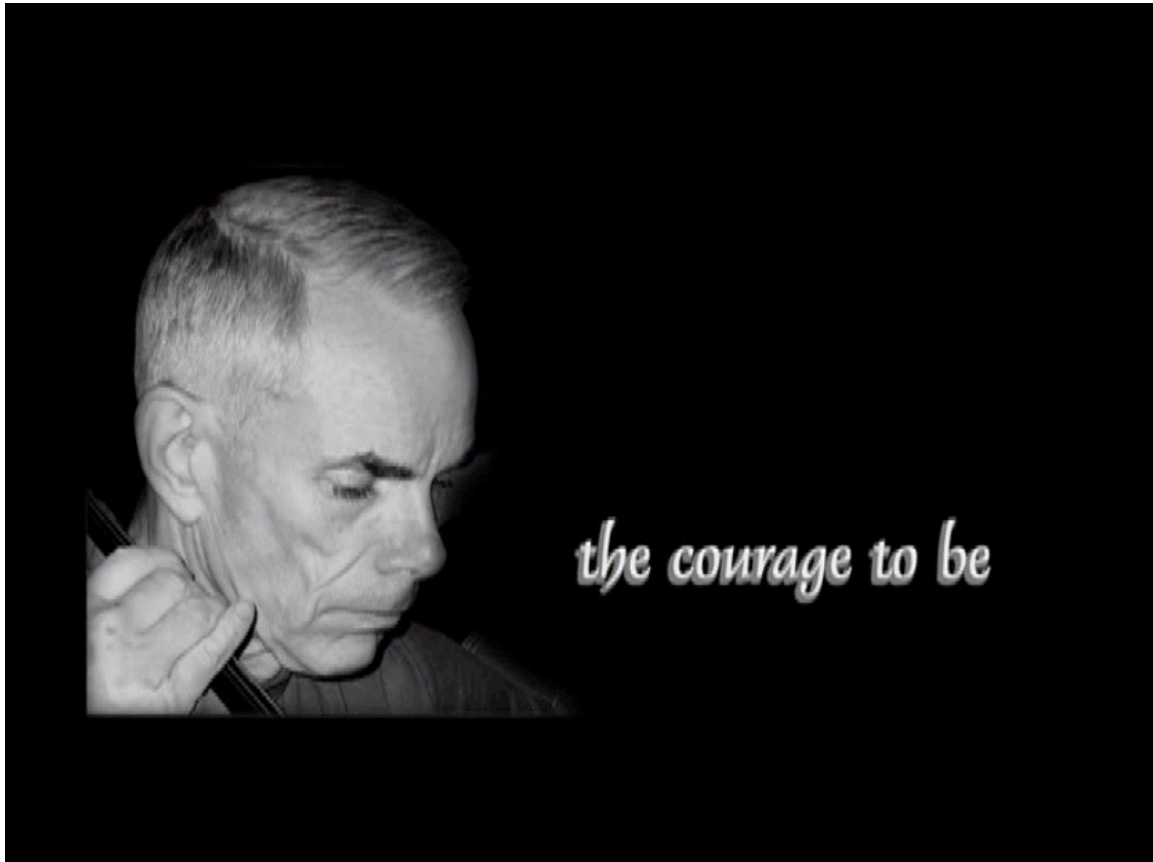


(Photo taken from *The Peer Inquiry Documentary in Health, Well Being, and Creativity*.)

“In our work it is sometimes necessary to deal with negative experiences and create from them.” Douglas Bacon

Anna Ornstein In her record of a lived experience as a child survivor of Auschwitz she reflects on the distinctions between people who retained hope and those who were not able. According to Ornstein, ‘those who retained hope fared better physically and psychologically.’ (Paris, 2008 pp. 34) She claims the difference between the hopeful and hopeless resided in ‘creativity’, which was prohibited in the camps. Those who found a

secret way to create in her assessment retained a sense of hope. Ornstein concludes it was their creativity that kept these prisoners alive and sane.



“ If the stories were painful it was worth working through the pain in order to get those stories out” Douglas Bacon.

Clarissa Pinkola Estes (1992) believes stories to be a form of medicine. “In their oldest sense, a healing art. Some (storytellers) are called to this healing art, and the best, to my lights, are those who have lain with story and found all its matching parts insider themselves and at depth.’

In order for us to engage in an ‘authentic’ practice of meaning making through creative work on story there needs to be elements present that protect that inquiry. An environment that facilitates physical, mental, and spiritual well being. The principles of engagement in a community engaged arts practice and research should seek to provide an

environment that can support this kind of creativity. Making art creates opportunities for communion amongst participants and it can create communities of care. (Finley, 2005)



Silver Harbour Digital Storytelling Group.

“We have learned to care for each other and not just ourselves” Shirl Lytle

It was a ‘community of care’ the participants in the peer inquiry research study articulated as a necessary component of their abilities to actualize their work and contribute to their sense of well being and health.

“ Crucial in helping that happen was the group. You learn you weren’t alone in your struggle” Douglas Bacon

The degree of being in the world, for the older adult, specifically the social world where we are seen and heard by others (Arendt 1956) has been greatly determined by our cultural view of the sick and the aged. In this view the sick and the aged are expected to separate themselves from the rest of society. (Ross 1977)

Here at the intersection between a cultural narrative that tells us the sick and the aged should be separated from the rest of society is where the collective story can be transformed by the creation of digital stories that pursue an authentic search for meaning in the lives of older adults. The stories that seek to re-interpret or seek to uncover the ‘tensions’ between the known and the unknown and in the doing create a ‘life’ of its own are the stories that constitute a collective legacy. They are stories that seek to transform not just an individual story but the collective story as well.

“ If we are not seen and heard by others we disappear”

The pursuit of an authentic story practice that involves the learning and mastering of digital technologies is only one method to sustain communities of creative practice with older persons. This practice, confirmed by the findings of the participants in the digital storytelling peer inquiry into the relationship between health, well being and creativity claims real changes in identity, increased mental health, revitalization of family relationships, enhanced self esteem, positive physical and social activities. Perhaps most importantly is the opportunity to engage in authentic searches for meaning creates changes in our perceptions, in our identities, and in our well being.

In an era of global communication and information systems we must re-enforce our efforts to actualize the ‘story’ of people’s lives. Our efforts must be concentrated on assisting the older adults in our communities to record and create stories from their lived experiences. Choosing to create in new communication technologies is choosing a form that speaks to a future. The elders of our communities need to have opportunities to be remembered and must have opportunities to create these stories themselves. These stories are not only the domain of the personal they represent the way the global community understands each other and are of great value to the larger community.

“If we don’t tell our stories we disappear.”

Engaged in the practice of discovering our most authentic selves through the recording of our voices, in the images of our ourselves and others, in the language of our making is more than the endorsement of the personal voice or an individual's statement. It is an engagement with the most human part of our selves. It is our need to seek meaning through the stories of our lived experience. This inquiry leads irrevocably to the web of human and worldly interaction. It creates a communicably shared experience of the world. We need to be working with our elders to ensure their voices and their images and the authentic stories of their lives are brought to 'life' for future generations. They are the stories of hope and change, of survival, and endeavor, of places long gone and still here, of our deepest human need to make meaning in the world.

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