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The Stone Angel Speaks: Older Women's Voices in Prose and Poetry

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In this article, we pay attention to the voices of older women, both as writers and as fictional characters, and listen to the stories they tell about aging and about their lives. As Canadians transplanted from the United States, we focus on Canadian writers but also include some Americans; we look at published authors, women writing and talking around their kitchen tables, and women in longterm care. We hope to show how storytelling by the older woman—the crone, the elder—can enhance her presence in the world and let her share her wisdom with future generations.

KEYWORDS *narrative, writing, Canadian literature, older women, prose, poetry, identity*

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. 97).

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The crone, or elder, asks us to consider the meaning and value of women in the third stage of life, after the roles of maiden and mother: this is when a woman can begin to nurture her community in a new way. (We wish to emphasize that ‘mother’ refers to a middle stage of life when a woman is active in her community through work and other roles, not necessarily as a biological mother).

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. In almost every culture, ‘Grandmother’s stories’ are beloved, treasured, and passed down through generations.

How Stories Create Meaning

Stories, like grandmothers themselves, can be nourishing and supportive. Gail Sher, Zen Buddhist writer, teacher and psychotherapist, 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 lives both inside us and outside in the wider world of space and time.

Although the world is always changing, stories do create pattern and order within the chaos. This is true for ancient cultural myths, for modern fiction and poetry, and for our own personal and family stories. It is not a scientific, rational order, but the order of story itself: “story-truth” in the words of writer Tim O’Brien (1990, pp. 203–204). 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, says succinctly, “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2003, p. 2 and *passim*).

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. We can 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 and retell it in their own ways.

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, finally, this “force field of love” that gives meaning to our stories, both personal and mythic.

“Old Grandma” (in Silko’s words) is a generous giver of stories. A kind of caricature or mirror-image of this nurturing crone/wise woman is the wicked witch. On one hand, the witch embodies the devouring aspects of the goddess/mother, who can hate, enchant, and destroy her children with magic powers; these qualities have an emotional truth. She does not tell stories; she casts spells, eats us up, or turns us to stone! On the other hand, the witch may also represent a slandered version of the wise woman and healer, demonized by patriarchal forces, both religious and secular. In stories, the witch (as devouring mother) often pushes the heroine/young girl into becoming stronger, smarter, and more empowered as a woman. Thus, she is a crucial part of the story’s development, not just an obstacle or symbol of wickedness. In this article, we focus on the more positive aspects of the older woman in stories and poetry; we hope to further explore the witch’s *persona* in future work.

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.

A patchwork quilt, like a story, brings together diverse elements, creating a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. The first author, Jaffe (2001), has written 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.” (un-numbered page). She notes that writers, like quilters, “hope to take our lives into our own hands.” Similarly, Canadian writers Carol Shields and Marjorie Anderson (2001, 2003) used the image of stitching in the titles of their women’s anthologies *Dropped Threads* and *Dropped Threads 2*.

The spider spinning her web is another image that describes creativity and story-making. Some southwestern U.S. Native mythologies, like those of the Keres people, tell the way 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 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).

Even the modern term “World Wide Web” uses the image of webs and spinning to show how we connect our thoughts at lightning-quick speed in virtual reality.

LITERATURE: FICTION, MEMOIR, 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 their imaginative creation of characters (human, animal, and other) and the places they inhabit.

We would like to look closely at one memorable fictional portrait of an older woman. In her novel, *The Stone Angel* (1964), Margaret Laurence, a respected Canadian novelist (1926–1986), created an archetypal story of a ninety-year-old woman, Hagar Shipley.

In *The Manawaka World of Margaret Laurence*, Clara Thomas (1976, p. 60) writes that the character of Hagar is partly a joint tribute to Laurence’s “tough and terrifying” grandfather and her “beloved” stepmother. But Laurence moved beyond the personal to create a character with her own unique identity, with whom readers can empathize.

As she recalls the story of her life, Hagar says, “Now I am rampant with memory” (p. 5), 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 dissembles, 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. “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. He sings the hymn that 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.

The stone angel of the title, a monument in the town cemetery, 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). She is also a symbol for Hagar herself: hard and stubborn, but also enduring. Hagar 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 fail to see; she also muses on the words we say and those we hold back.

Certain objects, like a shawl and a plaid-pin, become talismans in the story, and help Hagar travel from present to past and back. Objects in our own lives, even seemingly trivial ones, often serve this function, triggering unbidden memories.

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* (1974). By using this image of a junkyard or dump, Laurence does not disparage and demean memory itself or the things we dredge up there. On the contrary, she is saying that we 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, dusted off, and looked at in a new, more loving way.

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 nor as a holy terror (as her son Marvin calls her), 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)

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.

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, and highlights the need for us all to learn to see and listen to each other. It is even more remarkable that Laurence wrote this book when she herself was under forty!

Creativity and Healing through Writing

As people age, they face realistic expectations of losing the ability to function, as well as becoming more aware of death. These perceptions may lead to anxiety and 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 desire to live. We will now look at writing by women who are 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*. Using color and form, as well as words, Ridker conveys not only her experience of growing older but also her lifelong quest to find wholeness. Needing to continue being creative as she aged, she found new media—watercolour and pastel—when sculpting became too arduous. 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” (Ridker & Savage, 1996, 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 various colours to visualize the aging process, including “red for railing/against the rush of years” and “green and gold for pervasive hope” (p. 75).

Canadian poet P.K. Page (2002, p. 197) has written a poem which presents different views of the self, reminiscent of Ridker’s double-image of herself as a teenage girl and an old woman, as shown in this excerpt.

The Selves

Every other day I am an invalid.
Lie back among the pillows and white sheets
lackadaisical! O lackadaisical

Every other other day I am as fit
as planets circling

Somewhere in between the two,
a third wishes to speak,

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

Coming into eighty,
I slow my ship down
For a safe landing . . .

It has been a long voyage
Through time, travail and triumph,
Eighty years
Of learning what to be and how to become it.

(1994, p. 15)

Florida Scott-Maxwell, another U.S. writer describing 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).

Forgetting and Remembering: "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 progressive loss of memory through a form of Alzheimer's or similar dementia. 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. 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," Diana's longestranged brother (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 questions like, "How old am I? What colour did my hair used to be? Have we always lived together?" (p. 40).

There are, however, some activities that Constance has done for most of her life, like gardening and swimming, which she remembers in her body and still enjoys. She also has flashback memories, such as huddling in London bomb shelters during World War II and being trapped in rubble with her mother and sister until she was rescued.

At the same time, the novel works on another, more universal level, which gives it greater power. It shows how everyone depends on the people and things around them in everyday life to help remember both good and bad times. Further, all of us may 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 at random moments. Getting in touch with these memories, however, can make us more whole and more compassionate, and help us better

know ourselves and others. And we can turn these memories into stories we tell each other, stories which both keep the experiences alive and transform them into something more meaningful.

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 can hold onto the hope and trust of rescue, as long as we live. The novel celebrates the value of loving relationships, both with family and with partners, as a way to overcome our fears. It shows how these relationships can last into old age, and how they can even be restored and renewed as we get older and reflect on our lives.

Rule died in 2007, at age 71; she was a mentor to other Canadian writers, a champion of free speech, and a friend to children and adults in her community, even though arthritis limited her writing in later years.

Seeing and Hearing: The Role of Theatre

Theatre, film, and dance give another dimension to the creative experience. The actors' voices and movements help the words come to life—or speak without words—and the settings can embody the visual and tactile elements of life, in either a realistic or more expressionistic form. We will look at a few examples of aging, as shown in these various media.

Like Margaret Laurence in *The Stone Angel*, Nan Blackmon McCants, a Houston playwright, has been able to visualize old age before she reaches it herself. In her short play, *Midnight Mother* (2000), 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 when day breaks, 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 (at night, at least for now) to retain sparks of her intelligence and true self, even when her daughter thinks she has lost them completely. Although we can read the scene on the page, viewing a performance with the two characters in relationship allows us more insight into their experiences.

Drama can also be a way of sharing more personal stories. Hannah Blevins (2003) performed and videotaped a drama with dance and poetry based on the transcribed reminiscences of her grandfather about his life in Appalachia. Anne Basting (2003) has found a way to work with groups of people with dementia: she has gone beyond the traditional focus on linear, individual narratives by facilitating performances of imaginative stories based on memory fragments contributed by group members. Later, we will look at other ways in which group-work facilitates oral and written stories.

Films can bring dramatizations to a wider audience. The Canadian film, *The Company of Strangers* (1990), is a semi-documentary, semi-fictional drama, acted by ordinary women rather than professionals. In this movie, a group of older women are stranded when their tour bus breaks down near a deserted house by a lake. During the few days before they are rescued, they survive by living off the land and telling each other stories of their lives. The actors knew the basic scenario but improvised their conversations, using their own life-experiences, to give the film more spontaneity. Painter and writer Mary Meigs (1991), one of the women who participated in the film, wrote a book describing this experience as “a happening in which strangers become company.” The women, she says, “stepped out of time and logic into a magic space where old women have room to exist” (pp. 9–10). The strangers did indeed become a close group during the filming.

Another, more recent cinematic example is the Canadian film *Away From Her* (2006), directed by Sarah Polley and adapted by her from Alice Munro's 1999 short story, “The Bear Comes Over the Mountain.” Julie Christie portrays a woman moving into Alzheimer's disease; the film shows the illness's devastating effects on her, her husband, and the people around them—and the grace of love which the couple ultimately salvage. The technique of film helps us empathize with the various characters. We also see how the settings—nature, family home, nursing home—help tell the story.

FAMILY STORIES

We now turn from works of literature to the telling and writing of family stories. In daily life, people are apt to tell stories during conversations, often while engaged in a familiar activity. Furthermore, in almost every social gathering, talk turns to growing up and the memories of childhood stories. Sometimes families share these remembered stories around the holiday dinner table, with many voices chiming in their own versions. Various people in the family may each have their own memories of a particular incident or event; it is important to understand that all these memories are true (at least for the teller) and add to the composite picture of the family's history.

Looking at family photographs is a helpful way to elicit storytelling and to learn details about people and places from older relatives. Family members may also set up a special occasion to record stories, perhaps using a tape recorder or video camera as well as pen and paper.

Communicating and recording one's life story offer older adults many benefits: better 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, the second author (Ryan, Pearce, Anas, & Norris, 2004; see also Ryan, Elliot, & Meredith, 1999; Ryan, Elliot, & Anas, 2000) recruited letters, stories, poems, and memory pieces by grandparents to grandchildren, and grandchildren to grandparents, all providing rich and moving material. Here are two excerpts of writing by grandmothers, sharing their views of life:

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 (Wood, 1999, p. 9).

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 . . . a loving family helps create the basic framework, but . . . the windows are constructed of your life's experience.

(Dickey, 1999, p. 80)

Grandparents' stories are often 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, wood-working, and similar kinds of work are communal activities in which stories emerge, but in which the focus is not on the story itself.

One of Ryan'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 passage illustrates how storytelling emerged while a young girl helped her grandmother bake bread.

"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 . . .

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

(Continenza, 1999, p. 162)

Grandmothers: Stories and Memories

In a recent book, *Our Grandmothers, Ourselves: Reflections of Canadian Women* (Valle, 1999), women from almost 20 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.

Jaffe has written and published several poems about her family members. In this excerpt from "Roots," about her maternal great-grandmother, Mary, she reflects not only on her memories of Mary, but also on other women in the family.

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 hothouse plants,

fragile as greenhouses . . .
yet they too have survived, as women do . . .

(2002, p. 16)

Years later, she wrote about Mary's daughter, her grandmother Rose, just before Rose died at age 93, using the "rose" as a metaphor for her grandmother's beauty and strength, and seeing herself again as a child.

Rose, bloom of my childhood . . .
I remember
your rose-painted nails
and nestling in your feathery bed
when I slept over . . .

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 . . .

(2002, pp. 64–65)

Jaffe believes that the specific details in poems like these are important to the writer, and also help readers remember the small details of their own lives. Poems also allow us to talk to relatives who are no longer alive, but live on in our mind's eye.

Lil Blume, a writer and teacher living in Toronto, notes: "Stories passed from one generation to the next solidify a sense of belonging, because they carry the values, culture, and unique mythology of that family. They give us roots, and also help us move out into the world." She adds that these memories help people recognize and honor courage, kindness, and love, and fit their personal and family stories into cultural and world history (2003, personal communication). Blume says that it is important to write down or record these stories for the benefit of a wider audience existing both in space (relatives living far away) and in time (future generations). (See also Ryan et al., 2004.)

"Too Hard to Talk About"

Pennebaker (1990) and his colleagues document many therapeutic benefits that result from writing about important, even traumatic, life events and sharing these memories with others (see also Smyth & Pennebaker, 1999). They suggest that the process of writing, even without sharing the story with others, can help the writer digest these events.

Stories, however, 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 (including affairs, bankruptcy, and mental illness) or because the person or family has been caught up in terrifying world events, such as the Holocaust and other tortures. 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. No one can force the telling of a story. Sometimes it 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. Each person needs to choose when—or whether—to open the door on past experience.

FACILITATED LIFE STORY WRITING

Within gerontology, the importance of life review and telling stories of our lives has become a central tenet of notions of lifespan development (Kenyon, Clark, & deVries, 2001; Pasupathi, 2001; Webster & Haight, 2002). Many older adults 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 historical information. Other individuals, especially women, choose to form a supportive group of peers. Still others seek the help of group leaders and educational resources (Birren & Cochran, 2001; Coberly, McCormick, & Updike, 2005; Ray, 2000).

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. Ryan and colleagues have 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 (Hagens, Beaman, & Ryan, 2003; Hagens, Cosentino, & Ryan, 2006; Ryan, 2006; Ryan, Bannister, & Anas, 2008; Ryan, Spykerman, & Anas, 2005).

Reminiscence groups and activities are frequently a regular part of activity programming in day centers and long-term care facilities (e.g., Thorsheim & Roberts, 2000). The techniques described in *Memory Board* (i.e., the slate with a list of activities and the gentle invitation "I'd like to remember something for you.") could be used in groups or individually to elicit memories.

The work of Ryan and colleagues 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 are two ways of facilitating meaningful conversation and reminiscence for older adults, including those with cognitive impairment (Hagens et al., 2003,

2006). 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 1940s hat box or a fishing tackle box. Family members can supply material for the box if the older person cannot do this for herself; photos or downloaded images can be substituted for large or unavailable objects. The objects themselves can make a person feel more at home in a residential setting, and can stimulate conversations with relatives and with caregivers. The writings, especially if incorporating the person's specific words, can then elicit familiar stories, whose new telling might be revealing to both teller and listener.

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; see also Killick & Allan, 2001, and 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!

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!").

The opportunity for translation is a special advantage of written stories over oral storytelling. Older people born in other countries can record early memories in their mother tongue and still share their story with

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 finds an older Chinese man to act as translator. When she reads his translation, she learns about her mother's early life in China and the unexpressed truths of her mother's heart. This is profoundly healing for both mother and daughter in the present. As well, moved by the story and by the mother's personality, the translator is able to talk intimately about her life with the woman whose mind is failing—an added benefit!

These various aspects of facilitated writing can enrich the lives of people who are aging or have dementia and/or other disabilities, and can also improve their relationships with their families and caregivers.

CONCLUSION

We have looked at the ways—in literature, in daily life, and in facilitated settings—in which older women can find and tell their stories. When they exchange stories with each other and with younger generations in this “magic space” (in Mary Meigs' apt words), both teller and listener can experience enhanced empathy, increased knowledge, and greater opportunity to find connections and meaning in life. The stories are like ripples in a pond. As we have noted, they can be told again and again in different settings, taking on deeper meanings and more resonance with each telling, whether the listener has heard them many times before or this is the first occasion.

In her last novel, *The Diviners*, Margaret Laurence (1974) used the phrase “memory bank movies” to describe the images from which people create their stories. In this article, we have explored the importance of story in creating and compounding—with high interest!—older women's “memory banks,” to enrich their own lives, preserve the past, make links in the present, and leave an enduring and ever-growing legacy to future generations.

We close with a poem written expressly for this article, borrowing and augmenting the ‘memory bank’ image and further defining our concept of storytelling and active listening. This is how 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, c. 2008)

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