

THE JOURNAL OF Creative Aging

SAGE-ING

with Creative Spirit, Grace & Gratitude



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NUMBER 47, WINTER 2024

KNOW YOURSELF. BE YOURSELF.
LOVE YOURSELF. SHARE YOURSELF.
ONLINE AT www.sageing.ca

FROM THE EDITORS

First, I want to thank Katharine Weinmann for two years of dedicated involvement as assistant editor with an enthusiastic commitment to expanding *The Journal's* reach. Katharine, your support has been deeply appreciated and I wish you the 'love of life' as you continue your creative adventure.

"I (we) live in that solitude which is painful in youth, but delicious in the years of maturity."
Albert Einstein

Watching the growth of our *Sage-ing* community over the past 12 years of publication and seeking out others committed to understanding creative aging as a powerful social and cultural movement has been our mission. By professionally documenting your stories of creative engagements, *The Journal* believes it is documenting the next chapter of human understanding. In this issue we are proud to present evidence of this growing community by profiling a program led by founders of the Intergenerational Memoir Project at McMaster University, where students and senior volunteers have participated for more than three years. As you read their stories in the first nine articles of this issue I feel certain you will resonate with recognition, and perhaps hear a buried personal need to review and to share your story creatively.

As a suggestion for considering a possible submission to this issue we asked, "What comes up when you look at an old photograph or piece of writing, discover the jewels of experience your life has brought, and translate them into a sparkling creative moment - vivid in 'youness'." In *THE POWER OF DOODLING* painter Jan Corcoran passionately proclaims the joy she has experienced through playing with line, shape and colour. Glenda Goodrich in *LOVE LETTER TO MOUNT SHASTA* recalls through writing and collage the power in deeply feeling with nature's solitude. "I've become hooked, compulsively drawn to write my own short stories," confesses Chris Lihou in *MY STORY*. He shares his discovery of flash fiction, micro-fiction; stories limited to 50 or 100 words in length. What triggers reflections and how one might decide to explore the past creatively leads Siegmund Schnepf to share his rekindled love for Saskatchewan in *HOW WE CHOOSE TO REMEMBER*. We conclude this issue with a submission from a faithful member of our *Sage-ing* community, Susan McCaslin, in *CONSIDERING "CONSIDER."* *Consider* is Susan's recently

published book of poetry. When I listened to Susan present poems from her book I heard the lines: "Whoever has eyes/Let them feel." I knew I had found the theme for the March issue of *The Journal*. Life glistens when we take the time to truly enlist all our senses with what life presents to us and to feel through engaging in a creative response. When we look with our hearts we hear ourselves, we can ask questions of ourselves, describe ourselves and share the innate wisdom that is our purpose. Susan's collection is a rich offering in contemplation and considering.

Our invitation for submission to the March issue is: "Whoever has eyes, let them feel," let them create and let them send their story of discovery to us. Share your innate wisdom as it has revealed itself to you through creative engagement.

Merry Christmas. In the New Year, rejoice in the winter solitude to give yourself the gift of your creative self, which Einstein suggests is "delicious in the years of maturity."
Editor, Karen Close

A NOTE FROM KATHARINE

After two years working with our founder Karen Close as her thinking partner and co-editor for *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*, it's time for me to shift my sights to an emerging horizon. I'm grateful to have been given the opportunity to share my own creative efforts by way of personal story, poetry and photography, and by inviting and crafting the stories of others in their pursuit of creative living. My hope has been to widen the lens of what it means to live a life inspired by and aligned with that inner wellspring, the birthright of us all, to value the unique and varied expressions of that birthright beyond the painted canvas, musical score, potter's wheel or written page... to invite stories representing our rich demographic diversity. During the hours Karen and I spent in "old-school telephone" conversations preparing each issue, without fail I came away appreciating the scope of her vision for the *Journal* and her commitment to living daily, in grace and gratitude, with her own creative spirit.

My sincere thanks to you, Karen, for this most memorable experience, to copy-editor Johanna Beyers, designer Robert MacDonald, and to you, dear contributors and readers. With every issue, your efforts are an act of sage-ing with creative spirit, grace and gratitude.
Kindest regards, Katharine

HOW TO SUBMIT

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

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.**

WHO WE ARE

Karen Close, Editor, taught English and Visual Arts for 30 years. Retirement in 1995 gave her the opportunity to meet vibrant senior



Canadian artists and to hear their stories. Indigenous cultures teach us, "All Elders have medicine—physical, emotional, musical, story. Let's give our unique medicine to the world." In 2011, believing in the medicine inherent in creative expression, Karen began editing the free online arts and aging journal *Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. She is the author of two books. *Unfinished Women: Seeds From My Friendship With Reva Brooks* and *The Spirit of Kelowna: A Celebration of Art and Community* profiles a community art project in Kelowna, BC. In January, 2015 Woodlake Publishing released *Creative Aging: Stories from the Pages of the Journal Sage-ing With Creative Spirit, Grace and Gratitude*. Karen is the recipient of the 2016 City of Kelowna *Honour In The Arts* award.



Johanna Beyers, Copy Editor, is a poet and mixed media artist. She began her career as a marine paleontologist, and holds a PhD in environmental policy

and a Master's of Social Work. She is a certified sandplay therapist. Johanna is the author of *Sandbar Islands* (The Caitlin Press, 1988) and *Wearing my Feathered Hat* (Wind Oak & Dove, 2013). Her work has been published in *The Capilano Review*, *Sage-ing*, *Room of One's Own*, *CV2*, *Waves*, and elsewhere. She has been copy-editor for *Sage-ing* since 2018.

Robert MacDonald, Designer and Publisher, has lived by his wits, some hard work, and a good lashing of luck. Almost completely



unschooled, he has, over several decades, invented identities as graphic artist, typographer, printer, community activist, publisher, information architect, program director, programmer, and designer. He hasn't finished with inventions. Having spent most of his life thoroughly urbanized (Toronto, New York, San Francisco, Vancouver) he is now nestled into the grasslands and orchards of the Okanagan valley. He finds profound solace in the virgin wilderness upland from his habits. His works have appeared in the journals *Kosmos*, *Image*, *Sage-ing*, and more, and he has chapbooks: *Dead Drop* and *Headwinds*, with more anticipated. He is transcribing several decades of writings from notebook to manuscript, and is otherwise biding his time.

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Cover image: detail from *Sisters, for Diane* by Stephanie Wickens

Please note: not all browsers can use the hyperlinks on our PDF pages. If you encounter that issue, we suggest you copy the web and email links, and paste them into your applications.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

BRIDGING THE GAP

AN INTRODUCTION

Ellen B. Ryan and Stephanie Wickens

“The future belongs to those who give the next generation reason for hope.”
– Pierre Teilhard de Chardin



Top: Ellen B. Ryan
Above: Stephanie Wickens

What a shock! In Spring 2020, the Covid-19 pandemic made personal interactions dangerous instead of the bread and butter of the good life. Social isolation deepened as Canadians hunkered down in their separate homes (or rooms) to endure the lock-down for months and months.

We, a retired professor and a fourth-year honour’s student, were concerned about the impact of physical distancing on young and old. In particular, how could Aging and Health students at McMaster University, restricted to online courses, gain applied experience with older adults? How would older adults in the community manage in isolation?

Through our social organization, Hamilton Aging in Community, we had been fostering intergenerational connections between youth and seniors. Now our usual activities were forbidden – gathering spaces were empty everywhere.

Hence, the birth of our *Intergenerational Memoir Project*, in which 80 pairs of McMaster students and senior volunteers have participated for more than three years. We collaborate with Aging and Health Studies Professor Geraldine Voros and Experiential Program Manager Ruthanne Talbot. We recruit senior volunteers from the community to pair with students wishing to fulfill their applied aging requirement. Brief initial biographies enable us to match students with older volunteers. We offer both groups instruction on strategies for writing a memoir, including use of photographs and Internet research to track down historical context and details. As well, we provide troubleshooting guidance during the semester.

Each student meets virtually (via Internet or phone) every week to assist the senior in writing their memoir. Seniors talk through with their partners which stories to write and then receive back comments on drafts. Some seniors start with written stories, and need the structure and technical assistance to put them together with images for a self-published book. Others complete the semester with their first written life stories to share with loved ones. Weekly get-acquainted interactions and learning of each other’s lives nourish mutual support.

Feedback shows that students discover much to admire about their partner’s past and present, learn oral and written communication skills and come to appreciate the strengths of age. Seniors savour the refreshing

connection with youth, the opportunity to contribute and mentor, and support for writing down their life stories.

Each year we hold a Memoir Fest via Zoom. These are two-hour recorded events where partners work together for the senior to present a five-minute excerpt from their memoir, usually illustrated with photographs. See Memoir Fests on YouTube: 2021, 2022, and 2023.

In the following pages, we are pleased to present life story articles by seven senior volunteers. In the last article of our presentation, the two of us exhibit the fruits of our intergenerational collaboration on visual and poetic metaphors of aging.

**Each year we hold a
Memoir Fest via Zoom.
See Memoir Fests on
YouTube: 2021, 2022,
and 2023.**

Ellen B. Ryan is Professor Emerita at McMaster University and leader of Hamilton Aging in Community. Teaching memoir writing and building intergenerational connections are cornerstones of her work to foster resilient aging. A member of Tower Poetry Society, she is co-editor of *Celebrating Poets over 70* and *Second Journeys: The Dance of the Spirit in Later Life*, and lead author of the book *Ability Speaks: Talking with a Person with Disability*. She hosts the Writing, Aging and Spirit and the Hamilton Aging in Community websites. Ryaneb@mcmaster.ca

Stephanie Wickens is a graduate of the Health Studies and Gerontology program at McMaster University and Dundas Valley School of Art. Her area of research interest centres around arts-based intergenerational programming to promote individual and community resilience. Stephanie combines her academic and creative knowledge to help develop and foster inclusive arts-based initiatives and programs in Hamilton. As a member of Hamilton Aging in Community, Stephanie strives to support inclusive and accessible creative opportunities to connect others and to combat isolation, ableism and ageism. steph.hamiltonagingcommunity@gmail.com

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

WRITING MEMOIR

WITH A STUDENT PARTNER

Flora Macdonald Spencer



This was the needed incentive to sort out and connect the many pieces of reminiscence that I had written over the years

Ten years ago, my friend Ellen Ryan organized a group of women, many recently retired, for a writing group. Rotating leadership, we make use of writing prompts (e.g., the word December, or “Streets where I’ve lived,” or an image along with one or two poems) for timed spontaneous writings, emphasizing sensual detail. We usually accept the invitation to read aloud what we have written and often are pleased and surprised by at least a portion of our own work. In 2023 we still met twice a month, and every one of us hates to miss a session. Meantime, our writing has improved, and we have memoir materials galore.

I appreciated the invitation to take part in the memoir project with a student to facilitate the final compiling of memoir. This was the needed incentive to sort out and connect the many pieces of reminiscence that I had written over the years as part of our writing group sessions. I could focus on my vivid recollections from my first eight years in the 1940s spent with my grandparents as the loved “tail end” grandchild in the home where my mother had grown up.

In January 2021, mid-Covid, I was matched to a partner – a third year Gerontology student named Siena. I was a little apprehensive about how we were going to connect, given the almost sixty-year difference in our ages. It was one thing to tell my memories to contemporaries and see them spark recognition – but I had also seen my children’s eyes glaze over when I recollected the past!

Siena and I met on Zoom. Confinement to our respective bedrooms helped to break the ice from the beginning. In fact, it was a little like meeting a roommate at university – though none of my contemporaries had dyed her hair magenta! My new friend sat on her bed, and I sat in my study, computers at hand, and we chatted about our interests and the plans for the writing project.

Siena had a part-time job in a long-term care home and had chosen Gerontology because she loved her job. She was dealing with people in the hotbed centre of the epidemic and had just received the first of the vaccines. The time was scary, but here she was, full of the enthusiasm of youth and dealing with matters head on. My past seemed to me to be tame, the greatest risks I had taken as a student were skipping lectures to go to a movie. Now I was hiding out in a condo with my retired husband and revisiting my childhood.

My hope was to figure out how to put my short reminiscences into a



Top: Dad's sketch of "Our Apartment House"

Above: Travel by train

Our apartment was familiar and secure, but the word "home" was complex to my understanding.

cohesive form, connected in a creative way, and make them relevant to my children and grandchildren. Further, I needed help with adding illustrations – photographs and drawings that I already had. We decided that I would send her one of my written pieces as a beginning, and we would meet in a week's time to discuss the possibilities. Before our next date, she had sent me a link to an interactive computer program where I could post my writing and pictures and where she could write suggestions and arrange images within the text.

I dutifully sent a piece that I had written about my early confusion about the word home.

In 1942, my parents lived in an apartment in a large stone house in Guelph that was owned by a cousin of my father's. The house appeared as an imposing Georgian-style home, but it had been turned into a fourplex in the 1920s. It stood on a large lot at the end of Perth Street. The street itself ended at a wide gate in a long stone wall, and just inside that gate was a small stone house, marking the entrance to a large property, forbidden to the public by a sign that said NO TRESPASSING. Across the street was a steep bank and, below, the burbling flow of the Speed River. This was where I was brought by my parents as a baby in January 1943. Almost immediately, my father, who had joined the Canadian Military Engineers, was posted to Vancouver to serve as an instructor in camouflage for almost three years.

From 1945, when I was almost three, my memories become vivid. I knew my way around our apartment, knew how to recite that I lived "at 205 Perth Street, phone number 1692-W." I also had learned that "NO TRESPASSING" meant that I was never to venture a foot beyond the gate next door and that I was not to cross the street to explore the river. I was to stay home.

Our apartment was familiar and secure, but the word "home" was complex to my understanding. At the sound of the morning train whistle, for as long as I could remember, my mother would declare cheerfully, "There's the train that goes home to Chesley."

Sometimes, we would actually go to Chesley. Going meant taking a taxi to the station and boarding that very train, pulled by a massive iron-monster engine, whose rumblings on approach were followed by ear-splitting whistles and blasts of steam that terrified me. Tedious confinement followed and lasted for an interminable three hours as the various towns were arrived at and departed from with lengthy delays for passengers to leave and board – before we reached "home in Chesley."

By the time Siena and I met on Zoom the second week, I knew I was in excellent hands. My young partner had sent me two illustrations. One was a photograph of 205 Perth Street, in Guelph, taken from an archival collection of houses in Guelph, and the second was a map that she had found that illustrated the railway lines that formed the web of connections between



My grandparents' house

towns and cities in southwestern Ontario before they were closed in the 1970s. For years I had been longing to see such a map. I was delighted, and it became my first illustration in the process. At that moment, I could see the railway trips of my childhood as the “hook” for connecting the stories.

“Chicken and Dumplings” was a recollection about cooking in my grandmother’s kitchen. My mother would often recall delicious food cooked by her skilled mother, and later by Mrs. Johnson, the cook trained by my grandmother so that

mother, in turn, could turn her energy to good works in the church. Mrs. Johnson took over the hot kitchen with its large white enamel and chrome wood-burning range.

Grandma’s cooking skill came from several generations of Mennonites, who had moved from Holland to Switzerland and, by the early 1700s, over the ocean to Pennsylvania, then to Niagara and then Bruce County. This enduring cuisine was simple fare that respected the fruits and vegetables that grew and stored readily. The meats, most often chicken and pork, were roasted, braised or turned into sausages.

When I was small, in my grandmother’s house late mornings and mid-afternoons were visiting time. Grandma’s friends and relatives visited for tea or coffee, cookies and cakes (not to be snatched), and conversation (not to be interrupted). I was banished to the kitchen. My initial resentment quickly changed to amazed pleasure. I loved the ritual, smells and flavours of the busy kitchen. Mrs. Johnson didn’t talk much, but her activities were thrilling.

The basement was the anchor of the operation. The big door beside the stove opened to wooden stairs leading down. When the light flashed on, a bank of shelves sprang to life like Ali Baba’s cave with glistening jars of whole golden fresh peaches, rosy cherries and plums. Next to those, spicy red chilli sauce, string beans, mustard pickles and dills. Then there were many much larger jars, holding ghoulishly pale chicken bodies – canned for soup and sick-room-tender stews. The next room was fragrant, and, when the light went on, barrels of shiny apples and potatoes, crates of dark green squash, turnips and cabbages were revealed. There was a line of crocks large enough to climb into, covered with round wooden lids, under which was pungent sauerkraut, to be scooped into a bowl. I was allowed to carry the day’s chosen items to an open shelf. Once it was filled, we went upstairs to the hot kitchen where Mrs. J. pushed a little black button beside a closed cupboard. When the loud grinding sound stopped, she opened the door and, magically, there was everything we had piled on below: two jars of preserved chicken, the raw carrots, potatoes and onions, a jar of tiny and very green peas. This magic cupboard was called a “dumb waiter.”

The making of lunch would begin. The vegetables were peeled and

My grandmother’s house late mornings and mid- afternoons were visiting time ... cookies and cakes (not to be snatched), and conversation (not to be interrupted).



Dumbwaiter

My “editorial assistant” often asked what I was talking about. Her questions reflected the things that my own family needed to “see” to understand.

chopped and put into a pot on the stove to boil. The chicken with its own thick jelly – a small version of the Sunday roaster, only paler than pale – was slid out of the wide-mouthed glass sealers. Mrs. Johnson poured the chicken and its jelly into a bowl, and her hands slid deftly through the meat to remove all the tiny bones. When the potatoes and carrots were cooked, the boned chicken was added with the jelly, chopped celery, a jar of peas, parsley and pepper. The pot was watched closely by me, from my perch on a stool. “Shout when it comes to a boil.” Next and best, the “rivels”: a soft batter, mixed very quickly – flour, salt, beaten eggs and milk – was dribbled through a speckled blue enamel colander with large holes and into the boiling soup to make tender little “snakes,” not quite noodles, not quite dumplings. Cover for a couple of minutes and ladle into a shallow bowl. No time to waste; it had to be eaten immediately. Delicious beyond words.

My “editorial assistant” often asked what I was talking about. Her questions reflected the things that my own family needed to “see” to understand. After discussion, she was often able to find relevant images on the Internet.

Thanks to the McMaster project, I now have a slim book, including illustrations from family photographs and artwork. I had enough printed to give to the family for Christmas 2021. They claim to have read it.

Flora Macdonald Spencer was born in 1943 in Hamilton, Ontario, but grew up in Guelph, where her father was an artist and local businessman throughout his life, with the exception of his time in the army during the Second World War. Her education, after graduating from Guelph schools, was as an English and History student at the University of Toronto. This was followed by four years of teaching high school, marriage and children. She studied Fine Art and Art History part time at McMaster while her two children were small, and as soon as they went to school, taught art at elementary and secondary levels until retirement. Post retirement, she volunteered teaching drawing as meditation to cancer patients. spencerfm@sympatico.ca

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

GRAMMA'S MEMOIR



Ruth Murphy

I am an 88-year-old woman with a sense of humour. Since shortly after I was married, I have been writing about my family's funny days, good days and bad days. My writings are referred to as "Mum's life history," and now I have made them into a book.

For many of us, life changed in March 2020. A new word crept into the vocabulary that would change many lives forever: Coronavirus. Until then, my 2020 calendar was full of planned events: Shaw, Stratford and Drayton theatre dates, bridge, lunch with friends, craft shows and day trips with various travel groups. Coronavirus hit in March 2020. Face masks, Lysol wipes, staying home, social distancing, isolating. Little did I know that would be my calendar for the next couple of years.

I am fortunate to live in a small condo in Dundas, Ontario. I had a locker full of this and that, and I had a paper trail. "Mum's life history" was incomplete and not in order, my travel brochures needed sorting, and the list goes on. I gathered boxes and papers and started bringing them upstairs. My memories were everywhere. I spent days laughing, reading and sorting until finally I was able to return my boxes to my locker, ready for their next adventure.

Later, I realized I wanted to leave my story for my grandchildren and great-grandchildren – although I didn't know if anyone was interested or would want to read it. Last fall I became part of the Memoir project. I was paired with Bria, and with her help we wrote my memoir. I asked Bria to be prepared to correct, change and tell me what I needed to do to make my memoir fun to read and interesting. I asked her to pretend I was her Gramma. Bria saw my story from a new perspective, and this was what I needed to complete my project.

In my 80s, I sent for my original birth certificate and discovered I was born in Toronto at the Western Women's College Hospital on November the 28th 1933. My name was Betty Louise, and my mother was from Manitoulin Island.

My adopted name is Ruth Lillian, and that has been my name since I was almost three years old. I lived in west Toronto on Durie Street. I had many friends and neighbours who came from different backgrounds and spoke many languages.

I was included and accepted into this cross-section of society. I joined with other kids having fun and learning to get along. I had my own ideas, and we had a few fights. I picked my friends. I overcame my differences, and I had a great childhood. I went to good schools, had good teachers and had a good

My memories were everywhere. I spent days laughing, reading and sorting



Top: My home and my adoptive parents
 Middle: When I was young
 Above: Days on Lake Simcoe

My parents were 50 and 51 when they adopted me, and I was only three years old.

life with parental guidance and freedom to express myself.

I originally thought my memoir should follow my life and be in some sort of order. That didn't work, and Bria noticed right away. I sent my emails to Bria, and she emailed my writing back to me and highlighted changes in yellow, and we discussed them on Thursdays. These became known as "Thursdays with Bria." My family and friends knew not to call on Thursday morning. I mentioned I would like to add doodles or some comical illustrations. I wrote and she made helpful suggestions and added wonderful doodles. Her doodles have added fun and highlights to my memoir.

My Christmas memories took me to Eaton's department store in downtown Toronto. My visit to Santa, the Santa Claus parade, the decorated store windows with music and magic... and Eaton's annex for an ice cream waffle sandwich.

Mum later told me about my first visit to Santa Claus at Eaton's department store. A lady ran up and grabbed me. Mum was shocked and didn't know what to do. The lady said she knew me before going into foster care and prayed that some day she would know

where I was. As she related the story to Mum, it turned out it was true. She asked Mum if she could keep in touch. This wasn't allowed by the Children's Aid Society, but my mother agreed. Over the years I enjoyed many visits with this woman and her family. They gave me my only baby pictures.

Highlights for me were birthday parties, skating, swimming, trips to the theatre and other fun activities with the neighbourhood kids. I grew up during the Second World War. My friends and neighbours had family in the war. I had three step-uncles overseas. Some food items were not available, and we had ration books for sugar and meat etc. Mum often gave our extra ration coupons to the neighbours because they had bigger families.

We didn't have a car, and we travelled by streetcar or bus. My dad worked for the Canadian Pacific Railway, and we had a pass to travel on the train. We went by train to visit my aunts, uncles and cousins in the country. I enjoyed annual visits with my aunt and uncle who had a cottage on Lake Simcoe. My uncle and I would go out fishing and I got to drive the boat. We had a lot of family gatherings at the cottage, and my aunt was always preparing meals and organizing activities.

I wrote *Grandma's Memoir* for my grandchildren, but my family and friends have responded with letters, phone calls and emails: "I remember that...." "Do you remember when...?" "Did you really get the strap for kissing a boy in the cloakroom in Grade Two?"



Above: Memoir book cover. Co-designed with my student partner.

Right: Ruth on her 88th birthday



and 51 when they adopted me, and I was only three years old.

The course project brought Bria Mitrovica and me together. My memoir book would not be possible without her. Bria has a sense of humour and was patient, helpful and full of ideas. She has also commented on our experience together: “I so enjoyed the process of creating Ruth’s memoir... Our morning conversations were always the highlight of my day.”

Ruth Murphy writes that when she married her high school sweetheart her life became a train journey. “We stop in Hamilton and rent our first apartment. The next stop is Winnipeg, a new job, a new home, and a son is born. The train then continues to Wisconsin. We buy a house trailer, live on a farm and add two daughters to our trip. We leave Wisconsin for Dundas, Ontario – a new job, a new house, and another son is added to our journey. Campbellville and Kilbride are the next stops on our trip. Same train, different stations and different gauges.... My husband is a model-railroader, and our train continues to have new homes as we travel through life. Our final destination is the Garden Railway in the backyard, and our train stops here.”

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In my memoir, I mentioned a war veteran and his wife whom Mom and Dad invited to share our home after the war. She is approaching 100 years of age, and she wrote a note after receiving my memoir. She is the only person ever to tell me how my parents felt about adopting me. “Your mom and dad said to me that despite their ages they did the right thing by adopting you. You added joy to their lives,” she said. My parents were 50

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT



Donna Paige

The idea of writing a memoir has long been an aspiration. After years of courses, workshops, practices in memoir writing, the actual sitting down and writing in a focused manner continued to remain more of an idea than an action. This past winter I engaged in an Intergenerational Memoir Project through McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario, which paired me with a senior student, also interested in memoir writing. This project provided weekly meetings online with her to discuss goals and actions needed to proceed. The structure itself was the impetus for getting started. The student listened, read my work, made helpful comments and provided much needed computer literacy.

My story is about closed adoption, the threads of which are the underpinnings of the mosaic of my whole life experience. Writing and discovering the nature of these threads and how they shaped decisions, actions, cravings and self-afflictive behaviours will not only become a story of integration, ‘from the dark into the light,’ but will also highlight the quest for authenticity. This might be every adoptee’s story. I hope to reduce the barriers of exclusion that adoptees feel and show that healing and wholeness are possible when we open the doors to finding the truth, when we reach inside for the answers.

I’ve always known that I was adopted. My favourite bedtime story was how I was *chosen* to be the daughter of Marj and Chris Farstad and baby sister to Greig.

I was born March 10, 1943, in Edmonton, Alberta. Twenty-one days later a nurse accompanied me on a train to Lethbridge to commence a new life, with a new name, in a new family, in a new community. The origins of my birth from that day forward were to be held secret in a closed government file for the rest of my life. I was then left only with imagination to make up a story about who I am and who I look like. Are you my *real* mother? I would wonder about every woman passing by no matter where I was. I refer to my *real* parents in this article to be my adoptive parents. However, my birth mother, Willa, and birth father, Martin, are also parents. Without them I wouldn’t be here.

In the bedtime storytelling my mother was soft and animated describing the wanting of a baby girl to love and complete their family. She was not able to have more babies. When a baby girl was found whose own mother was not able to look after her, the family was elated. Her description of the preparation of sewing flannel nighties and blankets, and shirts with little ties, knitting soakers, sweaters and bonnets delighted me. This was wartime, and, because she was not pregnant, she was unable to buy supplies at the department store.

My story is about closed adoption ... I hope to reduce the barriers of exclusion that adoptees feel and show that healing and wholeness are possible when we open the doors



Top: Baby Donna with adoptive mother Marj – March 1943

Above: Tracy (age 2) and New Baby Brother Brad, July 1969



This story was both a beautiful message to a young child and simplistic in what it left out. So, although it soothed and comforted temporarily, it couldn't make up for the confused feelings of being wanted and not wanted, belonging and not belonging, being loved and not being loved, of knowing and not knowing the origins of my birth.

"To be rooted is perhaps the most important and least recognized need of the human soul." – Simone Weil

Adoption is based on loss. Loss for the birth mother, loss for the adoptee and loss for the adoptive parents – for the children they couldn't conceive. The deceit and secrecy of closed adoption is meant to protect, but instead fosters deep veins of vulnerability. The label "adopted" felt dirty to me and triggered an insecurity of belonging. The questions of "who are your *real* parents" reinforced the experience of inclusion vs. exclusion. The asterisk beside my name in my father's genealogy record seems to imply *you sort of belong*.

"The sense of abandonment and the mystery about origins will shape the child's life." – Betty Jean Lifton, *Journey of the Adopted Self*, p. 20

The answers to the question "Why was I adopted?" emerge gradually. It's every adoptee's question. These deep-seated questions began to show up in my writing. I recalled the first meeting with my future in-laws when I said to them, "I hope it's okay that I'm adopted." Although not totally cognizant of the significance of the statement, I remember how vulnerable I felt when we moved from Lethbridge to Ottawa in 1959 and then when I left home for post-secondary education in Toronto in 1962. I was uncomfortable and anxious, particularly when meeting boys, and strong feelings of inadequacy surfaced. I didn't manage this well and coped by striving to be best at whatever I did. I was searching for something unknown out there somewhere.

I married Brent in 1966. I felt very comfortable and safe with him and our shared values. The dream of my life was fulfilled with the birth of our first-born, daughter Tracy, in 1967. When two miscarriages curtailed the desire for more children, we decided to adopt. I had always wanted to do so, but didn't know why that was important. I began to unravel when our baby son, Brad, was offered to us in 1969 when he was 7 and a half weeks old, having been in three different foster homes prior to coming to ours. On that day we too changed his name, his identity, and signed the closed adoption agreement. I left that meeting with an enormous sense of responsibility to a young mother who gave up her son in hopes of a better life for him.

Difficulties with the baby began immediately, and I felt very inadequate as a mother. Why can I not soothe him? He cried for hours every day. In those days the word *bonding* wasn't prevalent, and frequent visits to the pediatrician to see what was wrong resulted in messages of his physical well-being only. It wasn't until he was four or five years old that I knew we were finally bonded. Sitting in his little chair in the kitchen at lunchtime one day, he



Lethbridge, High Level Bridge

looked right into my eyes, focused, intense. The impact was profound even if I didn't totally understand what had happened.

Our marriage provided well for us as a family, but my inner unsettledness continued in the form of striving for learning and growth. Eventually, when the children were in university, I felt a deadness in our relationship, which perhaps reflected my inner world. We divorced. Three years later I remarried the love of my life, or so I thought, and embarked on a romantic high. I overlooked red flags at the outset, believing that everything could be worked out. I did not get married a second time for failure, and in the service of the marriage (I kept saying to myself) I made choices that in the end were disserving. Fear of abandonment was always just under the surface of my skin.

It was during this time in 1994 that I entered therapy to help figure things out. The wise therapist suggested that I begin to meditate, and she offered books and resources that began a journey onto the Buddhist path. Little did I know at the time this was a journey into wholeness. When the marriage ended after five years, my brokenness and grief led me to another therapist who guided me into the dark shadows while I continued to meditate and practise.

I was now ready to start at the beginning – to go inside those fractured bonds and their impact. There was not going to be an external fix.

Leonard Cohen's lyrics said it all:

O, gather up the brokenness
Bring it to me now
splinters that you carried
The cross you left behind
Come healing of the body
Come healing of the mind

I learned to love myself just as I am, to embrace the broken parts and appreciate them not as broken, but just left out until the light overshadowed the dark places, the parts unknown. Thoughts are not reality, and self-compassion offered kind soothing when beliefs tried to keep me tied to old habits of mind. In the year 2000 I experienced reunification with members of my birth family and learned the origins of my birth. My half-brother and his wife made sure, in an updated version of their family history, that my name also appears as the daughter of Martin Mix. My birth mother, Willa Meek, died at the age of 62.

This past summer, my 80th, I went on a personal pilgrimage back to my roots in Alberta, to Lethbridge. My heart was filled with memories, embraced by the landscape, the big sky, the dry air, the prairie grasses. I know now how much I was loved and how much was given me during those early years. Gratitude enveloped me in the beauty of life, in the generosity of my parents who adopted me, of a birth mother who hoped for more for me, and how these actions lay the groundwork for healing the wounds of loss into wholeness.

Donna Paige retired as a Registered Couple and Family Therapist in 2014 after 30 years of practice. She held a part-time faculty appointment in the Department of Psychiatry at McMaster University in Hamilton for 10 years, teaching family studies. In 2007 she began teaching mindfulness classes while engaged in study, mentorship and practice in Theravada Buddhism. She facilitated a sangha in Dundas, Ontario, until June 2022 when she wanted more time for practice and for writing her memoir.

The garden has been a support and a passion during her years of work, as well as reading, hiking, golf, spending time with family and friends, and creative endeavours. Her children and grandchildren continue to be great teachers, widening her view of how to live fully!
donnapaige77@gmail.com

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

MY BEGINNINGS IN THE BLITZ

Margaret Jenkins



It's strange when the most story-worthy part of one's life is a period that one has no memory of nor had conscious participation in.

To begin, let me acknowledge the involvement of my delightful student partner, Hailey Simpson, without whose assistance in keeping me focussed to meet deadlines, frequent trimming of wordy sentences and her patience in teaching me, somewhat unsuccessfully, how to use Google Docs, it is unlikely this memoir would have been completed. As an octogenarian, it is a huge privilege and a pleasure to have the opportunity to interact with young people. Kudos to Hailey and McMaster University for making this activity possible.

It's strange when the most story-worthy part of one's life is a period that one has no memory of nor had conscious participation in. On two fateful nights in March of 1941, my hometown of Clydebank, Scotland, was the target of a horrendous blitz during which four thousand houses were completely destroyed, another four thousand five hundred severely damaged and yet another three thousand five hundred suffered minor to serious damage. Five hundred and twenty-eight people lost their lives, 617 were severely injured and yet hundreds more injured by shrapnel and shards of exploding glass. Many more deaths occurred in nearby towns, but war secrecy did not allow records to be released for thirty years. History claims it was one of the most aggressive two nights of bombing in the Second World War.

I was five months of age, a sickly baby recovering from a severe case of whooping cough. When the air raid sirens sounded, my poor mother, who three years earlier had suffered the death of her second baby at three days of age, found herself alone with my six-year-old sister and me, as hundreds of enemy bombers approached. My father was out on air-raid warden duty. As I was sick, my mother made the decision not to go into our assigned air-raid shelter and instead crouched under the stone stairs of our tenement building. It is difficult to comprehend the extent of the fear and anxiety my mum must have felt as she listened to the whine and shrieks of exploding bombs, trying to protect her young family while at the same time worrying about my dad, grandparents, her sisters, brothers and nephews who all lived in the same town.

Sometimes fate works in mysterious ways. The shelter, into which my mum chose not to go, received a direct hit from a bomb that killed all 50 souls inside. Shelters can protect from shrapnel, flying glass and bomb blasts, but not from a direct bomb hit. My very relieved dad came home to find his family had avoided the devastation of the ruined shelter. So, with one suitcase, the family's government-issued gas masks and a colourful tin containing impor-



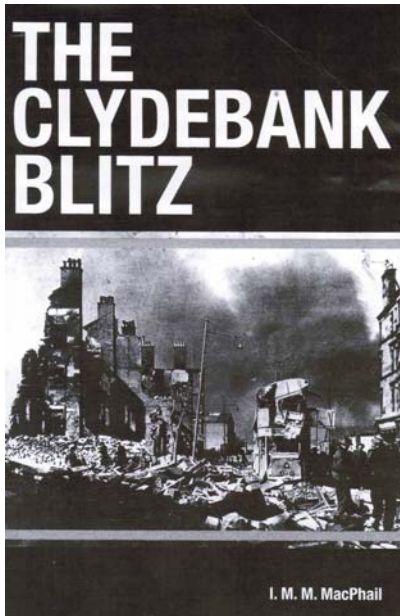
Rescuers working hard during blitz

Thus began a three-year odyssey during which we were evacuated to several areas around Scotland.

tant papers like marriage and birth certificates, my baby sister's death certificate and the ubiquitous ration books, we were evacuated to a small community about 10 miles away. That colourful hexagonal tin sat prominently in our various living rooms for as long as I can remember. The blitz continued with the same ferocity for another night. When all was quiet my parents returned to their home, hoping to pick up more clothes to help them during the evacuation, but all they found were ruins: the entire solid stone, three-storey building and contents were gone, as was the remainder of our street.

Thus began a three-year odyssey during which we were evacuated to several areas around Scotland. My sister attended six elementary schools. My father, whose job at the huge Singer Sewing Machine factory (which was making war armaments instead of sewing machines) was classified as a "reserved occupation," which kept him both in town and out of the army. He lived with his parents, brother and sisters in town, as their house, while in need of many repairs, was deemed livable. Whenever possible he visited us every second weekend.

While I have snatches of memories of those years, my earliest vivid memory is when, at age 3 and a half in April 1943, our family moved into permanent housing. The small houses, adjacent to a very pretty village, had been built to be army barracks, but never used, and so they were converted into housing for people whose homes were destroyed. Those memories are very happy: me playing in a sand pile, children running around, adults chatting, laughing and helping each other. A great buzz of excitement permeated the air, and I understood that my daddy would now be living with



Author Macphail's book

Everyone had lost their homes to the bombs, had been evacuated around the country to strangers' homes where they were not always welcomed with open arms

us permanently. The elation in the community was palpable even to me at that young age. Everyone had lost their homes to the bombs, had been evacuated around the country to strangers' homes where they were not always welcomed with open arms, so understandably they were ecstatic to have a place to call home again.

Later, I understood the seriousness of what had happened and how both my nuclear and extended family had been affected. Rationing of all foods and clothing in wartime was severe and continued in some form until 1953. Everyone was required to help with the war effort. All the women in our neighbourhood picked potatoes, which I thought was great fun, but I'm sure my mother didn't share my enthusiasm. She had to learn to cook using different ingredients such as dried eggs and milk and use ingenuity to make the meager rations go far enough to feed the family.

Years later, when I became interested in researching the Clydebank blitz, I discovered that one of my high school teachers, Dr. Ian Macphail, had published a book on the blitz. It is an interesting read. To illustrate an example of a typical Scottish way of making light of dark times he says: "People left their homes in such a hurry that they often forgot to put in their dentures. One such person, running into the Anderson shelter in their garden, suddenly paused and started back to the house. 'Where are you going?' cried his son, 'back for my teeth,' replied the old one. 'Don't be daft,' said his son. 'It's not pies they're dropping'." ¹

I never heard complaints or "poor me" coming from either of my parents, who had lived the first five years of their married life during the Great Depression and the next six years in wartime. I am forever grateful to them for their optimism and resilience in the creation of such a loving and safe home for us during those difficult, scary years with so few resources. My mother always said: "We may have lost everything materially but that is just stuff and can be replaced." Unlike countless other people, none of our large extended family was killed or injured. My uncle, who had fought in North Africa and Europe and spent the last part of the war as a prisoner, came home safely. We have to be very grateful and count our blessings.

Bobbi Lee Maracle OC, an Indigenous Canadian author who died recently, said this about her life, and I think her words could well be attributed to my mother:

"My life has been a slow journey, sometimes over sharp rocks, but I'll be damned if I didn't dance over every last one of them."

**THE
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MEMOIR PROJECT**



DEAR DAD

(AKA RADGY RANGO)

Tracey D'Alessio

Dear Dad (aka Radgy Rango),

You loomed large in my childhood, not only because of your six-foot-four-inch stature, but also because of your extraverted personality. You influenced me greatly. I was your first child, born on your birthday, November 27.

You had a fierce intelligence, high standards, a dry sense of humour, a scathing wit, didn't suffer fools lightly, were extremely generous, but you did have a short fuse too.

You were the life of the party, always ready with hilarious personal stories to entertain the gathered company. Your speeches for work were professional and accomplished, your "Address to the Haggis" and your rendition of "The Laughing Policeman" were legendary and much sought after. I can still quote the first two lines of "The Address," after hearing you prepare for your golf club's Robert Burns Night celebrations for so many years.

"Fair fa' your honest, sonsie face
Great Chieftain o' the Puddin-race!"

My mother lamented that others often saw the best of you.

You not only had high expectations of everyone around you, but you also had them for yourself. You had high blood pressure dating from your young adult years and a high-stress job, and were inclined to "throw wobbles," as we four kids called them. My two younger brothers were frequently in trouble for trampling flowers with their footballs, leaving bicycles strewn on the garage floor and general untidiness, not to mention a few broken windows.

As a young girl on the darkened stage of the Rowntree Theatre in York, England, ready to perform in my annual ballet school recital, I remember peering out into the audience, my eyes roaming across the rows until they rested on the tallest silhouette, you. I was relieved that you weren't standing up and waving this time.

There were many memorable incidents when you demonstrated your fierce love for us. Do you remember saving Guy and me from the rapidly rising tide on Lindisfarne Island? We were playing on the beach, oblivious to the fact that the tide was forming a pool behind us, cutting us off. You charged over and grabbed us both, lifted us out of the water, cavalierly disregarding your non-swimmer status.

A pivotal moment came for me in 1978, when I was 16 years old. We were in the kitchen, you were upset about something, yelling and throwing a wobbly. With no forethought I blurted out, "How the hell do you expect

You had a fierce intelligence, high standards, a dry sense of humour, a scathing wit, didn't suffer fools lightly, were extremely generous, but you did have a short fuse too.



me to study and do well in my O’level exams with all this going on?”

Silence.

I was gobsmacked, as we say in England when something of this magnitude and shock happens to you. You were instantly deflated, your anger dispelled. You gave me a big hug and genuinely apologized.

That was a turning point for me. I realized that I could stand up for myself. Your larger-than-life personality could easily have overshadowed me, but I think it inspired me to speak up for myself. We all learned to take ourselves less seriously, gradually being able

to tease you, calling you Radgy Rango and finally Ranald instead of Dad.

As adults now, the four of us kids have great stories that we tell, usually ending up in choruses of laughter. A favourite that I like to relate, and act out, is about you driving me to school in York when I was a teenager. You were very impatient with the other drivers; “Get out of my life” and “Die” were the two phrases I remember you chanting as you feigned banging your head repeatedly on the dashboard.

Returning from working in London for occasional weekends at home, you would pick me up at York Station. Disembarking from the train I cringed with embarrassment to see you in the distance, dancing about on the platform, arms waving, yelling “My Trace, My Trace” when you spotted me. Very embarrassing at the time, but now it’s one of my favourite memories of you.

You delivered an eloquent, engaging speech at my wedding, even if you did describe me as pig-headed and obstinate to Vince and the assembled guests. You elicited much hilarity as you joked about the possibility that the church could have listed to the groom’s side due to the sheer volume of people in Vince’s family.

I’ve never told you that one of my only regrets, especially now, is not dancing with you that night. The whole day flew by in a blur and before I knew it the moment had passed. I’m sorry.

You travelled so much during your long career with Rowntree Mackintosh, so it was understandable that you didn’t want to travel as much in your retirement years. We were thrilled when you and mum came over for the christenings of our daughters, Maya and Emily. We took many trips to England with the girls over the years. They got to know their English family and particularly enjoyed walking your beloved beagles with you. When they were young, they had trouble saying Grandad Ranald. It came out as Grandald Randald. That is how you’ll always be known to them.



Top: Lake District, England 1984

Above: Dad’s 65th birthday



Mom and Dad

It's been fifteen years since I received that shocking phone call from mum telling me that you'd passed away. We knew you might only live another ten years after your quadruple bypass surgery. We should've been happy that you got seventeen more years, but it still felt too soon, you were only seventy-four years old.

Although I was thousands of miles away when you died, I am comforted to know that your last moments were spent in your beloved "chapel" doing something you loved: playing snooker with your friends. I don't think you felt any pain.

We all miss you, but at least we have lots of great memories of you to share with each other.

Love,
Your Trace

Tracey D'Alessio was born in England and moved to Canada when she was almost 21 years old. She loves reading, photography and scrapbooking. Once she discovered memoir writing, she was able to bring all these passions together. She started taking memoir writing classes at the Haliburton School of the Arts in 2008 and gradually built up enough pieces to self-publish two of three parts of her memoir. The first covered her early years in England, the second covered moving to Canada, getting married and starting a family. She

is still living the third part, but has quite a few pieces already written.
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**THE
INTERGENERATIONAL
MEMOIR PROJECT**

IN SICKNESS AND IN HEALTH

Joan L. Robertson



On the next page are three poems about my marriage. I wrote the last poem in 2017, a year before my husband, John, accepted his new home in long-term care. John often confided to friends who drove him to the Adult Day Care programme that he was concerned about my welfare. It was obvious I was fraying at the edges coping with his dementia and Type I diabetes. It was a challenge to administer his insulin injections and monitor his roller-coaster glucose readings. Caregiving is both a privilege and exhausting. At the end of one long day, when John dropped a glass that shattered into a million bits, I wrote "Shattered" to tell the tale.



First year of marriage



50th anniversary

Joan L. Robertson was born in Memphis, Tennessee. Her father was upset when she chose to attend Yale Divinity School up north because he was afraid she might marry a "damn Yankee," but she married John, a Texan, and moved north to Canada. They immigrated in 1968 with their toddler son, Eric. Soon they welcomed their second son, Mark, putting down roots at McMaster University and in Dundas, Ontario. Joan is a 1986 graduate of Emmanuel College, University of Toronto, and a retired United Church of Canada minister. As a widow, she is blessed by 56 years of marriage, a loving family and communities of stories yet to tell. Jl.robertson@sympatico.ca

He Chose Me

Jesus said: "You did not choose me,
but I chose you ..." – John 15:16

Echoes of Good Friday
sink into my psyche.
He chose me...

Under a tree, there,
would he propose?
Here, where we first
locked eyes?

But no moonlit night
or poignant place
could ever have predicted
when he chose me.

The doctor asked,
"Are you engaged?"
My body stiffened,
my voice uttered, "No."
"Pregnancy
stops the bleeding
if you don't want to lose
your last ovary."

Emotions swirl.
I rush back
to tell John.
My face flushes –
My heart palpitates.
I wait at the edge
of the tennis court.
He walks towards me.
My head tells me
my chances for marriage
are over
He has to know.

You tell the one you love
that you are damaged goods
that dreams are dashed
that you understand if he says,
"I'm so sorry" – and then what?

Prepare for nothing
but the truth
even if it hurts.
You tell the one you love.

In mid-day sun
beside the tennis court
barren of trees
He chose me
to be his wife.

And now
when dementia stalks
dreams are dashed
and loss becomes
an invisible companion
I choose him
over and over again.

I Never Said

By the way, I never said he was a saint!
What can be said is this...
"John is such a fine gentleman, but boy is
he high maintenance!"
My response: "Whew, You got that right!"

I never said he could find a damn thing...
You name it: keys, slippers, books.
Did I mention glasses?

I never said he was tidy
books treasured as old friends
strewn around the house like empty pop
cans.
If you want to trace his steps,
follow the books...

I never said playing "lost and found" was
fun.
Two signature berets, special order from
California
repeat birthday gifts from sons
misplaced insulin kit and wallet, replaced,
then found, sigh.

I never said I would forget
how he lost my wedding gift to him
an engraved sterling silver comb and
brush.
My mother's sage advice: "You are going
to have to watch him like a hawk."
She read my future.

I never said I would quit reminding him
when
he forgets days of the week or our
anniversary
or confuses most of what I tell him.

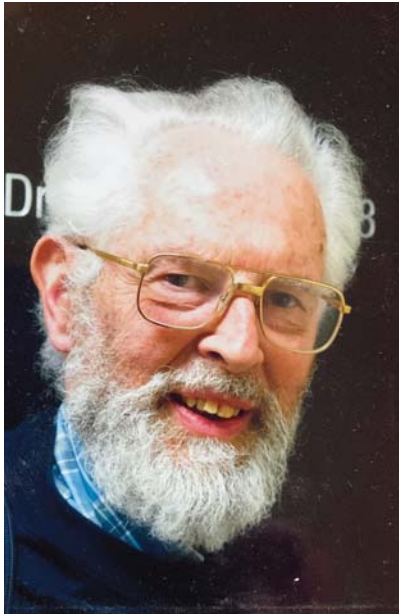
But you can bet some things are known.
The jersey numbers of favourite football
players
how to throw a knuckleball, swing a golf
club, ride a bike
names of theologians, philosophers, and
old Texas friends
And how to stand when a woman enters
the room.

Shattered

Shattered glass
on the floor.
I did not pick it up
or sweep grief under the rug.
It stayed there overnight.
Would steps on splintered shards
feel the hurt?
It would remain there
in the dark shadows,
not asking to be thrown away
or pleading to remain.
It just was.
Couldn't put the glass together again.
No longer to hold water
or bring refreshment.
It was a broken offering
to the gods of heartbreak,
fragments held in trust.
Bathed in morning's mellow glow,
we pick up the pieces
and let them go.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

A RETIREMENT EVOLUTION



Ken Watson

I grew into retirement with the help of others: the goodness of friends, family and strangers. In living out their gifts, I honour their giving. And that is a sustaining strength in seniorhood. But I realize that nobody finds their own individual route there the way I have without a lot of ‘Capital in their Risk Bank’ – another dividend from investment in youth. One of my evolution’s greatest joys has been music.

The story starts midway.

“Missed you recently,” I said as my church choir seatmate slid into place.

“I’ve been singing with the opera chorus,” replied a bass voice. “You should try out. You sing well.” Those words changed my life.

“What do you do to try out?”

“Audition.”

“I don’t know any opera,” I guffawed.

“Take a hymn book.”

On the appointed day, I walked from the glare of sun on fresh-fallen snow into the gloom of a darkened sanctuary. Ahead, in a halo of light, a smiling face was looking over a grand piano. The accompanist held out his hand for my hymn book. The man’s eyebrows flicked. His smile deepened. “Number 86?” he asked, seeing the bookmark.

“Please.”

He improvised a majestic entry, slowed, and nodded my entry.

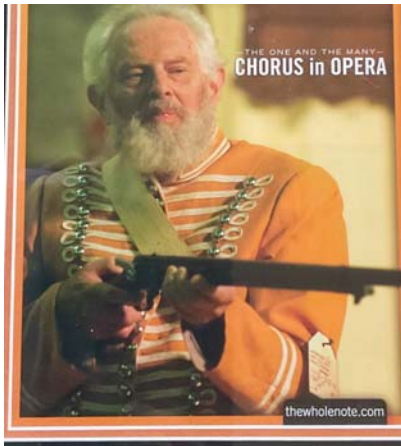
“Guide me O, Thou great Jehovah...” I surged into a breath for the third verse when a voice boomed from the darkness. “Mr. Watson, we don’t need to hear the THIRD verse.” I was dismissed. I crawled out through the pile in the carpet. A week later, the phone rang.

“Mr. Watson? It’s the Chorus Master from the Opera Company. I am following up on your audition.” I remember looking up and out the window as he concluded with ... “And we’d like to offer you a place in our chorus.” I waited.

The sun had stopped in the sky. When it began to move again, I realized I still held the phone. “Welcome to the chorus, Mr. Watson.”

I became one of the program’s most diligent pupils. That growth happened because of the generosity of donors, supporters and teachers I did not know. I became polylingual – French, German, Italian, Russian. I was taught to occupy space, to become someone else convincingly. In doing so, I got to support some of the best singers of our time, to join a community of performers stretching over centuries, to recreate experiences that had inspired millions of listeners. But with every invitation to join a new produc-

“I’ve been singing with the opera chorus,” replied a bass voice. “You should try out. You sing well.” Those words changed my life.



Top left: Opera chorus

Above: La Traviata

Top right: La Traviata, at the gaming table



tion, I felt a continuing duty. I was taught early and often that it was mannerly to say thank you to those who gave you a gift.

“As a new chorister, I don’t know what I don’t know,” I said to mates singing the bottom line of music from the back row. “So, I just watch what all those high-priced helps do, and copy them.”

“But you do tell them,” my friend gently added.

Those were my reflections as I stacked my envelopes of thank you notes ready to distribute at dress rehearsal that night. I left early to ask the Assistant Stage Manager to pass them to the principals and minor performers to whom they were addressed. Chorus do not intrude on their dressing rooms.

Two responses of many now come to mind. One came one opening night.

On top of my singing duties, a companion and I had been designated guards in one scene. No big deal except it required a quick change of costume – thirty-three seconds – top to bottom. The route of 75 steps was through a backstage hallway to a vestibule off the corridor leading to the Principal’s Dressing Rooms. The move cut dressing time to twenty seconds or less. We practised. Piece of cake!

My first step into the darkness of the wings was a leap. “Pssst!” I warned anyone. Running, I stripped off my cloak. I stopped in the gloom at my dressing chair with an old costume in hand and tossed it to the dresser. Off came sandals, down came my tights. And then the door to the Dressing Rooms opened and the diva stood there.

“I’m looking for Mr. Watson,” she said waving a letter. I froze. Wearing nothing but briefs, I blurted, “That’s me.”

The dresser hissed, “Pants,” galvanizing me back into action.

The soprano was equally surprised to find the nearly naked man, now thrashing around with costume pieces before her, but she continued anyway.

“I wanted to thank you for your kind letter,” and she waved my note over

the musical crescendo from the pit.

"I don't usually receive women in this condition," I blurted as I bent to yank up long stockings and slip on shoes. The dresser slapped on vinyl gaiters with a velcro closing the back making me look like I was wearing knee-high leather boots. I was wiggling into a gold-braided tunic.

The lady laughed and spoke. "Well neither do I. Thanks again," and backed through the doorway.

"Put it on as you go," urged the dresser handing me my sword belt. I reached out. "Sword on the left."

Ten steps to the entry. My friend moved ahead to give me time for two steps to catch up.

"Rifle," said a voice and slapped it into the hand coming off my belt buckle. I stood puffing in place with three beats to spare.

"Hat," I whispered to the darkness when I realized it was still at the dressing table. As I said so, it was slammed on my head from behind.

"Go," said the ASM and touched the shoulder of the chorister ahead.

Scowling as angry soldiers must, we ran on stage rowdy and arguing. After the curtain, I stopped to see if the diva was available to chat.

"Already at the donor meet-and-greet," said the ASM guarding the hallway. "Off limits to Chorus," was the translation.

Another response came years later. "Is Mr. Watson still a Chorus member," asked the understudy for the diva in the rehearsal hall. The young helper looked up from her list of duties and immediately smiled in recognition.

"I think so. I'm new here," said the Assistant Stage Manager. "Let me ask the Stage Manager." She leaned over and waited while the lady finished talking with the Lighting Manager.

"Yes, he is. As regular as the sun in the sky," answered the SM. "I saw him headed towards the kitchen with cookies for break time. I waylaid him for an inspection." She moved her musical score to reveal two of the treasured treats. She pointed the way as she called, "Places please for Act I. Chorus men: Pick up your swords on the prop table."

The understudy was busy with her principal companions during the break. It was as they were headed out of the hall that she spotted me in the queue, empty cookie container in hand. "I gave you my recipe last time, Marta," I was saying to the chorister beside me. "I can't help it if yours don't come out like mine." The soloist planted herself firmly in front of me, cutting off my exit while letting the chorus through.

"Mr. Watson?" she asked rhetorically.

"Call me Ken," I replied, side-stepping out of the lineup. "Do you know who I am?"

"Sure. I was hoping to be able to say how much I enjoyed your aria tonight. You sang with us a bunch of years back. I cannot remember when."

The lady fussed in her purse and looked up at a fold-fatigued, tattered and dirty scrap of paper. She tenderly unfolded it as the last of the chorus passed

Years later. "Is Mr. Watson still a Chorus member," asked the understudy for the diva in the rehearsal hall. The young helper looked up from her list of duties and immediately smiled in recognition.

by saying their goodnights. I turned back from adding mine to see the date and salutation, staring up from her hand.

“You sent this to me when I was here last. I wanted to say it is part of every performance preparation since – as necessary for me as my warm-up. And I wanted to say thank-you.” I stared at the paper, mouth agape. “I also want to apologize for not replying at the time. You have no idea how I am still moved by your kind words.” She started to list the subtleties. I hadn’t known that my words of gratitude for the methods and mannerisms she had taught me without knowing it could have such weight.

“I don’t know what to say,” I croaked. The maestro and Chorus Master broke our silence.

“Can we walk you to your car?”

I locked eyes with the lady. “You’re welcome,” I mouthed. She nodded and turned. The caretaker, key in the lock, was urging me out when I finally found my feet.

“You sent this to me when I was here last. I wanted to say it is part of performance preparation since – as necessary for me as my warm-up. And I wanted to say thank-you.”

Ken Watson is/was a partner, parent and science teacher. Those are the long threads of the warp of my life. Some short strings that weave between the others are being a quarter-inch carpenter, cottager, mountain climber, blacksmith, farmer (trying to culture nut trees), gardener, chorister, opera participant, author (12 books in print and counting) and storyteller.

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We dedicate this Intergenerational Memoir Project collection to the memory of Ken Watson, who died shortly after completing his article.

THE INTERGENERATIONAL MEMOIR PROJECT

PLANTING HOPE AND CULTIVATING RESILIENCE

Stephanie Wickens and Ellen B. Ryan



Stephanie (left) and Ellen (right)

One day in art school – I was then in my 30s – I was sitting in my studio, messing around, wasting time and deliberating whether to toss out the wilted tulips on my drafting table. The water was murky, the stems drooping, petals curling and starting to drop. Something stopped me. I looked at the flowers more closely. I noticed the way the colours were changing, gaining more depth and vibrancy. The veins in each petal were becoming more prominent and vivid. I took the vase over to the sink, dumped out the water and got to work. For several years, off and on, I drew, painted and photographed tulips in different stages of growth and decay.

In my 40s, I returned to school as a mature student to pursue a degree in Health Studies and Gerontology at McMaster University. My father had recently suffered a series of medical crises. As his advocate, I was struggling to navigate the healthcare system. I wanted to understand better the aging process and why it was so difficult to obtain consistent care and support for older adults and their care partners.

Nearing the end of my degree I was faced with planning my final course, which would be an independent study with Ellen Ryan. Exhausted, I dreaded writing another paper. I was sure I was never going to be able to finish my degree. It was fall. My father had passed away a few months prior. We were in the thick of the pandemic. I was battling multiple chronic health issues. I started to think about what I had learned about aging, resilience and hope.

My mind turned toward tulips. I ordered bags of bulbs and started to brainstorm. I planted tulips all over my garden. Before covering them up with dirt, I took photographs and steeled myself for winter.

Mid-March the following spring, I was rewarded by my first hints of green and red. After taking many photographs during the flowers' growth, I chose five images on which to focus my paintings. These show the following stages – bulb, early shoots, a blossom starting to open, a flower past full bloom, and a flower starting to wither. I used colour, shape, line and texture to capture the spirit of separate phases of tulip life. For example in the first piece, the bulbs each have different shapes, sizes and warm earth tones like brown, red and gold. They evoke feelings of potential and innocence. The soft round forms suggest egg and womb shapes. The second painting shows green and red tinged sprouts, leaves boldly emerging from the fresh brown earth, surrounded by a brilliant blue sky.

Planting Hope. Acrylic on canvas, 12" x 12"





Top: *Shoots and Leaves*. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 18" x 18"

Above: *Sisters, for Diane*. Acrylic on canvas, 18" x 24"

There is a feeling of hesitation and vulnerability, but also of bravely forging ahead after having taken root. The third painting is a pink flower emerging from a sea of waving green leaves. It stretches up towards the sky and is just beginning to bloom. Although part of a larger group of tulips that also emerge, this flower stands out from the rest. The fourth painting shows a flower just past full bloom. Its petals curl downwards, leaves twist and curve, allowing the interior to be exposed. The colours display more depth and intricacy. In the final piece the flower has become almost unrecognizable. Pale pink has been replaced by deep reds and purple and green by soft brown earth tones. Petals and leaves fill the canvas with a bold show of colour, depth, grace and movement.

Creativity and nature

In trying times it is common to turn to the arts and nature as sources of comfort, connection and meaning. Participants, young and old of all abilities, are drawn to the natural world and its elements as sources of inspiration, expression and sharing through art, stories, music and movement.

Putting on my artist's cap gave me strength for the final push. Through cataloguing, writing and reflecting, I found that my work with the tulips paralleled my learning for this degree as well as experiences with my own aging body, chronic illness and disability.

I was able to explore a different kind of connection to the knowledge I had gained over the course of my degree.

I was encouraged to tap into my creative side and to play, which allowed for a more visceral and accessible form of expression. This shift towards right-brain thinking helped me realize that my learning was not just linear and intellectual. My final project enabled me to integrate academic experiences with my life as an artist and my ongoing connections to other people.

Throughout my time at McMaster, engagement with arts-based initiatives outside the classroom led me to develop a deeper appreciation for the power of creativity and connection. I was facilitating memoir writing and learning about personhood, guiding intergenerational craft activities and listening to music with people living with dementia. Often, I would bring my portable record player and a selection of records to a long-term-care home where I volunteered. I was amazed at the effect music would have on residents who struggled with communication and memory. A record would be chosen, a song would start to play and the room would light up. There would be smiles, dancing and reminiscing. One woman sang along to an aria after not having spoken in months.



Top: *Blooming, for Loretta*. Acrylic on canvas, 16" x 16"

Above: *Dancing, for Ellen*. Acrylic and oil on canvas, 24" x 18"

Connections across the generations were especially instrumental in a communal development of self-compassion, empathy, wisdom and creativity.

Humans of all ages, experiences and abilities have an appreciation and connection to some form of the arts. The arts speak to our vulnerabilities and strengths. They allow us to express what makes us special and unique. Being able to express myself and engage with others through the arts during challenging times showed me the power of creative activities to connect, heal, sustain and build resilience.

Intergenerational relationships

Nature was one part of inspiration in my tulip series. However, the true catalyst to return to exploring tulips in various stages of life and death was a desire to express what I had learned about aging and relationships, as well as my frustration with ageism in the health care system. I came to understand the value of intergenerational relationships and community connections to foster positive changes. Through my studies and community engagement I came to appreciate diverse kinds of grace, wisdom and growth. My beliefs about aging were challenged, and I was encouraged by hearing other people's stories and forging connections.

Due to sometimes disabling chronic illness, I had felt shame and put pressure on myself in unproductive ways. This ableism is reinforced in society as is ageism. Over time the self-reflection and newfound awareness coming from being a mature student with disabilities and from my involvement with young and old in the community helped me to claim the resilience I have achieved through coping with my life experiences.

One experience in particular had a lasting impact. I was given the opportunity to work with a highly respected and much-loved retired nurse educator who lived in assisted care. Her wisdom, warmth and insight were invaluable sources of inspiration as we found creative ways to write her memoirs. While talking about similar health problems, we encouraged each other to focus on the piece we were writing. My questions about her life stories helped her to snap out of a blue mood and relive cherished moments. Despite logistical difficulties, we nudged each other to attend arts and social events together. She had a way of making everyone around her feel special while remaining humble and gracious about her own accomplishments. She taught me about the concept of personhood and about the importance of connecting with others, especially in the face of adversity. She taught me to live life to the fullest and not be afraid to take risks or make mistakes or to ask for help.

I learned self-compassion, deeper empathy for others and how to build community. I learned that no matter where we come from it is important to create and share spaces where we can be ourselves and encourage sharing our stories. Connections across the generations were especially instrumental in a communal development of self-compassion, empathy, wisdom and creativity.

Tulip Life

Ellen B. Ryan

Deep beneath November dark
with faith in light's return
we savour the company of sister bulbs

Our shoots peek through soil
Green stalks stretch
drawn up by sun's rays
leaves cheering in the breeze

Buds ride windy waves
swelling toward the warmth
Glimmer of colour

We are pink! We are pink!

Now we smiling tulip sisters
rosy-cheeked blooms
open our petals to the bees
as we shout *Spring!*

Pink pales, petals droop
edged with rust
Stalks and stamens slouch
What we could teach those lilac blooms!

Bulbs in a bushel basket
squirrelled in the shed
for next year's showing

Resilience across the life cycle

Tulips cycle through varying features of colour and texture across their lifespan, even as each exhibits its individual uniqueness. Like tulips, each person has unique life experiences: where they are born, where they live, challenges and tragedies they face. Flowers tell their stories of aging and beauty through changing appearance as described through my art and Ellen's poetry. Flowers can share their stories by nurturing each other through a shared life force (roots acting together, the richness of fallen petals in the soil). Humans undergo similar transformations, gaining valuable insight and perspectives along the way. These parallels underscore the beauty and significance of embracing the wisdom we accumulate throughout our lives and the importance of sharing these treasures with one another.

My paintings and Ellen's poem reflect the work that she and I have accomplished so far. They are a testament to the power of intergenerational relationships, mutual respect and purposeful collaboration. They mirror our shared interests in nature, creativity and fostering resilience. They reflect parallels between our research interests and the sparks we share when working together. We wish to encourage others to benefit from working together across the age divide. We want the ripple effect to carry on. No matter what age, we sometimes need someone's nudge to face the sun, plant hope, clear out the weeds or cultivate mutual resilience.

Stephanie Wickens aspires to be a lifelong creator of art that makes people smile. She is a graduate of the Health Studies and Gerontology program at McMaster University and the Independent Studies and Foundation Studies programs at Dundas Valley School of Art. Stephanie uses her creativity as a means of exploring, understanding and sharing her imagination, dreams and life experiences. She is an advocate for creativity at all ages and for intergenerational community arts programming to promote compassion, inclusivity and resilience. Her other interests include cultivating and arranging flowers, collecting family recipes and vintage cookbooks, and trying to perfect her pie and cookie baking skills. Stephanie is beyond grateful to Ellen Ryan for always nudging her to face the sun and helping to clear the weeds.

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Ellen Ryan is Professor Emerita at McMaster University and leader of Hamilton Aging in Community. She fosters resilient aging in her work with HAC and in her creative expression through memoir, poetry and photography. Throughout her working and volunteering years, she has enjoyed connecting young people with older adults for their mutual benefit. Collaborating with Stephanie has been a source of inspiration, accomplishment and joy. ryaneb@mcmaster.ca