

THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude



A PUBLICATION OF
THE OKANAGAN INSTITUTE
NUMBER 40, SPRING 2022
EDITED BY KAREN CLOSE

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The Voices of Creative Aging

CREATIVE AGING is a powerful new social and cultural movement that is stirring the imaginations of communities and people everywhere.

This is the first book to document the movement.

Often called Sage-ing, Creative Aging takes many forms: academic, social and personal. It includes festivals, conferences, classes, group sessions and individual creative pursuits. The Journal Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude was founded by the Okanagan Institute in 2011 to honour the transformational power of creativity. Intended as an initiative for collaboration and sharing, the Journal presents the opportunity for the free exchange of wisdom gleaned from creative engagement.

Sage-ing is about seeking – satisfying inner gnawing and transforming it to knowing and action. Aging can be alchemy when one allows the realisation that to Know Thyself and contribute that

knowing to our culture is indeed one of life's highest purposes. That knowing brings the gratitude, grace and integrity that a life deserves. The creative journey into self is a strong aid to health and wellbeing

for the individual and to our culture. Creative Aging brings together more than 50 essays and galleries of images that showcase the power of the imagination expressed and enjoyed.

CREATIVE AGING

STORIES FROM THE PAGES OF THE JOURNAL
SAGE-ING WITH CREATIVE
SPIRIT, GRACE AND GRATITUDE
EDITED BY
Karen Close and Carolyn Cowan



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SAGE-ING
WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT,
GRACE & GRATITUDE

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Cover image: *Dinner With Friends*
by Harriet Moore Ballard

FROM THE EDITOR

Entering 2022 marked a significant threshold for me, my 75th birthday. I decided to return to the arts community of San Miguel de Allende in Mexico because of how it had influenced my last 25 years since retirement. While there I received an email from an early *Sage-ing* contributor telling me about Jungian psychotherapist Connie Zweig's recent book, *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul* (2021), in which she offers a beautiful map for those embarking on this path. It was the perfect guide for reviewing my own aging process over the past 25 years.

My career as a teacher was guided by a steadfast belief in the human need to explore oneself through creative expression. I delighted to watch my adolescent students find pride by encouraging them to be authentic in what they created. On my first visit to San Miguel, I was privileged to become friends with talented photographer and octogenarian Reva Brooks, who had long since abandoned her photography. Still, in the 1975 inaugural *International Women's Year*, the San Francisco Museum of Art chose Reva Brooks as one of the top 50 women photographers in history. By sitting with her, hearing her review her life choices and together creating *Unfinished Women: Seeds With my Friendship with Reva Brooks*, both of us opened to deeper awareness of ourselves and the importance of our creative spirits. I became an ardent advocate for Creative Aging.

It seems to me now that what is unique about this current moment is the pronounced need for collective action illuminating a sense of belonging, a sense of community, and a sense of forging together a new direction that embraces and uplifts imagination. My return to San Miguel and the vibrant senior community who embraces its call to engage with creative spirit, individually and collectively, reinforced my passion – the one that envisioned *The Journal* a decade ago as a gathering place for individuals coming alive to themselves by *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. With each story written, shared and read, our sage-ing community takes deeper roots and grows further across communities.

In this issue, rich with story and poetry, our contributors generously share their personal experiences with making the shift from role to soul. We read how each is learning to relax into themselves and discover renewal and purpose as they transition from doing to being, from role to soul. In the words of one of our contributors, octogenarian artist Harriet Moore Ballard, "Only by going beyond what you know, will you move forward. The act of painting is the most spiritual thing that I have ever done. You lose yourself, you transcend what you are doing and you are enlightened."

Regardless of how one chooses to explore oneself, the move deeper into the

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dance of life is the invitation. We are all creators with the collective challenge to embody and make vivid our common destiny, our oneness, and to release our inherent power to transform both ourselves and the world around us. The renowned creativity professor, Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, coined “flow” to describe this optimal, live-giving state of experience. In his final book – he passed away in October, 2021 – *The Evolving Self: A Psychology for the Third Millennium* (1994), Csikszentmihalyi urges: “The self is a creative construction. No one is ever complete and finished. It is what you will do in the future that determines who you are...life becomes serene and enjoyable when selfish pleasure and personal success are no longer the guiding goals.”

His words echo this month’s theme, ‘No Time Like The Future,’ inspired by the title of Michael J. Fox’s recent book. Csikszentmihalyi’s legacy challenges us to join our imaginations to create what he describes as ‘A Fellowship of the Future.’ Our Indigenous cultures have always known we each possess many medicines – physical, emotional, image, music, story. As we age, moving from role to soul, we continue to have opportunities to share our uniqueness, and make our joy.

In our next issue, June 2022, we invite you to submit your stories of how you give your medicine, make your joy and create a new sense of belonging in ‘A Fellowship of the Future.’ How are you moving out from all you’ve been, finding joy, celebrating and championing our human creative spirit?

SUBMITTING AN ARTICLE TO SAGE-ING

The theme to consider for our next issue will be in the FROM THE EDITORS in each issue. Your story is to be original, related to creativity in any of its many forms, as a path to gaining self awareness and wisdom, and/or the act of harvesting your life’s wisdom as a legacy for future generations.

Please attach it as a word document (.doc) – not a PDF - to enable editing, using calibri font, 14 pt, 1.5 spacing. 500 – 1500 word maximum (use word count).

Please attach 3-4 photos, separately, including: Your headshot, 2-3 photos related to your article. All photos should be numbered, given a caption, and attached in high resolution jpg. format. Insert the word “photo #” with its caption within the article where you would like each image placed (we’ll try to honour this request as layout permits). Please include a brief bio note, written in the third person (one or two short paragraphs of up to 200 words). Your bio will be placed at the end of your article and is intended to give the reader an idea of who you are, your passions and/or what you do and have done with your life that feels relevant to the article. Please include your preferred contact information, including email, website, blog address – whatever you want included in the publication. In your cover email, please share how you found your way to submitting to Sage-ing. Please email your article and photographs to Karen Close at karensageing@gmail.com and Katharine Weinmann at panache@interbaun.com

Quarterly issues of The Journal go online around a solstice or equinox: March, June, September, and December. We need to receive your intention of submitting an article by the first day of the preceding month or earlier. **Your complete submission is required by the first day of the month preceding publication.**

Antiquity identified a sage as a wise person ... wisdom is a form of goodness, and is not scientific knowledge but another kind of cognition.
– Aristotle, *Eudemian Ethics* 1246b

LOST AND FOUND

The Art of Harriet Moore Ballard

Karen Close



“I had a wonderful teacher. He would begin every class with the words, ‘Remember, the secret to a great piece of art is – dot, dot, pause, dash.’ That’s when the surprise happens. It’s a wonderful way to explore the canvas and life.”

– Harriet Moore Ballard

When I meet someone aging with dignity, vitality and creativity I fill with joy and eagerly seek to engage in conversation. Recently I sat with (almost) 85-year-old Harriet Moore Ballard in the sunshine of the inner courtyard/garden of her home, which she designed, in San Miguel de Allende, Mexico. Almost immediately I felt deeply drawn not only to Harriet, but to a life metaphor rich with meaning.

Shortly after graduation from Cleveland Institute of Arts in 1987, tragedy hit when one of Harriet’s twin sons, George, was struck on the head with a steel grid. He died at age 24. Absorbed in grief, Harriet knew in order to survive she must build a bridge from her inside grieving to the outside reality. The creative process would be her vehicle. In 1992 she began building her home in San Miguel de Allende. She acquired two adjoining lots near the centre of the old Mexican town and began building two interlocking structures surrounding the inner courtyard in which we sat. Harriet had no experience with house construction, but she does have a keen sense of aesthetics and a drive to create her own spaces. She approached designing her home as she might a painting. In recent years, she said, the house has influenced the course of her paintings as much as the other way around. “Pressing multiple planes into one ambiguous surface and crossing planes with lines that deny the third dimension is central to my work.” One is reminded of the words of Kahlil Gibran “On Houses”, in *The Prophet*, where

he compares a house to the larger or outer body. He then asks: “what have you in these houses? And what is it you guard with fastened doors? Have you peace, the quiet urge that reveals your power? Have you remembrances, the glimmering arches that span the summits of the mind?”

On visiting Harriet’s home, Douglas Max Utter, author of *Harriet Moore Ballard*, said, “I felt nurtured, and to a degree perceptually cleansed by the house’s complex patterns of intersecting levels and contrasting geometric and natural motifs, as if I had wandered into a sort of sacred space... Everywhere, it seemed, ancient and modern things merged to form an environment that

The courtyard garden of Harriet’s home





Top: *Ochre Table*

Above: *The Garden of Crossroads*



seemed timeless.” As I sat in the garden of the inner courtyard, I resonated strongly with Utter’s words and I feel this resonance in Harriet’s paintings. The interior spaces begin to resemble boxes or compartments, in which she places furnishings not so much of her home but of her mind. Max Utter notes, “Throughout her mature paintings, certain shapes and motifs and types of line recur as she casts the gestures of painting and drawing out into the air of the canvas.” As she paints she seeks to bring her insides out. As we talk, I feel invited into the courtyard/garden of her mind. On a canvas, Harriet tosses the objects and events of her life into the winds of process. “For me painting is all about process.” Almost dreamily she expounds, “I just paint, make marks, until I am lost in the making. That’s when the best part happens. As I continue I find the surprise – Lost and Found. I know that’s when to stop. I let myself feel the self-satisfaction that I have created a painting with meaning for me and what I have glimpsed into my own mind. This experience of being lost is always part of the excitement and surprise of painting. It’s important to allow this.” As I hear her words, I think about how they are true of life too. It’s only when we go beyond what we know, knowledge that we’ve acquired, that we discover the wisdom of our own uniqueness and can experience the deep satisfaction of being true to our souls.

Perhaps Harriet’s painting *Ochre Table*, in which we see her approach to a still life, helps one to understand her process. Here the intersecting outlines of household shapes, what is seen with the eyes, no longer informs the painting. Rather, Harriet has allowed herself to play with the objects, bringing their edges, extensions and connections back into a room of her mind where she senses connectivity, a greater unity, perhaps a better way of seeing, at least a more personal one that relaxes. In describing the work, Max Utter explains, “In the immediate foreground, there is a bowl of round fruit, but the bowl and the fruit share the same color and texture. A vertical, pure-white rectangular patch above that is like sunlight, and like the original gesso surface of the canvas, as well as a little like spilled milk; the fine gray edge of a bottle is drawn with careless asymmetry in the middle of it, claiming it perhaps, but not containing it.” Although the painting is composed of references to objects we find familiar, by simply playing with them in a non-objective way Ballard invites the viewer to feel her ease, harmony with a liminal moment. Her answers are not absolute, just found moments.

The Garden of Crossroads is free and open almost with a sense of abandon. Harriet is willing to take risks. This is a large painting, and it seems to take place outdoors, like a dramatic performance in her garden as it recalls the vertical transitions of the courtyard and roof terraces of her home. Dark lines dangle like ropes or threads criss-crossing one another as a loose scaffolding



Dinner With Friends

to the painting while Harriet constructs her vision. The irregular mass of mostly warm, pink tones, set aflame by the orange outlines of witty scribbles, occupies most of the canvas. Max Utter suggests, “It’s like the side of an adobe or stucco building in strong sunlight, but is also like flesh, pulsing with dimly-perceived features... the top, mounting with yellow and orange, steps out onto the roof of the picture, up toward the sun...the words ‘garden of cross-roads’ suggest (that) Ballard contemplates the functions and implications of linkage, hooking related and unrelated things together.” Is she contemplating the incongruities of life as they emerge in her mind while she paints?

Dinner With Friends with its cool blues evokes the onset of evening and maybe a sense of coolness in Harriet. Harriet seems to be pondering, as she constructs this painting with a kind of detachment. I am reminded of a tangent in our conversation where we shared how we sometimes yearn for more in dinner conversations with friends. Both of us shared the delight we find in painting and discussing our works with intergenerational groups of fellow creators where we feel free to open ourselves, perhaps say the unexpected, and explore new dimensions of being. Formalities are abandoned. I told her creating the opportunity for such open exchanges is my purpose with *The Journal*. It’s an online forum for all to share how their creative spirit is leading them into new dimensions of being. I believe our humanity needs to open more freely to each other as we evolve into the future. To have met Harriet, and to be introduced to the open luminal moments of self exploration that are her paintings, was a delight.

In his conclusion to *Harriet Moore Ballard*, Douglas Max Utter writes:

“Life is an expanse of passages and places, connections and desires. And the work of an artist is therefore a journal and a geography of this ‘no place,’ which is the self. In the alternatively bright and somber, sensual paintings of Harriet Moore Ballard, visual remarks and structural concerns fluctuate, and the painter’s intense inwardness merges with a life improvised in the open air, unfurling the self like a flag. Throughout her career, Ballard has sketched the dynamics of psychological freedom, played out in restless explorations of spatial relationships. In each layered, resonant work, deeper perspectives rise piecemeal to the present, like the notes of a plain-spoken diarist inflected with the poetry of times’s strange combinations.”

I am very grateful to Harriet’s biographer Douglas Max Utter for his insight into Harriet’s works and for the occasion to have personally met and visited with her.

To hear Harriet speak of her work, enjoy her very personal video on her site

<https://www.harrietmooreballard.com/>

[index.php?vw=1280&vh=598&v0=&v1=185&v1b=0&v2=eng&v3=0&v25=1744](https://www.harrietmooreballard.com/index.php?vw=1280&vh=598&v0=&v1=185&v1b=0&v2=eng&v3=0&v25=1744)

STITCHES THROUGH TIME

Katharine Weinmann



Our Spring Issue is inspired by the title of the new book by resilient Canadian creative, Michael J. Fox: No Time Like the Future. Our lineage and ancestors may inform the shape of our creative expression, just as ours may influence future generations. This story, first published in my blog, A Wabi Sabi Life, November 22, 2021, is a tribute to the women in my life who stitched, by hand, lives of function and beauty.

Last month I started a hand-making project I'd envisioned for over a year: to interpret a series of mandalas I'd designed and painted by tracing onto linen and embroidering with wool crewel yarn. That had been the original plan. But when it took many months for the yarn to arrive from England and to secure the right colour and weave of linen, I had to consider plan "b."

A comment to my mother, when we finally visited our families in September – she remarkably skilled in high counted cross stitch, our home graced by several of her creations – led to her gladly gifting me with her supply of needles, hoops, scissors, specially made wooden boxes, beads, and 'signature' well-organized collection of threads – hundreds of colours in a multitude of hues and metallics. For me who was enthralled with my childhood Christmas gift box of 64 Crayola crayons, I was in that same colour-smitten heaven. I paid the extra baggage fee to bring the entire collection safely home, spent an evening going through it all to understand Mom's 'system'. I finally broke the seal on the new tracing light board I'd purchased a year ago in anticipation, and began.

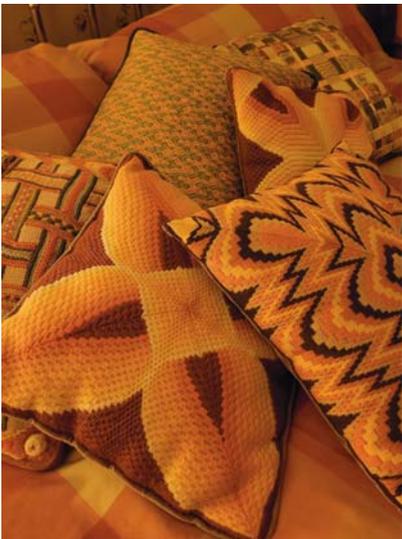
My mom's *Jesters Abound*, counted cross stitch



Initially, I thought I'd follow closely the colours in the original watercolour of a mandala I had made, but I soon realized that working with needle, thread and yarn, despite being close in colour, is not the same as brush and paint. So, I began to improvise within the spaces, using a variety of shades and stitch patterns. I discovered that "split stitch" is pleasing in its coverage, texture, ability to move back and forth between thread and yarn, and in making each stitch. It simply feels good to make that particular stitch.

The biggest discovery has been how soothing I find this act of handmaking. It goes slowly. Gradually I see the colours and textures resemble the painting that inspired the plan. Not an evening goes by when I don't silently grok and or remark out loud how soothed I feel doing this work. In part I know it comes from the deep appreciation I feel using my mother's materials and supplies, that my hands are using what her hands had used for years to make beauty. And that given the amount of thread she's given me I will most likely have many more years than my mother's life to bask in this gratitude.

"There is a juiciness to creativity, a succulence, or a sensuality which both



Top: Mandala: from watercolour to embroidery

Above: My mom's Trapunto cushions

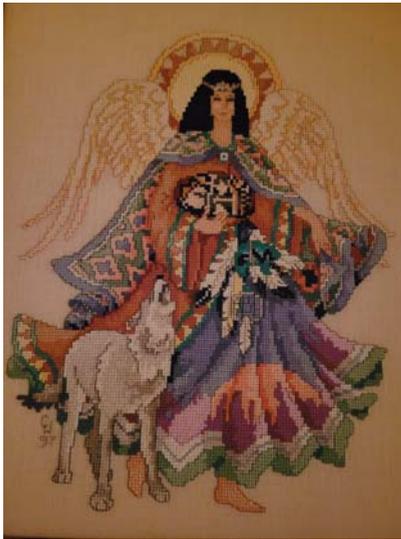
*produces and is soothed by creating something. I think that creativity is pleasing to women on a very deep level, whatever form it might take – whether it's the feel of clay in our hands, the colours that work on us as we knit, the meaning that we find in the words that we write, or the energizing feel of movement as we dance and the music moves through our bodies.” Lucy Pearce, in Sharon Blackie's *If Women Rose Rooted**

As I look over my life, my mother always did handwork, as did many women of her generation and those before her. I remember many of the clothes she made for my sister and me until I began sewing my own in my early teens. After living in an apartment for my first thirteen years, my parents then built their home and Mom poured herself into its decorating, needlepointing the backgrounds of eight dining room chairs – a meditation in monotony, same stitch, same colour for many months. From there she mastered every style of needlework, again gifting me with cushions, purses, and such. She knit beautifully, always challenging herself in ways I didn't then quite get nor fully appreciate. A brief foray into crewel work and then counted cross-stitch and cutaway. For Mom, the finer and more intricate, the better. In the last few years, she's found the strain on her eyes too much. Regrettably as she has several half-finished projects and wishes to make keepsakes for each of her grandchildren and great grandchildren. So, she's gone back to occasionally knitting, and now spends more time reading. It's a pastime I'm happy she enjoys, as when younger she never did, believing herself to be a poor reader. Utterly untrue when I think about what she's created – the patterns she had to read and interpret, the recipes she improvised, the books she kept for the business. Hers is another of those legacies of hurtful, limiting stories we're told, or tell ourselves.

*“When you learn to make things with your hands, you begin to awaken an awareness of the beauty and value of things in your life. Handmaking teaches us about slowness: the antidote to brevity and efficiency. It shows us, through the patience of our own hands, what goes into a thing. When we put those long efforts into bringing beauty into the world, we are honouring that which made us by creating as we have been created. We are taught to respect the slow, attentive piecing together of the life we yearn for.” – Toko-pa Turner, *Belonging**

And looking further back, my mother's grandmother, my Gramma, was always sewing – spectacular fashions inspired by the turn of the century Edwardian era. Plumed and netted hats, velvet coats. No wonder I was so taken by *Downton Abbey* for its costume design, as those old sepia tint photos of Gramma looked just like those characters. I have a one-hundred-year-old sample of her silk embroidery, and for my wedding I wore the white cotton lawn embroidered dress she'd made for her own wedding – fine hand sewn tucked bodice, tiny mother of pearl buttons.

My paternal grandmother, Oma, also was a very skillful seamstress, though in the pre and post world war periods of Germany, her talents were



My mom's *Spirit Dancer*, counted cross-stitch

out of necessity directed to the functional, utilitarian, to get more wear from what was worn. Emigrating to North America in the 1950s, she became a pieceworker on the assembly line making glass cases for Bausch and Lomb. An accident on the sewing machine nearly severed her middle finger, and left its nail permanently clawed over. Her dowager's hump the price for countless hours bent over those grinding machines.

Before my mother's second birthday, her mother died. Eleanor, my grandmother, had been adopted as a young child. Family dynamics and bureaucratic policy were such that we grew up knowing very little about her. Did she like to sew? Was she a hand maker? Did she embroider or like cooking? We don't know. We have very few pictures of her, but one as a young girl shocked us all in the resemblance I share with my grandmother.

Early this morning I woke up having dreamt of her. A young boy hand-delivered a painting or photograph of a young girl child, now restored and framed. Stretching, I had to reach up high and retrieve the parcel from its precarious perch. I unwrapped its golden Klimt-like heavy wrapping paper to see a little girl sitting at a table outside, surrounded by little glass pots of paint, flowering bushes beside her, blue sky above. I knew immediately this girl was Eleanor. I felt a whisper in my heart murmuring that this is how I am connected to my grandmother, in little paint pots of colour – the timeless iteration of the 64 box of crayons – in a yard warm with flowers and a blue sky.

"... I needed that bond to feel whole, competent and grounded, connected to my heart and soul, to my community, to my ancestors, and to the natural world around me..."

– Melanie Falick, *Making a Life*

In the still dark of this morning, I sensed this is the bond with which I am connected to my lineage of women – through the shimmering cotton threads, warm hued woolen yarns, fabrics woven on looms and sewn into garments and furnishings. My ancestors whisper to me in dreams and in the stitches we make through time, to now and into the beyond.

Writing poetry and contemplative creative non-fiction, co-editor of *The Journal*, **Katharine Weinmann**, shares the beauty in her imperfect, sometimes broken, mostly well-lived and much-loved life in her weekly blog, *A Wabi Sabi Life*, a celebration of life unfolding in all its mess and mystery, grit and grace. awabisabilife.ca

Katharine has been published in the global online Abbey of the Arts blog, The Poets Corner in Maine, USA, and the online Canadian Company of Pilgrims. She is the writer for local social enterprise EdmontonEats.

FROM A CONUNDRUM TO METAPHOR



Letty McFall

“Creativity comes from looking for the unexpected and stepping outside your own experience.” – Masaru Ibuka

I have lived with a conundrum, a gap between how people see me and how I see myself. “Oh Letty, you are so creative...you must be an artist.” Each time I nod, say thank you and leave with an unease. I can see some merit in the comment; however, the idea of being called an artist feels false and inaccurate. It has taken some 70 years to unpack this dis-ease and figure out why I am affected in this way.

Perhaps after too much reflection and rumination, I have discovered the creative tribe I belong to and gained a little insight into the brand of creativity that lives in my bones. It is not an “artist’s kind” of creativity, which most often stems from a self-expressive focus. My creativity does not result in pieces of art that I can hang on the wall or a handmade object I drink tea from. Rather, my brand of creativity is externally motivated. Solutions may appear radical because I seem to identify promising, exciting and, most importantly, accessible routes to progress. I have no interest in solving the same problem over and over again or creating a solution that does not fit the problem. I gain energy from a fascination with anything dis-advantaged, dis-enfranchised, devalued or dismissed...anything that does not fit. It seems I am intuitively tuned to people, places and things that jar normal sensitivities. I enter the creative flow state when immersed in collaborations that acknowledge difference and explore solutions that seem beyond normal. I live with a fierce restlessness and a healthy cynicism. My creative energy requires a good dose of fun and laughter, wrapped in a comfortable sense of happiness and well-being, peppered with a sprinkling of purpose for good measure. Here’s an example of a problem-solving process that sheds light on how my brand of creativity works.

I was a director of an inner-city health centre for years, and public washrooms were one of the many necessary services provided. Users were for the most part respectful of them. However, one day the cleaners informed me that toilet parts were missing from the back of the toilets. Strange! The situation continued and staff were exasperated with such vandalism. Their solution: glue down the toilet tops or lock the washroom doors. I questioned this solution. A bit of sleuthing helped pinpoint the problem and clarified the concern. In fact, only one piece of the toilet innards was being taken: the shiny

My creativity does not result in pieces of art that I can hang on the wall or a handmade object I drink tea from. Rather, my brand of creativity is externally motivated.



Top: a piece of jewellery using toilet chains
Above: a liberal dose of craft sales

ball chain that attached the plunger to the handle. Street people were collecting and using them for jewellery making. In the end, a perceived act of vandalism was instead an indicator of a burgeoning street jewellery business. The solution? We found a local charitable plumber who happily provided used chains. The problem was solved, and a community jewellery initiative was supported with no disruption to the much-needed washroom services.

This externally focused brand of creativity is my go-to in both my personal and professional life. When street people could not come to the health centre, I initiated a Nurse on a Bike project, providing timely, on the spot health care to local, community residents. When HIV/AIDS began affecting large numbers of gay men and then women, I created a team of gay guys to participate in the gay night scene. This team sported t-shirts and tool belts outfitted with educational materials and condoms in a variety of colours and flavours, including condom earrings. Interactive engagement in night clubs helped to keep men and women safe, healthy and alive.

In another creative scenario, I was managing a successful outdoor farmers' market. Both vendors and customers were keen on an all-year market; however, there was no appropriate indoor public space available. I proposed an alternative model – indoor in the winter and outdoor in the summer – and pitched this idea to a local greenhouse owner. Despite some initial skepticism about an untested solution, the new market attracted over 70 farmers and large crowds of customers throughout the year. This unique market garnered great media coverage,

and the market continues to thrive. Farmers' markets located in greenhouses are now popular in other communities. Closer to home and heart, when neighbourhood kids were sent home from daycare with head lice, I organized a backyard Nit-Picking party, complete with Scotch, bags of goodies, nit combs and lice shampoo. Add to that a hose and blow-up swimming pool. Happy, clean heads returned to school the next day.

Whether the creative solution involves strangers, friends, institutions, community organizations or 2000 doilies, an external request or problem sparks the action; a process of collaboration and cooperation ensues, and the result is practical and useful.

I know, I know... You are wondering about the 2000 doilies and how they got into this story. Honestly, I am not sure. Anyone who collects 2000 doilies is either a batty old woman or a radical creative thinker – and creative thinking is an essential part of me.

For thirty-five years I have collected doilies. I did not intend to become



Doilies: The Forgotten Art of Women's Net-Making

I mustered my creative energy and treated the addiction with self-prescribed methods.

a collector when I picked up two doilies from the floor of a second-hand shop, took them home and dropped them into a container in the studio, marked “embellishment.” This mild interest continued for years, picking up a doily here and there. Each time I felt that I was saving a devalued remnant of some woman’s handwork of historical significance. I am not sure when this “little” habit turned into a growing addiction, but it did. Each new acquisition generated feelings of excitement. Adding new doilies to the box prompted me to reorganize the growing piles regularly – colour piles; small, medium, large piles; crocheted, tatted, knitted piles.

I began inviting friends to see my growing stash, and they were soon giving me their family doilies. Friends of friends joined in. Strangers started showing up with doilies. Brown bags of doilies were left on my doorstep; even old lovers mailed them to me. A full-page article in the local paper outed my fetish. I became the SPCA of doilies, taking lost and unused doilies and finding them new homes.

Recognizing the signs of a serious and escalating problem, I mustered my creative energy and treated the addiction with self-prescribed methods. I created the *Doily Darling* studio, appliqueing doilies on cushions, footstools, and lap quilts. In addition, I prescribed myself a liberal dose of exhibitions and crafts sales. I created booths at farmers markets and staged home sales. I was certain I could use up most of the doilies and perhaps entice someone else to come and take the doilies that remained. The doilies kept coming.

When my partner and I decided to move across the country to Lunenburg, Nova Scotia, I packed the doilies in boxes and piled them alongside the other boxes for recycling. You can imagine my surprise when the movers came down the walk to our new home carrying four big boxes labelled doilies. These boxes of doilies languished for a few years. While they were never very far from my mind, I just did not have any energy to deal with them, although I must admit the piles of doilies continued to grow slowly.

Recently, armed with brave intentions, I revisited my habit. I was excited to open the boxes and, when I began to examine each doily, I discovered it was like seeing them for the first time. The doilies held a new depth of understanding for me. I was seeing them in a metaphorical way. I was aware of the symbolic sensibility stitched into each one, a reflection of women themselves. I could see they were strong yet flexible, functional yet beautiful, requiring time and focus and commitment to blossom. I also felt they had



SHE-nets

Exciting SHE-net projects that will celebrate women in creative ways.

indeed been devalued, not fully understood, often with their truth and worth obscured or even denied. Sitting with these doilies I explored how they could amplify women's voices. These metaphorical doilies were calling me to create a future. They were enticing me to find ways to use them and give a public voice to women's experiences.

I think it was Abe Lincoln who said, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." These doilies are sparking my future. In fact, they already have. I now refer to the doilies metaphorically as SHE-nets – so fitting for a fishing town. Last summer I mounted an exhibition, called *Doilies: The Forgotten Art of Women's Net-Making*, at the *Knaut Rhuland House Museum* in Lunenburg.

I am excited to be playing with ideas and anticipating exciting SHE-net projects that will celebrate women in creative ways. I am even imagining a public sculpture, complete with doilies, in a local park celebrating the contributions women have made and continue to make to family and community. Who knows – for now I have a new future: standing with arms open, mind fresh, boldly embracing what I know as my brand of creativity.

I am facing the future
 ...albeit it shorter than it once was....
 with
 "creative spirit, grace and gratitude"...
 embracing SHE-nets
 and a new beginning
 with no conclusion to this story...
 for I need years to create it...

Letty McFall

Past: A factotum by trade with a Master of Arts Degree, conjuring solutions to address challenges in the social service, religion, education, health and recreation, and consulting fields.

Present: Finding ways to discard what is no longer useful in my life, learning new ways to join with others to sprinkle whatever wisdom we have wherever we can.

Future: Who knows – I do know it will be exciting!

MAINTAINING THE QUEST



Dave and Marion

I consider growing up in a home with neither TV nor radio to be one of the greatest blessings of my life.

Dave Miller

“Our tasks now require us to move our attention from the exterior world to the interior one, from the ego’s role in society to the soul’s deeper purpose.”

– Connie Zweig, PhD, *The Inner Work of Age: Shifting from Role to Soul*,

Growing up in a home with few toys and games other than colouring books, building blocks, tinker toys and marbles, I learned how to use my imagination. Using that and the few things I had, I was able to create my own games and diversions. Outside, which is where I spent a significant amount of time, it was nature itself that I utilized. Sticks, stones, the snow and my own hands and feet were things through which I gave expression to my identity. I consider growing up in a home with neither TV nor radio to be one of the greatest blessings of my life. This “poverty,” supported by my inclination to make “stuff,” led to a life of making, creating and interest in many things.

My wife, Marian, grew up in a home and community similar to mine but in a different state. For both of us the importance of a good work ethic was instilled at a very young age. She did better than I did with that. When I was sent to do a task such as feeding the chickens, I could be distracted by almost anything that I found or noticed along the way: a flower, a stick, a butterfly, etc. Frequently I was led off on a tangent and I became immersed in doing something other than my forgotten chore. Eventually, however, I did learn, and both Marian and I are thankful that we learned to work at a young age. It has served us well.

In the conservative atmosphere in which we grew up, creativity didn’t have a significant place. Art for the sake of art was not valued highly. The only “pretty” pictures on our walls were on calendars. Beyond that, religious pictures and decorated mottos with Bible verses or moral sayings were the primary ornamentations.

A significant exception to this occurred outside. Our parents were avid gardeners, and with that came the planting, not only of vegetables and fruit to feed the family, but also flower beds. These beds provided a way to express the love of beauty innate in every person, and they provided an outlet for creativity in the selection and arrangement of the flowers that were grown. This later became a part of our life when Marian and I married. Wherever we have lived, if space permitted, we grew vegetables and flowers.

I have a friend who lives in another state. We met as high school seniors about 65 years ago and have stayed in touch more or less regularly since then. We both pursue photography and we email on that topic, and others, quite often. When he concludes his messages, he frequently types, “Stay creative.”



Top: Coloured foliage: on the trees, on the ground, and reflected in the water

Middle: Dandelion & Grape: juxtaposition of the ephemeral and the durable

Above: Quilt composed of blocks made by four generations of women.

Both of us, as well as Marian, work at that even though we are now all in our 80s.

As I have become older and more interested in creativity, I have come to believe that it is intimately linked to spirituality. I use the term spirituality in its broadest sense, not in a religious sense. I think that everyone, regardless of religious beliefs or lack thereof, embodies a spiritual nature. That is what seeks to emerge in one's creative work. Approaching any activity in a creative way, be it teaching, sewing, cooking or gardening, allows the inner person to become visible.

Unfortunately, much of modern society seems to be designed to stifle creativity. There is the idea, especially when it comes to the creative arts, such as drawing, painting, music, writing or sculpture that, in order for the art to be acceptable, it needs to be perfect. It should also be saleable and, if it isn't, it isn't of value. So why bother doing a watercolour painting when it isn't good enough to sell? The underlying message is that only experts can do it right. This leads many folks to think they have no creative ability. The crucial concept that is missed is that the doing is as valuable, frequently more valuable than the end product.

One of my creative interests is photography. I have offered some of my photos for sale in a local venue. Folks have admired my work, but I have sold none except to my sister-in-law. I'm not sure if that counts or not, but it doesn't matter. If I never sell a single photo, I'll continue to capture and print images because I find a strong sense of satisfaction in the process. My photos show my interests in my world, and I continue to look for new ways to see and interpret the world in which I live.

Creativity has also been an important part of Marian's life. This mutual interest in creating things has been a blessing to our relationship over the nearly 62 years of marriage as we have encouraged and supported each other. While my interests went in the direction of photography and woodworking, Marian's interests led her in other directions. From the beginning of our marriage, she has always had numerous house plants as well as outdoor flower beds for which she has cared. As our children became older, however, and the demands of parenting and housekeeping lessened, she took up quilting. Over the years she has made some 40, or nearly 40 single-needle quilts and wall hangings of various sizes. All our children and grandchildren, as well as several nieces and a nephew, own pieced and hand-stitched quilts she has made.

Perhaps the most unique quilt is one given to our only granddaughter. Both Marian's mother and grandmother made quilts. Some quilt blocks from both came to Marian when her mother died. After pondering on what to do with them she decided to make a multi-generational quilt. She used four blocks made by her grandmother, four made by her mother, four that she made herself, and had our daughter make four. Marian arranged and sewed them together into a beautiful quilt, which she gave to our only granddaughter for Christmas a couple of years ago. She loves this quilt, which has the



Tatted doily and crocheted baby hat

We continue to apply our dwindling energies to creating in one way or another

work of her mother, her grandmother, her great-grandmother and her great-great-grandmother.

Other fabric arts are also important to Marian. A few years ago, she took up tating after having some simple instructions on how to begin. Since then, she has tatted many beautiful doilies, most of which have been give away to friends.

Unfortunately, age has curtailed some of the finer hand movements necessary for these activities. Undeterred, however, at 86 she continues to crochet hats for newborn babies for our local hospital.

So, we continue to apply our dwindling energies to creating in one way or another. At times I stand in my woodworking shop, where I spend a few hours each day, and ask myself, “Why are you still doing this?” I guess the answer, at least in part, is that it is fun and challenging. I have plans in my head for various projects, involving techniques I have not tried before, that I hope to turn into reality while I am still able to use my tools.

In photography there is no end of subjects to be found and recorded. Everyone knows the saying, “A picture is worth a thousand words.” I tell folks sometimes that I am looking for the picture worth “two thousand words.” I’ll never find it, but the quest is both enjoyable and rewarding.

Dave and Marian Miller live in a retirement facility in northern Indiana. Marian began her career as a teacher in central Michigan, in a one-room school with all eight grades. Since then she taught at other schools, started and ran her own reupholstery business, and worked as hostess, receptionist and secretary at Merry Lea Environmental Learning Center, Goshen College. Dave also worked at Merry Lea as program director and was Department Chair in Biology at Goshen College where he taught field courses in biology. He holds advanced degrees in entomology. Between graduate school and Goshen College he started and ran a commercial millwork business. They have three children and five grandchildren.

THE VIBRANT WEB OF EARTH



Susan Walsh

lawrencetown

she wades into the water at lawrencetown
 beach on the far side of the bluff where
 hurricane force winds, waves sometimes
 carry boulders up, up to the parking lot the road
 her hands full, dried flowers daisies rosebuds
 deep red pink yellow brown-edged remnants
 corsages pressed for decades between
 pages *Harmsworth Universal Encyclopedia* (1925)
 moments pressed in time three generations
 of girls women she breathes deeply
 the Atlantic Ocean cold water sand feet offers
 prayers for the mothers sisters daughters who
 once held flowers vibrant alive opens her
 hands dried petals stems leaves fly into
 the wind with love and love and love

three gulls come from nowhere
 on the long open empty beach fly
 directly in front of her so close she
 could touch them

Dry brush of photos 1 and 2



Susan Walsh lives with gratitude on Treaty Six land, traditional territory of the Cree, Blackfoot, Dene, Métis, Nakota and Tsuu T'ina people, land now known as Alberta, Canada. She has been a writer since she was a child, and has taught writing, language arts, literacy, dance and arts-based research over many years. Susan is interested in the ways that contemplative arts can help us to live well with others, with ourselves and with/in the vibrant web of Earth. Her work with contemplative photography complements her writing practice. She deeply appreciates the years she spent within a diverse community of Schol/artists, exploring a range of spiritual and arts practices, together and individually. Susan is a mother, grandmother, partner, former schoolteacher, and Professor Emerita, Mount Saint Vincent University. Her publications include poetry and creative nonfiction in national and international venues. Her book, *Contemplative and Artful Openings*, explores writing as contemplative practice in the context of arts-based research. Please see selected publications at <https://www.msvu.ca/academics/faculty-of-education/faculty-profiles/dr-susan-walsh/>

MY GARDEN OF CREATIVE INSPIRATION

Susan Blacklin



For most of my life I pretty much raised my four children as a single parent. I never had time for myself. I never had time to think about what or who I wanted to be when I grew up. Finally, my time arrived; I could grow up, embark on and seize the opportunity to get to know myself, to nurture and develop all that I aspired to be. I had just turned 60 and was about to begin my new life.

It was no easy feat leaving Saskatchewan to drive across the Rockies in the middle of winter to establish a new home on Vancouver Island, not knowing anyone. Slowly I made friends. I joined aquacise classes, signed up for various art and creative writing classes, and I volunteered my therapy dogs at care homes. I had dreamed of retirement being a time to paint, draw and garden, to knit, to hike with my dogs, to read as many books as possible and to write my memoirs. Now my dreams were becoming reality. And fate introduced me to a wonderful man who would become my new partner and soul mate. Two years later we set up a new home where, for the first time in my life, I had an art studio. My partner and I shared a love of gardening, and soon set out to “paint” our garden landscape for ten-hour days.

Originally, we had designed a plan to renovate the back garden of our home. By the end of the first day, we discarded the layout prepared on paper and began working organically, by sight and feel, in the back corner and along the fence. As neither of us liked straight lines, we designed curves centred by

a large wrap-around patio poured with curved edges. As our design confidence grew, so did our garden, abandoning lawn for additional flower beds, building gravel paths for access and views. My partner, thinking a pond would be a great feature, dug one in the opposite corner to where our initial reno began.

With local garden clubs holding plant sales and nurseries having an abundance of beautiful selections, we went crazy. But my most treasured plants were those received from friends. Louise, a Master Gardener and member of one garden club, took me under her wing, gifting me with many plants: false solomon’s seal with its fabulous scent, euphorbia, bloodwort – which, in my

Front garden





Top: *Tulips*, watercolour

Above: *Birch Trees*, watercolour



opinion, is the most beautiful small spring blossom. Another friend, Janet, gave us beautiful perennial poppies. Others gave us annual poppy seeds that we scattered everywhere. Everything grew like magic – astilbe, aquilegias of many varieties, campanula, callicarpa, echinacea, hostas for the shade garden, hydrangeas and lupins, even orchids. Coming from Saskatchewan I had no idea how fast and prolific everything would grow here on Vancouver Island. My partner and I were elated with the results. It was a true collaboration, with neither of us holding back nor anchoring the other. After completing the backyard, we turned our attention to the front.

Continuing the meandering paths between flower beds, we filled them with plants gifted from others. The front garden, once a long sloping expanse of boring dead lawn, impossible and inappropriate – given climate change - to water sufficiently to keep green, was removed by my partner. We changed the gradual slope, built retainer walls and more flower beds along meandering paths. By year six we had added the “icing” to our garden – a yin-yang shaped patio. We had no idea that this sitting area would invite so many from the community to stop and chat. It was the sum of our combined creativity, a place for socializing and community making. Each year we hosted garden concerts with local musicians. With my art group, we enjoy painting “en plein air,” where I love painting my flowers.

After building the gardens, we began to garden in earnest, as many plants needed to be divided each spring and fall. I couldn't throw perfectly good perennials into the compost, so we began potting the plants to give away. Eventually, having to buy pots and potting soil, we charged a small fee to cover costs. As people came to buy plants, we invited them to stroll around our garden. In return, fellow gardeners invited us to visit theirs. And so, “Gardeners Anonymous” was born – a group who share a serious addiction to gardening. We soon discovered another magnet drawing us together: many of these avid gardeners are also passionate artists. From watercolours to oils, abstract to realism, gardens inspire us to paint our creative spirit. The only requirement to join Gardeners Anonymous is to open your garden to fellow members once each summer.

Having taken many art classes and experimented with a variety of media over the last decade – pen and ink, conté, graphite, watercolour and acrylics, come the cold winter days I paint pictures of various flowers in our garden. Our garden has truly become the centre of inspiration for all my creativity year round. Photography, reading, writing, music, painting and drawing, even knitting, in our garden brings me calmness, the ability to focus and inspiration in the form of meditation and therapy. Sitting in our garden to write my first memoir and do the required hours of editing was empowering, giving me a confidence transferred to my art.

In 2022 it will be nine years since we began our garden renovations. Today we have over 3000 bulbs announcing spring's arrival, and more than 700 perennial plants, all of which are labelled. We give away or sell over 1000 one-gallon pots of plants each spring to neighbours and fellow gardeners. I



Top: *Hummingbirds*, ink
Above: *Vase of pansies*, acrylic

like to think I am living up to my Nana's saying, "The front garden is to feed the souls of people passing by," and to my own belief that gardens are for sharing. We also share our garden with an abundance of birds, especially hummingbirds, who drink nectar from each colourful flower they find.

When we are playing in our garden people frequently stop to tell us how they intentionally cycle or walk past our garden each week to see what is in bloom. Inspired, my partner built a bench for folks to sit and admire our front garden beside the community library box he also built for locals to exchange their favourite books. Last year, I made garden signs saying "Imagine" and "This too will pass," never thinking then that we would still be waiting for it to pass today.

When Covid hit us all two years ago, the gardens became our sanctuary, motivating me to paint and draw, rejuvenating us both. We kept our fingers in the soil, watched the garden transform as new buds emerged, often with special memories of those dear to us who had given us that plant. I received pleasure cutting and arranging fresh flowers into the bouquets I delivered to friends and neighbours.

As a tutor of two ESL students, I am overjoyed when they take their chairs and sit deep in a flower bed, absorbing its scents and colours, being inspired to enjoy reading their favourite books. These students love to paint with me in my art studio, and in the summer months they become budding artists, painting rocks, which they sell to raise funds for their college tuitions. With my own grandchildren living so far away, it gives me great joy to nurture children who had only known a refugee camp until five years ago. I love that our garden invites them to be creative, too.

My new life has become everything and more than I ever dreamed. To get out of bed each morning and do whatever my heart desires is a blessing. Each day I pinch myself that life can be so great. To be surrounded, inside and outside, by my creative expressions, and those of my partner, continues to enliven and inspire us.

Susan Blacklin grew up in London, England, and emigrated to Canada in 1970. She spent the next forty years dedicated to raising her four children, often in challenging situations as a single parent. Upon retirement, Susan's life took a completely new path, one where she could aspire to many of her lifelong dreams and goals. Now living in Qualicum Beach on Vancouver Island with her partner, they share a love of gardening with their local community. Little did she know that the roots they would plant to establish their English garden would provide the foundation for her creative spirit to evolve and prosper – even during Covid. She is excited to have their garden on the local Mother's Day Garden Tour in 2022 (all being well with Covid), where her community's artists will be invited to paint. Susan can be reached at susan.blacklin@yahoo.com

Susan extends the sharing of her garden by including a video for your enjoyment: Either go to YouTube, Susan Blacklin, videos or follow this link:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TIXJwBIUuCG>

BEYOND THE HORIZON

ART COLLABORATION PROJECT

Ruth Bieber



When they entered the Tilted Brick Gallery in Creston, B.C., what did patrons see? The exhibition featured *blind art*, created by myself, a blind artist, in collaboration with three local Creston artists, Win Dinn, Lisa Benschop and Marnie Temple. Upon entering, you're invited to prepare for a whole-body experience with colour, texture and sound. I welcome you to my world. My art is intended to be as interesting to the eye as well as the sense of touch. The viewer is likely to 'feel' something, either with the hands, or with the heart, or both.

Traditionally a theatre artist and artistic director of my own theatre company, I moved to New York City in 2008 and began blind art education by becoming involved with the Art Beyond Sight Institute. Talk about an eye-opening experience. I always loved art, but the idea of becoming an artist

By Win Dinn



29. Photo: *Found a Feather*

seemed out of reach. After all, how can blind people make art? Well, it turns out there are quite a few blind artists, who can in very different ways respond to this question. After I relocated to Kelowna in 2010, I curated an exhibition of four blind artists, including Busser Howell from NYC, Bruce Horak from Toronto, Eriko Watanabe from Germany and PJ Lockhart from Kelowna. Each of these artists was as diverse as imaginable – just like blind people generally.

While in Kelowna, I also picked up the brush, figuratively speaking, and began painting using a spontaneous art process inspired by art educator Karen Close. Weekly classes were offered at the Rotary Centre for the Arts. Karen is a true artist from the heart. With great gusto, I entered the world of spontaneous art and then proceeded to enjoy several exhibitions of my own art during my six years in Kelowna. Many of my paintings were independently created, but some were in collaboration with local artists.

In November 2016 I moved to Creston, where theatre once again became my pri-



Top: *Mapping*

Middle: *Our Father*

Above: Sculpture by Lisa and Ruth

mary focus. Then, in 2020, I was successful in receiving a major project grant through the Columbia Kootenay Cultural Alliance and my mind began to explore. My initial goal was to create a body of my own work but also to work with three Creston artists and have the unique processes of each of the pieces filmed in a ten-minute documentary. Enter award-winning videographer Mark Wolfe from Westword Communi-

cations. The documentary, titled *Do You See What I See?*, was an integral part of the Creston exhibition, and includes description for blind viewers. It is true that the 'now 17 minutes' is not a significant amount of time, but Mark manages to capture some true essences as these relate to the very different and unique art experiences of three very different artist collaborators. <https://vimeo.com/644868309>. A second documentary was created with description added for blind viewers.

The exhibition is colourful, with an invitation to 'feel' the art, literally and figuratively. There is no warning of "Please do not touch the art." Artist Win Dinn, who loves colour as much as I do, claims, "We should all, always be allowed to touch the art." As we painted together, she and I had, on average, up to 10 artworks on the go at any given time, because each layer needed to dry so I could feel the result in order to make another suggestion as to what might come next. Together we created a lot of layers, and for both of us the sense of touch became very important.

"Working with Ruth for the six months just preceding the pandemic and through the year and a half that followed has been a creative game changer for me. My love of texture has always been deep, be it visual or actual. However, when we started working together, creating a piece while blindfolded altered the way I felt emotionally about texture. The resulting works often incorporated layer upon layer of physical texture, but as I reviewed some pieces with eyes closed, I became aware of how different they were in feel as opposed to when I looked at them. What showed to the eye may have been beautiful, but could become a nightmare to feel without sight involved.

"My penchant for feeling artwork – and yes, I'm one of those who would love to sneak my hands over any work of art – has become even more ingrained. I am now engaged in making my creations (at present in art book format) as interesting and enjoyable to the touch as they can be to the eye. Visitors to the studio are encouraged to run their hands over my pieces, and now I have a huge appreciation of how this can affect the viewer if they are truly engrossed in the tactility as well as the contemplation of a work. Making a work of art accessible to those who are not sighted is as important as encouraging them in their own creation of art." Win Dinn



Beyond The Horizon by Marnie and Ruth

***Creativity of Thought* became the name of this collaborative experience.**

Creating with Lisa Benschop was a very different experience. Lisa loves to feel as well, but, whereas Win loves to feel the art once completed, Lisa enjoys feeling the process prior to creating. Lots of her time was given to feeling and processing her way through the variety of ideas she and I discussed with a desire for a whole-body experience with the sculptures we were creating. We enjoyed feeling, hearing and a good amount of wondering. Our intent was to replicate the chakra system of the human body using colour, texture and sound through the use of wire coat hangers, hundreds of strips of cloth and more. In the documentary, Lisa speaks of her desire to “provoke” the viewer.

A final part of the exhibition was a collaborative piece by the operator of the Tilted Brick Gallery, Marnie Temple, and myself. Marnie completed a painting, which I had inspired, and then I completed a painting inspired by Marnie; there was plenty of sanding, and some curious colour. *Creativity of Thought* became the name of this collaborative experience.

Each of us created independently in our own studio spaces. After this process and

through much conversation and conceptualization, Marnie agreed to create some signage in the gallery to reveal an overall theme: “Feel What I See.” And, finally, a surprise. The world of the blind artist isn’t complete without a surprise. Every time I leave the safe confines of my condo, every time I put my hands on a painting finally dry enough to touch, or every time I get to experience a piece of artwork only previously conceptualized – surprise!

Artists are people first. Even two artists with very similar creative bents might express themselves very differently because of their differing personalities and life experiences. This is particularly true when considering the factor of disability. In my many conversations with Marnie, she was struck by the ‘surprise’ phenomenon in my world. Thus she suggested that we incorporate such a surprise into the exhibition. Marnie ordered a laser sound sensor to be installed strategically in the gallery so that viewers would be surprised by a sudden doorbell sound as they moved about. The sudden sound acted as a reminder to sighted folks of what it is like to have something unexpected appear without warning in one’s environment, even if it is something that is usually pleasant and emotionally reflective. This doorbell experience gave viewers an awareness of the ever-present surprises in the life

When considering the artwork itself, viewers were often surprised when they first felt a piece of art with their eyes closed, followed by looking at it with eyes open.

When the art doesn't look like anything representational, viewers are forced to move into their emotions.

of the blind person/artist.

When considering the artwork itself, viewers were often surprised when they first felt a piece of art with their eyes closed, followed by looking at it with eyes open. The experience can be very different – jarring even. Some people who have normal vision are often preoccupied by wanting a piece of art to look like something. When the art doesn't look like anything representational, viewers are forced to move into their emotions. Viewers discover that this new layer of perceiving makes for an interesting and more thought-provoking viewing experience. Anyone who has lost their eyesight can tell you there are things that are clearer when you cannot see the world through your eyes. Different from sight, which enables us to take in what we perceive around us, true vision comes from within and shows us how to navigate the realms of thought, feeling and emotion by connecting us to the parts of ourselves that exist separately from the world of form.

“What lies beyond the horizon, where we cannot see, fuels the seed of the imagination” – Ruth Bieber

“Many thanks... to the NYC Guggenheim Museum for a generous honorarium which was put toward this project.” – Ruth

Ruth Bieber holds a M.Ed. degree from the University of Calgary, with a specialization in Rehabilitation. Prior to obtaining this degree, her professional focus was as a counselling therapist, working with clients with disabilities, often more than a single disability. This work challenged Ruth to discover ever more effective therapeutic modalities. To this end, she shifted from traditional, verbal approaches to the power offered by the arts. In the early 1990s, she founded InsideOut Theatre, which was a reflection of her own evolution from therapy to theatre, from the therapeutic arts to the power of performance for people with a wide range of mixed abilities. Ms. Bieber was the Artistic Director of this groundbreaking, integrated theatre company for 17 years, during which time she spoke and performed at conferences and festivals, both nationally and internationally. Her publications reflect the evolutionary nature of this process.

NO TIME LIKE THE NOW



Tenneson Woolf

I suppose there is something in most of us that yearns for ourselves to be in the future. We can't not. The future holds our dreams, our aspirations. It was in our upbringings to keep our chins up in struggling times. The future contains our desire to contribute, our hopes of solving problems or relieving suffering. It's the pull of the river that flows to the distant sea. I have all of this in me. There is no time like the future.

For a long time I've been a person who likes to play with words. A twist of a phrase to uncover added meaning excites me. A nuance of depth lifts my head and my heart. A discovered belly-felt intuition lights me up. It's dwelling by the side of the river, feet in the water, listening and breathing the quiet. There is no time like the future – there is also no time like the now.

And here we are, living in the potency of contemporary life, so plugged in and so 24/7 volumed. I know of palpable cumulative fatigue that tags along with such life. And I know of polarized vigilance for this and that in people taking stands for varied causes. And I know some of the broadly marketed distortions and distractions. And threats of new war. And the day to day of injustice, often mainstreamed to background din. And grief unarticulated. And, and, and...

As I age, doing my best to contribute to eldering and not just oldering, I've noticed inner clarity in a way that wasn't possible in younger versions of myself. One of those clarities, in my heart as much as in my brain, is to pay exquisite attention to now. To this moment. To its 'unfetteredness' and 'unaccumulatedness,' with past and future momentarily suspended, with the incessant measuring of time taking a stretch of break.

I believe that *kairos*, the time outside linear *chronos* time, asks us to live and love now. To dig deeply and to embody boldly the values that we can imagine in our younger years, but most often can't come to inhabit until we've lived and lost some life. I keep learning that *now* asks of me to show up, acutely attentive and undistracted to this very moment. This is one of the offerings that we with a few years under our belts are called to offer.

I am on the last lap of my 50s. In my life I've generally felt young and playful in heart and in body. This lap has me accommodating physical changes while at the same time honing emotional presence to be with things now, fussing less to resolve the worries rooted in past and future. Some things just are.

With this in mind, I offer two poems of learning, words prosed to a narrative of purpose and learning. I offer them here in the spirit of a post-it note on the fridge, to remember the importance not just of the future, but of

All of his life, **Tenneson Woolf** has been a person with as much interest in the unseen as he has had in the seen. That has led him to a professional life of facilitation, leading workshops, teaching and, more recently, writing, to invite relationships with wisdom and soulfulness. Originally from Edmonton, Alberta, he now lives in a small town where urban meets rural in Lindon, Utah, in a valley at the foot of the Wasatch Mountains. He can be reached at www.tennesonwoolf.com.

this now that is so ‘possibilitied’ with the sound of trickling waters, whether headed to the far-away sea or the small pond within immediate eyesight. Here’s to our living now, to our discovery and to the inherent need for community in which we cohere, writing new stories of creative and invaluable aging.

A Heart That Believes

There are some hopes that
become more important
with age.

Physical health is one of those.
A body
that is mostly in harmony.

Knees
that bend and straighten
to support movement.

Skin
that remains vital and elastic.

Organ health
for a sound internal.

A back
that bends and straightens
to anchor other basic structure.

Shoulders, elbows,
toes, fingers, hips,
and all the other joints.

And then, of course,
emotional health.

A psyche
that seeks to contribute
with kindness and awakens.

A heart
that believes
in possibility.

An Undisturbed Now

In younger days,
I was excited
for multiple forms of modern connection.

A computer.
A smart phone.
Texting.

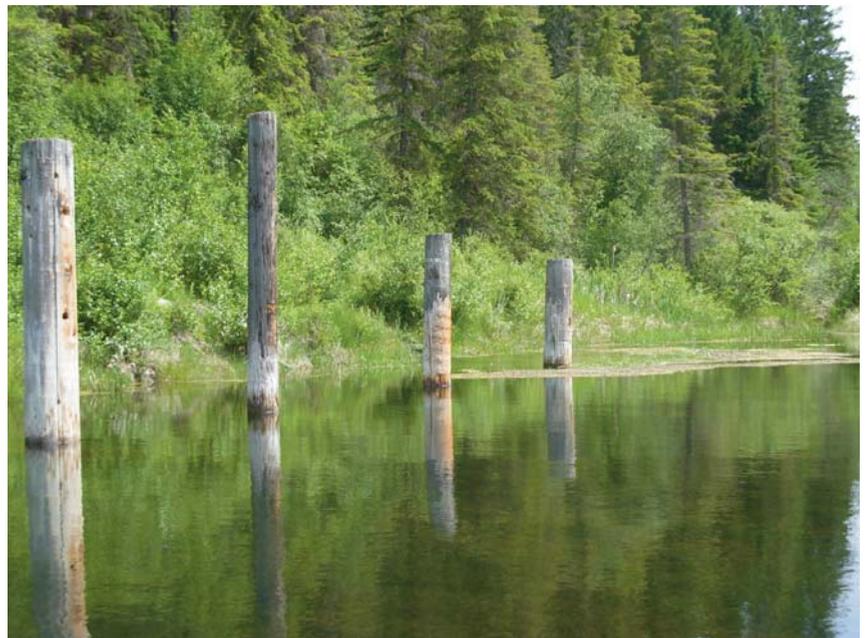
I loved then and now the fluidity
and freedom.

Now, I don’t consider myself in older days,
yet my excitement
is for singularity of moment.

A breath that has no to do.
A stillness without multiple prompts.
A quiet freed of notifications.

I love the poignancy
of an undisturbed now.

Columbia Lake, British Columbia (near Canal Flats).
Photo by Tenneson Woolf



GOING BACK TO SCHOOL

TO LEARN HOW TO BELIEVE

Judy O'Dell



“No, No, No, you don’t understand. She is trying to protect her husband.” I am surprised to realize I am standing and shouting these words. My fellow MFA students look at me in amazement. This is very un-Judy-like behaviour and not appropriate for a critique. Rodney is screening the rough cut of his documentary about a Navy veteran with PTSD helping other veterans deal with theirs. Rodney is a well-built African-American army veteran in his early 30s openly coping with his own PTSD. His film includes scenes of the veteran and his family at home, he and his children at a playground, he and his wife out to dinner. What set me off was a scene where the veteran’s wife would not discuss the effect of her husband’s PTSD on their marriage and home life. A student suggested that she might have opened up if a woman had interviewed her.

I leave the sound stage, run to my car, close myself inside and sob. I know that woman in the film, not literally. She would not talk about the long silences, the unexpected bursts of anger over something trivial, avoiding known triggers, wondering if life would ever go back to the way it was, hoping that the man she married would re-emerge, loving him despite this, knowing that her family and friends in the civilian world would never understand. Pretending all is fine.

I call my husband, a retired Marine major-general, blubbing about my reaction to the film. He listens.

“Photograph it, write about it,” he says gently. “We’ll talk later tonight. Good luck with your critique.”

I walk around the parking lot, take deep breaths to calm myself and enter the dining hall for lunch. Rodney is standing in a group with other students. When he sees me, he walks over.

“Yo, Judy, are you okay? What’s going on?” Rodney says with a concerned look and wraps me in a tight hug, bringing on more tears. In our conversations over meals, we have shared our PTSD experiences from different perspectives; Rodney’s from his combat experience in Iraq when he was just out of high school, mine as a wife. Generals with PTSD? Yes, especially if the general has been in Afghanistan and Iraq, lost 112 Marines in combat and attended over 80 of their funerals.

“Rodney, the veteran’s wife is not going to let anyone destroy the illusion of normality. Every veteran’s spouse watching the film will understand that.”

“I know that. That’s what I was trying to portray,” he responds. “I need to rework that scene.”

My coffee mug





Ghost town

I fell in love with photography when I got my first camera for my eighth birthday and have been making photographs ever since.

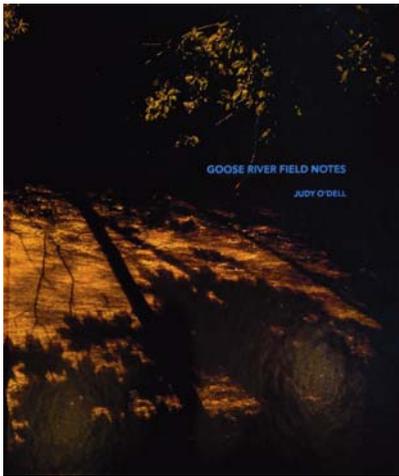
I fell in love with photography when I got my first camera for my eighth birthday and have been making photographs ever since. In my family, the purpose of college was to graduate with a degree that ensured a good job, and I have had a successful career as a CPA. At age 69, I am enrolled in a low-residency MFA program in visual storytelling. For years I fed the creative side of my brain by attending photography workshops, lugging my 4x5 view camera into the landscape and building a darkroom where I spent hours watching magic happen in the trays of developer and fixer.

My advisor suggested that Wayne, a faculty member and noted scriptwriter, would be the perfect mentor for a writing project about my experiences as a Marine wife. I have kept a sporadic journal for most of my life. I pulled it out to record joy, anger, hurt or momentous events. In 2000, I was introduced to *The Artist Way* and I became dedicated to writing “morning pages.” The writing was mostly about family, travel, photographic ambitions, career frustrations and accomplishments. Then 9/11 occurred. The September 2001 to September 2004 journals record the *Alice in Wonderland* experience of a 53-year-old mother, business owner and suburban wife of a reserve Marine officer suddenly living on a Marine Corps base as the wife of a general officer on active duty in wartime. Those morning pages chronicle worries, fears, uncertainties, funny stories, hurts, frustrations, politics, two of our sons’ engagements and weddings, yearnings, joys, ambitions, books read or listened to and new people I met in those years – in essence my life as lived, and recorded with as much honesty as any journal is. I had never reread them.

I begin my writing project by transcribing passages from these journals and researching the timeline of the war on terrorism. Wayne is a demanding critic and editor. The pages and pages I write over the semester evolve into short personal essays. I read pieces to my husband before dinner. We cry over some, laugh over others, and he corrects my military terms. It is wartime in my writing, and my photographs of former industrial sites, ghost towns, abandoned coal mines and quarries echo that. In the following critique, I present large prints and an abstract of the essays.

During our semi-annual retreats throughout the MFA program, I form strong friendships with my fellow students, all of them younger than I. We meet for early morning coffee, talk until late in the evening, help each other hang work and lend a shoulder if someone’s critique does not go well. Because our work is all different, we inspire each other. Between retreats, we offer encouragement in texts and emails. I find a tribe.

The program’s academic requirements are flexible, so I can explore my interests in subjects like phenomenology (the study of essences), landscape painting and photography history, and how words and photographs work –



Cover of my book

or don't work – together. In my third semester, we move to a house with a river in the backyard. The river serves as a metaphor for many things and becomes the inspiration for my art. I embrace the joy of using my view camera to explore the river in all seasons: the slow process of setting up the camera, checking exposure, focusing under the dark cloth, the world backwards and upside down on the glass, inserting the film back in and clicking the shutter. I write about photographing under the moonlight, kayaking to find the source of the river, cleaning trash from the river with my grandchildren and the day the blue heron buzzed my head, landed on the bank and stared at me. The Marine-wife essays become part of these “field notes.” These notes also include hydrology, botany, geology, my mother's dementia and death, and other memories. As an introvert, I struggle with how much to include and what I can leave out.

My mentors push, encourage and critique the writing and photographs. The idea of a book of photographs and essays emerges as my thesis project, and I learn about book design, sequencing, paper and cover and end-page choices. I self-publish 100 copies of *Goose River Field Notes*.

My project mentor tells me it is a love story. I'm not sure. But when I pull the first copy of the book from the box and flip through the pages, I see what she means. I mail each book with great trepidation. The book is so personal. “All art is personal,” she tells me. It is still scary.

Due to Covid, there is no thesis show for my cohort, and my thesis defence is held on Zoom. I sit alone at my desk. Faces on the screen are not the same as the physical support of my fellow students crowded into the conference room while the faculty grills me. Rodney sends a virtual hug through chat. I mail him a copy of the book, and he sends a long email about his new project. I attend his Zoom thesis defence and send him a congratulatory card when his documentary is accepted to a film festival.

I know I do not need the MFA degree at this point in my life. But like Scarecrow in the *Wizard of Oz*, the framed piece of paper on my wall is essential. It allows me to believe I am an artist.

Judy O'Dell is a visual artist and writer who splits her time between Laporte, Pennsylvania, where the forested Endless Mountains surround her, and Rockport, Maine, where “the mountains meet the sea.” She is an avid outdoors woman and posts images on Instagram using the hashtag #woodswalk. Judy's artistic practice includes film and digital photography, writing and making postcards and books. Her backyards provide the inspiration for her work.

Judy holds a BA in Economics from Immaculata University and has been a CPA for nearly fifty years. Her current practice is limited to business valuations and consulting. After years of taking photography workshops, she completed her MFA at Maine Media College in 2020. Her thesis project was a self-published book of photographs and essays, *Goose River Field Notes*, which was juried into the 2020 Photo Book Show at Davis Orton Gallery/Griffin Museum of Photography. Her photographs have been exhibited at Praxis Gallery in Minneapolis; the Chestertown Arts League in Chestertown, Maryland; the Onslow Council for the Arts in Jacksonville, North Carolina; the Maine Photography Show and the Knox Museum at the Montpelier mansion in Thomaston, Maine; Rayko Photo Center in San Francisco; and Prairie Village Museum in Rugby, North Dakota. She has essays published in various anthologies and the local newspaper. Judyodellphoto.com Judithodell86@gmail.com

The river serves as a metaphor for many things and becomes the inspiration for my art.

THRESHOLD



Virginia Stephen

When I look around, I see my aging friends, acquaintances and strangers making what they can of this elder phase of life. It is a journey unique to each, but all touching on loss, health challenges, bodies that somehow don't seem to work the way our inner 30-year-old thinks it should. There are changes in resources, changes in home, and of course all those mysteries invoked by changes in memory capacity. And those global worries – pandemic, climate change, political extremism.

To my eyes, the ones who seem to be anchored and living with purpose are those who have a rich creative life, engaged with their own practices and/or the creative expressions of others. For some these have been lifelong commitments, and for others newer pursuits. While life swirls around them, creativity is providing a rudder. I have just finished reading Ann Patchett's collection of essays *This Is the Story of a Happy Marriage* and what struck me was that the constant in her life, the life force, was and is her writing, her creative self, seeing her through unwise choices, criticism, loss, chaos. I see this in those I know for whom art, writing, music has been a lifelong driver, not a choice but core, not easy but visceral. I see strength among those who in later life have found the time, focus and opportunity to realize a long held desire to create. Such commitment to learning and making does not make idling nor not looking forward in retirement an option.

Art has been a part of my life from the beginning. My work life was consumed with the creativity of others. As an art teacher, museum educator, curator, public programmer and university administrator, my job was to facilitate, motivate, inspire people's engagement with art. As a facilitator and leadership educator, my job was to explore and facilitate creativity and creative thinking for effective teams and strong decision making. For me, all these roles were creative, providing opportunities to develop new programs, courses and exhibitions, and to write. The hard part was that always working with the creative work of others made my own creative expression take a back seat so that retirement was like a gift of opportunity. I could kick-start my art practices, which were largely painting, mixed-media work, felting and the writing of the odd article or review. And then the axe fell with the confluence of the outbreak of Covid, putting us all into isolation, and the death of my husband. And there I was, alone in all senses of the word. It was the drive to make that helped to move me forward, to endure – to cope. The odd thing, however, was that I turned to things that were not really part of my practice. In my online writing group, I was moved to write poetry. In my studio practice, I started to do rug hooking – small pieces that I could do on my lap while streaming the Internet. I was moved to say that "Covid and grief made me a hooker." My body of poetry became a way to process, to say

I see strength among those who in later life have found the time, focus and opportunity to realize a long held desire to create.

goodbye, and some of the hooked pieces ran in parallel.

Aubade is that moment when night begins to turn to dawn. In music, an aubade is a song about a lover leaving, and there are also references to it as the first bird song of the day. It was the moment my husband passed away. Here I share my Aubades, made during these past months to process grief, expand my art practice with something new, reflect and step me forward onto my threshold.



Aubade. Hooked with wool and silk on linen

Aubade

Last breath comes from night skies *
 Shepherded with love.
 Sentinel deer watch its flight
 And then prepare for dawn's returning of light.

Is love perfect to the last? **
 Ever perfect? Never perfect?
 Was it enough to guide the leaving?
 Black, to navy, to rose
 The sentinels move on.

And I will, but not yet
 I will look to first breaths coming from early morning ghosts
 Someday there will be light
 Shepherded by abiding love.

*Adapted from
 Oliver de la Paz
 **From "Leave
 Taking" by Louise
 Bogan

Through Light

I pass through the light.
 The light of day
 The candlelight
 The light that colours the moments before nightfall
 The light that guides the heart
 Lights of my life guiding a path.

Last night light glowed under the snow
 The garden path lanterns keep on
 As long as there is sunlight to recharge.
 Inside the trail of nightlights we installed
 so the nearly blind old dog didn't walk into walls
 when he (or you) had to get up in the night.
 My reading light late to go off.

You chose the night, the very early morning to pass from light
 Soft light, lamps and candles and heart light
 To guide the path
 The light went out in one slow fade.
 But its not gone, that light
 Light of my heart, light of my life
 Sometimes bright, sometimes a glow in the night
 But never extinguished my guiding light.

Passing through the light.

A Ponder

Pondering into my coffee
 'Where does my heart live?'
 Has it lost its home forever?
 And if it's lost its home,
 Where is my home?

On a wander with no map
 How to walk grief,
 To cross bridges,
 To be in a world gone sideways all around
 Usual paths muddied over.

As an art educator, gallery director and educator, curator, arts administrator, consultant, writer and facilitator, **Virginia Stephen** has been engaged in a rich career of facilitating the engagement of people of all ages with art in formal and informal learning situations. As an instructor and consultant, she employs creative thinking activities and processes to build effective team and personal decision making and thinking dynamics. Stephen's own art practices in fibre and paint underlie her education practice.

Virginia returned to Nova Scotia to live, make art and consult after several years in Edmonton as Director of the Edmonton Art Gallery, Executive Director of Liberal Studies at Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta, and faculty member in the Arts and Cultural Management Program. Previously she was for 15 years Deputy Director, Head of Exhibitions and Education, at the Art Gallery of Nova Scotia. She has curated over 30 exhibitions of contemporary, historic and folk art and craft, published several exhibition catalogues as well as art books for children, and published in anthologies and peer reviewed journals.

To feel when not feeling. Numb.
 Obstructions in the road,
 Will there be feeling again?
 Will its doors open?
 Will it accept?

Google maps doesn't have the destination for this wander,
 No voice to correct the course,
 Alexa has no advice
 For finding home,
 For the best place to rest.

And yet, it draws closer.
 My heart will find home again.
 Its home will "live in the place of my content"*
 That place in memory, in now, in peace, and inspiration.
 In belonging, in being.

*This is the message on the memorial to poet A.L. Rowe on a path in Cornwall, as described by Raynor Winn in "The Salt Path"

WOMEN ROWING NORTH

WRITING OUR LIFE STORIES

Helen Davidson



The story vibrates with emotion; humour crashes into heartbreak. We sit in stunned silence, captivated by the magical words. Six women, ranging in age from 60 to 90, have gathered to write their life stories in a guided autobiography workshop.

These are women new to writing. “I am not a writer,” each woman hesitantly states these words before reading her story. I understand their reluctance to claim that title.

Since childhood, I have dreamt of being a writer. In Grade 6, at Mary Garden Elementary School in Chateauguay, Quebec, I spent long hours lying on the stage writing a screenplay for *Treasure Island*. Mr. Springer had sensed my boredom and, wanting to spare the rest of the class from my restless interruptions, he found an ideal solution for both of us.

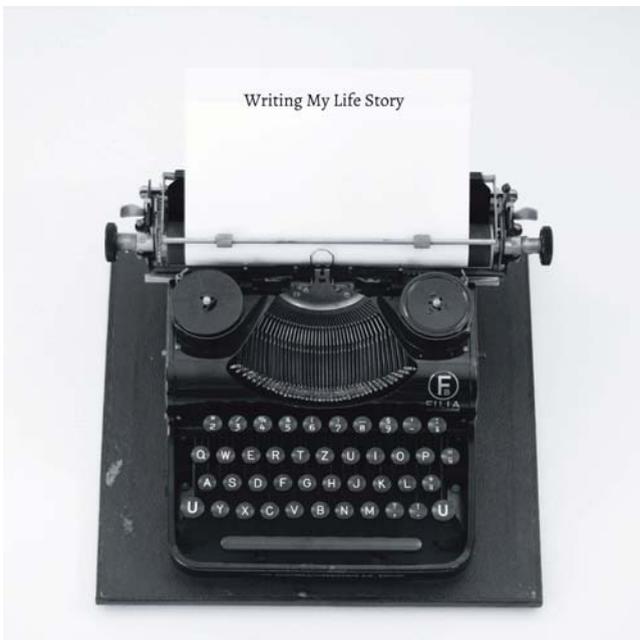
At 12, I began writing a novel. While spending the summer in northern New York, I overheard a conversation about the two bald sisters who lived across the lake. Straining to hear the hushed tones above the crackling of the fire, I understood their baldness to be the result of an incestuous relationship. Pure gossip, I later learned, but these words fuelled my young imagination. For the next year, I scribbled snippets of conversations, developed plot lines and strung descriptive words together in an attempt to weave a story about

these girls. Yet even I knew that I was doing a poor job; my words were stilted and boring. I abandoned my manuscript and my dream of being a writer, because at the time I thought the only way to be a writer was to write fiction.

For the next 40 years – through marriage, motherhood, depression and career – I continued writing. Poetry, morning pages and journal entries filled the many notebooks on my bookshelf. These intimate words, painful and sad, were not for sharing.

At 55, considered a senior, I was able to take discounted courses at Simon Fraser University. I plunged into memoir writing classes. Although I had been writing life stories since my twenties, the memories that emerged in these classes started me down a road to self-awareness through writing. I began reading personal essays and how-to books on memoir writing.

Writing my life story





Top: Nudging memories and learning the craft of life-story writing
Above: Blogging about the collective journey of older women

From this distance, with the clarity of age and wisdom, the sadness and pain of the past had numbed. The door in my soul where childhood traumas go was no longer gaping open. Finally, I was able to write life stories that I felt comfortable sharing with my daughters and other women.

As a young girl I had thought the only path to becoming a writer was through fiction, but as that young girl grew into a wiser, older woman, I realized I had been a writer all my life. Through my writing, I am now unravelling my past, making sense of my present and preparing to row north into my future.

I launched a blog exploring the collective journey of older women. Here, I began sharing some of my stories. These stories resonated; so many women had similar stories. This fuelled my passion for sharing this process with other women who wanted to pause, reflect and explore the experiences and relationships that put their lives in motion many years ago.

I focused on *Guided Autobiography* (GAB) as a way to invite women to row north with me. It is an evidence-based process developed by a gerontologist, Dr. James Birren, with 500 *qualified instructors* around the globe. GAB instructor Emma Fulenwider shares, “GAB teaches us to write for ourselves, to use writing as a tool for self-discovery and self-expression. It is a fantastic creative process that benefits the person who is writing.”

This accurately describes my experience. Writing my stories offers a self-awareness of my life through a lens of age and wisdom. My story about the 8-year-old girl who never wanted to be home helped me realize I had not been running away. I had been taking care of myself, resilient enough to look for safety and love in the

homes of my friends. My stories of early motherhood led me to write stories about my relationship with my mother. This helped me to understand better what it must have been like for her, a new immigrant who did not speak English, far from family and friends, with three young children under the age of five.

I now know that we cannot share our stories until we know our own stories. My soul is nourished when women light up because their writing has led them to an “aha” moment. A 64-year-old woman, writing about goals and aspirations, realizes that her vocation has paralleled her mother’s. In exploring the theme of embracing vulnerability, a 78-year-old writes a story about shame she has carried for many years, when, left to look after her baby

I have banned the words – I can't write – from workshops I facilitate. I tell participants I have never heard a bad story. They begin to believe me as they share their stories.

brother at 4 years of age, he wandered off and almost drowned. In writing and sharing this story, it dawned on her that a 4-year-old should never have been given the responsibility of watching a younger sibling. These stories are beautiful because they are written by the women who own them.

As is usual when I announce new workshops, in my inbox are a handful of inquiries from women. The most common question: I am not a writer – should I register?

I have banned the words – I can't write – from workshops I facilitate. I tell participants I have never heard a bad story. They begin to believe me as they share their stories. The stories are sad, beautiful, painful, insightful and compelling.

Last week was the start of an online level-two workshop, a group of women I had worked with in the past. Snippets from stories shared over a year ago re-surfaced in my head. That is how powerful life stories can be. People remember stories. Now well-acquainted with each other and the process, not one of these women felt any trepidation about sharing her life story. The theme was pivotal life moments, an invitation to look back along the river already paddled to reflect on themes or patterns that extend from one major life event to another. Each woman had prepared a two-page story she would be reading in a safe space, a place of deep listening and encouragement. I asked who wanted to start. They all muted themselves. I could see the silent laughter; no one ever wants to read first. Then two women unmuted, still laughing. "I'll go first," one said, "but there's something I want to share with you." We waited. "Do you know," she said, "as I was working on this story, I actually realized I am a writer. That's exactly why I don't mind going first." A second woman responded, "I feel like a writer too."

Helen Davidson has recently rewired her life to pursue blogging, writing and facilitating life story workshops. At *Ageless Possibilities*, Helen blogs with courage and curiosity about the journey of older women, paddling north. She writes about the transition into aging, discussing issues that hold meaning and exploring the ageless possibilities available to women.

Inspired by the words of John O'Donohue, "...into the temple of your memory where all your vanished days are secretly gathered and awaiting you" (from *The Soul as Temple of Memory*), Helen hosts "Women Rowing North: Writing Our Life Stories," workshops that offer an invitation to join her within a safe, supportive, small-group experience.

Contact: agelesspossibilities@shaw.ca

Blog and workshops: <http://www.agelesspossibilities.org>

LIFE FORCE



Jacques Leblanc

“The theory of flow is the state of consciousness that makes an experience genuinely satisfying.” – Mihaly Csikszentmihaly, *Flow* (1991)

It strikes me as ironic that the question of life force energy is not one I contemplated during my career as a pediatric cardiac surgeon. I was focused on curing illness, and life force or that “energy” that animates our being was a distant mystery. It was not part of my consciousness; rather, an awareness of doing surgery and having a genuinely satisfying experience was the reward of a successful case. I believe now that life force energy is the essence of our being. I am much more aware of the flow of that energy now that I have explored my own creativity. Creative energy is a flow of ideas. Humans have a unique creative advantage in that the life force energy is filtered through our individual mental patterns, and we are thereby able to specifically direct that energy to create our wishes, desires and dreams.

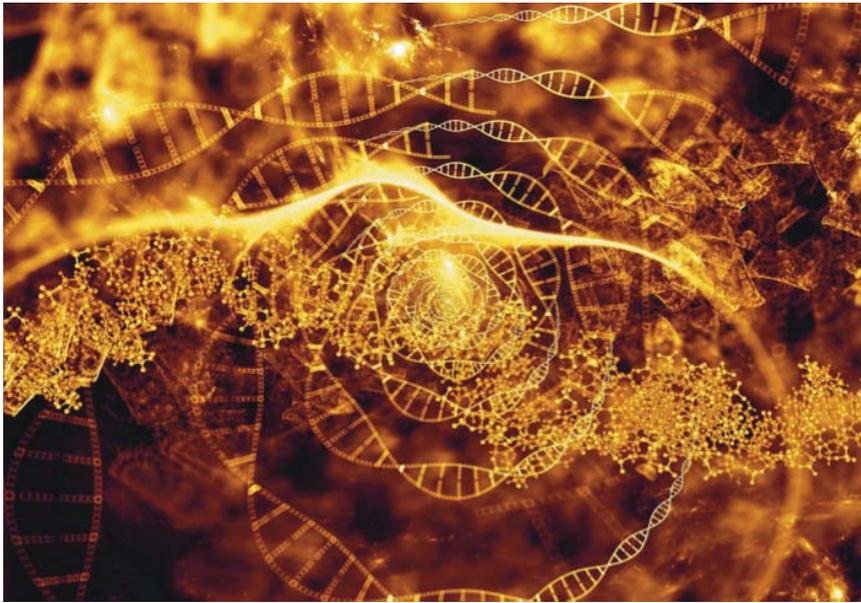
The following story is particularly special for me. It is the one that has shown me the development of my consciousness from those early years when everything was a mystery. It illustrates how two people’s life force can connect, from the depth of their souls, despite very opposite life directions. Gratitude does not manifest itself only for the living. It also occurs in the treble voice of the dying.

Isabelle was 14 years old when I met her, because she was found to have an intracardiac tumour in the left heart, giving her shortness of breath. From the multiple tests, it seemed that the tumour had all the characteristics of being benign, since malignant intracardiac tumours are quite rare. I met Isabelle and her parents at my office to discuss the upcoming cardiac operation. Isabelle’s parents were originally from France, so it was a wonderful connection to communicate in French. We established our first bond.

A few days later, I removed the intracardiac tumour without difficulty. Isabelle recovered from her open-heart surgery very well and went home after a week. I was extremely surprised to receive the pathology report stating that there were malignant cellular changes in the tumour. Although the tumour was completely removed, Isabelle needed a course of chemotherapy to abolish the possibility of recurrence.

Three years later, I was asked urgently in late afternoon to visit Isabelle, who had just been admitted for severe shortness of breath and respiratory difficulty. In fact, she was sitting up in her bed to help her breathing. The echocardiogram had shown a recurrence in the left heart of the tumour, which seemed larger than the first time. I had a long discussion with Isabelle and her parents. She was a very lovely, well informed 17-year-old woman.

Two people’s life force can connect, from the depth of their souls, despite very opposite life directions.



“Life Force”

It was in this moment that I realized that even with all my being and every drop of life force in me I could not save her.

She had full confidence in me, and we all agreed to proceed with an urgent surgery the next morning.

The operation was long and difficult as the tumour had involved the posterior wall of the heart. I had to use all my skills to remove the tumour and the posterior wall and use a patch to reconstruct the back of the heart. The heart function resumed normally, but Isabelle took a few weeks to recover from this extensive surgery. She was determined and exceptionally mature for her age. She was doing so well, but, unfortunately, nine months later she came

back to see me in my office with a laboured breathing. The echocardiogram had shown a severe recurrence of the tumour, attacking the back of the heart and the lungs.

Isabelle, who called me by my name, asked, “Jacques, can you operate on me again?”

I was devastated and sad. We were both close to crying, full of emotions. It was in this moment that I realized that even with all my being and every drop of life force in me I could not save her. But she composed herself and, with her usual determination, she asked me, “I would like to go to New York. I have always dreamt to visit the Empire State Building. Can you give me the permission to travel?”

“Absolutely,” I said without hesitation. “I will call Air Canada personally and organize a wheelchair and oxygen in the plane. I will fill out all the documents for you to travel safely.”

A large smile ignited Isabelle’s face. I did my best to organize everything so Isabelle could go to New York accompanied by her parents. When she came back, without incident, she had the energy and courage to come to my office and thank me.

Isabelle and I connected through our life force, albeit not in the same way. Isabelle’s life force was expressed in her determination to live, even as she knew her time was limited. She was able to transform a very difficult situation, giving her life force energy direction to create an experience that was genuinely satisfying for her and life affirming. She had wanted to live another experience, visiting the Empire State Building. That moment at the top of the Empire State Building was her connection to her life force, her moment of enjoyment. My life force was expressed in my determination to remove her intracardiac tumour surgically and give Isabelle her moment of happiness. Despite both our determination and our connected life force flow, despite our efforts, we both faced an uncertain future. Isabelle found a

When that time comes that our life force energy leaves the body and no longer animates it, as happens when the body dies, we could debate that the creative flow energy has left the physical body but remains within our soul.

conscious harmony and died peacefully a few months after her trip, and I had to learn to focus the flow of my life force on providing quality of life to other patients and stop chasing death. Isabelle, despite her very young age of 17 years, learned to be at peace with herself and find happiness in life. She nurtured this most important connection between us and life force, but also allowed me to learn from her creative life flow and happiness, an understanding that has stayed with me since.

When that time comes that our life force energy leaves the body and no longer animates it, as happens when the body dies, we could debate that the creative flow energy has left the physical body but remains within our soul.

Isabelle 's soul still lives with me.

Jacques LeBlanc retired after being a paediatric and adult cardiovascular and thoracic surgeon at B.C. Children's Hospital in Vancouver. Realizing that he had a lot to give back to his profession in the way of experience as a doctor, a teacher, a student of life, a husband and a human being seeking wellness in this rapidly changing world, he created leblancwellness.com. For the last few years he has been a regular contributor to The Journal, sharing a belief in recovering the connections we have lost and engaging the new skills we have gained to mitigate loneliness and create wellness.

SAGE-ING WITH CREATIVE SPIRIT, GRACE & GRATITUDE

The Journal of Creative Aging

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& KATHARINE WEINMANN

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Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude exists to honour the transformational power of creativity. We are a quarterly journal intended as an initiative for collaboration and sharing. We present the opportunity for the free exchange of wisdom gleaned from creative engagement. We invite all ages to contribute their discoveries.

Sage-ing is about seeking - satisfying inner gnawing and transforming it to knowing and action. Ageing can be alchemy when one allows the realisation that to *Know Thyself* and contribute that knowing to our culture is indeed one of life's highest purposes. That knowing brings the gratitude, grace and integrity that a life deserves. The creative journey into self is a strong aid to health and well-being for the individual and to our culture.

This journal exists for all those serious in exploring their creativity, in a chosen expression. It is a forum for publication and exposure to other artists, both emerging and established. It is an easel for any form of artistry undertaken out of personal intuition and imagination.