

***THE STONE ANGEL SPEAKS:
LISTENING TO OLDER WOMEN'S VOICES***



ELLEN S. JAFFE
and
ELLEN B. RYAN

WRITING DOWN OUR YEARS SERIES

Ellen B. Ryan, Series Editor

Ann Anas, Design Editor

1. Katie Allen, Ed. (1998)
It Ain't Over Yet: *Autobiographical Selections from the Writer's Cramp Group of Dundas, Ontario.*
2. Ellen B. Ryan, Gail M. Elliot, & Sheree D. Meredith, Eds. (1999)
From Me to You: *Intergenerational Connections Through Storytelling.*
3. Ellen B. Ryan, Gail M. Elliot, & Ann P. Anas, Eds. (2000)
Exchanges Between Us: *More Intergenerational Connections.*
4. Ellen S. Jaffe & Ellen B. Ryan (2006)
The Stone Angel Speaks: *Listening to Older Women's Voices.*
5. Paula Papky, Ed. (2006)
The Berries are Sweeter Here: *Older Women Writing Together.*
6. Chris Hagens, Andrea Cosentino, & Ellen B. Ryan (2006)
You Grow Out of Winter: *Poetry in Long Term Care.*
7. Kathleen M. Banchoff (2006)
Passing on the Blessing: *Stories, Tips and Tools of a Family Caregiver.*

**To order, complete the order form insert
OR CONTACT:**

McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies

KTH - 226

McMaster University

Hamilton, ON L8S 4M4

Tel: (905) 525-9140 Extension: 24449; Fax: 905-525-4198

E-mail: gercntr@mcmaster.ca

**Printed at: McMaster University,
Hamilton, Ontario, Canada**

Writing Down Our Years Series, No. 4

***THE STONE ANGEL SPEAKS:
LISTENING TO OLDER WOMEN'S VOICES***

ELLEN S. JAFFE
and
ELLEN B. RYAN

***SERIES EDITOR, ELLEN B. RYAN
THE MCMASTER CENTRE FOR GERONTOLOGICAL STUDIES
MCMASTER UNIVERSITY
HAMILTON, ONTARIO L8S 4M4
2006***

BOOK TITLE: THE STONE ANGEL SPEAKS :LISTENING TO OLDER WOMEN'S VOICES

AUTHORS: Ellen S. Jaffe, Ellen B. Ryan

COVER DESIGN: Ann Anas

First Printing: September, 2006

© Copyright 2006

No part of this book may be copied or reproduced through any means, electronic or mechanical, without permission in writing from the McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies.

Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication Data

Jaffe, Ellen S., 1945- The Stone Angel Speaks: Listening to Older Womens' Voices/ Ellen B. Ryan

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 978-1-894088-64-0

1. Authorship. 2. Older women. 3. Storytelling. 4. Narrative therapy. I. Ryan Ellen B., 1947- II. McMaster University. Centre for Gerontological Studies III. Title.

PN153.J34 2006

808'.020846

C2006-905124-0

**Writing Down Our Years Series, No. 4
Ellen B. Ryan, Series Editor**

TABLE OF CONTENTS

“PRAIRIE GREAT-GRANDMOTHER”: EXPLANATION and DEDICATION ..	v
FOREWORD BY SHARON BRAY	vii
INTRODUCTION	9
I: THE MEANING OF STORY	
<i>The Crone’s Promise</i>	11
<i>How Stories Create Meaning</i>	12
<i>Spinning Yarns</i>	14
II: LITERATURE -- FICTION, POETRY, PLAYS	
<i>Listening to “The Stone Angel”</i>	17
<i>Creativity and Healing Through Writing</i>	21
<i>Forgetting and Remembering: The “Memory Board”</i>	28
III: FAMILY STORIES	
<i>Enhancing Relationships</i>	31
<i>Everyday Activities</i>	32
<i>Grandmothers: Stories and Memories</i>	34
<i>“Too Hard to Talk About”</i>	38
<i>Interweaving Personal and Cultural</i>	38
IV: FACILITATED LIFE STORY WRITING	
<i>Remembering Boxes, Group Poetry, and Other “Tools”</i>	41
<i>Translation</i>	43
<i>Using Drama</i>	44
CONCLUSION	47
REFERENCES CITED	49
FURTHER READING	55

“PRAIRIE GREAT-GRANDMOTHER”:



EXPLANATION AND DEDICATION

The cover photograph, called “Prairie Great-Grandmother,” was taken by Ellen S. Jaffe in July, 1982: it is a picture of Gretta Caswell, my (then)-husband’s grandmother, age 87, and my son Joe Albert Bitz, age 20 months. This was our first and only visit to Gretta’s home in Swift Current, Saskatchewan, where she had lived for almost 70 years since moving from Kincardine, Ontario.

Her husband was the town barber; he died in 1948. Like my own great-grandmother and grandmother – and many other women – Gretta had lived on her own for many years. She still tended a beautiful garden, with day-lilies and many other flowers. She died in her own bed the following November, after raking the garden one last time.

After reading *The Stone Angel* by Margaret Laurence, I could see a resemblance between Gretta and Hagar Shipley, the central character in that book. So, I sent a copy of the photograph to Margaret Laurence, with a note saying how much her writing meant to me. She wrote back the following kind and generous letter, hand-typed:

*Lakefield, Ontario, Canada
13 May 84*

Dear Ellen Jaffe Bitz,

Thank you very much for your good and heartening letter, and for the picture of The Grandmother...I saw such a lot in that photo...and I am grateful to you for sharing it with me. I am also so glad THE STONE ANGEL spoke to you.

*With many many good wishes,
Margaret Laurence*

We are writing this book with the hope that the story of *The Stone Angel* and the other stories, poems, memoirs, and bits of writing in this book will speak to you – the reader – and leave their voices and images in your mind and heart.

This book is dedicated to Margaret Laurence, to all the writers who have allowed their work to be included here, and to all the older women and their families who share their own stories with each other, and perhaps with the wider world. We acknowledge our own grandparents and great-grandparents, for their stories spoken and unspoken.

We would like to thank Ann Anas, Kathleen Banchoff, and Ramona Carbotte for their invaluable assistance in the preparation of this book, as well as acknowledge help and encouragement from many other friends, colleagues, and associates.

We gratefully acknowledge permission for reprinting from published works from Katherine Gordon, Nan Blackmon McCants, P. K. Page, Claire Ridker, and Marilyn Truscott.

E.S.J. and E.B.R.

FOREWORD

Sharon Bray

THE STONE ANGEL SPEAKS: Listening to Older Women's Voices is as much an action as a written study about the power of storytelling. Authors Ellen S. Jaffe and Ellen B. Ryan take action: they guide readers into layers of creativity that emerge through divining stories, through telling stories, and through hearing stories.

The older woman, the crone, and her relationship to the story shifts in this work. Sometimes she *tells* the story and in doing so imparts rich personal and cultural histories to her listener. At other times, she may be the *subject* of a story, a wise or quirky woman from whom children can learn. She may, as an elder, hold memories to remind her family of their origins, their myths, their losses, and even their recipes. She could be the domestic crone, who, through daily activities like stirring the soup or clacking her knitting needles, alerts her listeners to the milieu, the narrative setting of storytelling as well as to the story itself. The crone may also be the keeper and the creator of a memory box, a tangible container that houses fragments of memory, pieces of the past – the stuff that stories are made of.

The authors' action continues: in revealing to us the crone and the potential of her voice, we as active listeners are guided into the ways of healing, of strengthening relationships between individuals and generations, of learning, and of self knowledge.

And self knowledge is Hagar Shipley's greatest wisdom. Hagar is the narrator, the crone, the storyteller of *The Stone Angel*, the novel that lends its title to this study. The parallels between *The Stone Angel* and the actions encouraged by Jaffe and Ryan are expansive. Reluctantly, Hagar emerges from the stingy silence of pride to the peace of rejoicing; it is a process that takes the entirety of her life. Through telling her story of loss and connection, she finally comes to self-knowledge: she can rejoice. Nearing the end of her time, Hagar's memories spill out of her, often to her own surprise. She marvels at the torn voice and the ancient memory that erupt into her story. Her marveling is self-perception, her move towards knowing her self.

She recalls her father's home, her brother's frailty, the pleasure of sex, her fear of motherhood, the shame of her husband, the waste of her son, how marigolds reseed themselves, how to 'head and tail' green string beans, and of course, her own undeniable strength. As crone, Hagar tells the story of **now** and **then**. And while her words render her a 'holy terror' in her son's thoughts, her grandchildren are appreciative, caring and aware of her 'library' of knowing.

In this study, Jaffe and Ryan take time to consider the creative process of Claire Ridker, an older woman who reaches out to other elders and notes that we live in "a society in which to grow old is a fearful, uncertain process. I hope that recounting my experience may be of use to others like me." Margaret Laurence, author of *The Stone Angel*, is also of great 'use' to others like herself: in choosing Hagar as her narrator, Laurence provides readers, or active listeners, with an important service in giving the crone a voice, a memorable, outspoken, even leathery voice from whom we all can learn.

Stories are our guides. They do not exist just for the individual, but also for the community. They are our directions, and they must be told. And when they are told from the vantage point of the crone, they lead the way with wisdom. Together, teller and listener create, heal, and learn. *THE STONE ANGEL SPEAKS* nurtures the story, and its many textured roles, in all of us.



Sharon Bray is a high school English teacher with a special interest in Canadian writers. She has been active in various writing circles over the last two decades. She is currently writing the life of Hamilton sculptor Elizabeth Holbrook.

INTRODUCTION

In a society where older women often feel invisible and relegated to the sidelines, storytelling and story writing play a key role in becoming more visible and more audible. We believe that older women are actively present in stories – when we know how and where to look for them. This is because stories (including memoirs, diaries, letters, recipes and poems as well as short stories and novels) encourage women to speak their truths, reflect on their lives, and pass on their skills, caring, and wisdom to the next generation. Sharing stories is a way for older women to overcome the “ageism” and powerlessness they/we often experience.

In this study, we look at writing and storytelling by professional writers and by women in everyday life. We explore the transformative, healing power of narrative throughout our lives, and its particular poignancy during the process of aging. Although we focus on work by women, we also refer to work by men: we are all part of one human family.

Through experiences in our personal lives and in our work, both authors of this study have seen that people learn to know themselves and to know others by the stories they tell – and the stories to which they listen. Human beings are surrounded by story, from the moment we are born until we die. Writing in the *Toronto Star* on the death of Louise Bennett Coverly, the Jamaican-born storyteller known as “Miss Lou,” Jim Coyle noted, “It has been famously said that when an old person dies, a library burns down. When the deceased is a storyteller, the loss is greater still. For storytellers are historians not of governments and grand deeds, but of the people, the streets and alleys, the kitchens and sitting rooms, the yards.” (August 1, 2006). But perhaps, in hearing, remembering and retelling the stories, we can keep the library alive.

We begin with an overview of the meaning of story, and how stories create meaning in our lives. Second, we address published literature of various genres, focusing on Margaret Laurence’s novel *The Stone Angel*. Third, we look more closely at family stories, both those told “around the dinner table” and those that are written down. We end by discussing the use of facilitated writing, to help people remember and tell their stories.

I. THE MEANING OF STORY



The Crone's Promise

“Why am I here, trivialized by my society, with a third of my life ahead of me?” asks Betty Nickerson (1995), in her book *Old and Smart*, a look at the older woman – the crone – in today’s world. As crone, she knows that “I am schooled by experience and common sense, with enough love to assist the care and healing of the world even as I undertook the care and healing of my children” (p. 7).

Nickerson suggests that the crone can help heal all of nature, not only humanity. In writing a Credo for the Modern Crone, she asks society to “accept the Crone, whom we shall call Elder, until such time as we have *rematriated* (italics ours) her rightful names (and) enabled her to fill her time-honored place in humankind’s harmonious relationships” (p. 98). She adds, “... as Elder, I shall add my services to those of the many to assist in restoring woman to her rightful place. Age has provided me with special powers in the persona of the Crone, representative of the Mother of All, Earth Mother and Nurturing mother – she who brings forth life and protects it” (p. 98).

The crone asks us to consider the meaning and value of women in the third stage of life, after the roles of maiden and mother. Many writers have noted that, after menopause, women’s primary creativity shifts to her spirit and wisdom, her memories and skills, rather than the physical creativity of childbirth and motherhood. This is not to deny, however, that a woman may actively pursue spiritual and artistic creativity in earlier stages of life. These three stages may not be entirely chronological; instead, they show different ways of thinking, feeling, and relating to the world.

Telling stories is an important aspect of nurturing and healing, and is a way in which the crone can share her rich experience of life. As mentioned above, in the tribute to Louise Bennett-Coverly, “Grandmother’s stories” are often beloved and treasured memories.

Let us take a moment to consider another familiar “type” of older women in stories. The well-known character of the “wicked witch” in myth and fairy tales is a kind of inversion of the crone, depicting a woman who is not only without the bloom of youth, but who is morally evil as well as ugly, split off from the wise woman’s creativity, nurturing, and healing. We believe the witch has a double meaning: she shows the devouring aspects of the goddess/mother, who can hate and even destroy her children with “magic” powers. On the other hand, she may also represent the corrupted, slandered version of the “wise woman,” the healer, “demonized” by patriarchal forces, both religious and secular.

In stories, however, the “wicked witch” usually pushes the heroine/young girl into becoming stronger, smarter, and more of a woman; thus she is a crucial part of the story and of the protagonist’s development, not just an obstacle. In addition, as a crone, she has her own challenges as well as powers. One of the authors (E.S.J.) has written a series of poems in the voices of fairy-tale witches, monologues showing their more human side: how loneliness, fear of aging, and lack of love, not simply “evil,” drives them to act the way they do. The witch in “Hansel and Gretel,” for example, ends her poem by thinking of Gretel and saying, “Poor creature! She too will live to be a starved old woman.” (Jaffe, *Water Children*, 2002).

In this work, we will focus on the more positive aspects of story for older women.



How Stories Create Meaning

Stories, like our grandmothers themselves, can be nourishing and caring. “Sometimes a person needs a story more than food to stay alive,” one author has said (Lopez, 1988).

Gail Sher, a Zen Buddhist writer, teacher and psycho-therapist, says that “a story cradles the psyche” (1999, p. 131). Leslie Marmon Silko, a Laguna novelist, writes in *Ceremony* (1980) about “a world made of stories, the long ago, time immemorial stories, as old Grandma called them. It was a world alive, always changing and moving, and if you knew where to look, you could see it, sometimes imperceptible, like the motion of the stars across the

sky” (p. 95). This haunting passage describes how the world of story is both inside us and outside in the wider world.

There are mythological, ancient stories, the bearers of our culture, and then there are personal and family stories. Both kinds of narrative create pattern and meaning from the chaos and raw experience of our lives. This is not a scientific, rational order, but the order of story itself: “story-truth” in the words of writer Tim O’Brien (1990). Poet Muriel Rukeyser has written, “The universe is made of stories/not of atoms” (cited by Caputi, 1993, p. 151). And Thomas King, a Native Canadian writer, has said succinctly, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, p. 22 and *passim*). King seems to be saying that we need to see our lives not as “facts” or raw experience, but as narrative, developing and unfolding over time. He quotes Cherokee storyteller Diane Glancy, “There are stories that take seven days to tell. There are other stories that take your whole life.”

What makes a “good” story, as opposed to one which is repetitive, boring, pontificating, or egocentric?

We know that telling or listening to a story is not like a test which you can pass or fail; it is more like a form of play, even when the content of the story is serious. Telling and listening take place in what psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) has called “potential space,” which creates a relationship and shared reality between teller/writer and listener/reader. A good story speaks to the inner feelings of teller and listener as well as being grounded in the “real world” – both human and natural – which they inhabit.

A good story changes each time it is told because the teller responds to the listener’s reactions and also to her own evolving relationship to the story. In active listening, we always hear different and deeper nuances in a story, even one that we have heard many times before.

This may be why children want to hear a story, written or oral, many times – in order to take it fully into their minds and hearts. Even adults, when re-reading a novel or seeing a film again after many years, often find that the details of the story are different from what they remember while still feeling familiar with the story as a whole, as if meeting a long-lost friend.

Poet Joy Harjo has said “Ultimately, a poem has an electrical force field, which is love” (Moyers, 1995, p. 157); we believe this applies to all writing and storytelling. It is this “force field of love” that gives meaning to our stories, both personal and mythic.

Philosophers such as Wittgenstein have wondered about the “medium” or dimension through which we make meaning from raw experience. Most people recognize the “aha!” experience of “I get it” and know this is a sensory feeling, not just a rational process.



Spinning Yarns

Many cultures have used the image of stitching and weaving as a metaphor for the way stories work. The Three Fates in Greek Mythology were often depicted spinning, weaving, measuring and cutting the threads that govern human life.

The spider spinning her web is another use of this image to describe creativity and story-making. Some southwestern U.S. Native mythologies, like those of the Keres people of Laguna and Acoma, relate how Spider Woman – also known as Thinking Woman – created the world from her own thoughts, songs and stories (Allen, 1986, pp. 33-37).

According to these legends, Spider Woman is both past and present: she creates and recreates the cosmos, again and again. She both *has* power and *is* that power (this echoes W.B. Yeats’ line, *How can you tell the dancer/From the dance?*). Further, she knew/knows “that the power’s song was a song of great age,” spidery and wrinkly and strong, and this spidery strength became an integral part of all the forms of life she created. Spider Woman wanted to “share her song-dream...not because she was lonely, but because the power’s song was so complete, she wished for there to be others who could also know it” (pp. 34-35).

This is sharing from a sense of abundance and a desire to nurture and enliven others, not from loneliness and need. Today, too, we feel that sharing a story enriches its strength and power. The tale resonates with the listeners or readers so that they can take it into their lives and share it with others in turn.

Shakespeare wrote that “the web of our life is of a mingled yarn, good and ill together” (*All’s Well That Ends Well*, 4.3.69-70). We use the word *yarn* both for wool or thread which we can stitch into literal quilts and garments and also for a tale, a story woven out of the threads of our lives. In fact, “yarn” literally means the guts, or intestines, of an animal, made into sinew for sewing. Metaphorically, we do create stories from our own “guts,” from the

physical and emotional experiences of our lives, transformed by imagination and language. There is a piece of advice for beginning authors which says, “Writing is easy: just open a vein and begin.”

A patchwork quilt, like a story, brings together diverse elements, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. One of us (E.S.J.) has noted in a book on the writing process that quilts are made of “bits and pieces of cloth (that) hold memories of events and experiences” stitched together in a pattern – even one that seems “crazy” at first glance – in the same way that a story is composed (Jaffe, 2001, p. 6). In the preface to that work, I noted that, like quilters, writers “hope to take our lives into our own hands” (*ibid.*).

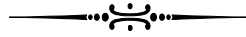
Canadian writers Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson (2001, 2003) used the image of stitching in *Dropped Threads* and *Dropped Threads 2*, the titles of their anthologies of women’s stories about previously-untold episodes in their lives. The first collection included writing by both established and new writers and received a warm response from readers, some of whom became contributors to the second book.

Even in the modern term “the world-wide web,” we use the image of webs and spinning to connect our thoughts at lightning-quick speed in “virtual reality.”

From the ancient, intriguing, figure of Spider Woman (so different from the cartoon super-hero figure of Spider Man!) to women in published fiction, poetry, and memoir, to one’s own memories of grandmothers and aunts telling stories of their girlhoods – the woman elder, the crone, is a powerful and universal figure in the world of story.



II. LITERATURE: FICTION, POETRY, PLAYS



Listening to “The Stone Angel”

Fiction writers, playwrights, and poets build their stories not only from personal experience, but also – and especially – from imaginative creation of characters (human, animal, and “other”) and the places they inhabit. Houston (Texas) writer and playwright Elizabeth Gilbert, paraphrasing playwright Tina Howe, says of fiction, “It’s all true but none of it happened” (2000, personal communication). We would like to look closely at one memorable fictional portrait of an older woman. In her now-classic novel, *The Stone Angel*, Margaret Laurence (1964), the beloved Canadian novelist (1926-1986), created an archetypal story of a ninety-year-old woman, Hagar Shipley. More than a “still” portrait, this novel shows a woman speaking to us in her own voice and discovering herself in the process.

In her study, *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, Clara Thomas (1976, p. 60) writes:

In a very considerable sense, her fictional realization of Hagar Shipley was both tribute and memorial to the two persons who had most deeply marked her youth: her tough and terrifying grandfather, John Simpson, who had died in 1953, and beloved step-mother, Margaret Simpson Wemyss, who had died in 1957 .

But Laurence moved beyond the personal to create a character with unique identity, with whom readers can empathize.

As she recalls the story of her life, Hagar says, “Now I am rampant with memory,” as if she herself has become an heraldic shield. But she does not want to stay stuck in the past. She comments:

Some people will tell you that the old live in the past – that’s nonsense. Each day, so worthless really, has a rarity for me lately. I could put it in a vase and admire it, like the first dandelions, and we would forget their weediness and marvel that they were there at all. But one disassembles, usually for the sake of such people as Marvin (her son), who is somehow comforted by the picture of old ladies feeding like docile rabbits on the lettuce leaves of other times, other manners

(Laurence, 1964, p. 5).

Hagar is a proud woman, not a “docile rabbit.” Pride is her achievement, one of the character traits that has helped her survive a difficult life. Yet it is also her stumbling-block, the barrier that keeps her from truly loving or empathizing with others. Through telling her story, looking back at the past while living in the present, she realizes how this has happened. “Pride was my wilderness, and the demon that led me there was fear,” she says (p. 292). Toward the end of the book, when she is dying, her minister visits and wants her to pray with him. In a firm voice, he sings the hymn which begins, “*All people that on earth do dwell...*” At the last line, “*Come ye before him and rejoice,*” Hagar finds her epiphany:

This knowledge comes upon me so forcefully, so shatteringly, and with such a bitterness as I have never felt before. I must always, always have wanted that – simply to rejoice. How is it I never could? I know, I know. How long have I known? Or have I always known, in some far crevice of my heart, some cave too deeply buried, too concealed. ...When did I ever speak the heart’s truth? (pp. 291-292).

With this knowledge, this rejoicing, late as it is, she can let go of life in a state of peace, perhaps of grace. Most of us can recognize Hagar's pride in people we know – perhaps even ourselves.

The “stone angel” of the title is a literal memorial to Hagar's mother, who died while giving birth to her. The angel is “doubly blind, not only stone but unendowed with even a pretense of sight,” because “whoever carved her had left the eyeballs blank” (p. 3). On a symbolic level, the stone angel refers to Hagar herself: although stubborn, she finally gives up her eyes and heart of stone and becomes able to see and to feel.

Throughout the story, Hagar reflects on what she and other people can see – and she includes the reader in her reflections. She helps us think about what we cannot see even when we have eyes, and what we see only when it is too late. She also muses on the words she and others say, the things we do not say even though we feel them, and the words we are too proud to take back. We see in the story when a lie can become the truth, both in speech (like the words Hagar says to her son Marvin when she is dying) and also in actions (as in a scene where Hagar's brother Matt puts on their dead mother's shawl to comfort their dying brother Dan). This shawl, like a plaid-pin and other familiar objects, become important talismans in the story. At one point, Hagar talks about the “junkyard” of memory; garbage dumps – and their contents – also play a crucial role in some of Laurence's other novels, especially *The Diviners*. We think that, by using this image of a junkyard or dump, Laurence does not mean to disparage and demean memory itself or the things we dredge up there.

On the contrary, she is saying that we ourselves often cannot help shucking and emotionally rejecting things that are of the utmost importance, sometimes too painful to keep in mind; these things need to be found later on, dusted off, and looked at in a new, more loving way, from a different perspective. In addition, in our memories the “trivial” and the “important” lie side by side – and who can tell which is which? A seemingly trivial event or object may be the key to a feeling or insight of great significance, and everything connects in some way.

Marcel Proust explored this in depth in his great work, *Remembrance of Things Past – En La Recherche du Temps Perdu*.

Most people know the story of how the book begins: Proust dips a small cake, a madeleine, into a cup of linden tea, and the taste brings back a flood of childhood memories. He believed that there were two kinds of memory: the intentional, in which we try to remember a particular event – and may not recall much; and the “unconscious,” in which a sense-experience – a sight, or more often a sound, smell, taste, or touch – can awaken long-buried memories.

In *The Stone Angel*, the story of Hagar’s present and her past are interwoven by many of these sensory experiences – pictures in a doctor’s office make her remember the horses on the farm where she lived with her husband; sitting on a log in a deserted wood takes her back to thoughts of her son who died.

Through these memories, we learn not just about Hagar herself but her family and ancestors; and through the scenes set in the present, we learn about Hagar’s living son, daughter-in-law, and grandchildren. Even the minor characters – nurses, doctors, townspeople, passing strangers – and about the world she lives in. Images come from nature – hawks, crows, trees, flowers. The story of the past tells Hagar’s life; the story of the present helps her move through illness toward death, not as a “stone angel” and not only as a “holy terror” (as her son Marvin says, in both anger and tenderness), but as a woman coming to terms with her own body and her own soul; a woman reaching out to drink her own glass of water, even at the end:

*I’ll drink from this glass, or spill it, just as I choose...
I wrest from her the glass, full of water, to be had for
the taking. I hold it in my own hands.
There. There.
And then --*

(p. 308)

Water makes us think of life, emotions, change, tears, growth after drought, fullness after thirst, "the river that flowed both ways" (in *The Diviners*, Laurence, 1974).

Hagar has told us that, earlier in her life she “wouldn’t cry in front of strangers, whatever it cost me” (p. 242). Telling her story to herself and also to a “stranger,” the reader, and letting us see her cry, is – paradoxically – a way of reclaiming her dignity and her humanity.

The symbol of the stone angel reminds us of the Victorian image of woman as “the angel in the house.” It lets us understand more fully the need for women to own their feelings, minds and bodies – to be neither “angel” nor “temptress” nor numbed as if turned to stone.

Laurence’s novel is taught in Canadian high school curricula and has several times been adapted for the stage. It shows old age in all its complexity, audacity, terror, and strength. The writer’s achievement is all the more remarkable in that she was under forty when she created the character of Hagar. It is a story of old age, of women and of men, of Canada’s history, and of the need for us all to learn to see and listen to each other.



Creativity and Healing Through Writing

As people age, they face realistic expectations of losing the ability to function, and greater awareness of death. This may lead to increased fear and perhaps depression. In aging, as in other times of stress, creativity can help people find a path through their suffering. Often in life, being creative is a choice to “go fearward” (Turner-Vessalago, n.d.) – to work through that fear which takes away our motivation and will to live. We will now look at writing by women well into the process of growing older.

Claire Ridker, an Ontario art therapist, Gestalt therapist, artist and writer, wrote a book at age eighty, *Railing Against the Rush of Years: A Personal Journey through Aging via Art Therapy*, with commentary by Patricia Savage (1996). Using colour and form, as well as words, Ridker conveys not only her experience of growing older but also her life-long quest to find wholeness. She knew that she needed to continue to be creative as she aged, so she found new media – watercolour and pastel – when sculpting became too arduous. Experiencing and recovering from a serious illness also played a part in helping her come to terms with growing old. Ridker writes, “The strange thing is that, in some indefinable way, in my innermost self, I feel fifteen years old. Yet in every way one can define, I am old, every bit as old as my years” (p. 6). She comments, “...I can’t deny the effects of the society in which I live, a society in which to grow old is a fearful, uncertain process. I hope that recounting my experience may be of use to others like me” (p. 4).

In the poem that gives the book its title, she uses colour to visualize the aging process (p. 75).

The Colours of Age

*Muted colours
gently flowing off the brush.
Paint blends
peach and mauve with pearly grey
the softly beautiful signs of aging.*

*Yet...
there's more to age.
There is rusty brown for lasting power;
there is red for railing
against the rush of years;
there is solid blue for never giving in.
And at last
There is green and gold for pervasive hope.*

Ridker's use of art and therapy show that she did not lose hope; she could, in Dylan Thomas's words, "Rage, rage against the dying of the light" – rage, not to become bitter, but to live more fully and well. As she says in the last poem in the book ("*The Irenic Solution*," p. 76, excerpt):

*Perhaps inner peace is not what I truly seek.
Perhaps inner peace is the price to pay
For the insatiable search for more –
More truth, more love, more knowledge...
Perhaps more of everything is the only answer.*

More.

The well-known Canadian poet P.K. Page (2002, p. 197) has written a poem which presents different views of the self, reminiscent of Claire Ridker's double-image of herself as a teenage girl and an old woman.

The Selves

*Every other day I am an invalid.
Lie back among the pillows and white sheets
lackadaisical! O lackadaisical.
Brush my hair out like a silver fan.
Allow myself to be wheeled into the sun.
Calves'-foot jelly, a mid-morning glass of port,
these I accept and rare azaleas in pots.*

*The nurses humor me. They call me 'dear'.
I am pilled and pillowed into another sphere
and there my illness rules us like a queen,
is absolute monarch, wears a giddy crown
and I, its humble servant at all times, am its least serf
on occasion and excluded from the feast.*

*Every other other day I am as fit
as planets circling.
I brush my hair into a golden sun,
strike roses from a bush,
rare plants in pots
blossom within the green of my eyes,
I am enviable O I am enviable.*

*Somewhere in between the two,
a third wishes to speak,
cannot make itself heard,
stands unmoving, mute, invisible,
a bolt of lightning in its naked hand.*

This kind of poem can be seen as a dialogue within the self, searching for meaning in one's experience. This inner dialogue can be healing in its ability to turn even frustrating or painful events into interior narrative. One of us (E.S.J.) has a friend in her eighties, living temporarily in a care facility because of a broken ankle.

A writer for much of her life, she passed the time by reading stories by Anton Chekhov and said that she imagined writing a story about her situation as Chekhov would have viewed it. This helped her achieve greater objectivity and equanimity.

Creativity and writing can also be an integral part of healing for those with a serious degenerative illness. Marilyn Truscott, a retired Canadian scientist with early-stage Alzheimer's disease, has turned her energy and vision to advocacy through public speaking and writing. In addition to writing essays for health professionals on her experience of dementia, she has been inspired for the first time to write poetry. Truscott contributed the following poem to an article by one of us (E.B.R.) describing how people with dementia have used creative writing as a coping strategy (Ryan et al., 2005, p. 196).

Missing Tunis – Storm in the Mediterranean

<i>Glowing, growing</i>	<i>Lifted high</i>
<i>Flowing, blowing</i>	<i>Slammed down</i>
<i>Growling, scowling</i>	<i>Water rushes over</i>
<i>The waves reach higher</i>	<i>The bow drowns</i>
<i>Foaming and frothing</i>	<i>The ship creaks</i>
<i>Shouting their anger</i>	<i>Groans, moans</i>
<i>Tossing, twisting</i>	<i>Through the night</i>
<i>Shifting, drifting</i>	<i>The long, dark night</i>
<i>Our ship sways</i>	<i>Morning the sea is still</i>
<i>As the storm carries us along</i>	<i>But we've changed course</i>
	<i>Missed our port.</i>

Even though Truscott recognizes the losses caused by illness (suggested by “the storm,” “the long dark night,” and “missing our port”), her new avenues of creativity and of advocacy on behalf of fellow-sufferers serve to buttress her sense of self.

May Sarton, U.S. novelist, poet, and journal-writer, also used the images of ship and port to describe aging. The first stanza of her poem “Coming Into Eighty” (1994, p. 15) reads:

*Coming into eighty,
I slow my ship down
For a safe landing
It has been battered,
One sail torn, the rudder
Sometimes wobbly.
We are hardly a glorious sight.
It has been a long voyage
Through time, travail and triumph,
Eighty years
Of learning what to be and how to become it.*

Florida Scott-Maxwell, another U.S. writer describing her life in old age, says, “We who are old know that age is more than a disability. It is an intense and varied experience, almost beyond our capacity at times, but something to be carried high” (1968/1979, p. 5). Later in this journal, she adds, “My dear fellow octogenarians, how are we to carry so much life, and what are we to do with it?” (p. 139).

Like Margaret Laurence in *The Stone Angel*, Nan Blackmon McCants, a Houston playwright, was able to visualize old age before she reached it, and she gives us some insight into how to “carry so much life.” In her short play, *Midnight Mother* (2000, p. 24-25), an older woman living in a nursing home pays an unexpected night-time visit to her daughter and makes a startling revelation. In this excerpt, the daughter (called “Woman”) begins the dialogue with surprise at her mother’s remarkable transformation into health:

WOMAN: Mom...sometimes when I visit, you don't know who I am. You've fallen half a dozen times. I haven't seen you this strong, this lucid, in years.

MOTHER: You haven't seen me at night. For a few hours every night I can see how things are, I can think. I'm not the only one. I told you about Mrs. Gibson. There are several others who rise in the night and see. We see where we are – segregated from our unctuous children and their version of life, which, by the way, is not the only life worth living.

WOMAN: Why have you never told me about the nights?

MOTHER: Because I don't remember the nights during the day. The days I remember at night. There are some residents who no longer have the nights. I've seen it happen. They begin to sleep through the night, once, twice a week, then they lose them altogether. It will happen to me, too. I'm sure of that.

At night, the mother wants to travel far away and leave the “sanitizorium” – the “place where they sanitize all the unpleasantness – the smells, the sounds, the misery.” But then day breaks and she returns to her state of confusion, helplessness, and amnesia, saying to her daughter, “You are so kind to help me, young woman.”

Although the sharp difference between day and night may not be literally true, this poignant scene shows the mother's awareness of the life she is losing as well as her ability to retain sparks of her intelligence and true self, even when her daughter thinks she has lost them completely.

Ontario poet Katherine L. Gordon also shows how older women may be empowered at night, in her poem "Care of the Elderly Moon-Mad" (2005, p. 19).

*Don't let grannie
see that moon tonight,
it's much too full and bright
Lock the door
pull the blinds
early bed and hush!
If she gets out
She'll throw away her cane
Do that dance again –
The neighbours will complain.
She'll come back demanding
Sugar in her tea!
She'll start telling those stories
Many times over,
Won't keep quiet for weeks.
Her days in the sun are done,
Her use is really over,
No time of life to be a moon-rover!
She says she sees her friends
In some great fairy ride
They wave to her and say they'll wait
And then for weeks she keeps
That damned moonlight
In her eyes.*

This poem shows how family members may become apprehensive when the older person begins asserting herself and "won't keep quiet" or be a "docile rabbit." They may have to listen to her stories, to her needs and feelings, insights and heartaches, to her transitions between rambling and clarity.

Forgetting and Remembering: The “Memory Board”

Memory Board, by Canadian writer Jane Rule (1987), is a novel in which people cope with memory loss and the recovery of lost memories. As in *The Stone Angel*, the story moves between past and present. One of the three central characters, named (with poignant irony) Constance, is facing actual loss of memory through a form of Alzheimer’s or a related illness. The “memory board” of the title is literally a slate on which Constance’s partner, Diana, writes down her daily activities to help her function in her life. The list includes everyday items like “put on your clothes” and “breakfast,” as well as events special for that day, such as “dinner with David” (p. 24). During dinner, Constance may need to consult the slate several times to remember the name of their dinner guest.

In addition, sometimes Diana consciously tries to “remember things for her.” Constance will ask simple questions like, “How old am I? What colour did my hair used to be? Have we always lived together?” This last question leads Diana to reminiscences of her own (p. 40).

There are, however, some activities that Constance has done for most of her life, like weeding the garden, that she still remembers with her body and enjoys doing. When Constance, Diana, and Diana’s widowed brother David go on a holiday together, Constance finds that she can remember how to swim. She also has flashback memories, such as huddling in bomb shelters during World War II and being trapped in the rubble with her mother and sister until she was rescued. Sometimes these memories surface in her present life, as when she is faced with an escalator in the airport that reminds her of the escalators in the London underground, which often served as a bomb shelter during the war.

In addition, she can size up an emotional situation and make strangely appropriate comments; in Emily Dickinson’s words, she can “tell the truth, but tell it slant.” And she still can relate to other people. Sometimes she is able to reflect on her situation: she once says that she feels “more like a dog” than a woman: “If only I had nothing to do but be interested in my bodily functions, distracted into barking by anything that moved, into wagging my tail at the sight of you, I’d be fine. But by the look on your face, I can see that more is expected of me” (p. 39).

Painfully, she and Diana both know she cannot always meet these expectations – and will meet them less often as time goes on. There is freedom as well as despair in this: Constance can remember that David is Diana’s brother, but also says, “You’re anybody I want you to be” (p. 321).

The novel, however, works on another, more universal level, which gives it more power. It shows how individuals who are not dealing with obvious memory loss also depend on people and things around them to help remember both good and bad times. We all can bury our sad, shameful, and painful memories so deeply that it is difficult to dig them up again, even when we are reminded of them through the unexpected “memory board” that life offers us every day. These experiences, however, make us more whole and help us better know ourselves and others, with greater insight and compassion. When we can remember with other people, we validate and expand our own truth, perhaps correcting the false impressions and defenses that we “made do with” in the past. We can turn these memories into stories we tell each other, stories which both keep the experiences alive and transform them, connecting them to the ongoing flow of our lives.

Toward the end of the novel (p. 321), David says:

Of all the misfunctions of memory, grudge-holding was perhaps the worst, for it fixed in stone episodes which should be carried along in the flow of time, diluted, finally forgotten.

So we sometimes have to forget, or let go, as well as remember. Yet part of being human is being able to keep each other in mind as well as we can. So this novel, like "The Stone Angel," helps us realize we do not have to become petrified with fear or old habits. It shows how we can all be “trapped in the rubble of the past,” but with the hope and trust of rescue, at least for the present.



III. FAMILY STORIES



Enhancing Relationships

We now turn from works of literature to the telling and writing of family stories. In ordinary life, people are apt to tell stories during conversations, often while engaged in a familiar activity; sometimes families share stories around the holiday dinner table, with many voices chiming in their own versions. Various members of a family may each have their own memories of a particular incident or event; it is important to understand that all these memories are “true” and add to the composite picture of the family’s history.

We have noticed that, in almost any gathering, talk turns to growing up and the memories of childhood stories, often passed down by grandparents, great-aunts and uncles, and other relatives. Looking at family photographs is a helpful way to elicit storytelling. Family members may also set up a special occasion to record stories, now perhaps using a tape-recorder or video-camera as well as pen and paper, to preserve people’s voices as well as their appearance and transcribed words.

Communicating and recording one's life story offers older adults many benefits: perspective on life, sense of accomplishment, legacy for family, enhanced intergenerational relationships, more meaningful conversations, and a richer emotional life. In order to foster intergenerational communication, one of us, working with a group of colleagues (Ryan et al., 1999, 2000), recruited letters, stories, poems, and memory pieces by grandparents to grandchildren, and grandchildren to grandparents, all providing rich and moving material. We found that the grandparents’ stories focused on the themes of history, family identity, advice, and life story, while the grandchildren’s stories expressed appreciation of family, acknowledgment of age-related losses, and regard for absent grandparents. As mentioned above, intergenerational writing can strengthen the grandparent-grandchild relationship by supplementing face-to-face communication and overcoming obstacles of geography and time.

Some studies of writing by older people find that grandfathers tend to speak more about mastering skills, while grandmothers are more likely to focus on the importance of family for happiness and their sense of self (Nussbaum and Bettini, 1994). Here are two excerpts of writing by grandmothers, sharing their views of life (Ryan et al., 2004).

*Memories are neatly stored and cherished;
Then retrieved when apart
To re-live the special moments.
This bond between grandparent and
grandchild-
Forever sealed in love. (p. 23)*

*I see life as a cathedral--a personal cathedral
with marvelous stained glass windows
portraying a life story in all its many colors and
with windows under construction . . . Your
cathedral has a strong framework, because a
loving family helps create the basic framework,
but the design of the windows takes a lifetime,
and that's the intensely personal part. The
windows are constructed of your life's
experience. (p. 10)*



Everyday Activities

Often, grandparents' stories are evoked in the context of performing ordinary household tasks and activities. We believe that the familiar movements involved in these tasks are important in prompting memories and in facilitating conversation. Gardening, sewing and knitting, cooking, woodworking, and similar kinds of work are communal activities in which stories can emerge, but in which the focus is not on the story itself. Even for adults with severe cognitive difficulties, participating in long-familiar activities

like receiving a back-rub or listening to a favorite piece of music can call forth moments of lucidity and memory. Later in this study, we will look more closely at ways to facilitate storytelling with people who are cognitively-impaired.

One of our (E.B.R.'s) students realized in the context of a gerontology course how her grandmother had made use of knitting to share her stories on summer visits from India: a great show of looking for her knitting needles served to call the little girl to Grandmother's knee for a story. In a related example, the following excerpt illustrates how storytelling emerged while a young girl helped her grandmother bake bread (Continenza, 1999, p.162).

"Nanna," I asked, "what are those marks on your hands?" Nanna laughed and held out her hand so that I could see.

"These are life marks," she explained, "The older I get, the more they come! I have one for all of the important times in my life. See this one. This one is for your Grandpa and forty-five years of marriage! And here is another for the day when I had my first baby, your Uncle Louie! And this sad looking one over here, that comes from the day when I lost my dear sister, Hannah."

I stared at Nanna's experienced hands in wonder and looked at her with a new realization. Nanna's life extended far beyond my brother and me. Her seasoned hands gave evidence of a lifetime of joy and pain, of cherished memories, and valuable lessons. I looked into Nanna's dark eyes in time to see a single stray tear escape. Nanna returned my gaze, held out her hand once more, and smiled.

"See this large one, Rebecca. This one is my favourite," she said with a slight pause, "because this one is for you!"



Grandmothers: Stories and Memories

In a recent Canadian book, *Our Grandmothers, Ourselves: Reflections of Canadian Women* (Valle, 1999), women from almost twenty cultural backgrounds tell the heartfelt stories of their grandmothers and the influence these women had on their own lives. In her foreword, Joy Kogawa (author of *Obasan* and other works) says, “Grandmothers should be ruling the world.... As a species, grannies are uniquely loving, long-sighted – viscerally connected to past and future. In a cut-flower world, grandmothers connect” (p. 7).

Known by many names in many languages – Bubie, Mémère, Nana, Nanay, Obaachan, Oma, Yiayia – grandmothers are remembered by their granddaughters for their love, their courage, their humor, their advice (followed and not), their survival in difficult, sometimes desperate conditions. Many of these grandmothers have demonstrated their ability to transplant themselves and grow new roots in a country where food, weather, language and customs were all strange but where their families needed them.

One of us (E.S.J.) has written several poems about her family members, including grandmother and great-grandmother. When I read these poems aloud, they usually bring murmurs of recognition from older people, children, even teenagers. Here is an excerpt from the poem “Roots,” about my maternal great-grandmother, Mary Becker Axelrod (Jaffe, 2002, p. 16).

*I remember you when old, eighty and ninety
I missed your violent tempers,
your passionate dancing....
I cannot remember your voice,
only your hands, and your eyes
smiling at me from old photographs
or the oven of my dreams.
What happened to make the women
who came after you
touchy as hot-house plants,
fragile as greenhouses?
yet they too have survived, as women do,
and I dig my air-roots into your firm flesh
as I did when eight, burrowing for a kiss....*

Years later, I wrote about Mary's daughter, my grandmother Rose Albert, just before Rose died at age 93. In the poem, I include details of my childhood and use my grandmother's name "Rose" as a metaphor for her beauty and strength (Jaffe, 2002, p. 64, excerpt).

*Rose, bloom of my childhood..
I remember
your rose-painted nails
and nestling in your feathery bed
when I slept over
You gave me
cantaloupe and ice-cream
balloons and kisses
You were never old to me
(even now, even now)
and I am not really grown-up, it is all an act
still dressing up in your clothes,
putting on plays.*

Personal, individual details in a poem or story often help the reader or listener remember details about their own lives and stories. And remembering (re/membering) these details may have healing power. Letting yourself re-experience specific details, via all five senses, can unblock and release feelings and memories. This can then let you see a situation from a new perspective. Smyth and Pennebaker (1999) document many therapeutic benefits that result from writing about important, even traumatic, life events and sharing these memories with others. The process of writing, even without sharing the story with others, can help the writer "digest" these events.

A woman participating in one of our writing workshops wrote the following piece in an exercise called “I Remember” (which can take you to yesterday’s lunch, your childhood, or remembering what you have to do tomorrow). In this piece, memory becomes a shared experience.

I Remember...

These days I get to remember with my mother. It is something new for me. My mother is remembering deep into her past. Sometimes to a time before I was born. I sit and I listen to her memories. I especially enjoy hearing her memories about things and places and times that I also have memories for. It gives my memories a new point of view, and that somehow enriches them. She is remembering parts of my past for me, and I find the whole process fascinating. I encourage her to write these memories down. I hate to think they will be lost to her family. (Name withheld)

It is particularly “enriching,” as this woman says, to remember *with* someone, and to have that person “*remember parts of your past for you.*” Parents can do this for children, and adult children for their aging parents.

When one of us (E.S.J.) talked with my 86-year-old mother about storytelling, my mother mentioned that it was too bad she had not asked her immigrant grandmother more about her early life. She said that, especially in her grandmother’s time, many older people did not discuss their life stories. They focused on leaving the old life behind and assimilating themselves and their children to the new place. This varied, of course, from family to family, culture to culture, and with the varieties of hardship and trauma they suffered.

Lil Blume, a writer and teacher living in Toronto, notes: “Stories passed from one generation to the next carry the values, culture, and unique mythology of that family. Knowing our family stories solidifies our sense of belonging. They give us roots, and also help us move out into the world.” She adds that these stories

can help us recognize and honor courage, kindness, and love. They can help us fit our personal and family stories into wider cultural and world history – wars, depression, immigration, civil rights movements, etc. Then, when we collect these family stories into a book (or video, or audio-tape), we can pass on this sense of belonging in a concrete, hands-on way as well as by word-of-mouth (2003, personal communication). Blume suggests that it is important to write down these stories, as well as tell them, for the benefit of a wider audience, both in space (geographically, for relatives living far away) and in time (to pass down to future generations.)

Books specifically for young children can help both children and parents reshape their views about older women. They also make clear the link between the very old and the very young. One example of this kind of book is *Tales of a Gambling Grandma*, story and pictures by Dayal Kaur Khalsa (1986), which presents a loving picture of a strong and unconventional older woman seen through her granddaughter’s eyes. The narrator says that her grandmother left Russia and traveled across the Atlantic Ocean in a hay cart, wearing only one little shoe. That story, of course, is not literally true, but it is the details of riding in the hay-cart and losing her shoe that the grandmother remembers most vividly about her own childhood experience and what she passes on to her granddaughter.

We all accept this “emotional truth” or “story truth”; in theatrical terms, we agree to “suspend disbelief.” This book, like many other stories, reveals how humour allows people to communicate more effectively and to cope with serious situations. Thus, family stories let younger generations see not only how people survive, but also how they celebrate life, even in difficult times.



❦

“Too Hard to Talk About”

Stories may raise disturbing questions. One’s own family history may feel too painful to tell or share with loved ones, or with anyone else. This may be for primarily personal reasons (such as affairs, suicides, bankruptcy or mental illness) or because the person or family has been caught up in terrifying world events, such as the Holocaust, the African slave trade, resettlement of Native peoples, and other forms of racism, torture, and genocide. Shame and secrecy often lurk in these stories, with taboos on talking and even thinking about a painful, escaped past. Even the few treasured good memories may be too hard to think and talk about.

Sometimes a story is not ripe for telling for many years; sometimes one’s children are not able to hear it until they have children of their own or have gone through their own sorrows. No one can force the telling of a story – but sometimes, the effort and energy expended in *not* talking becomes greater and more uncomfortable than the effort used to break the silence. Sometimes honoring the silence is a place to begin. Of course, there needs to be an atmosphere of trust for the story to unfold.

❦

Interweaving Personal and Cultural

We will close this section with stories from two very different contexts: first, aboriginal culture in Alaska, and then a brief look at modern grandmothers whose personal voices have also become political.

Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage, and Survival, written by Velma Wallis (1994), comes from a story her mother told her which was handed down “from generation to generation” even before the arrival of Western culture. It describes the plight of two elderly women during a period of extreme hunger. Over the years, these women have become chronic complainers. Unable to work, fed and supported by the rest of the tribe, they have apparently forgotten old ways of doing things.

Now, in the time of famine, the chief decides they must be abandoned and left to die for the good of all the people. Even though the daughter and grandson of one of the women leave them some supplies, these relatives are powerless to stop the abandonment.

On their first night alone, the younger woman (age 75) says to her friend (age 80), "We will die if we just sit here and wait. This would prove them right about our helplessness. ...So I say if we are going to die, my friend, let us die trying, not sitting" (p. 16).

Working together, the two women begin to remember their old skills and push themselves to find ways to survive and then to thrive. When they are found by the still-hungry tribe at the end of a year, they share their food and skills with the people. Finally, both the rest of the tribe and the women themselves understand the importance of Elders to the life and spirit of the community. Like Hagar, we can all learn that it is never too late to rejoice.

In modern societies, it is often the very old and the very young who are left to pick up the pieces after tragedy occurs. One striking example concerns the African grandmothers who are raising their grandchildren after their own children have died from AIDS; often the grandchildren themselves are infected with HIV and may die before their grandmothers. A group of about one hundred of these grannies met with about two hundred Canadian grandmothers during the 16th International AIDS conference held in Toronto, August 13-18, 2006.

In their official statement, the Grandmothers' Gathering said, in part (taken from the website of the Stephen Lewis foundation; documented in the references):

"Each of our stories is different, each of our experiences is unique, and yet we are here as representatives of countless women who share in our tragedy.... Our courage paid off. The age-old African ways of speaking without words broke down our communications barriers. We gestured and nodded. And we sang. We danced. We drummed. We laughed and clapped and wept and hugged. Through our new discovery - grandmother to grandmother solidarity - we carried ourselves and one another through the grief to where we are this morning."

Stephen Lewis, the UN's special envoy for HIV/AIDS in Africa, said that "grandmothers have become the unsung heroes of the continent."

In Argentina, grandmothers also joined together to mourn and search for their "disappeared" children and grandchildren after the war from 1976-83. Often, newborn infants as well as older children of mothers imprisoned and (after childbirth) killed, were given to military or other politically powerful families. A book by Rita Arditti, *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina*, tells the story of how the grandmothers organized, the resistance they encountered, and their quest to establish the children's true identity.

These grandmothers are creating a new form of political action by telling and sharing their own stories, in their own ways.



IV. FACILITATED LIFE STORY WRITING

Many older adults feel they have the time and inclination to write their life stories. A small number go ahead on their own to write their memoirs in short or long form, with or without extensive photo collections and incorporation of related historical information. Other individuals, especially women, choose to join a group of peers. For example, another book in this series, *The Berries Are Sweeter Here: Older Women Writing Together* (Papky, 2006), shows the range of writing that women can do when they meet together regularly in a group to nurture and encourage each other. Still other individuals need or seek the additional help of group leaders and specialized educational resources to structure the process of recording their life story (Birren & Cochran, 2001; Coberly, McCormick, & Updike, 2005; Ray, 2000).



Remembering Boxes, Group Poetry, and Other “Tools”

It is especially important to encourage and structure the sharing of memories when older adults reside in age-segregated long-term care settings and/or suffer from Alzheimer’s disease, strokes, and other illnesses that cause loss of memory and connection. One of us (E.B.R.) has been working with several methods of facilitated communication to extend the benefits of life-story writing to older adults unable or unlikely to participate in this activity on their own.

Reminiscence groups and reminiscence activities are frequently a regular part of activity programming in Day Centres and long-term care facilities (e.g., Thorsheim & Roberts, 2000). The techniques described in the *Memory Board* (i.e., the slate with a list of activities and the gentle invitations “I’d like to remember something for you.”) could be used in groups or individually to elicit life-time memories.

Our work is unusual because it emphasizes the special benefits of writing down the memories in the older person’s own words. In this way, the stories can be enjoyed again and again through conversations with family, staff, and friends.

Using “remembering boxes” and creating poems as a group activity, as described by Hagens et al. (2003, 2006), are two ways of facilitating meaningful conversation and reminiscence for frail older adults, including those with cognitive impairment. A conversational remembering box is a collection of photographs, mementos, and writings gathered in a container which can itself be personally meaningful, such as a 1940's hat box or a jewelry box. Family members can supply material for the box if the older person cannot do this for herself. The objects themselves can make a person feel more at home in a residential setting, and can stimulate conversations with relatives and with caregivers. Over time, more and more written accounts of stories told by the older person can be added to the remembering box collection.

Writing group poetry is another type of facilitated communication. A facilitator systematically records the words generated in a reminiscence session focused on a specific theme and later arranges them into a poem (see Hagens et al., 2003, 2006; Killick & Allan, 2001; Koch, 1978). Here is an excerpt from a group poem generated by five nursing home residents with dementia, who participated in one of our projects (Hagens, et al., 2006):

A Day At The Beach

*Sand --
Soft, natural, sandy, granular --
Heavier than I expected,
Not as coarse as some.
If you're trying to ride a bicycle
In the sand
It makes a path -- the bicycle wants to wobble!
If it's wet sand, it's rather tough --
Loose, no traction!

Went in my father's black Ford,
Sitting in the back seat.
Went over a bump, hit the ceiling!
Below the hotel there was a path --
You could keep on going --
Walk in the water
till it got up to your stomach.
Then you could lean over and lie on top
of the water.
You feel just great!*

There are no “right” or “wrong” ways to write this kind of poem – the facilitator elicits words, images and memories, and gathers them together to communicate meaning. The group poem can then be displayed prominently in individual rooms and in lounge settings, given as gifts to family, and included among the items in a remembering box. Older adults, even those with cognitive impairment, often recognize their own words within a group poem (“I said that!”) and so do members of the family (“Those are Mother’s own words!”). These written images and words can therefore re-create the personal and family connections frequently broken when individuals develop cognitive impairment and/or move out of their own homes into a long-term care facility.



Translation

The opportunity for translation is a special advantage of written stories over oral storytelling. Older people from other countries can record early memories in their mother tongue and still tell their story to English-speaking grandchildren and other relatives. There is a wonderful fictional example of the role of translation in Amy Tan’s (2001) novel, *The Bonesetter’s Daughter*. In this touching tale of mother-child heartache, a middle-aged daughter finds a calligraphed Chinese manuscript, her mother’s story of all she must not forget as the fog of dementia descends upon her. The daughter hires an 80-year-old translator who becomes engrossed in the manuscript. When she reads his translation, the daughter learns about her mother’s early life in China and the unexpressed truths of her mother’s heart. This cross-language connection is profoundly healing for both mother and daughter in the present.

Moreover, the translator falls in love with the mother of then and now, and interacts with her in the present. He is able to obtain further essential family information because he talks knowledgeably and compassionately with her about all the details of that long-closed-off part of her life, details he has discovered in her manuscript.

The novel shows poignantly how rediscovering and re-experiencing the past can help this past become a living, changing presence. “They can choose not to hide it, to take what’s broken, to feel the pain and know that it will heal” (p. 403). Thus, the novel allows the characters – and the reader – to look at the power of love and of choice, and to see how we can view the “events” of our lives in a variety of ways. Translation offers the additional power of overcoming some of the generational barriers that can impede other forms of satisfying communication between the young and the old.



Using Drama

Interpreting life-stories through drama and dance can be powerful ways of sharing them. For example, Hannah Blevins (2003) performed and videotaped a drama with dance and poetry based mainly on the transcribed reminiscences of her grandfather about his life in Appalachia and the significance of home, family, and heritage. Another example of performance is Anne Basting’s work (2003). She has gone beyond the focus on traditional linear and remembered narratives of individual lives by facilitating group performances of imaginative stories based on memory fragments contributed by individuals with dementia.

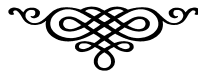
This group storytelling process can also be used with healthier older adults. Film can take the story into a larger space and also records it for a wider audience. For example, the commercially successful Canadian film, *The Company of Strangers* (1990), is a semi-documentary, semi-fictional drama, acted by ordinary women rather than professional actors. The story concerns a group of older women whose tour bus breaks down while they are visiting a deserted house near a lake. In the few days before they are rescued, they survive by living off the land and by telling each other stories of their lives, sharing information and establishing rapport. During the filming, the women knew the basic scenario but improvised conversations in their own way, giving the film more of a spontaneous quality.

Painter and writer Mary Meigs, one of the women who participated in the film, wrote a book *In “The Company of Strangers”* (1991), describing this experience, “a happening in which strangers

become company.” She believes that “the mist from which (the women) emerge at the beginning of the film...symbolizes the absence of explanation.” The women, she says, ‘have stepped out of time and logic into a magic space where old women have room to exist” (pp. 9-10).

Meigs’ perceptive book illuminates both the film-making process and the women’s own lives and stories, truly giving them, in Virginia Woolf’s phrase, a “room of their own” set within the larger room of nature itself.

Facilitation, whether in a group of peers or with a leader, helps people access their memories and language and connect with others to produce a whole that is more than the sum of the individual parts.



CONCLUSION

When older women exchange their stories with each other and with younger generations, both teller and listener can experience enhanced empathy, increased knowledge, and greater opportunity to find connections and meaning in life.

In her last novel, *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence (1974) used the lovely phrase “memory bank movies” as one way to describe the images from which people create their stories. In this article, we have looked at the importance of story in creating and compounding – with high interest! – older women’s “memory banks,” to enrich their own lives, preserve the past, and leave an enduring and ever-growing legacy to future generations. We see this “story exchange” as an opportunity to shape one’s identity as an individual human being in relationship with others while alive and even after death. We close this book with an unpublished poem by one of us (E.S.J.), borrowing and augmenting the “memory bank” image and further defining our concept of storytelling and active listening. In this way, the stone angel can find her voice and speak to all of us, over the reaches of space and time.



The Memory Bank Exchange

*Funds are there, in the memory bank,
saved and stored as raw data,
but access is denied.
Not enough credit, they say,
too many withdrawals,
not enough memory.
Your account has lapsed
over time, too many gaps,
and no one's accountable.
Bankruptcy threatens.
But wait –
the teller has come back from her lunch break,
she is ready to tell the story, again and again,
adding up the details, subtracting
nothing,
saving nothing for a rainy day.
She has brought our grandmothers, our mothers,
our sisters as witnesses,
each with her own account of what happened,
playing with the data,
correcting the balance,
compounding the interest.
Together, we unlock the safety-deposit
boxes of the heart,
share the wealth
of information, memory, hope.
We count on each other
And invest in our futures.*

Ellen S. Jaffe



REFERENCES CITED

Allan, Paula Gunn. *Grandmothers of the Light: A Medicine Woman's Sourcebook*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1991.

Arditti, Rita. *Searching for Life: The Grandmothers of The Plaza De Mayo and the Disappeared Children of Argentina*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999.

Basting, Anne D. "Exploring the Creative Potential of People with Alzheimer's Disease and Related Dementia: Dare to Imagine." In *Mental Wellness in Aging: Strengths-Based Approaches*, ed. Judah L. Ronch and Joseph A. Goldfield, 353-367. Baltimore, MD: Health Professions Press, 2003.

Birren, James E. C. and Kathryn N. Cochran. *Telling the Stories of Life Through Guided Autobiography Groups*. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins, 2001.

Blevins, Hannah N. *Coming Home: Memories from the Heart of Appalachia: Weaving Memory, Stories, and Lives Through Performance Ethnography*. Unpublished M.A. Thesis, University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, 2003.

Blume, Lil. Personal communication.

Caputi, Jane. *Gossips, Gorgons, and Crones: The Fates of the Earth*, Santa Fe, New Mexico: Bear and Co., 1993.

Coberly, Lenore M., Jeri McCormick, and Karen Updike. *Writers Have No Age: Creative Writing for Older Adults (2nd Ed.)*. Binghamton, New York: Haworth Press, 2005.

Continenza, Diane. "Life Marks." In *From Me to You: Intergenerational Connections Through Storytelling*, ed. Ellen Bouchard Ryan, Gail M. Elliot, and Sheree D. Meredith, 160-162. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies, 1999.

Gilbert, Elizabeth. Personal communication.

Gordon, Katherine L. "Care of the Elderly Moon-Mad," in *How to Dance Naked in Moonlight*. Kitchener, Ontario: Passion Among the Cacti Press, 2005.

Hagens, Chris, Amanda Beaman, and Ellen Bouchard Ryan. "Reminiscing, Poetry Writing, and Remembering Boxes: Personhood-Centered Communication with Cognitively Impaired Older Adults." *Activities, Adaptation, and Aging* 27, 2003, 97-112.

Hagens, Chris, Andrea Cosentino, and Ellen Bouchard Ryan. *You Grow Out of Winter: Poetry in Long-Term Care. Writing Down Our Years Series, No. 6*. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies, 2006

Jaffe, Ellen. *Writing Your Way: Creating a Personal Journal*. Toronto: Sumach Press, 2001.

Jaffe, Ellen S. *Water Children*. Hamilton, Ontario: Mini Mocho Press, 2001.

Killick, John and Kate Allan. *Communication and the Care of People with Dementia*. Buckingham, England: Open University Press, 2001.

Khalsa, Dayal Kaur. *Tales of a Gambling Grandma*. Montreal: Tundra Books, 1986.

King, Thomas. *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative (CBC Massey Lectures.)* Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003.

Koch, K. Teaching Poetry Writing to the Old and the Ill. *Millbank Memorial Fund Quarterly/Health and Society*, 56, 2003, 113-126.

Laurence, Margaret. *The Stone Angel*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1964.

Laurence, Margaret. *The Diviners*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1974.

Lewis, Stephen.
stephenlewisfoundation.org/documents/torontostatement_002.doc.
(statement of the African grandmothers for the AIDS conference in Toronto)

Lopez, Barry. *Crow and Weasel*. Berkeley, CA: North Point Press, 1990.

McCants, Nan Blackmon. "Midnight Mother," pp 24-25, *Food, Sex & Longing: Women's Works Collaborative Project*. Houston, Texas, 2000. Book and performance piece produced by Elizabeth Gilbert, Artistic Director of Women's Works; performance premiered June 23, 2000, at Theatre Lab in Houston, directed by Ann James).

Meigs, Mary. In "The Company of Strangers." Vancouver: Talon Books, 1991.

Moyers, Bill. *The Language of Life: A Festival of Poets*. New York: Doubleday, 1991.

Nickerson, Betty. *Old and Smart: Women and the Adventure of Aging*. Maderia, BC: Harbour Publishing, 1995.

Nussbaum, Jon F. and Bettini, L. "Shared Stories of the Grandparent-Grandchild Relationship," *International Journal of Aging and Human Development*, 39, 1994, 67-80.

Page, P. K. *Planet Earth: Poems Selected and New*. Erin, Ontario: The Porcupine's Quill, 2002.

Papky, Paula. Ed. *The Berries are Sweeter Here: Older Women Writing Together. Writing Down Our Years Series*, No. 5. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies, 2006.

Ray, Ruth E. *Beyond Nostalgia: Aging and Life-Story Writing*. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 2000.

Ridker, Claire, and Patricia Savage. *Railing Against the Rush of Years- A Personal Journey Through Aging Via Art Therapy*. Hamilton, Ontario: Mekler and Deahl, Publishers, 1996.

Rule, Jane. *Memory Board*. Toronto: Macmillan of Canada (a division of Canada Publishing Corporation), 1987.

Ryan, Ellen Bouchard, Hendrika Spykerman, and Ann P. Anas. "Writers with Dementia: The Interplay Among Reading, Writing, and Personhood." In *Alzheimer Talk, Text and Context: Identifying Communication Enhancement*, ed. Boyd Davis, 190-198. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005.

Ryan, Ellen Bouchard, Gail M. Elliot, and Sheree D. Meredith. Eds. *From Me to You: Intergenerational Connections Through Storytelling*. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies. 1999.

Ryan, Ellen Bouchard, Gail M. Elliot, and Ann P. Anas. Eds. *Exchanges Between Us: More Intergenerational Connections*. Hamilton, Ontario: McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies, 2000.

Ryan, Ellen Bouchard, Kristine Pearce, Ann P. Anas, and Joan E. Norris. "Writing a Connection: Intergenerational Communication Through Stories." In *Family Stories and the Lifecourse: Across Time and Generations*, ed. Michael W. Pratt and Barbara E. Fiese, 375-398. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum, 2004.

Sarton, May. *Coming into Eighty*. New York: W. W. Norton, 1994.

Scott, Cynthia, director. *In the Company of Strangers*. National Film Board of Canada, 1990.

Scott-Maxwell, Florida. *The Measure of my Days*. Toronto: Penguin Books, 1968/1979.

Sher, Gail. *One Continuous Mistake: Four Noble Truths for Writers*. New York: Penguin Books, 1999.

Shields, Carol, and Anderson, Marjorie. *Dropped Threads*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2001.

Shields, Carol, and Anderson, Marjorie. *Dropped Threads 2*. Toronto: Vintage Canada, 2003.

Silko, Leslie Marmon. *Ceremony*. New York: Viking Press, 1977.

Smyth, Joshua M., and James W. Pennebaker. "Sharing One's Story: Translating Emotional Experiences into Words as a Coping Tool." In *Coping: The Psychology of What Works*, ed. Charles R. Snyder, 70-89. Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 1999.

Tan, Amy. *The Bonesetter's Daughter*. New York: Ballantine Books, 2001.

Thomas, Clara. *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1976.

Thorsheim, Howard, and Bruce Roberts. *I Remember When: Activity Ideas to Help People Reminisce*. Forest Knolls, CA: Elder Books, 2000.

Turner-Vessalago, Barbara. *Freefall: Writing Without a Parachute*. Toronto: The Writing Space, n.d.

Valle, Gina, Ed. *Our Grandmothers, Ourselves: Reflections of Canadian Women*. Vancouver: Raincoast Press, 1999.

Wallis, Velma. *Two Old Women: An Alaska Legend of Betrayal, Courage and Survival*. New York: Harper Perennial, 1994.

Winnicott, D.W. *Playing and Reality*. New York: Basic Books, 1971.

FURTHER READING

- Adams-Price, Cynthia E. Ed. *Creativity and Successful Aging: Theoretical and Empirical Approaches*. New York: Springer, 1998.
- Angelou, Maya. *The Collected Autobiographies of Maya Angelou*. New York: Modern Library/Random House, 2004.
- Apbom, Mitch. *Tuesdays with Morrie: An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life's Greatest Lesson*. New York: Random House, 2005.
- Ash, Irene Borins. *Treasured legacies: Older and Still Great*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 2003.
- Beckett, Samuel. *Krapp's Last Tape*. In *Krapp's Last Tape, and Other Dramatic Pieces*. New York: Grove Press, 1960.
- Berman, Harry J. *Interpreting the Aging Self*. New York: Springer, 1994.
- Berton, Pierre. *The Joy of Writing: A Guide for Writers, Disguised as a Literary Memoir*. Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2003.
- Birren, James, and Linda Feldman. *Where to Go From Here: Discovering Your Own Life's Wisdom in the Second Half of Your Life*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1997.
- Boden, Christine. *Who Will I Be When I Die?*. East Melbourne, Australia: Harper Collins, 1998.
- Booth, Wayne. *The Art of Growing Older: Writers on Living and Aging*. New York: Poseidon Press, 1992.
- Bryden, Christine. *Dancing with Dementia: My Story of Living Positively with Dementia*. Vancouver: University of British Columbia Press, 2005.
- Chivers, Sally. *From Old Woman to Older Women: Contemporary Culture and Women's Narratives*. Ohio State University Press, 2003.
- Cohen, Gene D. *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*. Avon Books, 2000.
- Cole, Thomas R. and Mary G. Winkler. Eds. *The Oxford Book of Aging: Reflections on the Journey of Life*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994.

- Cole, Thomas R., Robert Kastenbaum, and Ruth E. Ray. Eds. *Handbook of the Humanities and Aging (2nd ed.)*. New York: Springer, 2000.
- Conway, Jill Ker. *When Memory Speaks: Reflections on Autobiography*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998.
- DeBaggio, Thomas. *Losing my Mind: An Intimate Look at Life with Alzheimer's*. New York: Free Press, 2002.
- DeBaggio, Thomas. *When It Gets Dark: An Enlightened Reflection on Life with Alzheimer's*. New York: Free Press, 2003.
- DeSalvo, Louise. *Writing as a Way of Healing*. Boston: Beacon Press, 2000.
- Fowler, Margaret and P. McCutcheon. Eds. *Songs of Experience: An Anthology of Literature on Growing Old*. New York: Ballantine, 1991.
- Fowler, Margaret and P. McCutcheon. Eds. *Love in Full Bloom: The Many Faces of Love in the Golden Years*. New York: Ballantine, 1994.
- Freed, Rachael. *Women's Lives, Women's Legacies: Passing Your Beliefs and Blessings to Future Generations*. Minneapolis: Fairview Press, 2003.
- Friedman, Jerry. *Earth's Elders: The Wisdom of the World's Oldest People*. South Kent, CT: Earth's Elders Foundation, 2005.
- Greene, Bob, & Fulford, D. G. *To our Children's Children: Preserving Family Histories for Generations to Come*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.
- Havemann, Joel. *A Life Shaken: My Encounter with Parkinson's Disease*. Baltimore, MD: John Hopkins University Press, 2004.
- Heilbrun, Carolyn G. *The Last Gift of Time: Life Beyond Sixty*. New York: The Dial Press /Random House, 1997.
- Henderson, Cary Smith. *Partial View - An Alzheimer's Journal*. Dallas: Southern Methodist University, 1998
- John, Martha T. Ed. *Story Writing in a Nursing Home: A Patchwork of Memories*. Binghamton NY: Haworth Press, 1992.
- Kenyon, Gary M. and William L. Randall. *Restorying our Lives: Personal Growth Through Autobiographical Reflection*. Westport, CT: Praeger Publishers, 1997.

- Koch, Kenneth. *I Never Told Anybody: Teaching Poetry Writing in a Nursing Home*. New York: Random House, 1977.
- Kohn, M., C. Donley, and D. Wear. Eds. *Literature and Aging: An Anthology*. Kent OH: Kent State University Press, 1992.
- Mccarthy, Doris. *Ninety Years Wise*. Toronto: Second Story Press, 2004.
- Martz, Sandra Haldeman. Ed. *Grow Old Along With Me - The Best is Yet to be*. Watsonville, CA: Papier Mache Press, 1996.
- Sarton, May. *After the Stroke*. New York: WW Norton, 1988.
- Sarton, May. *Endgame*. New York: WW Norton, 1992.
- Waxman, Barbara Frey. *To Live in the Center of the Moment: Literary Autobiographies of Aging*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1997.
- Wyatt-Brown, Anne M. and Janice Rossen. Eds. *Aging and Gender in Literature: Studies in Creativity*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1993.
- Yahnke, Robert E. and Robert M. Eastman. *Literature & Gerontology: A Research Guide*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1995.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Author

Ellen S. Jaffe is a writer and teacher; she also trained as a child psychotherapist at the Tavistock Clinic in London, U.K. Ellen's interests as a writer focus on the poet/writer as witness, the importance of family stories, the interweaving of fantasy and reality, exploring the possibilities of language, and helping people discover their own voices. She has studied with Canadian poets Bill Bissett and Patrick Lane. Ellen's published works include *Writing Your Way: Creating a Personal Journal*, *Water Children* (a collection of poetry), and most recently *Feast of Lights*, a young-adult novel. A group of her poems, *Birthsongs*, has been translated into Finnish and published in Helsinki, Finland. She has received grants from the Ontario Arts Council, and works with Learning Through the Arts™, teaching writing in schools and other community settings.



Author and Series Editor

Ellen Bouchard Ryan is Professor at McMaster University and former Director of the McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies. Her psychological research demonstrates how empowering communication fosters personhood and successful aging. She has created the *Writing Down Our Years Series* of publications to highlight the many ways in which writing life stories can benefit older adults and those with whom they share their stories and poems.



WRITING DOWN OUR YEARS SERIES

FROM
MCMASTER CENTRE FOR GERONTOLOGICAL STUDIES

ELLEN B. RYAN, SERIES EDITOR



PUBLISHED BY:

**McMaster Centre for Gerontological Studies,
Department of Health, Aging and Society
McMaster University
Hamilton, Ontario
L8S 4M4**