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THE SERVICE LEARNING EXPERIENCE:
HOW STORYTELLING EVOLVES IN PEOPLE WITH ALZHEIMER'S AND
DEMENTIA AND WHY THIS IS IMPORTANT TO THE CREATIVE
WRITING STUDENT AND THE COMMUNITY

by

ALICE M. SPICER

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the Honors in the Major Program in Creative Writing
in the College of Arts and Humanities
and in The Burnett Honors College
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

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Thesis Chair: Terry Thaxton

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ABSTRACT

All meaningful communication is a form of storytelling, according to Walter Fisher, who introduced the narrative paradigm to communication theory, and storytelling is universal across cultures and time as the manner in which people comprehend life. Storytelling is also a creative form of art. This interdisciplinary, multimedia work will explore the creative use of non-traditional storytelling to gather information about how creativity evolves in people with Alzheimer's and dementia and why this is important to both academia and the community.

Currently, there is a lot of research available about the debilitating affects of memory loss, but there is very little research available about retained abilities. Perhaps, just as the blind significantly outperform the sighted in tactile experiments, there are some forms of creativity in storytelling in which people with Alzheimer's and dementia may demonstrate more ability than their fully cognizant peers. My goal is to contribute to a small but growing effort to explore "memory loss as [...] more than just memory loss" (Dr. Anne Bastings).

DEDICATIONS

This work is dedicated to storytellers and to my grandfather, Fred Wexel.

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It has been my honor to work with Professor Terry Thaxton, “sister of the page,” mentor, and a source of creative inspiration for this thesis. I would also like to thank the other members of my thesis committee, Dr. Jocelyn Bartkevicius and Adam Lenz.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	1
CHAPTER ONE: Somebody Might Be Important in There.....	3
CHAPTER TWO: I Don't Know Where I Live and How I Can Go Home	12
CHAPTER THREE: The Baby's Name is Floyd.....	20
CHAPTER FOUR: The Girl Does More Than Those Kind of Hats.....	25
CHAPTER FIVE: Aren't You Ashamed of Killing an Animal Like That?	31
CHAPTER SIX: The Wrong Way Home.....	35
CHAPTER SEVEN: Blood on His Sword	40
CHAPTER EIGHT: The Arrival	43
CHAPTER NINE: Chit-Chat, Stories, and Musings.....	48
CHAPTER TEN: Bad Habits Versus Good Habits.....	56
CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Painted Lady	59
CHAPTER TWELVE: The Wind Took Them Apart.....	66
CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Them Singin' Bones	69
CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Protector.....	73
CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The 2011 Service-Learning Showcase	77
CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Hunting for a Title.....	79
CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Costume Party	85
CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Gangsters in Chicago	87
CHAPTER NINETEEN: Looking for the Reference Point.....	90
CHAPTER TWENTY: People or Targets.....	97

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: They All Settled It, Didn't They?	102
CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: A Cat and a Fish	105
CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Being Thoughtful and Considerate	108
CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Alfie	113
CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Music is the Best Medicine.....	120
CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: What Is Creativity?	123
CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: Peek-A-Boo	125
CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: Is Anyone Listening?.....	132
APPENDIX	140
REFERENCES.....	141

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Somebody Might Be Important In There	5
Figure 2: I Don't Know Where I Live And How I Can Go Home	13
Figure 3: The Arrival.....	46
Figure 4: Cover.....	49
Figure 5: The Painted Lady	63
Figure 6: The Protector	74
Figure 7: Service Learning Showcase.....	78
Figure 8: Hunting for a Title	80
Figure 9: Hunting for a Title, a Storyteller's Sketch.....	81
Figure 10: Costume Party	86
Figure 11: Alfie.....	114

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is universal. Across cultures and time, storytelling is the manner in which people comprehend life. Definitions of creativity vary: the ability to transcend traditional ideas, rules, patterns, relationships, or the like; the ability to create meaningful new ideas, forms, methods, or interpretations; or the ability to use originality, progressiveness, or imagination.

In this thesis I explore my process of working with persons with Alzheimer's and dementia in storytelling workshops. My mentor for this project, Professor Terry Thaxton, began offering "storytelling workshops" in August of 2009 at Emeritus, an assisted living facility near our university, modeling them after *TimeSlips*, a program started by Anne Basting at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. Basting's work and her latest book, *Forget Memory*, have inspired many artists who work with people with memory loss to focus on imagination, not memory. We bring in a picture, ask open-ended questions, and guide the residents toward telling a story about the picture

My goal in writing this thesis is to contribute to a small but growing effort to explore "memory loss as [...] more than just memory loss" (Anne Bastings) so that a broad audience of creative thinkers in gerontology, linguistics, neurology, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and of course, arts and humanities might recognize the value of further research into creativity as a retained ability in people with Alzheimer's and dementia.

I began working with my forgetful friends as part of a Service-Learning (SL) option in one of my first creative writing classes at the University of Central Florida in Spring 2011. SL proved to be so valuable to me that I decided to continue my service project after I stopped

receiving course credit. I continued at Emeritus for two years. During the first semester, I worked with one of my classmates, Kyle. Once a week we went to Emeritus and worked with a group of residents with Alzheimer's and dementia. Another classmate, Tom, also worked at Emeritus, but with the residents in the Assisted Living unit. In the Spring of 2012, Professor Thaxton asked me to mentor Stella who wanted to work with Alzheimer's and dementia residents for her SL project, and then in Fall 2012 I worked with another SL student, Lana.

During my first few months of service-learning, I focused on the emotional, philosophical, scientific, and other aspects of creativity, and I failed to notice the small things that created a sense of place or conveyed the individual preferences and habits that the participants brought to the storytelling workshop.

This multimedia work—which includes text, images, and video—explores the creative use of non-traditional storytelling to gather information about how creativity evolves in people with Alzheimer's and dementia and why this is important to both academia and the community. Currently, there is a great deal of research available about the debilitating effects of memory loss, but very little available about retained abilities. Perhaps, just as the blind significantly outperform the sighted in tactile experiments, there are some forms of creativity in storytelling in which people with Alzheimer's and dementia may demonstrate more ability than their fully cognizant peers.

My grandfather experienced progressive dementia through his final years as a side effect of seizures. How helpful it would have been to me, one of his caregivers, if I had known then what I know now. I missed out on the opportunity to communicate with him, to understand how he perceived the world around him. I didn't know he was still there.

CHAPTER ONE: Somebody Might Be Important in There

On the wall, beside the locked door, there is an institutional-looking sign in all capital letters that, by appearance alone, may as well have said JANITOR'S CLOSET. It says PLEASE RING BELL FOR ENTRY INTO OUR NEIGHBORHOOD. The memory care unit must be secure because many of the residents believe they are simply lost or delayed somehow and will inevitably wander off, searching for people and places that are more familiar. Although the segregation of these residents may demonstrate our concern for their safety, it also serves as a metaphor for how we "lock" them out of our own minds—as a society—how we don't have to see them if they're locked away. Do we considered them former people? As I wait for someone to open the "neighborhood" door, I am preoccupied with these concerns. I imagine myself kicking the door in and inviting the whole world to join us in our storytelling workshop.

Kyle, my service-learning partner, offers me a squirt of antibacterial lotion. He rubs his hands together briskly and rings the doorbell again. We are greeted first by a busy caregiver and then by Martha, a thin, worried-looking woman, who asks me in a high-pitched cartoonish voice, "Do you know the way to Apopka, where I live?"

I don't explain that she no longer lives in Apopka, that this is her home now. "Yes, I know how to get to Apopka," I reply.

"Will you drive me to Apopka? I can give you gas money." She searches through an oversized purse full of props, an empty wallet, an out-of-date pocket calendar, pictures of people she no longer recognizes, and lipstick she no longer wears. Were it not for the storytelling workshop, all that I would know about Martha is that she's the woman who wants to go home. I

ask her if we can continue our conversation after the workshop, and she agrees. During the workshop, Martha will forget all about going to Apopka.

I've brought a handful of identical pictures of a pile of rocks, and one of the rocks has a face Photoshopped on it. I'll be using the pictures as a storytelling prompt. I've also brought a small bag of smooth river rocks, similar to the rocks in the picture. There are so many participants; we decide to create two separate groups. I hand each storyteller a picture and empty the bag of rocks in the middle of the table. I bring some rocks and photos to Kyle's table as well.



Figure 1: Somebody Might Be Important In There

“There might be somebody important in there,” says Gretta, who used to be a military wife and schoolteacher. Her eyes are very small, sandwiched between sagging lids and high cheekbones. She complains about poor eyesight yet leaves her glasses hanging around her neck.

I’m terribly impressed with the opening line of the story. I haven’t even explained what this workshop is about yet, and the story already has a beginning. “His name is Phillip Abraham,” adds Martha. “I was with them. I know.

I explain who I am and why I’m there, but the workshop participants don’t pay much attention. Tom, who works with lucid residents in the same facility, gives a similar introduction in the workshops he facilitates. I wonder if they are just as eager about getting the story started as the residents in the memory care unit.

“He is the moon or maybe he is not the moon,” says Ruby. Her voice is almost as soft as a whisper. I’m glad I’m sitting next to Ruby, because I can hear what she’s saying despite the nursing home noise. The storytellers seem to gravitate toward storytelling from an omniscient point of view, weaving their way in and out of the main character’s thoughts. They even take the omniscient point of view a step further, implying that the main character is interacting with the authors. Ruby compares her picture to Martha’s and sees that they are the same. “He’s tricking us,” she says.

“He’s thinking about women, and he wants happiness. He is not smiling because he can’t find his smile. It’s because of the powerhouse.”

I wonder about this powerhouse. Somehow the word conjures up images of sweat, dirt, heavy metal beams hanging from large cranes, people pushing and shoving each other, a man in

a business suit with a wicked, oppressive smile. I ask, “What will Phillip Abraham do about the powerhouse?”

Dolly, who has been patiently waiting for her turn to talk, speaks for Phillip Abraham. “‘Just stay to one side,’ he says, ‘don’t clash.’ He’s not happy because they clash. That’s what they do in the powerhouse. They clash.” Dolly seems annoyed, and her New York City accent adds to this impression. Apparently we are in agreement about the nature of the powerhouse.

I forget about the rocks in the middle of the table until Pat tastes one. I try not to draw too much attention as I tell her it isn’t food. I don’t want to embarrass her. She forms a little cup with one wrinkled hand, drops the rock in the center, and studies it thoughtfully.

Barbara is passing through the room. She pauses to ask, “What is this all about? What are you doing here with all these rocks?” I tell her we are writing a story and ask her if she’d like to join us. “I don’t have time for that nonsense,” she says as she shuffles away quickly. As she disappears down the hall, she mutters disapproval.

The storytellers are very interested in rocks. Some of them are putting the rocks together in purposeful little groups, like little rock-people gathering to socialize. “What happens next?” I ask.

“Now, he’s going to impress them with his thoughts. That’s how all the other rocks got there. With thoughts,” Gretta says, squinting her tiny eyes until they almost disappear. “These rocks don’t have faces because they are all nervous. All of them.”

Another storyteller adds, “They are nervous because they don’t know what he is thinking.”

“What is he thinking?” I ask. Phillip Abraham is coming to life as the main character.

“Maybe something good or bad. They can’t decide, because they don’t know his thoughts,” says Greta.

Soft-spoken Ruby suggests, “He could be thinking about another woman.”

“He is thinking about another woman,” Greta agrees, “and he can’t make up his mind.”

Ruby points to the rock in Pat’s hand and says, “Phillip Abraham doesn’t know how she thinks.” The rock in Pat’s hand is now a nameless female character in our story. Pat smiles proudly. She doesn’t say much. She hasn’t said anything, yet, but now she is officially a workshop participant. She is the keeper of the mysterious “other woman,” the object of Phillip Abraham’s angst. Pat nestles the rock among one of the little social groups.

Ruby understands and interprets Pat’s gesture. She informs the other storytellers that the other-woman-rock, “is with her family.”

Dolly’s thoughts have turned from the powerhouse to Phillip Abraham’s predicament. “He doesn’t have very many friends,” Dolly says, “because he can’t get around. He doesn’t have any of these.” She waves her hands around. This makes sense in a world of imagination. Rocks have no appendages. No wonder they can’t get around. Dolly employs the literary technique objective correlative, constructing a situation of external facts as a formula to evoke sympathy for poor, lonely, helpless Phillip Abraham.

Greta agrees with Dolly but finds a way for Phillip Abraham to break free from Dolly’s construct. As a former teacher, her voice carries, “After all, he can’t do much stuck in that box. That’s why he put wheels on the box. Now he can go get some friends. That’s why.” Greta’s excitement disappears quickly as she creates a new construct for Phillip Abraham, this time an internal one. The volume of her voice drops dramatically. “But he can’t make up his mind about

friends; he doesn't know whether to be serious or not. That's why he has no friends. He can't make up his mind." She presses the picture against her chest, as if to comfort Phillip Abraham. "If I could help him, I would talk to him and find out what the problem is. But I can't talk to him, so I don't know. I am not very good at this. I told you I am not very good at this."

I reassure Gretta that she is better at storytelling than she believes, and I remind her that it's just a story, because she seems to be seriously worried for the image on the paper.

Martha snatches a rock, holds it up for all the storytellers to see, and announces in her high-pitched voice, "This is his one friend. That's the way he wants it. He doesn't know how to relate to people. That is why he has just one friend."

"His one friend is a woman," Ruby says slyly. The storytellers forgot all about Ruby's "other woman" idea, but Ruby finds a way to reintroduce it. "She is medium-good-looking compared to him," Ruby adds.

"What should we call his friend?" I ask.

"His friend is William," Martha says, forgetting that Phillip Abraham's friend is supposed to be female.

"Is this a woman?" she asks Ruby.

Martha nods. "If William is a woman," Martha explains, "we will call her Betty."

The workshop continues for almost an hour. I ask, "How should the story end?"

"We are getting close to the end, but that is not the end," one storyteller says. They all nod in agreement, adding little comments about why the story can't possibly end yet.

"Not good."

"Left out."

“Behind.”

“This is hard.”

“I wish I could remember.”

We sit in solemn silence for at least thirty seconds. I don’t dare hurry them along, because this story has become very, very important to them.

Suddenly Gretta announces, “He is going to make up his mind now! That’s better!” The story flows from Gretta as if she’s sprung a creative leak. “He is going to get married. Not at that high-up diner with all those people. It’s too hot there. And it is too high up.”

Dolly agrees, “And all those people saying and telling the hmmmmmm. We will find our way. This is good. It’s not like when we…” Dolly makes a sleepy, disinterested face to accompany her “hmmmmmmmm” sound effect.

I understand what Dolly’s really trying to say. Some of the storytellers have slept through the entire workshop. She’s happy that she’s not tired, disinterested, or disengaged at the moment and that she feels a sense of camaraderie with the other storytellers. Making eye contact with each waking person at the table, Dolly smiles and says, “Now we really did this one.” She makes a fist and punches her other open hand for emphasis. “We did this!”

Gretta is still gushing, but she’s somehow managed to contain herself long enough for Dolly to make her point. Now that Dolly’s done, Gretta continues where she left off, “I can tell you about this wedding. His friend did the wedding decorating for him. It is a medium size wedding. He is supposed to have a big wedding, but his friends won’t go because they say he should have made a better choice. He could have made a better choice than that.”

I type as fast as I can, trying to record every word Gretta says.

“Somebody gave them a hard time. Religion gave them a hard time. Some of this story is true. It’s true. You are a mind reader.”

CHAPTER TWO: I Don't Know Where I Live And How I Can Go Home

Communication is a basic human need. People who have Alzheimer's and dementia experience difficulty in communication. Sometimes they get stuck in a world of missing car keys, and they need help, not to find their keys, but to find themselves. Most of the roles they have filled throughout their lives no longer exist in their minds. In lucid moments, if they happen to remember something about themselves, the frame of reference is usually past tense, not "I am a schoolteacher," but "I used to be a schoolteacher." Since starting storytelling workshops, I've begun to read as much as I can about Alzheimer's and this method of using imagination. I learn from Anne Basting at the UW-Milwaukee that storytelling workshops enable participants to self-identify as "storyteller" and "re-open avenues for meaningful expression." The arts are especially important for people with Alzheimer's and dementia to reclaim their identities and see themselves as someone other than a victim of a devastating disease.

Today's storytelling prompt is a picture of one of my ancestors, Marguerite Petersen, an art major at Cooper Union School of Art. She dropped out of school and became a bank teller.



Figure 2: I Don't Know Where I Live And How I Can Go Home

“It’s lost,” Earnestine-the-storyteller says. Hers is the first line of the story. “Wonder if she is in here, was in there and just left. I would know cause I am a mother.”

I don’t fully understand what Earnestine means, but I type her every word.

“If you were that then you would be something like that.”

Another storyteller chimes in, “He is in the dead post. I think it’s a good relationship. It’s good when these kinds of people have something like that these people. If you were outside then you would go in and go into constellation inside there, and they’d and wide things open. If you see one of them then you can just take them. Acting like that anyway. You can almost answer.”

“You can see how cheap he is that’s him and that’s her then.”

“She really has thick arms. I don’t think she is a young chicken.”

“It looks like he’s been doing something because he is in love style.”

The storytellers are not taking turns like they did before. They are all talking at once, and although they are seated together around a medium size dining table, they do not seem to even be aware of one another or of me. There is no cohesiveness. Each participant is in his or her own story. I’m glad that today Kyle and I are both transcribing, because it is difficult to catch everything they say.

The strange, broken dynamic may have something to do with the obvious discomfort of a new volunteer, Sandra, a sharp and classy woman who appears to be in her mid sixties. Sandra is here to observe and help and decide whether she would rather work in the memory care unit or with the other residents. I suspect she won’t be coming back to the memory care unit. In the weeks that follow, my suspicions prove to be accurate.

I note that the line, “wide things open,” seems like a fitting description for the purpose of an art school. Hopefully our exercise in creativity will help “wide things open” for the storytellers. (Note 1)

“If you look at him, then how she looks at him, looks like he is saying ‘yes, yes, yes, yes,’ but he isn’t.”

“He’s looks kind of dirty.”

“That’s what she does everyday. Most of the people down there are that way.”

“I don’t think he is anyone’s husband because he is green. If my husband was green I would shoot him. I would go to jail. I wouldn’t be involved with him.”

I wonder how Marguerite Petersen’s husband felt about her dropping out of art school to become a bank teller. Is the sculpture a likeness of Marguerite’s husband? Was he a melancholy “green” because of their financial troubles? As a bread-winning male in an early twentieth century society, did he feel like a failure? Or was he green with envy that his wife seemed to lead such a life of leisure in art school? Maybe he pressured her to give up on her dreams.

I’m pulled from my reverie when I notice how uncomfortable Sandra, the new volunteer, seems to be. Her arms are tightly folded, her legs are crossed, and her back is rigidly pressed against the back of the chair. Everything about her body language indicates that she would rather be somewhere else. She is having a hard time digesting all the disjointed and seemingly nonsensical ideas, more like verbal confetti than a narrative. The workshop is probably nothing like she’d imagined it would be. My service-learning partner, Kyle, shakes his head, rolls his eyes, and keeps typing, ignoring Sandra and the chaos. He’s on a mission to record every word.

I attempt to bring unity to the discussion by asking, “How does she know him?” Never mind that he’s a piece of clay. To the storytellers, he is a real man.

“Might be a sister,” Gretta says.

“What should we call her?” I ask.

“I haven’t thought about a name. There are about a million of them.”

“It doesn’t look like its natural.”

“It’s just a table. It’s just a little table they use in a little room or a sitting room.”

“I know that I can’t see that good.”

The storytellers are back to interrupting one another again. They seem to have forgotten that we are writing a story, even though I have explained several times what we are doing. Instead of becoming annoyed, I choose to celebrate the chaos. Everyone is engaged and participating. No one is asleep. This feels right.

“She’s cleaning out his ears.”

“I don’t know why they would make him green.”

“He looks like he is a child. It’s not a child but it’s a younger man. I don’t know; I’m not a good judge of character.”

The general impression society seems to have about people with Alzheimer's and dementia is that they ramble aimlessly, as if their minds are like malfunctioning computer speech programs just making noise. Self-expression cannot happen independently of a thinking self. The human being is still in there, somewhere. In this moment, the uncomfortable volunteer, Sandra, is to me a microcosm of society, and the storytellers seem to be playing the stereotypical roles of people with Alzheimer’s and dementia. How is it that just one week ago, workshop

participants were so much more aware of one another, working together to create a fantastic narrative?

“She must be about forty-five. She’s fat isn’t she? It’s bare underneath there.”

“He probably has no grand-kids yet.”

“He’s got something but I don’t know what I don’t like that color. It should be flesh color.”

“His mouth is in good vocation. Anybody over here, that is what they do. Look under his chin.”

All the chatter comes to an abrupt end when Beatrice says, “I don’t know where I live and how I can go home.” Her lonely, vulnerable confession seems to give the storytellers a sense of community. It is a turning point in the workshop. The storytellers now pay attention to one another and to the story itself. We have experienced a breakthrough.

“We’ll call her Georgette Paley,” Gretta says. “She is painting. Or she is cleaning his ear. She seems to be interested in what she is doing. She needs something at a service station, maybe gas.” Gretta looks at the other participants and asks, “What do you think?” Gretta the former school-teacher has taken over my role as a storytelling workshop facilitator. I am obliged to let her lead while I type.

“If I could only think,” Beatrice says. Beatrice is having a bad day.

“Are we going to see her?” Gretta asks.

“Yes,” says Pat.

I prefer to ask open-ended questions, to help invite more dialogue from the storytellers. When I ask Pat open-ended questions, her usual reply is, “I don’t know.” Gretta-as-facilitator

has helped me discover something about Pat, that she is comfortable with yes or no questions. I tuck this information in the back of my mind for future reference.

“I want to ask her something — if she knows me,” Beatrice says. “I don’t know where I’m from. Maybe my family will be worried to death about me. Do you have any pictures of my friends? Surely my friend wouldn’t leave without trying to find me.”

Gretta points to the photo. “Ask her how she’s doing,” Gretta suggests to Beatrice.

Ruby thinks that Gretta is pointing to the man. She says, “We’ll call him George.”

Gretta looks a little confused. She’s probably wondering why Ruby thinks the lady in the picture is a man named George. I want to keep the flow of the narrative going, so I ask Ruby to tell us about George.

“He’s a scholar. He’s studied everything. He’s not young.” I can barely hear her and only understand about half of what she says.

“Where does he study?” I ask.

“He studies in Washington, about all the events of the world. She is touching him up, like a sculpture.”

Gretta doesn’t seem to be confused any more.

Beatrice says, “I don’t feel like talking.” But, apparently, she does, because she goes right on talking. “Is that me? No, that’s not me. She’s going to tell it loud. I don’t think she is going to go for that.”

According to Gretta, the woman in the picture won’t need to “tell it loud.” Gretta explains to Beatrice, “He’s got a hearing aid. You know damn well that could happen. It could happen to anybody. And he is going to register. When he gets three girls, then he will register;

because that's what you have to do when there's something in your ear. I told you..." Gretta realizes she has lost her train of thought. She incorporates this idea into the story by adding that George, our sculpted, green character, has now "lost his hearing aid."

Beatrice tries to be polite, but she's had enough storytelling for one day. She unlocks her wheelchair and backs away from the table slowly, saying, "I have to go to the other one. You can pick it up now. It's terrible. I love to."

Gretta responds, "I was unpacking my show... I don't know how the hell this happened. It's mysterious. I just laugh when I don't know how to say it. That's how it is."

The other storytellers nod in agreement.

CHAPTER THREE: The Baby's Name is Floyd

We meet a new storyteller today. Her name is Judy. She's very angry about being in a nursing home, and she wants to start trouble as a way of venting that frustration. One of the caregivers warns us about Judy's mood ahead of time and offers, "If things get really bad, just come get one of us." Kyle has a confident look on his face, but his ears have turned bright red, giving him away. He's worried about how today's workshop will go.

Sandra, the new volunteer, hasn't shown up for a few weeks in a row. Kyle asks about her, and I tell him that she must have decided to work with the other residents. He nods in unspoken agreement. I suspect that Kyle identifies with Sandra, but since he chose service-learning in the memory care unit for course credit, he doesn't have the luxury of shifting gears and going somewhere else. The residents in the memory care unit have warmed up to Kyle, especially Gretta, who has five sons. Perhaps Kyle reminds her of one of her boys. Kyle is fond of the residents as well, but his life is too full to continue facilitating workshops indefinitely. When this semester ends, I'll be on my own.

Today's storytelling prompt is a photo of a baby in the foreground, and in the background are some trees and a couple of out-of-focus adults, a man and woman. Kyle and I split into two workshop groups because we have a lot of storytellers today. Judy is part of my group.

"What should we call the baby?" I ask.

"The baby's name is Floyd," Judy says. Although she doesn't say it out loud, her tone adds, "Everybody knows that, you dumbass."

As I continue asking open-ended questions and the storytellers respond, Judy softens up. She says, “That’s my dad’s name, Floyd. Maybe the baby is related to my dad. They are strange to us because we give them names.” Judy uses a literary technique called hypallage, which is easier to explain by example than to define. In terms of proper cause and effect, one might assume that by naming something, it becomes more familiar and less strange. Judy creates an emotional antithesis by reversing cause and effect, implying that the authors know less about named characters than they do unnamed characters. Later, as I write the poem, “Passing Image,” Judy’s opinion influences my writing. I think about a man on his deathbed in the hospital, watching two strangers destined to spend the rest of their lives together meeting each other for the first time in a park across the street from the hospital. The dying man doesn’t know their names, but based on Judy’s reverse logic, they are not strangers to him. In fact, he knows more about them than they know about themselves.

Much of what I’ve read up to this point about people with Alzheimer’s and related dementias is written by caregivers, doctors, psychologists, or medical researchers, but I have yet to find a publication that is written by someone in mid to late stages of Alzheimer’s or related dementias. Why aren’t there any publications written by people like the storytellers with whom I work? Careful reflection upon the concepts set forth by people with Alzheimer’s and related dementias has been beneficial to me, not only as a person, but as a writer. It saddens me to know that most people are completely unaware of their unique insights.

In required reading for one of my courses, Natalie Goldberg’s book, *Writing Down the Bones: Feeling the Writer Within*, Goldberg explains, “Forget yourself. Disappear into everything you look at — a street, a glass of water, a cornfield. Everything you feel, become

totally that feeling, burn all of yourself with it.” (Note 2) Admittedly, when I first read these words, I had a hard time wrapping my brain around them. I try to “be” the glass of water. I try to “burn” myself with that glass of water. I might as well be trying to bend a spoon with my mind. It is not until I reflect upon Judy’s unique reversal of strange and familiar that Goldberg’s concept finally makes sense to me.

I write the poem, “Passing Image.”

Passing Image

The man is hungry and salivates
at the candy-like color of a limp blue balloon.

The woman wraps a thread around her finger as she dreams
of bearing a child. The string reminds her of DNA
until it ends there on her blue fingertip.

Branches dance briefly in the blue sky
and red leaves fall, covering the clay canvas.

Blowing, the man empties his lungs
through the tiny elastic breach —
from lifeless rubber to sky-blue globe.

Between two hospital window blinds, eyes in
a body shattered by glass and brick watch them.

At every cumulative score the medical intern
places a blue checkmark on his clipboard. The rubber
dispenser squirts antibacterial handshaking.

The bandage wrapped around the face divides at the eyes
and covers the nose. The gauze smells like blood and candy.

The black and white documentary gives life to the
box on the wall. A judge gavels and clunks
like a skeleton held together with duct tape.

The intern gets older after four minutes, stammers
apologies, silences the judge, leaves the room empty

except for the eyes watching the woman offering string.
Three steps. The man closes the distance between.
Secures the air in the blue balloon.
Lets go. It twirls in the gust.

They do not see. Library books and diary pages tie
them together, stony and fertile. The facts on the clipboard
decompose. The eyes close and the secrets behind them
go with the blue balloon.

I *become* the concept of DNA in the body of an infertile woman. Who am I? I'm a string that is supposed to be tied to a balloon, a string that should venture into the wide-open sky when the time is right. My journey ends here, tightly wrapped around a finger, cutting off the circulation, turning the finger blue.

The storytellers continue, "They are having a good day, and they brought something with them, but we don't know how they brought those things or where they are. And of course they brought food." That Judy becomes agitated again is evidence by the way she can't sit still.

"What kind of food?" I ask.

Judy leans forward in her chair and slides her photo-prompt picture across the table. "What kind of food?" she scoffs. "A baby." Judy uses the literary technique black humor, which is grotesque or morbid humor that is used to demonstrate the insensitivity of the world. She reminds me of the cannibalistic witch in the fairytale Hansel and Gretel. Judy's intention may be to shock the other storytellers, as some kind of strange punishment for cooperating with each other and with me. And that's when it hits me. She may be acting out, because she feels like an abandoned child in her new nursing home environment. Or perhaps I assume too much. After all, I'm not a professional geriatric psychologist, but in my experience, the storytellers *become* the story, expressing themselves through the decisions of the characters, the mood of the setting, and unexpected plot twists. . Regardless of Judy's intentions, the baby-as-food concept is now part of our story. I doubt very seriously that if I had facilitated a storytelling workshop with the residents outside of the memory care unit that they would have created such a dark and unexpected plot twist.

CHAPTER FOUR: The Girl Does More Than Those Kind of Hats

Our storytelling workshop space is also the dining room of the memory care unit. Usually, the room is empty except for tables and chairs that have been wiped clean on floors that have been swept. Today, the dining room is full of residents, some of whom I've never seen before. They are finishing an afternoon snack of peach cobbler with vanilla ice cream and coffee. Pat and Earnestine are folding napkins by the window. In the living room nearby, a news anchor describes the way people relate to one another in the world outside these walls, something about counter-revolutionary groups working to hinder Egypt's transition to democracy. Caregivers are washing dishes and cleaning up around those who have finished, one of them, a large, charismatic woman named Ethel, sings along with the radio. The small speakers of a boom box on the kitchen counter crackle when Whitney Houston hits her high notes. "I want to dance with somebody, with somebody who loves me," Ethel and Whitney sing. One of the caregivers is transporting medical equipment from a room at the end of a long hallway to a room at the end of another long hallway on the other side of the memory care unit. The wheels on her cart squeak in protest, and each time the cart makes the transition from carpet to hard floor to carpet, it clacks and groans like a little earthquake.

A resource guide called "The Arts and Dementia Care" suggests, "In selecting a space for the activity, remember that people with dementia need to be able to hear and concentrate. Often times this means finding a space away from blaring televisions or radios, or other activities that might be distracting. If your facility has no space other than a large common area, don't despair. We have observed and held arts activities in large common rooms where other activities are

taking place, and have found that they do work. Just be prepared for the fact that they will often include more interruptions and distractions than smaller, more dedicated spaces.” As I compare the reality of our workshop environment to the ideal space described in the resource guide, I determine that Kyle and I have picked the wrong week to try something new. We have brought two photos to use for storytelling prompts instead of one.

I flash Kyle a reassuring smile. We can do this. Being new to facilitating storytelling workshops in the memory care unit, I worry about whether I’m allowed to turn down the radio or the television blaring in the next room, and I’m too uncomfortable to ask the workers to put off their dishwashing until after the workshop. It also doesn’t occur to me until it’s too late to suggest to Kyle that we just go with one photo this week instead of two.

As we gather participants and prepare to begin the workshop, a red-haired woman named Dot, who has never participated before, joins us. She’s very hard of hearing, and with all the extra noise, she needs me to nearly shout my instructions. Kyle’s group has settled in, but several of them keep turning around every time I raise my voice for Dot’s sake. Gretta misunderstands what I’m saying to Dot and thinks that I’m telling her how to dress. Kyle thinks that Gretta means for her words to become part of the story. He types the complaints Gretta directs toward me, word for word.

“You can’t tell me how to dress. You’re bossing me around! That’s not nice,” Gretta shouts across the room. The storytellers in my group become anxious. “Why don’t you go someplace else?” Gretta continues. “Why don’t you come over here and take over, if that is what you want to do! I can just go back to class, if you are so noisy. Get off of my clothes!”

I ask my group to excuse me for a moment while I go make peace with Gretta. “I didn’t mean to upset you, Gretta,” I say in the most soothing tone I can muster.

“Sorry I didn’t see that there,” Gretta says. She forgives me, but she’s still angry. “This belongs to me, and you are so noisy, and you need to appreciate other people’s things.”

I apologize again.

“And I’m cold all the time,” she adds, for good measure.

One of the caregivers takes Gretta’s sweater from the back of Gretta’s wheelchair and drapes it over her shoulders, startling Gretta, who doesn’t know anyone is behind her. “Ya, that’s scary,” she tells me. “You’ve got to button down.”

I help Gretta with her sweater buttons, she goes on complaining, and Kyle just keeps typing. “Too many of them working on that field. She is messing them up for you.” Gretta points to Dot, who shouts everything she says so that she can hear her own voice. Gretta says, “Why don’t you get her out there and participate? She is the one being noisy.” Gretta holds up one of the photos we brought, a cat on a fence, and says, “And this is yours, and this is a rabbit.”

Over at the table where my group is sitting, Dot shouts again.

“I don’t want her in the house,” Gretta says. “It’s a good thing to know what is going on, because of those other customers. She’s a pain in the ass, if I you don’t mind my saying so. Why don’t you go over there with her instead of us? She is reading everything you do. Do you know what I would do? I would put test first. First. Then I would leave it, and put it back there.”

Gretta tries to give me her photo. “Do you want this one? It’s a mouse. It took that long.”

Barbara disapproves of storytelling workshops. She usually passes through the room, but today, she's decided to sit down at an empty table. With all the commotion, she can no longer contain her disapproval. She smacks her hands together and shouts at Gretta, "Smart aleck!"

This sends Gretta back into her bad mood. Gretta responds, "You are nosy as hell! You don't have any kids in school, and you don't know what you are doing." She looks at Kyle, who is still typing everything Gretta says. "There he is. Why don't you go someplace else! Why don't you go on!"

Barbara rushes out of the room in a huff.

"You are doing your job," Gretta reassures me. "That is the main thing. That's what they are. Everything."

Some of the people my group lose interest and go elsewhere. I did not intend to be gone for so long. James Brown sings, "I feel good. I knew that I would." The caregivers have finished cleaning up and are off doing whatever it is that they do during the storytelling workshop. I've had enough of distraction. I go turn down the television in the living room and turn off the radio.

By this time, Barbara has come back, and I'm surprised to see her sitting at the table with my group. It turns out that Barbara is a talented storyteller. She compares the photo of the cat to the other photo, a woman posed in front of a plain, green backdrop. The woman holds a book so that only her eyes and the top of her head are visible.

"She is trying to decide if she should catch the bird or let it go," Barbara says. She is staring. She can't see the cat. The cat is not there. She is looking at a book of drawings. She has a serious look on her face, because she can't read it. She is just pretending to read it. The book is

half way open, which means she must have started it some time ago. She has been there for a long time.”

I hadn’t noticed how far into the book the woman in the photo was. Barbara is observant. “What kind of book should we say this is?” I ask loud enough for Dot to hear.

“The book has pictures of fire,” Dot shouts. “There are pictures of animals. She already has a cat, so now she wants to see what a dog looks like.”

“Pussycat will go see the girl, maybe,” says Judy, who is in a much better mood than last week, despite the chaotic nature of this particular workshop.

“The bird is on the fence, trying to stay away from the cat,” says Barbara. “There’s some space in between. The bird is chirping. The cat hears the bird. In between the cat and the bird are fishing poles. It is just growing there, too stiff, too young, leftover from what was there before. The people are on a lakeshore. The cat belongs to them. It’s too well fed. That is why he hasn’t jumped the robin. He isn’t interested in eating it.”

Judy describes her point of view, “She knows she has a cat, but I don’t know if she knows this is taking place. The light is all around her. She doesn’t need it to read the book, she needs it to have her picture taken.”

“There’s more in the book than just watching a cat chase a bird,” Barbara adds.

Pat says the most I’ve ever heard her say at one time, “This is the cat-in-the-hat.” I feel a sense of accomplishment for Pat, that she is able to put her thoughts into words today. I want to give her a big hug and celebrate, but this would probably embarrass her. She doesn’t seem like the type of person who wants to be the center of attention.

“The bird can fly away, way faster than the cat can jump. That’s a big heavy cat. He is not going to be limber,” Barbara says.

Dot shouts, “The whole book goes together. She is scared. She sees something.”

For some reason, perhaps the volume of Dot’s voice, Barbara becomes very aggravated with the other storytellers. The remainder of the story belongs to Barbara, whose matter-of-fact tone serves as a warning to anyone who might dare interrupt her. “She’s not scared! There is no fright there at all! Just shadows on her forehead. She’s damn bored looking at that damn book and that damn cat. It’s just a textbook. A school book to hold up to her face. The book is exciting. If it was exciting, then the cat would be crouched down, ready to attack. But he’s not. He’s saying, ‘Get the hell out!’ He is too heavy and fat to catch it. He has nothing to do. The girl is just somebody they knew. They said, ‘Hold the book up and act like you are interested in a cat chasing a bird.’ She was just over there. They said, ‘Hey look at the cat.’ Then she picked up a book. I don’t know why she would pick up a book to look at the cat, if the cat is out the window. How can she see out the window when she is over there looking at a book?” Barbara sits back in her chair, spent. She’s breathing heavily.

I’m relieved that Kyle has put his computer away. He greets our group, breaking the tension. I thank the ladies for their time and tell them I’ll see them again next week. Our session only lasts forty-five minutes this week, but it feels much longer. This is the first storytelling session that I actually want to end.

I’ve learned firsthand why “The Arts and Dementia Care” resource book warns, “However much we may plan, the reality can prove far different from our imagination.”

CHAPTER FIVE: Aren't You Ashamed of Killing an Animal Like That?

In the introduction of an informative booklet by Anne Basting, *Art Care: The Story of How an Arts Program Can Transform Long Term Care*, under the heading “Who Should Read This Book,” there are some words of encouragement for people like Kyle and me. Basting writes, “If you are interested in working in long term care settings, this book can help prepare you for what to expect and how to work with staff, people with dementia, and their families.”

In the couple of months that we have been facilitating storytelling workshops, we have had very little interaction with the staff, and we have never met a family member. I want people to appreciate the efforts of the storytellers.

Along with Tom, Kyle and I are planning a celebration for the end of the semester. Tom, our classmate who is working with the residents who do not have Alzheimer's or dementia, is an accomplished pianist, and he will provide the entertainment. Barbara, the director of the memory care unit, says that she will prepare some refreshments. Friends and family members will finally have the opportunity to discover how creative their loved ones are. Caregivers will be curious about all of the excitement, and perhaps they will be able to carve out a few minutes from their busy schedules to socialize residents and their guests.

Tom and I make plans to print and bind the stories we are collecting, including the photos we use for storytelling prompts.

Today, I've brought a decorative plastic wolf head that I've borrowed from my son's bedroom wall and a photo of a wolf licking the face of a girl who is kneeling in the grass. As usual, Gretta doesn't hesitate to speak her mind. Starting the story, she says, “Aren't you

ashamed killing an animal like that he is so pretty? Honey. I didn't know you were going to use it." Gretta strokes the plastic wolf's nose, as if to comfort it. "I don't know. I feel sorry for the animals. But it doesn't feel like a real dog. This looks like a real dog's face. Look at this. It's so pretty. I can't get over hurting for him. Don't you feel bad for shooting a dog like that?"

Gretta scolds Kyle and me. She suspects that we may have killed a dog to use as a storytelling prompt.

"Love me or love my animal. Good golly, I don't know. It's a penguin. I might be wrong. Penguin. Penguin. Penguin. A real... whatever it is."

The other storytellers quietly disapprove, as well.

"Do you think we should put the wolf head away?" Kyle asks. I shrug. How am I supposed to know? I'm as new to facilitating storytelling workshops as he is.

Earnestine says, "But I have to have a live animal. I have been like that my entire life. I can't stand seeing an animal killed. I think the reason I feel that way is that I had dogs or cats around us so much, and if one of them dies we all would cry like kids. That's my problem."

"A dog is a beautiful animal," Gretta says. "I couldn't kill them. You killed them? I would never kill my dogs. Eat a dog? Oh god, no. Not ever."

When no one is looking, I slip the wolf head back into my bag and redirect the attention of the storytellers to the photograph. There's energy and eagerness among the group today, and the open-ended questions are few and far between, because everyone has their own ideas about what is supposed to happen next.

As the workshop winds down, Dolly assesses the group and says, "We have a wild stab of imagination. Everyone has a different story." Dolly shares her version of how the story

should end. “The girl came from a town down the road. She looks like she is about twenty. The wolves are looking for some food and for some attention. The girl doesn’t have any food. What is she going to do? Go to church. She can explain to the wolves that she doesn’t have any food. If they are close enough to touch nose to nose, then they will understand. I talk to my dog, and he understands. But this wolf doesn’t understand. He is just going to lick her face.”

Barbara agrees wholeheartedly, “I don’t give a damn what anyone else says. That is the way I see it.”

Even though our story has no clear beginning, middle, and end, this workshop is a success because the participants have expressed their individuality. For at least one hour today, each storyteller knows who she is. People with Alzheimer’s and dementia experience awareness and a sense of accomplishment in storytelling. The atmosphere of acceptance here, at this moment in time, stands out against the general disinterest in the world outside these walls.

No doubt, musicians searching for lyrics would love to borrow Dolly’s line, “a wild stab of imagination.” I know this firsthand because I’m a back-up singer in a coffee shop band, and when I read this story to my band mates, they envy Dolly’s original choice of words. “Wild. Stab. Of imagination,” my brother, Ian, the lead singer, repeats back to me for emphasis. “Incredible.” Dolly doesn’t spend half an hour, pen in hand, trying to clear her mind of overused expressions or searching for more inventive language like Ian does, when he’s writing a song. Though dementia has stolen a great deal, it has not destroyed Dolly’s ability to transcend memory loss through creativity, and she may even be better at writing song lyrics than my brother.

Forgetfulness, language difficulties, confusion of time and place, decreased judgment, and personality changes are symptoms and frustrations of people with Alzheimer's and dementia. In the storytelling workshop, I use these symptoms as springboards for creativity. Language difficulties are transformed into poetry. Confusion of time and place are irrelevant because participants are engaged in an activity that is right here, right now. Decreased judgment helps the writers formulate unique plot twists, characters, and settings. Personality changes and mood swings become emotional elements of the story.

Our story began with and now concludes with Gretta's verbal book-ends. "My phone is on a telepole. Are they going out tonight? There's two more. They are going to go behind a restaurant and find food. There's food everywhere."

CHAPTER SIX: The Wrong Way Home

A baby practices babbling in order to learn speech; a toddler practices falling in order to learn walking; a child learns to become a grown up by playing pretend at the grown up life; and it has been said that the writer learns to write by writing. If we take this a step further we can say the writer is taught how to write by teaching others how to write. It is one thing for an instructor to say, “Here’s how to overcome this or that difficulty,” and it is another thing for the student-as-instructor to actually struggle through that same difficulty with his or her own student. The student instructor has a greater appreciation for the reality and depth of instruction itself.

In my Theory and Practice of Creative Writing course, Professor Thaxton encourages students to write, write, write, on a regular basis, no matter what. One good way for a writer to feel a sense of accountability in maintaining a regular writing habit, according to Thaxton, is to start a blog. I have always wanted to be a real blogger, instead of someone whose writing is mostly packed in two brown paper grocery bags full of spiral notebooks or posted on the internet in the “notes” section of her Facebook profile. Thaxton’s suggestion pushes me out of the warm and comfortable nest of intentionality and into the blogosphere. I become the proud owner of the domain name “whatgoddoes.com,” although my first choice “whogodis.com” is already owned. Thaxton also suggests that students write about their experiences, because writing about one’s own experiences helps a writer to become more observant. Essays, articles, stories, and poems are everywhere, if one is intentional about mining little sparkling diamonds of extraordinary from the dark cave of ordinary.

Through the facilitation of storytelling workshops with people who have Alzheimer's and dementia, and through the structured reflection I'm required to do each week, I'm supposed to "learn to recognize creative language use and gain valuable analytical skills." Service-learning is supposed to allow students' "perception of education to expand from the classroom to the real world as they begin to understand the civic responsibility to apply their knowledge in helpful and practical ways. Similarly, the real world becomes a part of the academic community."

In my new blog I combine my preferred subject matter (spirituality) with my observations from the storytelling workshop. Being taught an idea is one thing, but teaching it to others is quite another thing. As a SL teaching artist, I acquire a certain sense of responsibility that causes me to see what I teach in a whole new light, and I question the validity of certain ideas that have been handed to me about creativity, like the idea that storytellers with Alzheimer's and dementia must first earn a stamp of approval in the form of public recognition before their creative work can be considered a significant new achievement in the arts and humanities. The storytellers are aware, even if they don't appear to possess this awareness, of the idea that they don't currently hold a recognized place in the arts as writers of what I would classify as an entirely new genre of fiction. This awareness is recognizable in the form of restlessness.

Gary Amirault of Tentmaker Ministries calls the purposeful denial of restlessness "mental back-filing." He uses the label to describe how in spiritual ministry, a person can become convinced of truth, yet continue in silence in order to avoid persecution from the leadership in the institutional church in the form of shunning or name-calling (heretic, wolf in sheep's clothing, false prophets, etc). An excerpt from my blog post entitled "Spiritual

Bottleneck” demonstrates how SL amalgamates my writing education with real world application and how my analytical skills have been influenced by my personal decompartmentalization of social institutions like the church or academia. My spiritual observations about people who are afraid to talk about what they believe because they don’t hold a recognized position of authority in the church hold something in common with my observations as a creative writer working with storytellers who are afraid to consider themselves the authors of creative fiction because they have not yet received public recognition as such.

Spiritual Bottleneck

Most of the restlessness that I have observed among the storytellers takes place in one of two ways. First, the residents with memory loss do not remember that they have experienced memory loss. They don’t understand why they don’t understand. If they become consumed with their own inability to reason, they really struggle. But if I, as the instructor, can help engage them in the creative moment, then they relax, and the story writing flows naturally and easily. Second, the residents with memory loss sometimes come to their senses, realizing that they are writing a story and that the story is supposed to make sense, and when they simultaneously discover that the story does not make sense in the ordinary way that people define sense-making, they become disconcerted by their own internal censors. The internal censor wakes up and asserts itself, audibly, visibly, and emotionally, in a very tangible way through facial expression, body language, and tone.

I do not see the restlessness as a good thing. To me, it is an indication that the creativity is being bottlenecked. The restlessness seems to be a result of too much creative energy and no way to make use of that energy in a meaningful way. If the storytellers have been silenced in the

workshop, it is only because they silence themselves. This may happen involuntarily, because of physical impairment, or voluntarily, because of an overwhelming moment of sanity and clarity about the position they currently hold in the public milieu.

Barbara, who I refer to in my notes as Mrs. Internal Censor, has her own unique creative process. First, she experiences frustration over the fact that she is supposed to write an entire story about a picture with not very many details. She shouts, “That’s a bunch of horseshit! That house is not 100 miles away. This is stupid!” But then, as she explains, she uses words in an unusual way. She begins telling a story about herself telling a story, a literary device known as metastory. Barbara does this without even realizing it. She says, “You can’t listen to it. You can’t understand what it is saying. This picture is not telling us what we need to know. It is completely uninteresting. There is no way that we can make this interesting.” She reveals her own feelings of inadequacy as a writer, in language that is strong, emotionally raw, and new – she is becoming a writer before my eyes.

Then she becomes immersed in the story that she thinks can’t be written, saying, “There’s nobody watching except who is in front of these two men. Nobody is there with them. No one is interested in them. After all, how can a man be that much bigger than a car?” Here Barbara uses the literary device expressionism. She imagines that one of the men in the picture is much bigger than he ought to be. Why is he bigger than he ought to be? How did it happen? What is life like, for a giant? This is how I learn from Barbara. By seeing things that are not there, and trying to make sense of what I don’t see.

Barbara’s thoughts begin to clear again, and her frustration as a writer is renewed. She says, “That is stupid. Some people like stupid. If they are interested in stupid, then they like

this.” Again, even in criticizing herself, she uses strange logic and sentence construction that is likely to appeal to the reader in the same way the strange use of paint or camera angle appeals to the art connoisseur. Barbara becomes lost in the moment again, analyzing her own mind, as if she were outside herself, “She stays up with children all night, that’s why she’s tired. That mind is not normal. Her mind is not normal. Something is setting her off. The young people have a better line of reasoning than this. Maybe we should ask the young people who are interested in this kind of thing. They have problems, but they are making the most of it, trying to help each other because they have quite a mess there. They want to pick it up and put it together again.” She is continuing, pressing through the rough patches, where she is her own worst enemy, and she is actually coming up with some really great writing.

There is no way that a moment like this can be captured or explained to a student and have as much impact as living in the moment itself. As a writer, I am inspired by Barbara’s process in several ways. I learn to put aside expectations about myself. And if I can’t do this, then I learn to explore through writing the reasons why I can’t do this, how I feel about my inability, etc. And maybe when I have written all I need to write about the frustrations of writing, or why I can’t communicate effectively, or how stupid the whole damn thing is, then I will be ready to write what I meant to write in the first place. Service Learning is a teacher like no other.

CHAPTER SEVEN: Blood on His Sword

My major is creative writing with a minor in digital media. I am also a person in the habit of creating informative, documentary-type videos as a form of creative self-expression, because I recognize the value of audiovisual storytelling. My YouTube channel averages over 1,200 views per month, and I regularly receive feedback from viewers about the videos I create. I find myself surprised by that I've made the workshop participant's stories accessible to the public in text only. This week's story is action packed, dramatic, and conducive to an audiovisual format. The storytelling prompt is a painting of a queen, jack, and king dressed and posed in playing-card style.

At the beginning of each storytelling workshop, I explain to participants that we are creating a story that will be posted online where others can read it. Sometimes the storytellers understand, other times, they don't. This week, they do understand, as is evidenced in the final lines of the story, "Do we want this end? No. Let's leave them in suspense. We have to wait until the next episode to find out what happens."

Perhaps the increased awareness of an audience gives the storytellers a greater sense of cohesiveness and community than we've experienced during other workshops. The storytellers seem to be united in communicating something more than a surface-layer narrative. The actions of the characters sustain interest and suggest that the authors are unwittingly crafting a formal satire, a literary technique in which the author, or in this case, authors, address the readers in first person. The story features exaggeration and ridicule as a scathing critique of romantic social standards. Because the workshop participants have such a heightened sense of reader-awareness,

this is the first story I translate into audiovisual format. The storytellers want an audience, and I intend to do what I can to give them one.

In several instances throughout the story, the characters are caught in situational irony. For example, one of the characters (the jack in the photo prompt) has a bird on his head. By appearance alone, the character is poised. His square shoulders, confident expression, and fancy clothing suggest that he is someone who demands respect. He holds his head high, and a bird rests on the edge of his fancy red hat. One of the storytellers employs sarcasm, identifying this character as “that little pipsqueak over there with a bird on his head,” and explains the irony of his appearance, saying, “He wants to attract attention. This is the only way he knows how to get people to like him. He puts a bird on his head, and when the bird talks, everyone thinks he’s talking.” So now, he is the antihero.

The King, like the “piqsqueak,” does not conform to idealistic standards, another example of situational irony. Although his sword is drawn and he has taken a stand, “He’s just threatening. He doesn’t have the nerve to whack him one. He’s too old.” There’s blood on the King’s sword, not because he used it in battle, but because he “scratched his ear,” one of the storytellers explains. “He has so many clothes on that we can be sure he didn’t scratch anywhere else.”

Our small group of all-female storytellers makes use of the queen character, who they have decided is the King’s daughter, as the embodiment of an amusing reprimand of the historical female stereotype in story. The King’s daughter may hold the position of damsel in distress in the plotline, but she does not think of herself as a frail, objectified person. The storytellers contrast appearance with reality through this character, who breaks the stereotype by

being “completely unconcerned about the whole thing. She doesn’t give a hoot’s ass. She’s in love with herself. There is nobody in the world who can compete with her, to make up to what she is.”

During this storytelling session, the participants sustain a linear narrative form almost the entire time. First this, then that. Cause and effect. The story has an introduction: “Oh, it’s a couple of fighters from the mid-time, mid-terms. They are fighting because they are mad at each other and everyone else. They got themselves involved. That’s for damn sure, in the middle of the ages.” The story has rising action: “Evidently he is in love with her, and he wants to get to her, but the father is standing in between saying, “No. You are not of royal blood, so you can’t marry her,” and here we have our rising action, climax, falling action, and a dénouement: “The guy in the middle wins!” “He can have as many Queens as he wants as long as he can afford to keep them.” “She is long gone.”

“Blood on His Sword,” and previously, “Somebody Might Be Important in There,” are the two stories in which participants seem to grasp the idea that other people will be reading their stories. These two stories are the most creative, organized, and impressive of all the stories told thus far. Does this mean that audience awareness is somehow related to cognitive improvement in storytellers with Alzheimer’s and dementia? Though I cannot claim this with certainty, progress begins with a hunch and a stirring.

CHAPTER EIGHT: The Arrival

“Irene seems to be alone in a sea of tall buildings and concrete full of people that rush hither and yon and don’t pay attention to the things around them and don’t get to see much of nature. She is standing on a high balcony in this large city, which I assume is New York City, and she has allowed a small insect to sit on her hand. She is looking at wondrously because she sees so few of them in that environment. The plane is coming in to bring in more people who will be less attached to the real world and more attached to the mechanical world. She is wondering where this will take her in her life.”

Jenny, a new resident in the memory care unit, starts our story off with a theme of a natural world overrun by technological progress. I introduce myself to Jenny, just as I always introduce myself to new residents, except that during the first few minutes of our conversation, I think that she is there as a visitor. I learn that she is a resident when I ask her who is she visiting today. We have a moment of unspoken mutual understanding when her silence tells me she’s not just visiting.

Today, there are seven ladies gathered around the table, including myself. Jenny clutches her purse tightly, but reluctantly agrees to participate in the workshop. Jenny wants to make it clear to me and everyone else that she does not belong here, that she’s not, as she say, “crazy like these people.” I suspect that the careful, precise, well-chosen words she uses for the opening lines are intended as an argument that says, “If you want a story, then I will tell you a story better than anyone else. Maybe then you’ll see that I don’t belong here, that I still matter in the real world.” Jenny sits straight in her chair, alert, focused, professional. Her long salt and pepper

hair is pulled away from her face in a high ponytail that rests on her shoulder when she turns her head.

Next to Jenny is Martha, who has finally given up her search for someone to take her to Apopka. She, unlike Jenny, has found contentment in her new home. This might have something to do with her new best friend. They sit side by side, holding hands as if it were the most natural thing in the world to do. Martha is inspired by Jenny's eloquent introduction, and she adds her high-pitched voice, "It's an opera up high. In her hand is a clink, clink. She is an opera singer who needs a lot of clothes. She wants black heels. She is meeting someone in New York City."

"I think so, too," Martha's best friend agrees. "He will want to see her very, very nice. Everything is clean. You can go on it. You have to get a mirror."

Jenny is clearly annoyed that Martha has given the name "clink clink" to the small insect in the woman's hand in the storytelling photo prompt. I am happy to hear onomatopoeia in the story. The "clink, clink" is a sound similar to the noise it represents. I imagine a little mechanical bug in the opera singer's hand, a tiny example of technology replacing the natural world. Martha's idea may compliment the theme Jenny created for the story introduction.

Barbara demands answers, asking, "Where is the man? He went away in the water?"

"Let me explain," says Jenny, as if she were speaking to small children instead of women ten years her senior. "The plane is over the water. The man who is coming to meet her is in the plane."

"Who is he?" Barbara asks.

Martha responds, using archetypal themes, "He is anybody that can do it."

Archetypal themes and characters are a staple in the stories by people with Alzheimer's and dementia, although the archetypal themes and characters are harder to recognize. Superman is still a hero, but it is more difficult for the rational mind to recognize him as such when he is female, elderly, wearing overalls, or in this case, "anybody that can do it." People with Alzheimer's and dementia actually have one advantage over their storytelling peers in that they invent words and concepts when their memories fail to produce the typical image or word, resulting in some very unique creative work. Take, for example, Martha's clink clink. I've learned to accept the most bizarre ideas and to consider them equally as impressive as Jenny's story introduction. Jenny, on the other hand, does not appreciate Martha's ideas or those of the other storytellers. As they continue the story, Jenny pulls a drawing tablet and a pencil from her purse. She sketches the image of our storytelling prompt photo. We will use this image for the cover art for the printed compilation of the storyteller's work.



Figure 3: The Arrival

Jenny pretends to be disinterested in what the other storytellers say, but I know that she is still closely following the story when I ask, “How should the story end?”

She answers, “Irene is going back home to the farm. She is going to get on the plane to get out of the horrible unnatural nature of the city. She is going to go home and see how she feels about the situation before she makes up her mind. This is only a chapter of the story. We need another chapter to give us more information.”

I can’t help but wonder if Jenny has imposed her current feelings on the character, Irene. I ask Jenny if she would like us to use her artwork with the story when I put it on the Literary Arts Partnership blog, and she agrees. As she pulls it from her drawing tablet, I notice she only has a few sheets left.

CHAPTER NINE: Chit-Chat, Stories, and Musings

Tom and I use Jenny's drawing in the cover art design for a short story collection that we will distribute at the special event celebration at the end of the Spring 2011 semester. The book contains stories by both the residents in the memory care unit with whom Kyle and I worked and the other nursing home residents with whom Tom worked. We name the compilation "Chit-Chat, Stories, and Musings" because Tom's group engages in more informal, social discussion than storytelling.

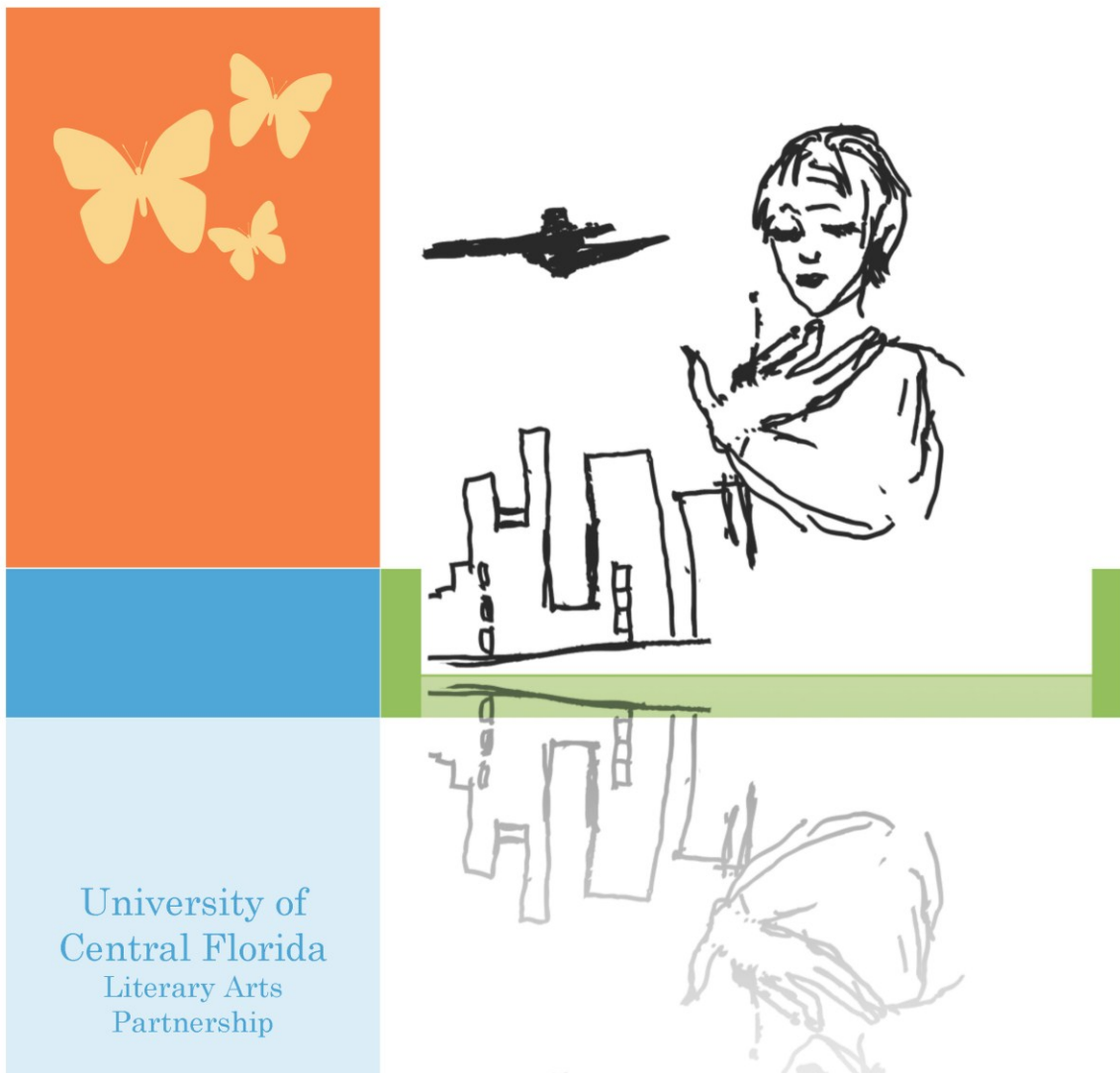


Figure 4: Cover

If I define a short story as a “fictional narrative in prose” that is a “consciously crafted unity of effect, tone, mood, and impression” that may be “tragic, comic, or satiric” and may “represent a work of realism, naturalism, or fantasy” that “reveals character” in the way NTC’s Dictionary of Literary Terms does, then my personal analysis of this short story collection reveals apparent strengths and weaknesses in each participating people-group. People who have Alzheimer’s and dementia sometimes show an *apparent* lack of skill in narrative, prose, and unity compared to their peers. On the other hand, those who have not been diagnosed with significant cognitive decline consistently demonstrate a lack of skill in fiction, fantasy, and character revelation compared to their cognitively challenged peers.

Narrative, according to NTC’s Dictionary of Literary terms, is “a recounting of a series of actual or fictional events in which some connection between the events is established or implied.” Included among the types of narratives that service-learning students have been collecting are short stories and biographies. Tom’s participants have a firm grasp of narrative in biographical, non-fiction form. For example, Grace tells a story called “Childhood,” in which she recounts, “We were not supposed to play in the street or anything like that.” As the story progresses, she moves from a limited perspective to a more panoramic perspective, saying, “They told us what friends we were supposed to mix with.” She also narrates in a linear fashion, moving from distant past to the not-as-distant past to the present to the future, saying, “But everything changed after so many years and everything came to be like it is now. [...] But with the years to come you can live very similar.” Finally, the unity of Grace’s story is demonstrated in that all content either directly or indirectly relates to the main subject, that is, “Childhood.” Grace has nailed narrative, prose, and unity compared to participants who have Alzheimer’s and

dementia whose stories are littered with apparent disconnect, non-linear perspectives, and confusing ideas.

However, Grace's story is non-fiction, even though she has been specifically instructed to create a fiction story. I verify this with my classmate Tom, asking him how he facilitates his storytelling workshop. He tells me that at first, he urges participants to avoid recollecting memories and encourages them to create new characters, plots, and ideas, but after five or ten minutes, he "gives up" on creating a fiction short story and lets participants "do what they want." He abandons his attempt to draw from participants original elements of creativity in exchange for more memory-based creative elements. Tom's open-ended questions inevitably transition from the story itself, focusing instead on the storyteller's memory of an actual event. Tom starts out asking questions like, "How did all the other rocks get there?" or "What will Phillip Abraham do about the powerhouse?" but he inevitably and unavoidably feels obligated to ask questions like, "So, what did you do for fun when you played with the children of your mother's friend?" or "Were you allowed to play with children in different social classes or of a different race?"

The characters in Grace's story are based on real people from her past. The setting and plot of her story are already written in her memory. If there are creative, non-fictional elements to Grace's story, they are unintentional. Most revelation of character is actually revelation about the author-as-character, revelation that has little, if any basis in fantasy. In contrast, the characters, setting, and plot in stories by participants with Alzheimer's and dementia are purely fictional, with few exceptions, and the revelation of character rarely becomes revelation about the author.

In my experience the few, above-mentioned exceptions happen when the storyteller with Alzheimer's and dementia enters into the fiction story as a character, or when the storyteller places a person from his or her past into the fiction story as a character. For example, in the short story "Adventure into the Woods," a group of people goes camping. One storytellers explains, "The people all tell stories and have fun. The fire tenant keeps the fire going. Fireproof. The biggest guy we've got. We'll call him Big Guy. He'll scare the bear off. What happens in the morning? I'm ready to go."

The characters in the story, not the storytellers, are the ones who tell stories and have fun or keep the fire going. Even though the storyteller uses the first person plural "we," when she says "the biggest guy we've got," she is not talking about some big, male storytelling workshop participant. "Big Guy" is simply a character in the story. In the case of the first-person singular "I" in "I'm ready to go," the storyteller's intention is to communicate that if she were a part of the fictional story, she would say, "I'm ready to go." She is not referring to a memory of herself in the past. If she were, she would not have later added, "You're talking to someone who has never done that."

Sometimes the storyteller with Alzheimer's or dementia places a person from his or her past into the fiction story as a character. For example, a storyteller named Ernie, who always wears fancy hats, is in the habit of inserting people he remembers into the fictional stories. Even so, he usually makes a clear distinction between what he believes to be real and what he knows is fiction. In the short story, "Roger and Gloria (Part One)," the main character named Roger is on his way to heaven. Ernie says, "He's a dead Job. That's my brother. He put his own name, Job, but we'll call him Roger." In other words, Ernie wants his brother Job to play the part of Roger

in the story. So for the remainder of the story, every time I refer to Roger, I say, “Ernie’s brother,” and each time, Ernie nods in agreement.

Despite the differences between the two groups of storytellers, a few things they have in common are an appreciation for the workshop environment, the opportunity to engage with one another, and satisfaction with the finished work. The special event celebration at the end of the Spring 2011 semester is a success and a failure: a success because it is well-attended by storytellers and staff, and a failure because only three family members attend. Tom and I each read a story to a very responsive and engaged audience. The most lively moment is when Tom reads a story about a belly dancer. He really hams it up, throwing his hips from side to side as he reads, “She stopped a ship one time. She was on a ship one time and a song came on where you really went crazy and she started doing her dance. It looked like her hips were over there. I mean, she was good. The boat stopped. I’m serious! The men on the ship went to go get the captain. So the captain stopped the boat so he could come down onto the deck and watch my Grandmother dance. A whew, the way she wiggled, it looked like her hips weren’t even attached to her body.”

When the hoopla dies down, I read. I notice that some of the caregivers seem to have expressions of disbelief on their faces, as if to say, “You mean, they wrote that?” I wonder how often caregivers and residents in the memory care unit really connect in a deeply social, personal way. If caregivers in the memory care unit were consistently part of the storytelling sessions, they might rediscover why people with Alzheimer’s and dementia are important, unique individuals, and that despite their limitations, we need to hear from them. If researchers could find a solid link between creative self-expression and the rate of cognitive decline, perhaps the

provision of opportunities for creative self-expression could become just as mandatory as changing linens, preparing and serving meals, and personal hygiene.

“Almost Home” is an informative video that mentions a link between reduced stress damage in the hippocampus with social interaction in people with Alzheimer’s, however, there is very little research available about creative expression and improvements in dementia symptoms. The UWM Center on Age & Community held a conference in 2006 to discuss the value of creative expression in dementia care. One of the questions in the discussion was “How can we effectively research creative expression in dementia care?” Certified Poetry Therapist with Arts for the Aging, Bethesda, MD, Carol Siegel responds, “It is somewhat of a Catch 22. We need research data to support our claims. But if people don’t think the programs are valuable, why even try to study them?”

The only research available at this time is anecdotal. The summary description of the conference describes those in attendance as “the most innovative thinkers, doers, and organizers in the field of dementia care,” and they meet, not to discuss the latest research results, but “to identify the goals for creativity and dementia research, obstacles to accomplishing those goals, and creative solutions to overcoming those obstacles.” Clearly, we still have a long way to go.

I share Carol Siegel’s frustration with the lack of research data and the inability to obtain such data. The research funds are simply not available. According to the Emmy Award winning documentary, *Alzheimer’s Disease: Facing the Facts*, “Alzheimer’s disease greatly lags in research funding, media attention, and celebrity activism,” compared to cancer, heart disease and AIDS. After I watched *Facing the Facts*, I wondered if people with Alzheimer’s could be their own spokespeople. How? Through the art of storytelling.

I wonder why the family members and friends of these amazing storytellers are not here to proudly celebrate their creative accomplishments today. If I can find a way to showcase the creative abilities of people with Alzheimer's and dementia, family members and loved ones who have always relied on memory as a tool of communication could discover new and meaningful ways to connect with people who experience memory loss. Sons and daughters likely visit storytellers on weekends or evenings when I'm not there. I imagine the visiting daughter carefully observing the words and facial expressions of her father, looking for some sign of recognition, something that indicates the connection is not entirely lost between them. If only she could have seen and heard him during the workshop, inserting his deceased brother, Job into the story as a character named Roger. A visiting son could have experienced the story "Lost and Found," placed himself in the role of Charlie, and been comforted when he heard the longing in his mother's voice as she said, "[Mama] is happy and loves [Charlie] and feels a part of his life." He could have recognized in his mother the desire to know and be known, the desire for close relationship, although these concepts are difficult for her to put into words outside of the storytelling workshop. Her creative expression could have opened doors of communication that might not have been opened otherwise.

CHAPTER TEN: Bad Habits Versus Good Habits

Jenny is thrilled when I give her a much larger drawing tablet than the one she keeps in her purse, because in addition to drawing, she also likes to paint. She seems very pleased who she is, that she is an artist. She is also very disturbed at the fact that she has no recollection of meeting me or participating in the storytelling workshop. I read her the beginning and ending of the story, the parts she created last week. I reassure her that she is an excellent storyteller and that our workshop will be a great success if she participates once again. “I used to be a college professor, you know,” Jenny says.

I begin the workshop by explaining what we are doing, creating a brand new fiction story, that there are no wrong answers, and that everyone’s input is valuable. I say, “Last week Jenny did such a wonderful job introducing the story. Jenny, would you like to get us started again?”

After a long, thoughtful look at our storytelling prompt, a picture of nuns seated at a bar on barstools with human-looking legs and high heels, Jenny says, “It’s very strange, but there are five nuns sitting on bar stools with tin legs with high-heel shoes, which appear to be the legs of the nuns. It is an oxymoron. The drinks are above the nuns. Obviously the bartender must have placed them up there. For some unknown reason they are meeting in a bar. Perhaps they want to see what the bar looks like. What is the great attraction?” Jenny’s determined tone of voice makes her question seem more like a declaration or challenge to the other storytellers, to bring harmony to the incongruity she has identified in the photo.

Gretta responds, “There are fifty working people, a whole expanse — that is what I am talking about. They are having a military meeting. Each one represents ten. So there are ten, twenty, thirty, forty, fifty. In the work military people do, there is no slowing down. They have lots of legs, which means they can really get out there.”

Jenny seems to be remembering the rules of the workshop, and she shows respect for Gretta’s response, even though she also seems a little frazzled by it. She takes the role of facilitator throughout the remainder of the workshop, and I gladly let her claim it. Jenny clearly struggles to make sense of Gretta’s response, and I can only imagine how she will reconcile the idea that the women in the picture are nuns at a bar, not military officers having a meeting. Somehow, she brilliantly pulls the ideas together, saying, “The group is not wearing military uniforms because it is a special occasion, and they are out to have a good time. They are on a secret mission to check out the bar and find out how their soldiers behave when they come to this bar. The bar advertises, ‘The drinks are on us!’ The habits are the nun clothing. The fact that there are ten bare legs is telling, a play on right and wrong.”

Jenny’s final line doesn’t make sense to me. In my mind, she must have gone the way of Gretta, where things only make sense in a way that the speaker can understand. Jenny continues to play facilitator, asking questions of the storytellers. They respond. I continue typing. The system is working beautifully for everyone.

Our time comes to a close, and I ask Jenny if she would like to wrap up the story, and this is when I learn what she meant when she said that the photo prompt is meant to be a “play on right and wrong.” “She found something. She found the irony in the whole situation. Wearing ‘habits’ to check out the ‘habits’ of the soldiers,” Jenny says, using verbal irony. “It is effective,

but only depending on the location. This is an extremely unusual visual situation, if nothing else, almost more than anyone can accept. They are checking out an unusual situation like this. Bars are not the most proper places. The secret mission is a failure. They were a little too obvious. Nobody is going to entice the military people that go there with their wares as long as there are nuns sitting there in their habits observing their habits. The whole thing is a play on bad habits versus good habits. They were too obvious.”

“That is obvious,” Greta says.

“The whole thing is obvious!” the storytellers agree.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: The Painted Lady

The storytelling prompt for this week has an immediate, deep, emotional impact on the storytellers. It's almost as if they are approaching a subject so holy and untouchable that it must be illegal to create a fiction story from it. I go through the usual routine of explaining who I am, why we are gathered, what we intend to accomplish, etc. while they examine the storytelling prompt. It is a mannequin head, used to store a wig. It is covered in papier-mâché and painted with exaggerated, cosmetic female facial features.

In an effort to emulate the reverent, respectful atmosphere in this particular storytelling workshop, and the long pauses between verbal responses, when storytellers are deeply contemplating matters of personal worth, I present the story in the form of a poem, with strategic line and stanza breaks. I include my own artistic rendering of the main character created as a result of overflowing inspiration for the heartfelt story, "Painted Lady."

Painted Lady

Each person is entitled to think
and to make themselves beautiful
and lovable.

She is obviously a paper-mache person, a stand in for a real person.
Her face is made of newspaper print, the story of her life is imprinted
all over her face.

Whatever she cares for in life, to make the best of it to help
other people establish friendship.

Be as good to each other as you can. They try
to tell her something or help to improve her. Not
with all the make-up.
She doesn't have to put a whole lot on. See the eyelids
weighed down.

No one
has seen a person who looks like that. Her name is June. It is a hideous
picture. Oh so beautiful. Are we sewing?

She is beautiful! Someone did an awful lot of work on
this one. I've never seen a more beautiful one.
Her smile,
her eyes,
that's about all I know about her. I don't know her that well.
She is a beautiful woman all the way through, a friendly open
person who tries to understand the position of those who speak
to her. She is making some noise, "Bu-bu-bu-bu-bu."
There's not a natural thing there.

Her eyes are overemphasized with black
circles, her cheeks are outlined
in the stupid red,
a stupid picture someone made who does not know
what a human being looks like. Anyone
who would make her look like that should be sad.

That is not beautiful. It is ugly to me the way they have her all outlined.
They don't have anything on hair
or smiles.
I wouldn't give two cents for that.

I'm sure it cost you more than that.

Whoever did the art work knows exactly what they are doing.
Someone who reads her
story will have the opinion that she hides
her own identity
in lots of stories
about other people.

She is a kind, thoughtful person who is very insecure about her own intelligence.
That is one reason
she has her story all over her face.

I don't like anything on a piece of paper.
I don't like it period.

You keep putting in
and putting in
making it up
so you can print it out
and throw it all over everyone.

It's because you like it.
I would throw a saucer at it.
Crack a saucer over your head.

We
should avoid conflict to keep peace and be healthy and not continually disrupted.
We
don't need fear in our lives, to be more and more afraid of things.
We
need to wait to be sure what people's intentions are.
They are curious to find out more
about other people.

One cheek looks rounded
and one looks straight
and flat across.
I don't agree with all that.

She has beautiful eyes.
She has little lights in her eyes because a photographer with a flash that left light spots in her
eyes has taken her photograph.

Which one do you like the best?
It depends on the mood the person is in,
what they are looking for,
but I'm not an artist.

You can't tell from looking at it what she is thinking
or what she is afraid of
or what they are thinking.
We'll just let her be who she wants to be
and we will live with it.

She
is looking at us, because
we
are looking at her.

Nobody can get through the expression of self.

She is interested in the person she is addressing.
She is taking in all the information the person is giving her and doesn't have a preset opinion of
what that person is like.
She takes as fact, whatever they say.

Bad people look differently at the eyes.
We should help
and accept help.

I don't know that you should consider them bad people.
Consider them false,
the people who project their opinion on her.

She is not affected by their opinion because she doesn't know them.
She is being polite, nodding, listening, but the words of the bad ones
are not sinking in.

The moral of the story is
be good to others.
This opinion is a loving and kind opinion.
Not putting your bad opinions on top of people before you know them.



Figure 5: The Painted Lady

I take a class from the UWM Center on Aging & Community to become a certified TimeSlips facilitator. The TimeSlips training materials say,

People with dementia commonly have social roles taken away from them. They retire from paid work. Friends might stop coming by. They might not remember they are a parent or spouse, or feel they can play these roles any more. Often, the only role available to people with dementia is 'sick person' - someone in need of care. As you can imagine, the role of 'sick person' does not offer much room for self-expression.

TimeSlips creates a new role for people with dementia - that of 'storyteller.' This is a role people recognize and value, and that offers opportunities for meaningful self-expression and growth.

I have already experienced the workshop participants as storytellers, and I am become accustomed to discovering profound meaning about personhood within their stories, a phrase here, a line there, but today is the first time that the story consists almost entirely of that type of dense content.

The workshop is over, and we all sit in silence. I take a few moments to mentally photograph the expression of what it means to be human on each lovely, aged face. Their collective, alienated souls permeate primal nobility so dense, it is almost tangible. I wonder if I could ever hope to capture and convey this moment to others, the people in the cars zipping past the assisted living facility, the students bustling to and from classes, the construction workers, dance instructors, technology administrators, accountants, and telemarketers. Shouldn't they all stop what they are doing and notice what is happening here? For now, our tiny communal understanding of significance will have to suffice.

I thank each person for the gift they have given me, and as I do, Jenny pulls a folded piece of paper from her purse. It's a water color painting that she apparently wadded up, as if to throw it away, and then changed her mind and flattened it back out again. "I would like for you to have this," Jenny says. She seems to be embarrassed by the abstract nature of the artwork. "I don't know what it is. I lost track," she says. The colored shapes in the artwork are separated by white space, with very little mixing or overlap between. If I had to use only one word to describe the painting, I would call it "Jungle." Something that vaguely resembles a face is there, hidden among the vines and leaves. At the top of the painting, Jenny has written, "I can't do anything to help the situation. I'm in a nursing home. completely trapped; while Bev is in my home and my cats scattered. I will never be able to get out of here. Help me God!"

CHAPTER TWELVE: The Wind Took Them Apart

Earnestine has been ill and has not been with us for quite some. Today, I learn that she has recovered enough to join the other storytellers. She's very frail compared to the last time I saw her, and she seems to be having a much harder time finding her words.

The storytelling prompt is a Photoshopped picture of a man on a hovering bubble and two children holding hands, standing on a separate bubble. The backdrop is an unobstructed horizon, a nearly cloudless sky and a calm ocean.

"Are they a family?" Ruby asks. I can barely hear her. She touches her neck every time she speaks, as if the words scrape and wound her throat on the way out.

"They can be a family if you want them to be a family. This is your story. You decide," I say.

"Let's do that. Let's make them a family," Ruby says.

Although most of the story is about how this family, apparently separated by these bubbles, is going to reunite, there's an underlying mystery that the storytellers have yet to solve. "How did they get up there?" Martha asks.

"They climbed up on a ladder," Earnestine replies, with much difficulty. "There must be a ladder somewhere. It's a bubble of water, and they are standing on it, but we don't know how."

The storytellers examine their photos closely, looking for a clue.

Earnestine continues, very slowly, with long pauses between each phrase, but the other storytellers don't seem to mind. They're in no hurry. "They wanted a better view. They have

height. How they got to the top, I don't know. Maybe they are standing on something just under the surface. If I tell a lie, then I can tell you what it is. There's some ice."

The other storytellers are satisfied with Earnestine's answer. Mystery solved.

As usual, I ask, "How should the story end?"

"How can it end?" Martha asks. "There is no part of the story that I understand that ever happened. Are they waiting for someone to come back?"

"We need details," Ruby says.

"It is very uninteresting," Barbara agrees.

"How about this," says Earnestine. "They played along and had a nice day, and now they are ready to go back. It ends just like that. There is nothing more. It ends, and there is nothing else. This ending shows them doing things. That would be it."

The following week, I meet Earnestine's son, who has come to make arrangements for Earnestine's memorial service. "I don't understand," he says. "She was getting better. She was doing so much better."

I read him the short story, "The Wind Took Them Apart," noting the parts that Earnestine contributed. Tears roll down his cheeks as he listens. When I finish, he scoops me into such an enthusiastic hug that my feet nearly leave the floor. "Thank you so much," he says. "Thank you. You have no idea what this means to me."

I give him one of the short story collections, letting him know that he will find more of his mother's creative work in it. He has no idea that she's been a storyteller for the past few months or that we have held a special celebration. Although I am grateful for the opportunity to

connect, I am very disturbed by the idea that he might not be alone in his ignorance. What if other family members and friends also have no idea what is happening here? Why hasn't anyone told them?

CHAPTER THIRTEEN: Them Singin' Bones

This storytelling workshop session is one of the liveliest and most unconventional of them all. Judy has been ill for quite some time, but she has improved enough to join us again. The last time I interacted with Judy, she was angry, combative, articulate, and very observant. Her personality seems to have been affected by her physical condition in both a positive and negative way. She's happy and cooperative, but also confused and very unfocused. Judy's speech has become broken, repetitive, and difficult to understand. Most of "Them Singin' Bones" belongs to Judy, who was so thrilled about being around other people instead of stuck in a hospital bed, that she verbally dominates the workshop. Her words are like poetry as she tells the story of a dark, scary place where there lives a woman-spider named "Duh-duh-duh," a song-name, like a short trumpet blast. Judy's words and song as a poem:

Them Singin' Bones

They are doing them a lot, like all of them around those.
It's not heavy
so it's just a stage
and all-all-all of that you see.
All of that different hip and lid.

We'll name her Duh-duh-duh.
She is not doing much.

A little piece of me over there, in the bones.
So many bones.
I saw him way over there. A guy trying to scream,
trying to make people limb.

I can sell you everywhere.
What is she doing? She's seeing how her bones can bounce.
She's all bones
and ball bones
and all bones
and ball-all-all.
She's bouncing up and down. Jumping up.
This is fun! I love the playing ones.

There's bones when you look at it,
all these and all this.
Can show you? And tell?

Them bones, them bones, singing them bones
them bones singing, them bones.
Duh-duh-duh sings, "Woo-Hoo! Why wouldn't it?"
Duh-duh-duh sings, "I'm the one."
That's why rama rama rama,
they want them dam ram dam ram
to be that way.
If you didn't, then dam dam ram dam ram dammaroo!

I'm not saying, "Damn." It's just a noise.

Duh-duh-duh says, "I would like to see the person that is weak. I will teach them."
I didn't hear it. I wonder.
Duh-duh-duh is blowing kisses in the closet.
If you get anywhere on this, you will get lost.

She does two hops.
One hop and then the other.
And then you have it. Light. That's the end.
I like it!
Done, done, done!

The other storytellers contributed, but Judy steals the spotlight and owns this storytelling session. The other storytellers are absolutely delighted with Judy's story, an impromptu song. They even clap their hands and try to sing along. When Judy says, "If you get anywhere on this, you will get lost," I believe that she is acknowledging her own artsy, unconventional method of storytelling. It just so happens that this is all that she is able to do, and we validate her creative work as it is. The other storytellers must identify with her transparency, because they all laugh in unison, the kind of laughter that says, "Getting lost happens to you, too?" In that moment, this group is the best of friends, a support system of like-minded people, having the most wonderful time together.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN: Protector

It's a hot and sunny Florida afternoon, and there are dark clouds on the horizon, a thunderstorm approaching. Ruby is visibly upset, but she is having a difficult time expressing what is bothering her. I suggest that if she participates in the storytelling workshop, this might cheer her up. She agrees.

Our storytelling prompt is a photo that Edy, one of my Facebook friends, has submitted for the purposes of our workshop. Edy has spent most of her life employed in long-term medical care, and she is very excited about helping contribute to the creative work of people with Alzheimer's and dementia. The photo, according to Edy, is a statue that "stands in the middle of Minnehaha Creek in the Minnehaha Park area of southern Minneapolis MN. It depicts Hiawatha carrying his beloved Minnehaha ('Laughing Waters') across the stretch of water. It is based on Longfellow's poem, 'The Song of Hiawatha'"



Figure 6: The Protector

“There’s two,” Judy says. “One is going.” Judy’s speech has become clearer since last week, but she is still verbally challenged, so she uses sounds and gestures to communicate the remainder of her idea. She looks at the trees, whistles like a bird, and taps her feet on the ground as if she’s running.

The storytellers agree on a setting and what the weather is like, and then Ruby unexpectedly announces, “She’s dead, like me. I’m going to die at 7:00 pm.” Ruby cries. “Every day is a bad day. They won’t miss me. He’s going to get rid of her, put her in the ground in a garden.”

The other storytellers try to convince Ruby otherwise, continuing their story in the most reassuring tone, “He is very gently carrying her, rescuing her, taking care of her. He would not walk off and leave her. He can protect her by putting her in the ground. To put someone in the ground for no reason is bad behavior. Even though he was the aggressor, he found her in a dangerous position. The people’s safety at heart. This is just one moment of kindness. She’s hurt. He’s carrying her at a distance, and her with her hands around his neck to help. Maybe she stepped on something. He is taking her home. Maybe she just likes to be carried. There’s a rock. Some people like to be carried.”

“It must be nice to be carried. I want to be carried,” Ruby says.

“I have Friday ninety,” Judy responds. Perhaps this is Judy’s way of identifying with Ruby’s idea that she will die at 7:00 pm.

Storytelling is clearly an avenue through which storytellers like Ruby may express feelings and concepts that they might not be able to express otherwise. Ruby is able to verbalize

her fear of dying through the story, and her peers are able to comfort her and help defuse her fear through the storytelling process.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN: The 2011 Service-Learning Showcase

In the 2011 Service-Learning Showcase, I try to set up the most amazing display possible despite my small budget and the limited amount of time and space participants are permitted. First, I set up the entire display in my living room. The display includes printed story excerpts, storytelling photo and object prompts, decorative elements, and my journal of reflection. The many hours of work I put into this project pay off as Kyle and I receive recognition and monetary awards, including non-traditional literacy engagement. The moment is bittersweet for me, though, because people seem to be more impressed with the display than the creative work of the storytellers. Not many people take the time to read the story excerpts. However, I do have the opportunity to check out the displays of other students, and I am pleased that there are several other projects involving people with Alzheimer's and dementia.



Figure 7: Service Learning Showcase

CHAPTER SIXTEEN: Hunting for a Title

In choosing a photo to use as a storytelling prompt, the TimeSlips training materials suggest, “We use images that appear staged, or that invite story. [...] Images should not be too busy.” The storytelling prompt I have chosen for today is a photo of myself, only I look nothing like myself, because I am dressed in an elaborate rented costume, wearing a wig, holding a rifle, and the setting is a wooded area.

I enrolled in a pre-1865 literature course, probably the most difficult course I have taken since college algebra, to satisfy the university requirements for my major. Studying Chaucer is like learning another language, which enables me to sympathize with the frustrations of storytellers who experience difficulty with their own native language. A group project for this class was to create a short film based on one of the stories in our reading assignment. My group thought it would be fun to mix old and modern elements in our film, which is why I was dressed medieval yet carrying a rifle in the photo.



Figure 8: Hunting for a Title



Figure 9: Hunting for a Title, a Storyteller's Sketch

Jenny is very comfortable in her role as “illustrator” of the storytelling group. She sketches the photo while the other storytellers do their best to create a gripping introduction to the story. But they are really struggling today.

“I don’t understand her,” Gretta says. “She needs to be warmer, I guess.”

“What should we call her?” I ask.

“Her name is Bo Peep,” says Ruby. “I can’t figure her out. All white except a black corset at the waste line.”

Gretta points out, “Well, she’s holding a very large rifle in her hands. Look at the instrument she is carrying, it is an awful long thing. Could it be a fishing pole?”

Jenny breaks from her sketch for a moment to add, “The whole thing is very incongruous, because she has such a fancy dress on in the forest.”

“The lady in her furs,” Gretta says. “One leg short, the other pretty good size.”

“What should we say she is doing?” I ask.

“There’s not enough there to say what she is doing,” Gretta replies.

“What kind of things is she chasing?” Jenny asks.

“An animal?” Gretta replies, unsure of herself. “Is she capable of leaving the impression of being somebody? I just don’t know about this one.”

I resist the urge to help them along, because this is their story, and if I give storytellers the time to think things through, they usually find a story to tell.

Jenny is finished with her sketch. She tears it from the drawing tablet and hands it to me. I tell her that her drawings are wonderful, and that they add a nice personal touch to the website

where the stories are published. Jenny ignores my praise, because she is not pleased with her drawing.

“Bo Peep travels with someone and takes lessons,” Jenny says. “She has her head turned to look at someone way back in the ancient days. She is carrying symbols of times gone past. She may be investigating the problem that she is out of her era, her usual way of living.”

The storytellers decide that the storytelling prompt must be an advertisement, but they’re not sure if the product is advertising a woman or a gun. Meanwhile, I feel a little bit sneaky, because I haven’t told them I’m the woman in the photo.

Jenny likes to be the last one to speak, so when I ask how the story should end, she’s ready to unleash the ideas she’s kept pent up since the beginning of the story. “No man is looking at the rifle,” Jenny says. “Whoever is advertising the rifle is handling it the wrong way. He may not necessarily get fired, but he won’t accomplish his mission. He is not bad; he is just not that bright. If he is advertising a girl, that will not happen, because the person looking is torn between looking at the gun or looking at the pretty model. If he is advertising a woman, he has failed in that as well, because her clothing is incongruent.”

Gretta interjects, “His boss will fuss a lot and give him a hard time.”

Jenny, annoyed, continues, “They need a time and place when the two of them agree on what they are going to do, instead of looking at what they’ve already done. Move on past the mistakes.”

Gretta interrupts again, “The end is one shot from the gun; she is out on the run!”

Jenny remains calm, ignoring Gretta, and says, “She goes back to the office and collects her paycheck, and she leaves that problem up to whoever hired her. She did the job they asked her to do. It is now their problem.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN: Costume Party

Our storytelling session is cut short because my schedule only allows me to facilitate a forty-five minute workshop compared to the usual hour and a half. The last quarter of today's story is told by Jenny, in which she uses metaphor:

Curiosity gets the closer to what is going on. The party dwindles down to just a few. It's just one of those things. In a political parade, everyone has extra masks and appendages. There's someone on a loudspeaker running for office. Since it is as dim as it is, there are only children. No old people! It has to do with politics. They can look at children's art, have refreshments, and the politicians will meet and greet individually. Do you oversee, overseas? That's understandable. Costumes and pretenses, but children just have fun.



Figure 10: Costume Party

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN: Gangsters in Chicago

There's a new storyteller in the memory care unit, a Polish man named John. He has a thick accent but his English is slow and precise enough that I can understand him perfectly. One of the few other male storytellers, Harry, seems happy to have another guy at the table.

Our storytelling prompt is a picture of a security camera on a street corner. Pedestrians under the camera are pointing up at it. One of the pedestrians has his bike parked, leaning against the building in the background. Harry believes the sidewalk is water, and his main concern is that the flow of the water is correct. Gretta is convinced that people are trying to demolish the building so they can put a parking lot there. Martha thinks someone must be dumping chemicals and everyone will get sick. John has been silently observing. When the other storytellers fall silent I ask John if he has any ideas about our storytelling prompt. His reply is a combination of certain elements from the responses of the other storytellers, as well as some of his own ideas.

"While this action is being taken in a big, big, big scale," John says, "any antique tree should be left alone for the signal to people who are complaining about it. In the past, this was a beautiful country or land. Save it for a few seconds. Preserve your health. Save money for the barbershop. People who use this kind of a passage, this is a healthy way of preventing some trees which are still growing. Eventually at that rate, the trees will be cut down, and everyone will be sorry. Everything grows back into the ground."

As I type John's response, I can't help but think of Joni Mitchell singing, "They paved paradise and put up a parking lot."

“They are pointing at what they know. They want that mouth to shut up,” Harry says.

“They know already, but what about the rest of the population? They need more space! How many people will come and be crowded, and disappointed with you, disgusted, and turning back home? Consequently, when the work is so hard, trying to preserve stone and trees is very popular.” He continues storytelling for quite a while, about “they,” the people who are watching the world through the camera, how they want to have a “special building for chemical expansion” and watching “for the bad storm” that is coming. “People,” John explains, “are very proud of their names and want their names on walls that are highly visible. At the same time, the government accuses and makes people work hard so it can be strong as possible.”

Martha nods in consensus the whole time John is talking, she adds her own ideas here and there, that people “were questioned deeper, deeper, deeper into the ground,” and “It doesn’t seem like anyone is asking to change,” but she seems more content to sit and listen to John.

“They want to prop each other up to reach the camera,” Henry says. He turns his photo sideways, as if to use gravity to help the people accomplish their purpose.

“He is telling the cameras that they want to decide what is the better idea: to talk or to dance,” Greta says in her matter-of-fact tone.

“Trees with out support from the ground will not be growing properly,” John says, “the skin detaches, and then they have a 50% chance of being male or female, and...”

Henry finishes John sentence, “and then the wheel on the sidewalk will go riding up the building.” Henry is still holding his photo and tilting his head sideways. He traces his finger along the edge of the building, from the ground up, willing the parked bicycle to go.

The storytellers have many, wonderful, terrible ideas about the bad people who are watching through the camera, who want to “change temperatures of weather, to conflict and dilute, cause damage,” and “things will fall down.” They are able to identify mood in the story. The people on the street find a way to take the camera down, but John isn’t satisfied with this idea. He says, “They open up their mouth, and they are surprised because those particular items are very easily attached, repaired, and reattached. Young people are not very happy being locked up in small territories with small actioning. They all want to read something about their country, watch movies that are highly appreciated.”

At first, no one seems to mind that John is letting the bad people win. John says, “Let’s be honest, they are not supposed to come close to the point where they can touch the camera.” But then the other storytellers reassert their ideas.

“Get rid of all this stuff. They are successful,” Gretta says.

Martha attempts to end the conflict, saying, “It needs to end.”

Gretta says, “They all go home and leave the letters on the wall.”

Henry points to the letters on the side of the building, one by one, and softly says to himself, “J-O-S-E-F.”

John adds, “And they study the camera to see how and why it happened.”

Everyone agrees once again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN: Looking for the Reference Point

Although I've spent about twenty minutes greeting and inviting people to participate, most everyone has other plans:

"I've got to brush my teeth."

"I'm expecting a phone call."

"I have to find my keys."

We only have four storytellers today. One of them is Judy, and she has been sleeping a lot lately, I'm told. The caregivers wheel her chair to the table. I ask, "Judy, would you like to open your eyes?" She opens one eye. Her mouth hangs wide open. I feel badly for disturbing her, but I also don't want her to miss out on all the fun. "Judy?" I say. This time she doesn't respond at all, so I leave her be.

Mr. K. is not a regular storyteller. The only reason he agrees to participate is that he feels sorry for me. He watches everyone declining the invitations to the workshop. When I finally approach him, I say, "Mr. K., I only have three people today. It's going to be difficult to tell a story with only three people. Why don't you give it a try?" He reluctantly agrees.

The other two storytellers are Gretta, who rarely misses a session, and the tall, studious-looking John, the new guy with the Polish accent. Our storytelling prompt is a picture of a group of people dressed in yellow pants and shirts, with their hair tucked in yellow hats or turbans, and with any visible skin is painted yellow, including their bare feet. They are entirely yellow, from head to toe. Gretta, who has poor eyesight, believes they are naked, and she reacts strongly when I hand her the picture.

“Is it mine?” Gretta asks incredulously. “Are they telling me I can’t do this? Do we have to talk about this first? There’s nothing on! I don’t care for this, when they have nothing on. The only thing good about it is you can tell which rear-end person is the best looking.”

“Immerse yourself in the front. Ahhhh! That is where you see the beauty of the person,” John says.

All of this is just too much for Mr. K., who throws his picture down on the table. “I can’t. I can’t. I don’t. I don’t,” says Mr. K. “Lady, what is wrong with you?”

John wants Mr. K. to stay. He says, “But, it seems to be okay, it just so happens, because there was nothing else to wear. You must have the will to be who you want to be, ignoring all the other reasons. That is the philosophy of the table.”

Gretta is persuaded by John’s speech. She says, “I can’t stay positively yellow, but I can try.” Mr. K., on the other hand, is not convinced and leaves the workshop.

“Well, it seems to me they don’t look ashamed,” John says. They look loose, talk to people, and don’t pay much attention to their body exposure. Do you know why? I’ll tell you why. All the people who have their backs to the camera can’t be recognized. In some countries there is an exposure that can be punished. Pay attention.”

Gretta says, “You shouldn’t pay attention to that kind of problem, if you do it yourself. How can you judge? If all the people think it is normal, let’s have it normal. A normal dance. Enjoy life.”

John says, “I always talk to myself and ask, why did God create it, that part of the body? Why did He create it? Bad people belong to you and your eyes, but you find yourself wondering if someone is bad or good. It depends on opinion. Opinion is based on looks and thoughts. If you

can judge on those things, well, then okay. I'm too old for this position. But remember that one side is polished. The other side is not polished."

"How did the people get polished?" I ask.

"People were created in a special unit. The exact moment they were created, there were a lot of crystals, breaking out, creating an illusion," John explains. "Use your own judgment, after they have finished ripening. Red tomatoes. They used to be green. Right now, they are yellow."

I'm typing like a mad-woman, because almost everything John says is highly philosophical, and I am just thrilled with his ideas. I can't wait to share them with my lyricist brother, Ian, who I know is really going to appreciate John's intellect.

"They have all had a little bit of alcohol, I think," Gretta says. "Some of them are in the shadows."

John's philosophical frame of mind gives way to a more somber and practical mood with Gretta's mention of alcohol and shadows. John says, "What do you think people should do, when they have been assigned a place, a bed, a room, and things that don't belong to them? Do they call this home? If they panic, they don't know how to go to where they belong. Someone should assign them to a group. Organize them in categories. Tell them how to go home. How can I go home?"

Do people who are cognitively impaired have an epistemological view or an ontological view? I'm not sure about this, myself. Admittedly, I have to re-familiarize myself with the difference between the two when I read Christine Brooke-Rose's analysis of metastory (fiction within fiction) in the book *Stories, Theories & Things*. What is reality? How can I know reality?

I allow this book to read me, so that perhaps, I may have a better understanding of the idea John means to convey.

Some of John's ideas are self-explanatory, but what is not as obvious is "the fracture of the subject as a stable interpreter" of meaning. John's observations are a deconstruction of the value of values (something that comes naturally to people with Alzheimer's and dementia). John sees the idea that "a place, a bed, a room, and things that don't belong to them" is what the displaced, yellow people in the picture should identify as "home." He takes this concept a step further, comparing reality with the illusion of knowledge, saying, "they don't know how to go to where they belong."

People with Alzheimer's and dementia forget scenarios. The advantage they have in storytelling is that they invent new ones—a convention shared with poets. It is no coincidence that the story of the yellow people closely resembles the circumstances in the lives of John and the other storytellers. When John says, "Someone should assign them to a group. Organize them in categories," he asserts himself as the "stable interpreter" of meaning. He has a plan, and that plan is, "Tell them how to go home."

But the confident, assertive John disappears when his attention turns from the story to reality. He asks, "How can I go home?" I've witnessed a storyteller who, in a moment of clarity, remembers that he or she is in a nursing home, and has an emotional breakdown. I try to keep John's mind on the story by asking, "How will the people get home?"

John responds, "The light is steady from the east to the west. The position, they are all the same, but all the wide shoulders cause problems. They may try to follow the sun, the direction of

the light, but then they come to a point where they ask if they are on the right road. Should they be there? Or should they be in a different direction?”

Gretta has fallen asleep. I’m so interested in what John is saying that I’m glad to have some one-on-one time with him.

“I’ve seen this before,” John says. “This picture was in the newspaper, attracting a headline, so they can push your mind into a predicament. They are very popular.”

“Why?” I ask.

“Why do I think so? Because I have created for myself a world of sun, so I have a chance to solve problems.” John replies. “Some people apart from others undertake ninety degree positions, thus if you look closely, you will find that previously there were at eighty. Go three-sixty, like a sport! Turn all the way around and see where you came from, your reference point! On that basis, you can be able to come to a conclusion that they are all not of the same kind, time, or place. I am eighty-five years old.”

Gretta wakes up long enough to hear John say he is eighty-five. She says, “No, I am much older than that! A long, long time ago, I was born. June twenty-third is how old I am. I am tired! Someone else can take my position, because I am done with all of this now.” She glances over at Judy, who hasn’t stirred since the workshop started, and adds, “Two people can take my position.” She falls asleep again.

John says, “The solution needs to be put on the table. Spread it out on a flat place, to find out the exact location. Look for someone who has a full face, open your hand at eighty degrees to receive the full.

“Tell me more about receiving the full,” I say.

“If you don’t expose yourself to the sun, being hidden somewhere in the shadows, then you can use the military. It’s to the left, between the east and the west.”

“Are any of these people in the military?” I ask.

John points to one of the people in the picture. “He is going into the sun, physically going into the sun, entering in. With this kind of puzzle, you must be very careful, think logically, solve the problem, and develop a circle. The consequence is that you cannot describe the circle properly.”

“What happens if no one can describe the circle properly?” I ask.

“Do you know where they live? Half of the world is one hundred eighty degrees, opposites. Four times ninety is three hundred and sixty. I can’t find my reference point in any of the nineties. Do you have the ability to pick me up and deliver me to my reference point?”

John looks at Gretta. Her chin is heavy against her chest as she sleeps, each breath heaving in and out, rocking her entire upper body. He looks at Judy with her mouth hanging open. He looks around the room. Mr. K. sits alone in the sunlight by the window, his hands resting on his cane. John asks, “What good are these people going to do, without knowing a reference point? You can’t just tell me to walk all around and look for it, three-hundred degrees, walking all the way around and never finding.”

I try to redirect his attention to the picture, but he’ll have nothing to do with it anymore.

“Don’t you have any answers?” he asks. He points to the yellow people in the picture. “That’s no help to me. I have no answers for them, looking, just looking.”

I don’t really know how to respond, so I don’t. We sit quietly for a moment.

“Sometimes when I talk to people,” John says, “I ask them if they understand what I am talking about. I don’t know all these words, what I am saying. This is my idea. I haven’t solved the puzzle, yet. Do you know what I am saying? Do you understand? I understand.”

“Yes, John,” I say. “I understand.”

CHAPTER TWENTY: People or Targets

ME: How did the elephants get there?

STORYTELLERS: The owners of the elephants had to take them in there. I don't know. I haven't ever seen any elephants in a church.

ME: Why did the owners take them in there?

STORYTELLERS: The elephants are not getting along. This one wants it one way, that one wants it the other way. Pretty hard to straighten it out. They need to go to the hospital. All the elephants have to do is make a visit and straighten it out. They will operate on the elephants to straighten the problem.

ME: What is the problem?]

STORYTELLERS: The elephants have no say. This one wants to do it the right way. This one wants to warn them. Every bunk has the same rules and the same fruit. Apples, sour cucumbers, and so on - the cheapest and most tasty. Sacrilege. We don't need any elephants in the church. Send a peeping tom to find out what they are doing in there. They are making too much noise.

ME: Who gave them permission to bring elephants in the church?

STORYTELLERS: The leader is Chief of Staff. This person is full of explanatory advices. He's the man we are going to take care of. The Chief of Staff is with the most authority, and is popular and is authorized to do things like that. He will keep all the money. He is fully responsible for every loss. People have to have leaders.

ME: Where did the money come from?

STORYTELLERS: If they want to collect money, they can collect it from the people. This is a waste of four minutes. The people are happy as they can be, but nobody is getting rich. If they get a lot of money, and it is heavy, then the elephants can carry all the money. They are big and can carry heavy loads. If they are using change, and not dollar bills, then it will be very heavy. It seems like he was helping other people. That should have made them happy.

ME: What will he do with the money?

STORYTELLERS: It all depends on his personality - play, take chances, be popular, or be the most wise person. It depends on how you agree with the one who calls certain persons, but it is hard to define persons with ability, because the one who commits this kind of crime has no witnesses. Would you approach a large elephant if you were a small person? I would not do that.

ME: How much money is there?

STORYTELLERS: I don't know. Count it. You should go around equivalent to the years that you have walked around that place, and then you will know how much money the Chief of Staff keeps. The bank holds the money for him, and the bank knows it is his money. If they ask my name, I will say, "My name is yesterday." They don't know my name. If you have a lot of money, then you have a name, and someone will keep somebody from stealing it.

ME: Is that your real name?

STORYTELLERS: Many times I was walking the street, and there were all kinds of people. The majority of them were asking, “Hey! Hey! Which one are you?” They are using names they are not supposed to use, names that are not popular in conversation, names that they are not supposed to use in church. I’m not going to tell you my name. Or maybe I will just call myself “Chuck”.

ME: What happens next?

STORYTELLERS: The Chief of Staff is going to check it all out and make a decision. You must have a base of how to make a decision. Find out which person is the most expensive, because there are people who like different stories and have some fun. He is presented with quite a lot of people. He wants to be popular by doing things people will appreciate. If he has a lot of money then he will be popular. Arming soldiers as frequently as possible, getting in touch with them by conversation. Those who drink go to the bar, those who don’t drink, don’t go to the bar.

ME: Where are they going?

STORYTELLERS: Mars. And do you know what Mars is? It is a planet. I’ll call you in about a year. As far as I can remember, going backwards, the scientists on this earth are trying to find a representative for this earth. I heard that Mars, and then the sun, and then the moon were once classified as one piece of something. Due to the fact that there are thousands of past experience, thousands of pieces, people are also able to ask about detachment. For that kind of expedition, we need an extra engine. Put your mind on those who

are in that kind of space. I explained to someone who wants to know more about the capsule. When collisions take place, it will be very easy to determine that the only person who can do it is the person who knows the capsule can travel, with the advice of scientists and people who have a lot of conversation. Extra, extra curious things, that up until now, no one is able to solve the problem.

ME: What is the problem?

STORYTELLERS: Last week I read an article that they came to the conclusion that the earth is part of seven planets covered with sun in different suns. If they can stop one, maybe there will be signs, and people who are fortunate to be there can find out about it. I never found this kind of money on the street. That is luck with a sign on top of it. Only with luck can you achieve this kind of profit. It is nice to go church and Mars. Interesting, and equally full of power and detachment.

ME: Do people find the answers?

STORYTELLERS: It is possible to find out about everything.

ME: How do they find out?

STORYTELLERS: A book in the library claims Christ will come back again. Maybe when Christ was a part of earth's life, around back then, the only people who were curious were the people who observed Him. These are the only people classified to answer this project. If you like to have very curious questions and answers, try to find the book. Read very slowly, because no

person can claim he knows the answer to this particular project, this kind of readership. The Bible has questions and the Bible has answers, but not the way any normal person can read or explain to himself.

ME: Does this mean they find the answer or does this mean they don't find the answer?

STORYTELLERS: The answer will find a question. Somehow, the pieces of these two items are too fast in order to meet and establish.

ME: How does the story end?

STORYTELLERS: The elephants will find a place in the circus. They leave the money in the bank, I guess.

ME: What should we call the story?

STORYTELLERS: I don't know. Maybe we will call it "People" or maybe we will call it "Targets".

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE: They All Settled It, Didn't They?

It's been about a year since I began working here, first as a service-learning assignment for a class, then as an internship, and now I continue as a volunteer. I continue to do this because....

My professor asks if Stella can work with me. Stella is a new service-learning student who has chosen to get some real-world creative writing experience in the memory care unit. I am excited to have this opportunity to gain a third-person perspective on facilitating storytelling workshops.

When I started this as a service-learning assignment, I wrote an essay about my expectations. In my conversations with Stella prior to our first workshop together, she asks many of the same questions that I asked myself as I wrote that essay. I may have one year of experience, but I still have a lot to learn about how creativity helps people with Alzheimer's and dementia to transcend memory loss. Although I will continue facilitating storytelling workshops, I plan to take some time off to explore avenues through which the short stories I've been collecting can receive more exposure in the general public.

I tell Stella about some of the regular storytellers, their personalities and preferences. Gretta is hard of hearing and doesn't see well. If she sees a picture of a frog and calls it a hippopotamus, don't correct her. Sometimes the other storytellers incorporate Gretta's misperceptions into the story and craft a more imaginative story than they might have if Gretta had recognized the frog. Harry uses a lot of metaphor. If you can figure out his "code" words, then what he's saying will make more sense. Pat doesn't say much, but pay attention to her

gestures. And even though we ought to ask open-ended questions, this doesn't really apply to Pat. She's very good at yes or no. John is a deep thinker. If he's in a talking mood, then let him just keep talking. The other storytellers like hearing what he has to say, and he will amaze you with the way he perceives the world.

In telling Stella about the storytellers, I realize how much I care for them, not just for practical reasons like service-learning or research, but I care for them as my friends. Yes. We are friends. And I decide from this point on, that I will refer to them not only as storytellers, but as my forgetful friends. Sure, there's a huge age gap, and we lead very different lives, but they've found a way to show me who they are, despite their difficulties with memory loss. I may not know who they were as engineers, teachers, and bank managers, but I know who they are now, their current fears, hopes, and opinions.

Stella observes as I facilitate the workshop. Our storytelling prompt is a photo of a well-lit, crowded coffee shop. My friends say that the people are actors preparing for a half-happy, half-sad play. There's a director, a hero, and a love triangle. One of the characters doesn't have a purpose and feels left out. A big fight breaks out. The director's big hair gets tangled up with a picture hanging on the wall. It's a very lively storytelling session even though there are only three storytellers this week.

After the workshop has ended, and Stella and I are walking to the parking lot, I say, "Can I share a little secret with you?"

"Sure," Stella says.

"I left the photo that I meant to use as a storytelling prompt at my house. The one we used this week is the same one we used last week."

“Was the story different last week?” Stella asks.

“Yes, it most definitely was!” I say. “You can go online and read it.”

Last week’s story was about an anniversary party. The husband and wife get into a big fight and nearly ruin the party, but things work out, and everyone is happy in the end, except for one character named Betty. Betty has to clean up all of the party mess.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO: A Cat and a Fish

Stella has been observing for a few weeks now, but still hesitant to attempt facilitate. I encourage her to give it a try, assuring her that if she feels overwhelmed, I'll take over. Stella asks several questions in a row, rewording her questions each time, not leaving enough time for the storyteller to process and answer. Her body language suggests anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. The storytellers pick up on her visual cues, shift in their seats, and mentally retreat in response. After a few minutes, Stella gives me a piercing, panicked look. As a peer mentor, I worry that I haven't set a good example for her as a facilitator. It never occurred to me that my open-ended questions to storytellers could make or break the story. In other words, how do I best communicate the question so that the person with Alzheimer's or dementia is able to best respond? I am challenged in my role as a peer mentor as I wrestle with whether to intercede or let her find her way, because she might just need more time to adjust to the idea of being "in charge."

I opt to intercede, with a back-up photo, although I'm convinced that the photo prompt she has chosen is irrelevant to the difficulty she's experiencing. I "take over" as facilitator for a few minutes. When the frustrated blush has faded from Stella's cheeks, I back off. I simply stop asking open-ended questions and wait for her to get frustrated with me, on purpose. I want to create a situation in which she feels like she needs to help me. As planned, Stella resumes as facilitator, with less apprehension than before. By the end of the workshop, she seems to have a better grasp of what works and what doesn't. For the remainder of the workshop, I second-guess

whether I have made the right decision in swapping out the photo and “rescuing” her. She probably didn’t need to be rescued at all.

In Stella’s reflection journal, she records her experience:

“I brought a photo of a few people sitting at an airport for today’s session, and it was a big flop. I hardly got a response out of anybody. Before I go on, let me explain that every week both Alice and I bring a teaching plan, as a rescue in situations like this. I don’t know why, but the residents had absolutely nothing to say about my photo. Not what I expected. They usually react well to photos consisting of a large group of people, and especially with people of different ethnicities. I predicted wrong for today. Alice’s photo was of a baby, cat, and goldfish, and they LOVED it. They built a grand story from that. Never would I have ever thought that’d be the case.”

Reading Stella’s reflection is an eye-opening experience for me, both as a facilitator and a peer mentor. As a facilitator, the third person perspective enables me to see my own foibles and strengths.

Stella and I meet for lunch mid-week, to brainstorm different workshop ideas and discuss how things are going so far. If Stella believes that the storytellers must have been so unresponsive at first because of the storytelling prompt, it won’t do any good for me to convince her otherwise. What’s important is that she is excited, confident, and full of ideas for future workshops. She knows what she is doing, and she knows that she knows.

Stella records the following in her reflection journal:

“Alice and I made up a survey of questions compiled of general ice breakers and getting to know you (GTKY) questions for the folks at [the assisted living facility] for

today's session. Rather than forcing them to rely on their memory, we kept them broad, to not stress them out. (i.e., rather than asking "What is the worst thing that has ever happened to you?" we asked "What is the worst thing that could happen to someone?" and in their responses, it was obvious they were pulling from their personal memories to answer us. As much as I enjoy the story telling from internet photos we've been doing previous to today, this is not only a breath of fresh air from changing up our routine, I feel like the residents are more interested and invested in this activity. My plan is to keep on this lesson plan for a while before going back to storytelling. I'm going to figure out a way to integrate props and other things with the ice breakers to attract their other senses."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE: Being Thoughtful and Considerate

In my efforts to explore avenues through which the short stories I've been collecting can receive more exposure in the general public, I begin with my immediate circle of friends, family members, and classmates. One of my classes is an advanced poetry course. The professor agrees to allow me five or ten minutes of class time to share a few of the stories by people with Alzheimer's and dementia. My classmates are thrilled with the work, and after the class is over, as we clear the room, they discuss amongst themselves certain lines that caught their attention. The professor, Russ Kesler, sends me an email that evening with some of his favorite lines and a book recommendation, a published collection of poems called *Honeycomb*, by a professor at Rollins College, Carol Frost. Kesler describes the focus of the collection as Frost's "mother's struggle with Alzheimer's," and "how that affected the speaker of the poems."

The content of Frost's poems is very different from my expectations. In the poem, "For the ones" the lines "Isn't this other one listening / from her shell of silence" strike me, because of a situation in today's storytelling workshop.

Margo is a woman who rarely says anything, and those few times that she does, her jumbled, stuttering utterances are so difficult to decipher that I have a hard time typing them into the story. She sits quietly with her stiff hands curled in upon themselves, staring vacantly, while the other storytellers have a discussion about beauty. Their idea is that a woman is loved because of her beauty and that a man loves a woman because a woman is beautiful. They spend a good twenty minutes or so reaffirming this idea amongst themselves.

Because Stella is facilitating the workshop, I have an opportunity to spend some one-on-one time with Margo. I ask her, "What is beauty?" She remains expressionless and silent for quite some time, and I, like the speaker in Frost's poem, ask myself, "Isn't [Margo] listening from her shell of silence?" I stare into her eyes and touch her hand so that maybe, just maybe, she knows that I am there, waiting for a response. The other storytellers move on to a new subject, describing the perfect vacation.

Margo speaks quietly, without making eye contact. If I had not been sitting so near her and paying such close attention, I probably would not have known that she said anything. She speaks clearly, expressing an idea exactly opposite that of the other storytellers, "She is beautiful because he loves her."

In that moment, I decide that no matter how far away a person with Alzheimer's or dementia seems to be, no matter how disconnected or non-expressive, he or she likely is a little bit more in touch than we know. Perhaps by the time he or she processes what is said or done, he or she loses the desire to respond or forms a mental response but forgets how to express it.

Frost paints a picture of total disconnect, "infinity's brainless wind / blows ash, and ash again." I see the fire and wind, the burning and blowing, as a dynamic process of change. This change is decline; I do not deny it. But I believe the brain is attempting to compensate for that decline in astoundingly creative ways that we do not yet understand. The "shell of silence" is thickened by our insistence on interpreting the expressions of someone who has dementia or Alzheimer's by our own linear, realist, critical standards of sense-making.

In "(Tyrannus tyrannus)," Frost writes, "Only the metaphysic flower / feels the approach: and emptying." These lines very eloquently express, the perceptions of rational people about the

deep and unexplored territory of the experience of cognitive decline. Do fully cognizant people want to know what experience the person with Alzheimer's and dementia has? Do they want to know what it is like?

If one is willing and able understand what it is like, then perhaps one can find a way to temporarily enter into that experience. If the people with the disease are no longer able to connect with us in our fast-paced, sensible, and ordered logic, perhaps we can find a way to connect with them.

To what extent can a person with Alzheimer's and dementia be known? I suspect that Frost, like almost every daughter would, observes her mother in light of the person she was before the Alzheimer's changed her. Frost writes, "orange rounds / hung from boughs - breasts, big acorns, eggs, jewelry bags? / She waited, she told me, for the right word / to come back to her." And toward the end of the poem she writes, "until too many of her words / flew like birds of the muses away, so few at first / that their disappearance didn't much matter." Frost's focus is on the mother's loss of vocabulary or the inability to access vocabulary. If the mother can no longer find the word "orange" to express the idea of an orange, then this means that the ability to express the idea of an orange is lost, but it does not necessarily mean that the idea itself is lost.

Maybe the idea of an orange has evolved into something new. Frost's mother has assigned a new meaning to the idea that no one but Frost's mother understands. To her, it makes sense, but unfortunately no one understands or approves of the new meaning assigned to the idea of an orange. Mother, as the creator of new concepts is misunderstood or rejected by her audience because she fails to express her ideas according to the a priori code agreed upon by all

others since she first learned to speak. The a posteriori idea is there in her mind, justified by illogical inference.

I imagine her mother in a storytelling workshop and that the photo prompt for the story is of someone picking an orange. In an environment where oranges are, in fact, breasts or jewelry bags or even jewelry-bag-breasts, mother, as she is, can be known, accepted, and understood. Her ideas are received without first being required to pass through the filter of logic, to be tested for validity according to the standards of rationality. Mother's paradigm is the new standard.

As a creative writer who does not feel the burden and grief of losing “Mother” as she used to be, I marvel in a garden of reproduction (eggs), providence (breasts), hidden splendor (jewelry bags), and huge potential (big acorns). Must “Mother” really be able to say the word orange or understand the properties of an orange in order for others to appreciate her deep and profound impressionistic expression of an orange? Must we grieve that mother no longer conforms to the standard? Can't we celebrate the idea that mother, like a living dream, invites us to view the world as a wonderland of strange new possibilities?

A meaningful exchange takes place in the storytelling workshop that doesn't take place in normal conversation. I believe now, more than ever, that creativity and imagination are a vital communication tool for both those in a state of decline and those who hope to continue sharing meaningful experiences with them, as Ronald Reagan described, "in the sunset" of their lives. We just need to learn how to use the tool.

Honeycomb also reminds me of the maze through which I must navigate in this endeavor, namely, privacy legalities. How can I ever hope to establish a bridge of communication between people with Alzheimer's and dementia and their significant others, not to mention, society in

general, if I am never able to interact with the significant others? I need to find a way to overcome this problem.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR: Alfie

Since “The Painted Lady” is one of the most impressive stories yet, I decide to bring her back, thinking that perhaps Stella may have an opportunity to witness an intensely sacred storytelling session. This time, however, the mannequin head has no elaborately painted female face. Although the story is definitely not at all like “The Painted Lady,” I share Stella’s enthusiasm over the storyteller’s response.



Figure 11: Alfie

“[Alfie] will have an exciting life if she meets her soul mate,” one of the storytellers says.

Harry responds, “It must be me.” He’s holding the head eye level, examining it intimately.

I want to laugh, because I think that Harry is trying to be funny, but his serious expression erases the urge. Harry wants that Styrofoam head to BE somebody. In this moment, I am so thankful that Stella is here, facilitating, because it opens up so much more opportunity for observation and reflection, and this, in combination books I’m reading, is expanding my understanding of people with Alzheimer’s and dementia.

I have recently started reading *The Language of Word Meaning* by Federica Busa and Pierrette Bouillon, and consequently, I have been paying very close attention to the word choices of storytellers. Based on my observations, people with Alzheimer’s and dementia collectively demonstrate a specific approach to language as a result of their impaired ability to understand or convey inferences. Busa and Bouillon say, “If dog means dog because dog --> animal is valid, then knowing that dog --> animal is valid is part and parcel of knowing what the word dog means.” Perhaps creativity is a tool people with Alzheimer’s and dementia use in an attempt to overcome their difficulty with inferences. If so, then they could be considered linguistic inventors. If this isn’t creativity, I don’t know what is. In today’s story, “Alfie,” there are several instances of clever inferences and invented words. Examples include:

“The second that someone comes to somebody’s head, they take it apart. They are very CONTRAPTABLE about it.”

“I didn’t HEAR its eyes.”

“I would put some hair on her. Some type of either one would do [dark or light].
YELLOW, I suppose, that color that is YELLOW. [Blond?] Yes.”

“Come on, we are going to do this. It is FANTASTICAL.”

“I could kind of PARTICTURE it this way.”

In a previous workshop, Stella asked one of the storytellers, "If you could be any animal, what animal would you want to be?"

The storytellers answered, "HAMBURGER.”

And in another workshop, a storyteller kept calling the woman in the picture a dog, and he also was fascinated with her hair.

I want to understand the underlying motivations for the storytellers’ creative word choices and to generate ideas for further qualitative research on how creativity is a tool for transcending memory loss, I try to make sense of what these inferences mean. Some of them are obvious, others, not so obvious. The word “contraptable” likely has its source in the word “contraption,” a mechanical device or gadget. In context, what the storytelling is communicating is that there are some people who treat other people like machines instead of living, breathing, thinking people. In the example, “I didn’t HEAR its eyes,” the storyteller could not remember the word for “see.” Both seeing and hearing are senses. Alfie the Styrofoam head doesn’t have eyes, and the storyteller wants to point this out to everyone else. In the case of the hamburger, hamburger --> cow, and in the case of the dog-lady, dog --> hairy. If one can't remember what the word for cow or hairy is, then one can simply use a word closely associated with it, like hamburger or dog.

Imagine how family, loved ones, and caretakers could benefit from knowing this in their effort to have meaningful communication with a person with dementia, if this observation turns out to be have some truth and relevance. Perhaps some of what people with dementia say is only "nonsense" because their listeners fail to understand their invented words and unconventional, improvisational inferences.

I want listeners to pay attention to how the “no-sense” language fits within the context of the conversation, since Busa and Bouillon say that, “rhetorical relations [...] influence metaphor.” Busa and Bouillon offer, as an example of this concept, the sentence, "Sam is a pebble." By itself, this sentence makes little sense. But paired with another couple of sentences, the metaphor makes more sense, "Sam is a pebble. John is a rock. But compared to John, Sam is a pebble."

Harry is hogging Alfie the Styrofoam head. The other storytellers want to hold it, especially now that Stella has shown the storytellers the hats. For the moment, in Harry’s mind, the whole world revolves around Alfie. He says, “Her looks are not like stone looks. How did all these people (referring to the other storytellers) come from stone? How do I fit into their shoes? The stone looks too much like somebody I know. It is the face of a woman. How did all of us come out of stone? She wants to find her parents; they went to stone. There’s five stones here (he points to the other people in the workshop), and I don’t know where they came from. I don’t know why they all lived in stone.”

Perhaps Harry is expressing the idea that he finds it just as difficult to relate to the papier-mâché covered Styrofoam head in his hands as he does relating to the other storytellers. He knows that papier-mâché is not the same as stone, but stone is the word he chooses to describe the papier-mâché. The desire to identify with the other storytellers is clearly demonstrated by

Harry question about fitting into their shoes. Harry says that he and the other storytellers came out of stone, and he says that the main character of the story wants to find her parents, who had gone to stone. In both expressions, Harry is attempting to identify with the storytellers and with the story, and he is using the word "stone" as his lifeline to both. The meaning of the metaphor is obviously significant to Harry, because he is very intentional and consistent in using the stone metaphor throughout the entire story, without any encouragement to do so.

The stone metaphor never becomes a part of the story for anyone else. That's part of the reason the stone metaphor makes little sense to anyone else, regardless of how many times Harry employs it, no matter how many different expressions he uses to frame it. Regardless, Harry is successful in expressing his feelings of frustration, that he wants to be a part of the storytelling group and the storytelling itself, and that the only way he knows how is to return again and again, to his first impression of the story prompt, his own "private" metaphor.

Days after our storytelling session, I am haunted by Harry's stone metaphor. What does it mean? I have a stack of books to read, but few of them delve deeply into linguistics. So I pull some references from the back of *The Language of Word Meaning*, go to the library, and throw out my left shoulder carrying all the books back to my car. I also send a lengthy email to my mentor and ask, "I am curious if you have any thoughts about inconsistency in Harry's stone metaphor. Is there something I am overlooking? Do his metaphors relate and I, the listener, am just failing to connect the dots? He spoke with such sincerity and conviction, it seems like a shame to miss how stone may have been significant to each expressed thought."

"I would interpret his use of stone as something solid--life itself," she says. There's only one sentence that at first reading doesn't seem to fit this interpretation: 'She wants to find her

parents, they went to stone.’ And yet, isn't death part of life? In this instance ‘stone’ seems to refer to death. So even here, the use of ‘stone’ refers to the corporeal--the body, the physical aspect of life, rather than the ethereal.”

Cartesian Linguistics by Noam Chomsky describes human language as “free from the control of independently identifiable external stimuli or internal states and is not restricted to any practical communicative function [...] It is thus free to serve as an instrument of free thought and self-expression.” This lends support to the idea that validity judgments that fully cognizant people impose upon the unusual language choices of people with Alzheimer's and dementia are biased. Just because the verbal self-expression of a person who has Alzheimer's or dementia sometimes (or often) does not serve “any practical communicative function,” this does not necessarily mean that the fault ought to be placed upon the speaker. In other words, just because the hearer does not understand the intended function of the communication, it does not mean that the speaker had no purpose in uttering the words. According to Chomsky, “language has an inner and an outer aspect. A sentence can be studied from the point of view of how it expresses a thought or from the point of view of [...] semantic interpretation [...]”

We must not assume when the hearer cannot identify speaker's purpose there is no purpose. Perhaps even the speaker, from one moment to the next, forgets the purpose behind the self-expression, but I do not believe that self-expression can happen independently of a thinking self — the human being still exists.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE: Music is the Best Medicine

Chapter Twenty-Seven: Music is the Best Medicine

“Alive Inside,” a YouTube video, demonstrates the role that music plays in awakening people with Alzheimer’s and dementia. Yvonne Russell, Recreational Therapist at Cobble Hill Assisted Living Facility says, “I have one resident that barely opened her eyes, she didn’t respond. As much as I tried, I’ve known her for two years, no matter what, massage wouldn’t work, nothing worked. But when we got introduced to the iPods, and the family told me the things that she liked, it was amazing when we put the iPod on her. She started shaking her feet. She started moving her head. Her son was just amazed. Okay, can we stop, because I’m getting [...] I’m seeing her all over again.” Yvonne is too emotional to continue the interview.

In the same video, a family member describes the musical experience of another resident in the same facility, “He was [...] always fun loving, [...] every occasion he would come out with a song, no matter where he was. I remember as a child, he used to walk us down the street, me and my brother, and he would stop and do ‘Singing in the Rain.’ He would have us jumping and swinging around poles. He was good, you know. He always loved singing and dancing.” On the video, there’s a close-up head shot of Henry, who is unresponsive. But once he hears his favorite music, he hums along, with wide-open, expressive eyes. When the music stops, the effect doesn’t wear off. Henry is able to have a conversation about music. Someone asks, “What does music do to you?”

Henry replies, “It gives me the feeling of love. Romance. I figure right now the world needs to come into music, singing, you’ve got beautiful music here. Beautiful. Lovely. I feel a

band of love of dreams. The Lord came to me, made me holy. I'm a holy man, so he gave me these sounds."

Stella wants to play music for the storytellers today to see if they might have an experience similar to Henry's.

Stella writes in her reflection journal:

"Today was a HIT! The residents took to the music like a teenage girl to gossip. We started off with soft rock instrumental hits, which got the residents to relax but not really to talk. When I stated playing The Drifters and The Beach Boys and their creative juices really got a-flowing. A resident by the name of [name omitted] even started to sing along to "California Girls" and shook her head excitedly when I told her it was by a band called The Beach Boys."

One of the storytellers says, "It makes you think of past days. How much fun and different things were. It makes you get it on."

Inspired by the storytellers' responses, I find some prewriting I did for a poem a few months prior and set out to write a poem from the perspective of one who has Alzheimer's. The technique I use for the prewriting is to listen opera music with German lyrics and write what I feel the words ought to be, to use words to express the soothing flutes, maniacal vocal trills, thunderous bass drums, and mourning violins. During this prewriting session, the words move into me and out of me like a current flowing through the daydreaming recesses of my brain, picking up nightmarish sediment along the way.

My hope in writing the poem is that I can play advocate or spokesperson and demonstrate the confusion and forgetfulness of Alzheimer's and dementia but also the clever word

combinations, imagination, and raw emotion. As I scour my brain, trying to find the precise words to illustrate what a connection I feel between the expressiveness of music as an auditory picture for a storytelling workshop with people who have Alzheimer's and dementia, all my words pale in comparison to those of Gretta the storyteller, who says, "Music is the whole soul." She stretches the "o" sound in the final two words so that the whole room is satisfied with her simple, musical words. After thirteen drafts, I've retired my unfinished poem to The Junkyard, a spiral notebook loaded with my unfinished, rainy-day writing.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX: What Is Creativity?

During the summer semester, I attempt to find a different assisted living facility, thinking that perhaps if I start fresh in a new environment, I might be able to meet and interact with family members and friends of the storytellers. It's a shame that people in general don't know that creativity seems to be a retained ability in people with Alzheimer's and dementia, but it's a travesty that families and friends of people with Alzheimer's and dementia are included in that group named "people in general."

At the end of my final session with my forgetful friends, I explain my plans and tell them that it has been a wonderful experience working with them. I expect that they will give me their usual half-hearted goodbyes, not really understanding the significance of what I'm saying. I expect that since they don't remember who I am or why I'm there from week to week, that it won't bother them much at all. I should know better. It seems that every time I set expectations, the storytellers turn those expectations upside-down and inside-out, wrestling my understanding of who they are or how they feel.

The storytellers fall silent, not because they are sleepy, not because they are withdrawn, but because they really do understand the significance, at least the emotional significance, of what I'm saying. When they finally verbalize their perspectives, I know that I haven't imagined that they understand. They really do understand. The bond we've developed is mutual. They don't know my name, but they know me. They don't know how we know one another or remember that the activity (storytelling) has knit us together, but they do know that I'm not just some stranger who is casually saying goodbye. I am betraying their trust in leaving.

I spend about two weeks making phone calls and dropping off contact cards. During this time, I wrestle with my decision. On one hand, we're friends, and as one storyteller says, "Friends don't just leave you behind." On the other hand, if I am going to pursue my goal of giving voice to people with Alzheimer's and dementia, not just in the memory care unit, but in the public arena, then I am going to need the cooperation and participation of storytellers' families and friends. After a string of roadblocks and dead ends, I give up on the idea of connecting with families and friends via assisted living facilities. I'll have to find some other way. That ever-elusive other way has its foundation in the stories told by people with Alzheimer's and dementia. The stories have the potential to revolutionize the systems that segregate the storytellers from their families and friends and society.

With the decrease in cognitive ability in people with Alzheimer's and dementia, is there also an increase in creativity, much like the sense of hearing or touch becomes heightened with the loss of sight? As a service-learning participant, have I learned more about creative writing than my peers who do not participate in service learning? I have already affirmed, in my own mind, a positive response to both of these questions. But I realize that in order to explore these questions in such a way that others, who have not witnessed what Basting refers to as the "magic" of creativity transcending memory loss, can receive. I need to be able to accurately assess creativity itself. Exactly how does one go about measuring creativity? What purpose does creativity serve in transcending memory loss? A rubric for creativity might give this slippery "creative research" a little bit more validity in the academic community.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN: Peek-A-Boo

Professor Thaxton pairs me with another service-learning student named Lana. I first meet Lana by email, and then at a bookstore on campus at UCF. She reminds me of Princess Jasmin from the Disney cartoon, Alladin. Lana's father has dementia, so I'm especially excited to begin working with her. I imagine that her reflection journal will include some observations about how facilitating a storytelling workshop affects her relationship with her father in a positive way. Lana watches the video I created for "Blood on His Sword," and listens to an audio file of "People or Targets," professionally narrated by George Sarris, voice artist. I go over what I'm learning in TimeSlips training, and Lana tells me stories about her dad.

I tell Lana about how, in the summer of 2012, I attended Uncle Orson's Literary Boot Camp, a weeklong, intensive writing workshop facilitated by the Hugo Nebula award-winning author of Ender's Game, Orson Scott Card. He taught a brainstorming technique for writing called "else-ing," that is, the author asks what a character does or why the character is the way he is, comes up with an answer, rejects that answer, and tries to think of a different answer. The author repeats this process until any or all answers are exhausted. Then, and only then, the author decides which answer to use. Consequently, the author avoids stereotypes and over-used concepts. People with Alzheimer's and dementia naturally create non-stereotypical story concepts, like having a baby for picnic lunch, without having to "else" at all. Because of Lana's experience with her father's dementia, she already understands exactly how this works. We sit and talk over coffee for nearly two hours, and both of us are amazed at how much time has passed when we part ways.

Lana writes in her reflection journal before the first workshop:

I'm not going to lie, I'm really nervous. I don't want to think I'll be a good storyteller leader and then end up being terrible. My dad has early dementia and he is definitely a huge reason for my interest in this project. I'm used to repeating myself, screaming so he can hear me, random topics of conversation that don't make sense to "normal" people but make perfect sense to him (and sometimes me), so I know I'll have the patience and heart to get to know each resident at Emeritus. [... Alice] played some stories for me and I couldn't help but laugh or cry! If I do well with the residents at Emeritus, I want to be able to work with my dad using the same creative practice. Maybe he'll stop second-guessing his own brain and feel confident enough to be himself again, regardless of how much he feels his life has changed.

After the first workshop observation, Lana writes:

Today was both exactly, and nothing like, the experience I thought I would have [...] I want to be able to experience the residents in all of their good and bad days because then I can understand. And then, the story builds on some real symbolism, not the fake stuff we writers think we're geniuses for 'coming up' with. The residents lack the censorship that we do, sort of like they've regressed back to their childhoods. They've become elder innocents, newborns in old worlds. They may not remember half of their lives, but they can remember feelings and actions. I can't wait to see more personalities flying around our circle.

At Lana's second workshop, I invite her to facilitate with me. Participants have gathered in a semicircle in the living room, we've given each person a nametag, and we are using fat

Sharpie markers to write the story on a large, presentational pad of paper. Lana asks open-ended questions and encourages response. Lana reflects on the experience:

I love retelling the conversations I have with the residents because I am continually reminded of the workings of their brains. I wish I could be as uncensored and unworried as the residents [...] At the end of storytelling today, one of the residents [...] was very unhappy. She kept resorting to wanting to kill herself because "What's the point? You don't care, I don't care, and we both know it." My dad has said some very similar words to me, mostly because he thinks it's what my family wants so we're not so 'burdened' by him. I wish there was a way to make the residents understand that they're not there because they're forgotten or alone, but because it's easier to be around people who can help if something went wrong. Today's story was a happy one, at least. It ended with a dog named Peek-a-Boo being adopted by a "bite-size" child no more than four inches tall!

After the workshop, I tell Lana that she's ready to facilitate on her own. She's confident, her technique is good, and there's no reason that I can see why she should wait. Lana writes about this as well:

I start my own storytelling leads next week. So far, I've found four or five good pictures to bring in, but I hope the residents take me seriously. Some of them are aware that I'm very young and don't bother speaking to me. I've noticed some of the residents that don't acknowledge me openly speak to Alice, but that may be because she's been part of Emeritus for a while now. I'm sure once my face isn't a complete stranger there anymore, the residents will at least subconsciously recognize me. Kindness may be a

good sign that I'm "accepted" in the residents' home, so I'm hoping for more smiles next week.

Lana's reflections confirm the connection I referred to before, the connection that I didn't realize went both ways until I said goodbye. Yes, I had come to consider the storytellers my friends, but I had never realized that they felt the same way about me. Lana's reflections prompt me to go back and reexamine Stella's reflections. I had written about Stella, "Stella asks several questions in a row, rewording her questions each time, not leaving enough time for the storyteller to process and answer. Her body language suggests anxiety and a lack of self-confidence. The storytellers pick up on her visual cues, shift in their seats, and mentally retreat in response. After a few minutes, Stella gives me a piercing, panicked look."

It had not occurred to me that the negative emotional push back had originated in the storytellers and that Stella's nervous energy could have been an effect instead of a cause. Lana asks clear, open-ended questions. Lana gives storytellers ample time to process and respond. Lana's body language and mannerisms are open and calm. Yet, Lana is getting the same push-back from the storytellers as Stella.

Lana identifies the problem when she writes, "residents that don't acknowledge me, but openly speak to Alice, but that may be because she's been part of Emeritus for a while now. I'm sure once my face isn't a complete stranger there anymore, the residents will at least subconsciously recognize me." The most operative word she uses is "subconsciously."

The storytellers, if someone were to ask them, cannot say, "This is Alice, and she's been facilitating weekly storytelling workshops here in the memory care unit for almost two years now." It is too difficult or confusing for the storytellers to use the words or symbols called

“Alice” or “facilitating” or “storytelling” or “two years” in an accurate and relatable way. For them, symbols are merely labels for underlying concepts, mental representations of the world. The storytellers have difficulty recalling or implementing the word-symbols for the concepts, but the concepts, themselves, are evidently still in tact. The mental representation of the world of “I know Alice” contrasted with the mental representation of the world of “I don’t know Stella” and “I don’t know Lana” are manifested in their emotional responses. Storyteller’s conceptual views are labeled, mislabeled, or not labeled at all, and that’s why we mistakenly assume that they are “gone.”

If I take this idea of retained concepts and apply it to linguistic definitions of creativity, it demonstrates how creativity is, at the very least, retained, but more likely, increased in people with Alzheimer’s and dementia. Lana’s journal reflections lend support to my hunch. Lana writes,

I caught myself hoping for some ramblers this week because the best lines and ideas come from those minds. I'm sure I don't have to reiterate how sad it is to watch people lose their ability to associate memories with real life, but the storytelling makes the thought less sad for me. The ‘crazy’ or ‘unconscious’ language that comes from some of the residents feels like it's come from a deep place inside their heads, like a form of lost art. Sounds that have been molded by our language, words that have been shaped off our lips, mean nothing to these storytellers and I'm so grateful that we can use this project as a filter for their sparks.

Cognitively unimpaired people fill the ears of people with Alzheimer’s and dementia with symbols that have less and less meaning due to cognitive decline. We have to learn how to

slowly, deliberately, patiently speak the many, varied, conceptual languages of individuals with Alzheimer's and dementia. We must learn how to speak and understand "creative expression."

Studying creativity through the lens of linguistics allows me to explain how the storytellers bend the rules of language to accommodate their condition. If the assumption that linguistic and mental processes are virtually identical is true, then linguists ought to be able to make determinations about the mental processes of people with Alzheimer's and dementia through various stages of the disease and/or treatment, in the same way that neurologists rely on brain scans to determine whether medications, diet, exercise, or other external factors slow symptoms of Alzheimer's and dementia.

Linguistic creativity, according to Busa and Bouillon, is "a generative ability to extend the expressive possibilities of language in a potentially infinite number of ways. From the perspective of the lexicon, it is the ability to give new meanings to words beyond their literal use." People with Alzheimer's and dementia use creativity to make up for what they lack in cognitive ability, to experience and express meaning. The problem is there is no unanimous definition for creativity, especially spoken creativity, which can be so easily misinterpreted and misunderstood, because it is as subjective as language itself. Addressing reasons, common sense understanding, and appropriateness, Chomsky writes, "discourse is not a series of random utterances but fits the situation that evokes it but does not cause it, a crucial, if obscure difference." The general impression society has about people with Alzheimer's and dementia seems to be that they don't address reason, have very little common sense, and use language that is not appropriate to the circumstance, or to borrow Chomsky's words, people with Alzheimer's and dementia seem to engage in a series of "random utterances" that "don't fit the situation."

The cause for their verbal expressions, in the view of society, seems to be generated by the random firing of synapses and ought to be ignored as if the person is some kind of broken computer speech program just making noise.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT: Is Anyone Listening?

Storytelling workshops have helped me to discover that what may seem on the surface to be random utterances are often not random at all, rather, the stories are close cousins with expressionism and surrealism, which according to *NTC's Dictionary of Literary Terms*, is the linguistic equivalent of "theater of the absurd, [... in which] characters [are] struggling to find order and purpose in irrational and incomprehensible situations." For example, a storyteller named Jean just keeps talking and talking, so much so, that others cannot get a word in edgewise. Her monologue seems to have no purpose, but I just keep typing what she says, accurately recording as many words recorded as possible, and postponing any complicated attempt to understand exactly what she is saying until later, when I am able to explore her conceptualization of beauty. Soon after, when I am closely reading her story, I discover meaning in her words. She says, "What does it mean to be beautiful? As soon as we get water into it, you put your head in and go 'Ah, ah, ah.' This is not it. Forget the silly thing you put in. You have to go in and say, 'This is the nicest place to go in. That's a good deal. Come on (blows kiss), next person (blows kiss), next person (blows kiss).'"

My interpretation of Jean's words is as follows:

"What does it mean to be beautiful?" = Beauty is not easily defined.

"As soon as we get water into it," = Jean is likely thinking of the concept of the fluidity. Liquid has no fixed shape and yields easily to external pressure. It is a word-symbol used to describe a concept. Jean's cognitive impairments prevent her from recalling the word-symbol. Her creativity kicks in and provides her with a substitute, that is, water.

"you put your head in and go 'Ah, ah, ah. This is not it.'" = Jean continues with the water analogy saying that you can submerge yourself in the concept of beauty and discover that it isn't what you thought it was.

"Forget the silly thing you put in." = It's pointless to impose your idea of beauty upon beauty itself.

"You have to go in and say this is the nicest place to go in. That's a good deal." = Just appreciate beauty for beauty's sake.

"Come on (blows kiss), next person (blows kiss), next person (blows kiss)" = Jean gives a dramatic visual representation of "appreciating beauty for beauty's sake" by blowing kisses to other storytellers.

Jean then retreats into a blissful world of introspection, half-smiling, studying the faces of the other storytellers, but no longer visibly paying attention to the story. At the end of the story, her remarks demonstrate that she is still considering the concept of beauty and the meaning of beauty in relationships. She says to the other storytellers, "I like you. I like me. We have a good one!" The other storytellers applaud, nodding and agreeing with her.

Someone else says, "A good one today," satisfied with her conclusion to the story. This example of apparently random utterances not being as random as we cognitively-unimpaired believe can also be used to demonstrate something that comes naturally to people with Alzheimer's and dementia, something that the cognitively-unimpaired do not easily recognize, that is, the use of metaphor.

Harry's metaphorical designation(s) remains a mystery, but even so, Henry provides hearers and readers with enough information that we are able to clearly identify mood and tone,

and consequently, meaning. Similarly, Jean's metaphorical designation(s) remains a mystery, and hearers have no way of knowing whether their assumptions about "this word" representing "that idea" are true or false, unless the speaker offers clarification. Jean provides hearers and readers with enough information that we are able to clearly identify mood and tone, and from there, we can make reasonably accurate assumptions about meaning. The way that speakers clarify meaning is by properly labeling concepts. But this is just a fancy way of saying, "Use the right word." People with Alzheimer's and dementia are in the habit of using the "wrong" words, but I prefer to say that people with Alzheimer's and dementia are in the habit of using "their own" words.

The object of Jean's water metaphor is the fluidity and subjectivity of the concept of beauty. Here, I apply the concepts from Busa and Boullon to emphasize that Jean's metaphor has aesthetic value that goes "beyond what is given by the rules of language but it presuppose[d] and rest[ed] on such rules." It requires the "imagination, aesthetic sensitivity, and creative reconceptualization" of the listener in order to be understood as something that is "about the world, [... and at] the same time, [...] differs from that of literal uses." Jean may not be aware that her use of metaphor is in complete agreement with creative understanding, the general lexicon, and what is considered to be an adequate theory of metaphor, nevertheless, that is exactly what she accomplished.

The poem collection, *Honeycombs*, opens with several quotations from *Pliny, Natural History, Book 11*. The rationality of Pliny and other ancient minds reminds me very much of people with Alzheimer's and dementia. I wonder why this might be, and I realize that even a fully cognizant ancient mind did not have access to the knowledge and discoveries that have

taken place since Pliny the Elder wrote. People with Alzheimer's and dementia, because of memory loss and confusion, have diminished access to sense-making that must have sounded very scientific at the time now seems irrational. For example, bees “extract bee-glue from the tears of [...] trees” and honey is made from dew, which is the “sweat of heaven” or “saliva emanating from the stars,” hence its sweet flavor.

As I read these attempts at sense-making, I am reminded of my reading of Plato's *Timeaus*. Several times, I put the book down and imagine what it must have been like to live in a time when so many mysteries had yet to be unraveled. Were they comfortable with irrationality? Perhaps someone in the distant future will do the same thing, pause the computer implant in his or her brain long enough to imagine what life was like before the mysteries of quantum physics were explained.

How can a particle be both here and there at the same time? Why is a change in a particle reflected in its counterpart, even when they are separated by millions of miles? Why do the behaviors of particles change when particles "know" they are being observed? It seems the more we understand, the weirder our questions become. How does a photon predict the future? How does a lab technician change the past? Our attempts at answering and asking now require more imagination and creativity than ever before. Scientists must be okay with irrational possibilities in order to explore the quantum universe (universes?).

Storytelling with people who have Alzheimer's and dementia is a playground for exploring irrational possibilities. In the story, “Gangsters in Chicago,” John says, "Trees without support from the ground will not be growing properly, the skin detaches, and then they have a 50% chance of being male or female," and Harry adds, while turning his photo sideways, "...and

then the wheel on the sidewalk will go riding up the building." Why does something like this happen? The storytellers eventually conclude, "...they study the camera to see how and why it happened." Although I certainly don't think that people with Alzheimer's and dementia are considering quantum mechanics, nor do I think that they have the same reasoning capabilities as Plato or Pliny, I do think that their attempts to express themselves with limited mental resources and jumbled data (what used to be memories of experiences and knowledge) available to them can provide inspiration to people, like quantum physicists, who find it necessary to think outside the box.

A fully cognizant ancient mind, like Pliny the Elder, did not have access to the knowledge and discoveries that have taken place since Pliny the Elder wrote. Sense-making that must have sounded very scientific at the time now seems irrational. People with Alzheimer's and dementia, because of memory loss and confusion, also have limited access to knowledge and discoveries. Just as the ancient scientist had permission to attempt sense-making without first having all the necessary information, so we must allow people with Alzheimer's and dementia to attempt sense-making having lost all the necessary information. We must validate their efforts, however irrational their conclusions may be to those of us who think we possess the missing or lost information.

Chomsky's book, *Cartesian Linguistics* provides some documented theories about language as a medium for creativity. Researchers in Alzheimer's and dementia should take these theories into consideration with the same fervor as researching for a cure. According to Wilhelm von Humboldt, "Speech is an instrument of thought and self-expression. It plays an 'immanent' and 'constructive' role in determining the nature of man's cognitive processes [...]" (qtd. in

Chomsky 20). If self-expressive speech can shape cognitive processes, then shouldn't the intentional use of creative speech (like storytelling workshops) have some kind of positive affect on the cognitive processes of workshop participants who have Alzheimer's and dementia compared to non-participants? And until there is a cure, shouldn't this be considered just as important in treating Alzheimer's and dementia as subscribing medication and caring for physical needs?

Martha is so much more than a lost and bewildered soul. She is deeply caring, spunky, and sensible. For example, this week the storytellers get stuck, and Martha helps them overcome their writer's block. The main character is a mother named "Mama" who is looking for her son, Charlie. Mama wants to let people know that her son is missing and decides to put an ad in the newspaper, but as fate (or some of the storytellers) would have it, her phone isn't working. Martha leans forward, as she always does when her wheels are turning, and suggests, "A friend to help her is the main thing, get her another phone is all I can say."

Just to be sure I understand, I ask, "So, her friend got her a new telephone?"

"Yes."

Rational minds examine such a gaping plot hole and assign the story equal worth with that of a kindergartner's story - cute, silly, and not to be taken seriously. However, because the art of non-traditional storytelling is one way in which the social need to communicate is satisfied for this undervalued segment of the population, rational minds ought to suspend disbelief and recognize the point Martha is really making here. Martha's creativity doesn't care to ask how Mama's friend knows that she needs a phone; Mama's friend simply knows. In Martha's mind, it makes perfect sense. She speaks volumes about what it means to be a friend, anticipating

needs, and being observant enough to show up and help without being asked. Friends are there for each other. None of the other storytellers oppose Martha's idea, so into the story it goes.

Through storytelling, people with memory loss in our community have a voice. But is anyone listening? The storytellers decide to call the story "Lost and Found." I upload it to writingfancy.blogspot.com. Who will read their story? Who will discover the unique perspective of time and place that people with Alzheimer's have? "[Charlie's] mama is looking for him. Where did she put him last? She looks in the closet. She looks back where Charlie was born, in the nursing home or the hospital. She's looking the other way. She goes to the water to make sure he doesn't drown."

The maternity ward of a hospital, a place equated with new beginnings, and the memory care unit of a nursing home, a place equated with lingering endings, overlap in the minds of the storytellers. In *Flight to Canada*, a satire that questions political culture, Ishmael Reed employs nonlinear narrative as a convention-breaking literary technique. Perhaps Reed uses this technique to emphasize the unique experience of African-Americans as a people-group ripped from the normalcy of their lives and transported to a land where time and place no longer had the same meaning. Similarly, storytellers with Alzheimer's and dementia break conventions as they express their unique experiences with memory loss and confusion. They've "lost" the memories of their children somewhere between the maternity ward and the nursing home, yet they never give up searching.

APPENDIX

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcAxgfYAJus>

Alice Spicer. "Looking for the Reference Point." Video. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Nov. 2012. Web.

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cx_kl8e0Q7E

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http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NKDXuCE7LeQ&feature=player_embedded#!

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