

**Social Potluck:
Everyone has something to bring to the table**

by

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A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

in

THE COLLEGE OF GRADUATE STUDIES

(Interdisciplinary Studies)

THE UNIVERSITY OF BRITISH COLUMBIA

(Okanagan)

July 2012

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Abstract

Social Potluck is an interactive community food storytelling performance project created by Gabriel Newman. Central to the work is the belief that the dinner table is the most important performance venue in our society. By trading meals for stories, Newman collects stories and creates unique and personal performances about and for the participants as a way of building community and celebrating the community's ability to practice the oral art of storytelling. Three voices, which represent three perspectives of Gabriel Newman -the artist, the student and the performer -present the findings using stories, anecdotes, photographs and critical theory to articulate the Social Potluck experience.

Preface

Social Potluck received ethics approval from the University of British Columbia Okanagan Research Ethics Board. Social Potluck's ethic's number is H10-02388.

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Glossary

Commodification	The economic process of turning an item, service or experience into a product, which can be bought or sold. Commodification implies the loss of exclusivity and consequently diminished value in exchange for wider availability of the product.
Dialogical	A term used to describe communication that embodies a number of different perspectives. Primarily known as a literary term, it refers to a written work, such as a novel, that has a variety of voices. When used to describe live performance, it refers to productions that encourage interaction and dialogue between the performers and the spectators.
Embody	The act of giving a concept a tangible, often physical, form. Performance that personifies an idea through the use of the body's memory or knowledge is an example of embodied performance.
Intervention	An artistic technique, which intentionally interrupts daily living in order to challenge artistic, social or commercial conventions. Interventions can take the form of conceptual art, installation, graffiti or performance art among others...
Monological	A term used to describe communication that is presented as definitive with no expectation or desire for a response. Traditional dramatic presentations are considered to be monological since the performances come from the single voice of an author and are presented to spectators as a completed script.
Polyphonic	A term used to describe communication that embodies many voices and perspectives. Traditionally known as a musical expression, <i>polyphonic</i> refers to the texture created by two or more voices in a melody. A storytelling circle, which provides opportunities for everyone at the circle to contribute, is a polyphonic form of performance.

Acknowledgements

I wish to recognize Neil Cadger, Denise Kenney, Michael V. Smith, Bernard Momer and Anne Fleming for the advice, guidance and support as my supervisory committee.

I want to thank Tyler Hansen who went beyond the role of assistant and friend by spending countless hours with me looking for locations, washing dishes, recording both the dinners and performances and editing.

Sharon Josephson provided invaluable feedback and editing as well as endless support.

This project would not have been possible without those who participated in the Social Potluck experiments. Their openness, generosity and support made Social Potluck not only happen but a joy to work on.

Social Potluck is dedicated to my family. Your dinner time performances offer me perspective, meaning and inspiration.

Dramatis Personae

“*Storytelling* is defined as the ability to shape life events into experience in a web of stories rather than a monological narrative. **Storytelling** does not take for granted that narratives are accurate representations (or reflections) of one's life experience.”

(Boje)

The document that follows is presented as a series of stories using the Social Potluck performance format. *The Encyclopedia of Case Study Research* states that storytelling “can be viewed as a means for ordering potentially disconnected experiences into mutually interrelated, meaningful episodes of a larger plot” (Boje). Because of the variety of perspectives present, I have divided the content into three separate “voices.” They are all my voice but they represent different aspects of my personality and the various roles I played in creating and conducting Social Potluck as my Master’s of Fine Arts in Interdisciplinary Performance thesis project at the University of British Columbia Okanagan: I am an artist, a performer, and a student. Thomas King, award winning author, storyteller and scholar, says that “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” (2). This document consists of my stories told through my various voices. I will be using *story reflexivity* to frame the creation and contextualize Social Potluck. *Story reflexivity* is described as “a matter of noticing the internal and external dialogue among our identities” (Boje). There will be stories that were collected and performed at one of the two trials of Social Potluck I conducted in Vernon and Kelowna, British Columbia. There will also be stories about the creation of the project, as well as commentary about how this project fits within contemporary artistic practices. The three voices are represented by different typographic fonts.

The Artist: The working artist who must consider the choices, obstacles and solutions for implementing the project. The Artist is represented by Times New Roman 12 pt. font.

The Performer: The Performer represents the oral tradition by presenting a transcript of selections from the Social Potluck performances. The style of the Performer is the spoken word as it was performed, not as it was written. The Performer, representing a performance that has passed, does not comment on the project unless a comment occurred during the performance. The Performer is represented by italicized Times New Roman 12 pt. font.

The Student: The student places the project within current academic and artistic discussions. The student is represented by indented 12 pt. Lucinda Sans font.

Aperitif

Neighbours

Once upon a time, in the Okanagan Valley of British Columbia, there were two couples. Both these couples had young children and both were moving to a new home.

One day something unexpected happened to one of the couples. Couple number one was in the kitchen unpacking and their infant daughter was having a nap in her crib in the nursery.

The couple had the baby monitor turned on so that they could hear every grunt and sigh.

They were new parents. Suddenly, they heard a man's voice coming from the baby monitor.

Now, to be clear, this story took place a number of years ago, back when baby monitor

technology and cordless phone technology were practically identical. So, while it was

surprising, the couple quickly realized that the monitor must have picked up a neighbour's

phone conversation. The voice said, "Yeah, they just arrived. They are unpacking now. I

think they are from the coast. They have a baby." The couple realized with horror that

whoever belonged to the voice was talking about them. Nervously, the couple continued to

listen to the conversation until they heard the voice say dismissively, "they seem kind of

*square. The husband looks like Jim Carrey's character from *The Truman Show*¹." The wife*

quickly turned off the baby monitor before the voice could comment on her.

Now, couple number two, when they arrived at their new home noticed that their next-door neighbour was tuning up his motorcycle. "Oh dear," they thought, "I hope he doesn't work

¹ The Truman Show (1998) is a film about a man, Truman Burbank, who discovers that his idealistic, prototypical American 1950's life is artificially created because he is actually living in a giant television studio where he is the star of the show. Truman's character is a spoof of the naive, comic husband character from early television known for saying, "Howdy neighbour" everyday on his way to and from work. It is this cliché of 1950's domesticity that the neighbour is mocking.

on his motorcycle all the time.” They were concerned about noise and about this man’s possible associates.

Shortly after arriving at their new house it was clear that before couple number two could completely unpack all the downstairs and stairway flooring needed to be replaced. So, it was decided that the wife would take the children on a trip for the long weekend so that the husband could replace the flooring. While the husband quickly pulled out, ripped out, chiseled up and generally dismantled the flooring, it became clear that installing new flooring was not part of his skill set. So, after he’d removed all the flooring he sat on his front step contemplating his situation. At that moment, his neighbour came over to introduce himself. After a brief introduction, conversation turned to the renovation project and the obstacles to completing it. The neighbour asked a number of particular questions in regards to materials, square footage, and stair run. “That shouldn’t be a problem,” said the neighbour, “let me just call work and see what they have in stock and then I’ll get my tools.” It turned out that the neighbour was employed as a flooring installer. This neighbour, who the couple had expressed concerns about days earlier, spent his entire long weekend installing flooring in their house so they could continue unpacking. He refused any payment.

Well, let me tell you, that neighbour can now do no wrong. He can do pretty much whatever he wants and this couple will never complain because not only are they in his debt but they share a story.

I tell you these two stories because they illustrate how we relate to each other as human beings. What is your relationship with your neighbours? Do you share a story? Do you know their story? Do they know yours? Have you sat down at a table together?

Introduction

In 2009 I started a journey to figure out how I could continue to practice as a performing artist, in a manner that I found exciting and relevant, while living in a smaller city. In order to aid this journey, I returned to university as a mature student to pursue my Masters of Fine Arts at the University of British Columbia Okanagan. Through my years researching performance styles, relational aesthetics, social practice, interventions and embodied work, I developed a structure for creating community-based storytelling projects that combined everything I love about performing while celebrating humanity's innate ability to perform itself through the art form of storytelling. I call the structure Social Potluck because in it I am creating community storytelling exchanges. Potluck refers to both the act of a community gathering, where everyone brings food to a communal meal, as well as to whatever food may be available² when guests arrive at a home unannounced (Harper). There is both a sense of sharing and risk in a potluck which is apt because the same occurs when you share a story. It is a format that I believe is easily replicable and can be adapted to different situations, communities, social groups or even businesses.

The project began with the basic premise that the most important performance venue we have as a society is at the dinner table. It is where we perform ourselves. It is where personal storytelling occurs naturally - so much so that most people don't think that they are storytellers despite the fact that they are contributors to dinner table conversations:

“storytelling is a form of performance in which we use our imagination and intellect to

² The term “potluck” is derived from the old English word “put-luck” dating back to 1590 meaning, “one's luck or chance as to what may be in the pot” (Harper). Modern North American meaning refers to community gathering. This is thought to be the result of combining the word put-luck with the First Nations term, “potlatch” which means “to bring a gift.” (Adams 234)

understand others and ourselves” (Vannini). As a performer I view all communal eating activities, such as dinner parties, family gatherings (formal or informal), romantic dinners, picnics, campfire cookouts or church potlucks to name a few, as improvised community theatre where everyone is both a performer and a spectator. This is live, embodied performance that is immediately relevant. I wanted my work to feel as directly relevant to the spectator.

The structure consists of two stages. For the first part, I host a series of five small dinner parties for no more than six people at a time. The dinners are prepared and held at a local location that has a kitchen (community group kitchen, church, showroom in a housing development, etc...). There is no financial cost to attend. Instead, guests pay by providing a story and sharing it at the dinner. The evening is comprised of listening to everyone’s story. I usually record these stories using an audio recorder so I can enjoy the stories as they are being told, keep the food coming and not have to worry about remembering details.

After the dinners are complete, I review the stories and create a menu (performance) of the stories I heard. I decide how to arrange, recreate or present them in a manner that will result in a varied and entertaining performance. I have appetizer stories, palette cleansers, pasta, main course, dessert and tea or coffee stories. In the second half of the project, I present this performance back to all the participants and their guests at the large final gathering. The fee to attend the performance is a dish of food to share as we will have a potluck dinner during the performance.

By the end of the project there is a real sense of community among the participants. They have shared in something a little scary—telling a personal story to strangers can be

unsettling—but they have had a great time and learned something about the people who live in their own community. The feedback I have received has been very positive with as many favourite parts as there were participants; some preferred the small dinners, some preferred the final show, some liked the community building aspect, some just liked to be entertained and some liked the local food and stories. The most important feedback in the questionnaires was that everyone who took part, as a participant or a guest, was willing to participate again.

The project is small, and this scale works to my advantage as I live in a smaller community. Social Potluck can only accommodate up to thirty people intimately and sixty by association, but I believe that those people have an experience that is unique and personal. We know each other's names and story. We have broken bread together and shared in a journey.

Toast

Toast Introduction Transcript

Ladies and gentlemen, thank you for coming. I really appreciate you making your way here for the final stage of the Social Potluck Project. I realize it is the summer and everyone is busy recreating. I appreciate that you made it here, and I am delighted that you brought food. I see some wonderful dishes. There are perogies, noodle salads, Saskatoon berry pies, oh my.

For those of you here as guests, let me give you a bit of background. Over the past month I held five dinners in which I offered to feed people in exchange for a story, any story, and I would take those stories and turn them into some kind of story... thingy, making absolutely no promises that I would use their story, that I would be true to it or even be respectful of it. They came anyway (I will try to be respectful). And this is the end result.

It is a tough task looking at twenty odd stories that could be their own films in their own right. They could all be expanded on. I equate what I have to do [creating a performance out of the collected stories] with staring at a potluck table because, well, because I'm a bit of a glutton. So, when I see a potluck, I want to put all the food on my first plate. But what happens then is that everything gets all blended together and you never really get to enjoy all the unique flavours. Rather than do that to you, what I have done, and how the evening will function, is that I have created a number of courses, story courses which will coincide with the food courses as well sometimes. I do this because each story I heard was so interesting, so inspiring, that it could be its own show, its own film.

Many of you have already discovered the aperitif. It is a little teaser, a sampler, in your welcome cards. The cards contain a little tidbit about someone sitting at your table. It is your job to figure out who that is. And even if you don't figure it out, that's okay. Just remember that that person lives in your community so as you are walking down the street and you see someone maybe you will think, "I wonder if that card was about them." Then you will be able to nibble on some appetizers as I realize it's getting late and you're getting hungry. So we will have appetizers, as we listen to appetizer stories. I will then make a Social Potluck soup and a Social Potluck soup story at the same time. We'll have a few different ways of sharing stories, and then we will stop and grab our main course. We will have some main course stories, some dessert stories... you'll be allowed to eat dessert... then we will have some tea and coffee, and tonight I will add a special bedtime story which will bring us to the end of evening.

Before we begin, I would like to propose a toast. To the amazing people who joined me for dinner and who shared their stories. By making that effort and taking that risk, we gather not as strangers in some strange experiment but as friends who have broken bread together and shared a piece of ourselves. And finally, a toast to your friends who join you tonight.

Welcome. May this be the beginning of more dinners, more stories and more friendships.

Thank you.

Impressions

There is an inherent tension when performing stories back to the people who told them to you. As a performer you want them to be pleased. They have trusted you with something precious: a piece of themselves. You want them to see that you appreciate and respect their story. Simultaneously, you have a responsibility as a performer to present, to entertain, to challenge, to embody and to be truthful. These thoughts were going through my head as I started my first performance of Social Potluck. As I started passing around the appetizer platter that had story clues hidden among them, I worried that this audience, made up of participants and guests, would not find the stories as interesting as I did, would find my performance flat or would only want to hear the stories they knew. This was not the case. There was so much more going on and very little of it had to do with my performance.

The first story selected was a cute story about a young woman's experience swimming in a homemade woolen bathing suit. As I began the story, "Once upon a time there was a young girl in Post-war Holland, Spring 1945, who wanted to do nothing more than go swimming." The woman who had told the story squealed, "oh, no," and buried her face in her hands. She was laughing and we were laughing. The performance no longer became just about the story, but about her relationship to me telling her story, her relationship to the story and also the audience's relationship to the story and the teller. The audience was watching her as much as they were watching me. The entire dynamic of how I saw the performance changed within that first story.

Afterwards, while I told the next stories it seemed as though the audience was playing a game to see whose story was being told. Those who had attended the dinner where a particular story was told knew who told it but nobody else did. Would they give it away?

Would the teller expose themselves? Who did tell that amazing story? I would see people whispering and looking around. They wanted to watch the reactions. Would they laugh, cry or try to act as though the experience was completely natural? After one story I told, an audience member, a member of my supervisory committee, shouted out that he had to know whose story it was. The story was simply too good, too amazing, to not acknowledge the original teller. The original teller got a spontaneous round of applause.

One of the audience members, who came as a guest to the performance, commented that they could “see by [the audience’s] body language that we all recognize ourselves in the story.” So, while I was telling one person’s story, the audience members were doing two things; they were seeing themselves as the teller listening to their story being told and they were seeing themselves in the story. This doubly empathic response makes the stories more urgent, real and relevant. The audience, being able to empathize with the story and the teller, wants to see the story both end well and be presented well. How I tell the story personally affects someone in the room.

Because of this powerful connection, it became clear that I had to tell every story I heard at the dinners. I couldn’t leave any out... Unfortunately, during the first round of Social Potluck which I held in Vernon, BC I did leave stories out because I had too many, thirty-six people contributed stories, and I was still figuring out how to present them. Even though I had made it clear at the beginning of the project that I could not promise every story would be included, people were disappointed that their story was not included. I did not want anyone to think that their story was not good enough to tell. All the stories were worth telling, I just had too many to fit into one performance. Later, when I conducted Social Potluck in the Glenmore neighbourhood of Kelowna, I reduced my participant size to twenty-five to ensure I would

have the right number of stories to work with and to ensure every story was represented in some way. It was important to acknowledge everyone.

As the first evening ended, those who had identified themselves as a source of a story told during the evening were swarmed with people thanking them and praising their story. I was thanked for the entertaining evening, for doing my job as a performer, and for creating the structure, but it was those who told the original story who were the real focus of interest. This is exactly as it should be; these were their stories.

When audiences of both the Vernon and Glenmore projects filled out a questionnaire about their experience as either participant or guest, the majority of people thought the strongest part of Social Potluck had to do with listening to other people's stories and the sense of community that was created through that process. Many praised the performance, but most praised the process.

Appetizer

Appetizer Introduction Transcript

Now, as you can see there are already some appetizers on the table. Some dolmades (Who brought the dolmades?), some cheeses, some freshly shelled peas and I have a tray of bruschetta. I have also prepared a number of appetizer stories but I couldn't decide on an order because I didn't want to privilege one over another so... it kind of means you are forced to eat my bruschetta appetizer... I will pass around the tray of bruschetta and underneath some of them is a piece of paper which has a word on it. That word indicates a story I have prepared and that is how we will come up with the order that I will tell these stories. If you don't want any bruschetta you aren't forced to have any. I'm not going to pressure anyone.

Has anyone discovered a word yet?

Holland

Once upon a time there was a young girl in post-war Holland who wanted to do nothing more than go swimming. The problem was that she had no bathing suit. Her mother took pity on her and unraveled an old sweater and knit this young girl a wool bathing suit. This, I am told, was not uncommon. At that time in Holland nobody had anything as they were still rationed.

And so, this young woman was so excited to go swimming in her new wool bathing suit. She ran to the beach and jumped in and swam about and was ecstatic, ecstatic that is until she started to come out of the water. You see, wool absorbs water, and wet wool is heavy, and wet heavy wool stretches so this bathing suit began to stretch and stretch until it was down to her knees. The girl frantically scrambled to re-stretch the wool over her body so she wasn't exposed in an inappropriate manner. So, with her bathing suit wadded up into a ball covering her body she had to walk back to where her clothes were which was humiliating for an eleven-year-old girl. She went home to "murder her mother" who just laughed at her.

Relational Aesthetics

While I identify Social Potluck as a performance project, using storytelling and theatrical techniques, it is within the relational quality of the structure that the project finds its closest allies and its underlying values. Nicolas Borriaud defines relational aesthetics as “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and *private* symbolic space” (14). While he is referencing art practices in the visual art world, his isolation of the relational and the social as areas to artistically explore give definition to all work that is in the social realm. It is this interaction that was so fascinating to me that it became integral to the creation of Social Potluck. By creating a structure, which creates opportunities for interaction between people, using storytelling as a common language, Social Potluck aims to celebrate that interaction not only as its own performance but in a performance as well so that all the participants can see their own cultural contribution. In this manner, I am referring to storytelling “as an activity embodied by a performer(s), with others, and within other activities of daily life and ways of speaking” (Langellier). These activities are not commercial cultural acts that focus on objects but rather are a part of our “vernacular culture”³ which gives our daily lives

Mackey writes that he uses the word

meaning. These vernacular cultural acts make the “‘others’ and ‘together’ more important than the something” (Mackey 18). The key to relational work lies in the intention of the work. Unfortunately, creating work that relies on public interaction does not guarantee that the intention is recognized by the participants.

One of the key critics of relational aesthetics is Claire Bishop who questions the artificial, feel good nature of some projects. She critiques Rirkrit Tiravanija’s *Untitled (still)*, in which he set up a kitchen in an art gallery, because it creates an artificial utopia: “there is no inherent friction since the situation is what Bourriaud called “microtopian”: it produces a community whose members identify with each other because they have something in common” (Bishop 67). Tiravaniji intended “not just to erode the distinction between institutional and social space, but between artist and viewer” (Bishop 56) in *Untitled (still)*. By choosing a gallery space in which to have his exchanges, he did challenge how the gallery space was perceived, but the choice also ensured that only certain social groups would participate. In presenting performance art to art audiences, there was an element of certainty to the exchanges.

‘vernacular’ to describe a set of imaginative activities that go back to the beginnings of human life and are still active today, but are seldom included in discussions of modern culture. Most of us make a distinction between mass culture and ‘high’ or serious art. I insist that a third category is necessary to describe creative activities that take place outside of the consumer marketplace and the world of trained professionals. I call this third category “vernacular culture” (11).

In comparison, Darren O'Donnell creates work, which focuses almost entirely on social friction. He calls his work Social Acupuncture and believes that small, sometimes painful interventions on the social body can cause relief for the larger social body (O'Donnell 49). He asks, "could we develop an aesthetic that favours work in which relational situations employ moments of antagonism toward a unification of opposites in the civic sphere" (33)? O'Donnell sees social art practice as activist work, where he pairs opposing demographics and groups together for an awkward social exchange as a way of expanding both groups' view of their world. He admits that these social projects can "amount to an attempt to hipify social work. This isn't a bad thing" (37).

Social Potluck fits between these two examples because it endeavors to explore and celebrate a community's inherent cultural creativity. It sounds microtopian and the project is constructed in a manner to feel utopian. The difference is that it does not aim to begin as microtopian. The project aims to attract people who do not know each other.

Having dinner with strangers is fraught with social tension because there are so many social unknowns and there is no place to hide. This is unlike social media, which joins people through individual screens. Physically participating in social interaction requires a physical and mental participation whereas interface with an individual through a screen such as a computer or hand held device allows time and space

for the participant to pick and choose which interaction they want to participate in. While picking and choosing social interaction through media devices may feel safer in that it avoids social awkwardness, this type of highly controlled interaction also ensures uniformity of experience. Social Potluck encourages participants to have interactions with strangers, who may not share the same religious, political, social or cultural experiences. By expanding the range of social interactions and physically being present Social Potluck offers an opportunity for new perspectives and ideas to be experienced.

Social Potluck challenges the notion that cultural and social value comes to us, especially in small towns and cities where this project took place, from major centres through commodified means such as movies, television, books and music. Social Potluck demonstrates, through participation, the cultural and social value that already resides in communities.

The simple act of showing up physically and taking part in social interactions, of any kind, is a cultural, social and political act. That is why telling a story “is to perform a meaningful individual and social act” (Boje). Social interactions become a secret theatre “in which both artist & audience have completely disappeared – only to re-appear on another plane, where life & art have become the same thing, the pure giving of gifts” (Bey). Does it matter whether these acts are framed as artistic practice, social practice or intervention? Not necessarily,

especially if the participants are aware that their actions have larger cultural and social implications as a result of participating. A community performance of this type is an “act of intervention, a method of resistance, a form of criticism, a way of revealing agency” (Denzin 7).

Since the inherent crux of a relational project is in the audience’s participation, it is impossible to say how it would be received by the participants. The relational depends entirely on who is relating to whom and to what. Subjectivity must be accepted as there is no objective way to value the experience. Each participant will judge, value and interpret based on his or her own narrative, which is what makes this type of work challenging and exciting in its unpredictability. As Bourriaud stated; “the artistic practice thus resides in the invention of relations between consciousnesses” (22).

Bishop’s critique of the micro-utopias created in some relational practices is valid when no new relationships or understandings are created for participants because they are already familiar with the form and content. New understanding and relationships may and will occur but there is a predictability established in the structure. However, by branching out of the gallery space and engaging with participants who are not always aware they are participating in what the art world would consider art, there is an uncertainty to the type of relationships and understanding that occur. The work can quickly

change from monological to what Russian literary critic, Mikhail Bakhtin, described as polyphonic depending on how it is constructed and who participates (Allain 18). The more people involved, the more varied the interpretation of the project. Through this process temporary micro-utopias may be created, but what the participants interpret from the project will always be an unknown until the project is completed.

Cow Shit

Once upon a time, there was an eleven-year-old girl who knew everything. This caused particular consternation to her uncle George. A man, it was rumoured, who was not capable of laughter. She had given him cause. Through her belief in her own superior intelligence, she had already destroyed a horse cart and distressed a pony so much that it may never carry people. This was all within the first couple days of her visit to Uncle George's farm. One day on her visit she was in the cow barn waiting for the cows to arrive for their evening milking. On the ground were garbage can lids that were filled with extra milk for the hundreds of cats that took care of the mice on this sprawling farm. By the end of the day, any leftover milk would start to sour. As the cows started to come in, the first cow dropped a giant, sloppy turd that splattered into one of the sour milk filled garbage can lids. Right after that cow came another cow whose hoof kicked the lid so that it went flying across the barn causing the sour, milky, cow shit to hit this clever eleven-year-old girl square in the face. It was at that moment that a strange sound was heard on the farm. It was the sound of Uncle George laughing.

Farm Tales

In 2009 I was hired by staff at the Okanagan Science Centre¹ to create a storytelling project that would complement their exhibit entitled “Food.” We decided that we would host a storytelling series. We invited local farmers, who represented a broad array of farming styles and experiences in the North Okanagan. They would be asked to tell stories about their own or their family’s experience farming in the Okanagan. The goal was twofold. We hoped to put a face to the food that is produced locally as well as address some of the concerns farmers face today. The project did not go as planned though I learned a great deal about community stories.

For the first two events I recruited two local men who had grown up in the Okanagan to host one evening each. I met with them individually and then together. When they were together they were charming and they spent hours telling stories going as far back as the 1930’s. Their stories ranged widely: They talked about a pet billy-goat that would follow one of them to school where he was a teacher; they talked about the uncomfortable truths that faced widows, that faced farmers, that faced everyone. They were personal and honest. I was delighted.

I set up the events in the traditional manner with a speaking space in front and the audience in rows. Unfortunately, once the speakers were alone in front of an audience, they changed completely. They both became teachers, delivering, in a somewhat stiff manner, details and information about the history of the area. The highlights were the few moments when there was a small personal perspective. I had hoped they would share the stories they told each other earlier, but the structure for the event that I had created was not conversational; it was presentational.

After the presentation, I noticed that people stayed to talk. These clusters of people were sharing excellent personal stories. Unfortunately, only the few people in the group had a chance to hear these stories.

When I began designing the third show I kept the previous experience in mind and arranged to have four speakers who were only allowed to speak for a total of ten minutes. I encouraged stories, of course, but was prepared for anything. After the opening ten minutes of stories/presentations, we would take a break and return for questions and conversation. This new approach caused me some concern since I had less control over what would happen and I was not convinced, should the events get off topic, that I was capable of facilitating the conversation.

When the day came, some people told stories, some gave speeches, some used it as a platform to voice grievances, but everyone stayed on schedule and, more or less, on topic. After the break, just about everyone in the audience returned and started asking questions on a whole variety of issues that were raised in the earlier talks. The event became dialogical and much more interesting. There was history, politics, and personal experiences, and by the end of the event there was a real sense of coming together as a group. The event, in my opinion and that of the Science Centre Director Sandi Dixon, was a success. We had achieved our objective.

For the final event, I planned to recreate the same structure. This time I had recruited farmers who also were performers. The lineup included myself, a cowboy poet and a cowboy balladeer who writes songs about local stories. This was the one event which was, unintentionally, held with professional performers. We performed on a snowy December afternoon in the loft of an old carriage house.

That afternoon performance felt magical: the snow, the location and three performers who knew how to entertain a crowd. It was by far the best performed event and the audience loved it! The problem was that it was a complete failure at facilitating dialogue.

After we finished our performance, we took a break and then opened up conversation to the floor. Nobody volunteered to participate. Nobody asked any questions. I realized afterwards that they were dead quiet because they were intimidated to follow up our performances. It was a better performance in terms of traditional performing styles, but it was an abject failure as a community, performance-based, educational experience. The event was about us as performers, not the community.

We, the performers, had fallen into the same trap as the first two presenters. We performed at the audience. We used our performers' tricks, tools and skills to present something that could not be questioned because it was the safest thing to do. We were monological and as a result the dialogue that had occurred at the third show was missing.

It was the third show with its uneven but genuine presentations and its rambling talk back that was more honest and more fulfilling even though it was less polished and skilled in the traditional performance sense.

I thought this was an interesting conclusion because it destroyed just about everything I thought I knew about performance. It also started me on this journey to figure out how to capture the rough honesty of the third show with the skill and enjoyment of the fourth. It was the beginning of Social Potluck.

Fatherly advice

Once upon a time there was a young woman who got busted for smoking pot. “Just wait until your father gets home,” she heard. So she waited and waited and waited and while she waited she got angrier and angrier and angrier so that when her father did get home she was ready to battle to the death. She was ready to bring forward every injustice, every slight, every piece of pent up frustration that she had been harboring for her sixteen years of life. Her father walked in the room but he didn’t yell, he didn’t threaten, he simply walked to the window and stared out of it for an uncomfortably long time. He had a very grave look on his face. When he finally turned he looked at her and simply said, “You have very different challenges than I had at your age. It is a very different world. You have very difficult choices to make and all I want to say is... Good Luck.”

She was speechless. All the fight was out of her. It was the most effective thing he could have said. Her father was letting her go, she was in charge of her own life now. This young woman realized that she did have choices to make and it completely changed how she viewed decisions in her life.

Years later, a parent herself to a young man who was caught smoking pot, she repeated these exact same words because they were true; the world had changed since she was a child. She also repeated them because they were the words of love, concern and... of letting go.

Soup

Soup Introduction Transcript

So, what I am going to do now, I'm not sure why I said I was going to do this but I'm going to do this.

You see, there are so many stories, and there are a lot of travel stories. I was trying to figure out what to do with all these great stories. I thought... well... you see, what happens is that you are going to leave here tonight and you will think, "well, there was a story about this..." but then you will kind of mix it up with that story and they will kind of become a new story.

So, I thought I would create a new story... out of a number of the travelling stories that I heard. Kind of a soup. A memory soup of travel stories. And, because I don't want to play favourites I am going to let you decide what goes in the story.

What I have done... I have a number of ingredients and they are all attached to a small plot point. If everything goes according to plan I am going to cook a soup and tell a story based on the plot points all at the same time (See Picture 1). In the end, we should have a unique Social Potluck soup and story. What could possibly go wrong?



Illustration 1 Soup. Preparing soup and improvising a story in Vernon.

Social Practice

Social Potluck was inspired primarily by the social practice work of Jon Rubin, Darren O'Donnell, Michael Hebb and Harrell Fletcher. Looking at some of their projects, which explore ideas of community, identity and the social, primarily in North America, brought about the realization that beyond creating a performance, Social Potluck was also playing a role in my community. By bringing people together to trade items, sit at tables, talk to strangers or contribute to a larger project, Social Potluck allowed for the creation of small communities of people who come together to celebrate their own humanity. The big-hearted generosity and child-like curiosity of the projects provided inspiration and a footing on which to build Social Potluck. Rubin, O'Donnell, Hebb and Fletcher create structures which allow participants, who, for the most part, are not typical arts patrons, to be given agency to highlight an aspect of themselves. The projects are just frameworks, the participants provide the content. Any message or intention is built into the structure.

One of O'Donnell's earlier projects, *Talking Creature* (2003), encouraged participants to go up to complete strangers at Toronto's Kensington Market and ask them to come back to a designated location to have a conversation. The conversations could be about any topic. "Talking without an agenda among strangers is a rare thing" (O'Donnell 53). It was also made clear to those approached that the

decision to participate was entirely up to them. This project aimed to interrupt the daily routine of shoppers and pedestrians by placing them in a socially tense situation, so they would think about those around them. O'Donnell found that there is a freedom in this type of risk taking: "dislodged from routine, many people became ecstatic at the opportunity of communicating with strangers, interacting with an openness and urgency remarkable for its relaxation, trust and joy" (O'Donnell 54). The ability to be part of that communication was a driving force behind the structure of Social Potluck.

In a similar vein but with a different approach is Michael Hebb who has been leading the cause for active "Tablemaking," which is defined as "the thoughtful or imaginative or progressive use of the common table. Any action that reinvigorates the common table, i.e. any action that inspires people to eat together" (Hebb). Hebb believes that "the world of progressive ideas is in dire need of civic rituals... We need to rethink how we gather, how we convene, the table needs to be part of this rethinking" (Hebb). Hebb recognized that the table is a site for social performance, a belief that is central to Social Potluck.

Hebb's practice includes setting up a table and offering stew on a median of Highway Five in Seattle. He also traveled to coffee growing regions of South America and Africa where he cooked and feasted with the coffee growers. By serving dinners in 'non-traditional' spaces, he invites conversations from a wide range of people and challenges the

certainty we have when we eat in the same place and with the same people all the time. Hebb's contribution is to make an effort. What occurs afterwards is entirely up to those who participate.

Whereas Hebb, Tiravaniji and O'Donnell are making social offers with a curious eye to see what occurs, at least in the projects mentioned above, artists such as Jon Rubin and Harrell Fletcher along with Miranda July create structures for interactions, which have more complicated sets of parameters, yet still allow the participants to control the content. Despite these rules, or restrictions, the aim of the projects is to allow individuals or communities the ability to celebrate their diversity and talents.

In 2003 Rubin created a locally based relational piece called *FREEmobile* where neighbours in a Seattle suburb took turns giving away free items in an old ice cream truck Rubin provided. The items were of the participants' choosing as long as they were either made by the participant or were a service such as bike repairs or line dance lessons (Rubin).

In essence, Rubin provided the platform for the neighbour's generosity and expression. Through the course of the project, neighbours got to know each other in a personal manner. The focus was not on the conversations that occurred but on the interaction; the

conversations, the dialogue between participants, took place because of the shared experience of exchanging personal goods and knowledge. Participants did not need to have conversations or further their relationship with other neighbours to engage with the project - that was done voluntarily. The project gave permission for neighbours to interact with each other in a manner that replicated commodity-based exchanges but that celebrated the neighbours' talents.

July and Fletcher's *Learning to Love You More* project connected people over the Internet by issuing assignments. These diverse assignments ranged from "spend time with someone who is dying" to "make a neighbourhood field recording." Participants would take part in these acts and report back with written material, video, photography or audio recordings. The resulting reports would be posted on their website. There were no prerequisites; the project was open to anyone to participate or view the submissions. From 2002 to 2009, eight thousand people took part in the assignments (Fletcher) - Fletcher aptly describes the allure of creating interpersonal work: "The work is interesting and complex not because I made it that way, but because the people I work with are interesting and complex (as it turns out everyone is). I'm just able to put it all into an art context, which makes people consider it in ways they might not otherwise"

(Fletcher). *Learning to Love You More* is the only project listed here which had a product that could be viewed by outsiders.

Central to all of these projects is the act of freely giving of yourself, of making yourself vulnerable in public spaces. This applies to both the artists and the participants. It invites risk, but as O'Donnell demonstrates, there is a freedom in risk taking. Also, those who accepted the free gifts in *FREEmobile* and those who accepted a bowl of stew from Hebb are, in an unspoken way, in debt to the giver. It ensures a continuation of exchanges in the future. This exchange of gifts does create micro-utopias. "What makes a dinner party distinct from making a reservation at a fabulous local restaurant - the future - a dinner party implies a future - it is what Marcel Mauss calls "the obligation to return" you might not be roasting a whole pig in return - but a basic obligation to return the cultural exchange is established" (Hebb).

The structure of Social Potluck uses techniques from all the artists mentioned because "the ritual of food preparation and eating provide[s] a common platform for everyone... regardless of their opinions or beliefs" (Rakowitz quoted in Fletcher 61).

Like *Learning to Love You More*, Social Potluck does create a performance product at the end; however, it is not the product that creates the interactions but the interactions that create the product.

As Fletcher states, “my job was to offer the structure, the content is completely filled in by the participants” (23). While Social Potluck could have simply focused on the interactions, I believe it was important to celebrate the interactions that were created through the structure.

This is why I built a final performance into the project.

Social practice projects are hard to evaluate because the notion of success is slippery when the focus is on interaction. For this reason I created a simple questionnaire to see what the participants felt were the strengths and weaknesses of the project and to solicit suggestions for change. Written feedback echoed O’Donnell’s comments. While participants praised the final performance I created for Social Potluck, it was the exchanges and relationships created during the project that most participants valued the most. Many felt the strongest part of the project was the “gathering of neighbours,” “friends and strangers; sharing and being vulnerable.” These relationships made participants feel as though they were “part of something special” and left with a heightened “sense of community.” Most interestingly, and pleasingly, is that every participant who filled out a questionnaire afterwards stated they would participate again. Also, 83 percent of participants indicated they would be or might be willing to host Social Potluck dinners in the future. A few commented that they had already replicated the formula for their own gatherings. The continuation of interactions, the continuation of the celebration of our storytelling

ability, and the continuation of building communities are as much success as I can hope for.

Sharing Stories

It became obvious as I began recruiting participants in my Social Potluck project that some people are natural exhibitionists and have no problem dropping a personal story at the least provocation, but the majority of people will shy away from public speaking. Usually, potential participants would claim they did not have a story or, even more frustratingly, state “I’m not a very good storyteller.” Up to this point, I had been very careful to not restrict participation based on location, finances or food choices. I had attempted to make the environment comfortable, so that people could feel comfortable being themselves (See Picture 2). The biggest barrier was not the location, nor the environment, but the insecurity participants had about speaking in public. In my press releases, in which I called for participants, I had put the focus and importance of the project on the participants’ stories by stating, “the first part (the dinner) is a true community play where participants portray themselves”. I realize now that, even though I still believe this statement to be accurate, it actually scares participants away; the pressure to perform raised doubts even in the most outgoing of individuals. I discovered, however, that if I took the focus away from their stories and placed the pressure to perform on myself that people were more willing to take part.

When I was first recruiting participants, I received many inquiries about what kind of story I wanted to hear or how I expected the stories to be delivered. I had not anticipated the amount of time I would spend reassuring people and building their trust. I tried to make it very clear that I was looking for whatever story people wanted to tell me because I was interested to hear what people had to say when they were not biased by a specific question. I reassured

them I had no themes or topics in mind. If they were stuck, I encouraged them to tell one of their favourite stories, the kind of stories they often tell at parties or gatherings.⁴

It was not just content that was a concern to potential participants but the entire idea of presenting. I repeated endlessly that there was no stage and nobody had to stand up and tell or recite a story. Just because I refer to it as performance did not mean it required the formal performance model. I also had to discourage people from writing down their story, as I wanted to hear them tell it in the moment as themselves. I emphasized that I wanted them to think of the dinners as though they were coming over to my house and instead of bringing a hostess gift they would bring a favourite story to share.

What finally allowed people to relax in the end was the knowledge that it was up to me to create a show out of all the different stories. So, instead of the participants being the entertainment, which unnerved many people, they preferred to think of themselves as content providers who were helping me with a project.

The fact that I thought their stories created some of the most entertaining evenings I have ever experienced was irrelevant because their notion of performance was different from mine. They thought that I wanted them to “perform” in a classical sense, which terrified them as they had no experience or training in what they thought of as representational performance. I did not want them to fake anything. I wanted them to be real, to be themselves. No “performing” was required. This argument was meaningless for them; instead, if they knew that all the responsibility to “perform” fell to my shoulders they were happy to sit back and be themselves. Performing was my problem, not theirs.

⁴ I usually have to add that if someone can't think of a story they tell often that they should ask their family or loved ones because it is usually the ones closest to us that hear those stories the most.



Illustration 2 Sharing. Participant Denise Kenney listens to Tom Pilgrim tell his story in Glenmore, Kelowna.

Palate Cleanser

Palate Cleanser Introduction

For the palate cleanser, we are all going to have to work together. I have printed out one of the stories I heard at the dinners on a long strip of paper. Working together we are going to pass the story around the room. So as the paper comes to you and you read it to yourself you are going to pass it on to your neighbour until the whole room is surrounded by this story. You need to make sure that you aren't going too fast or too slow. This story is delicate, so you don't want to break it (See Picture 3).

After you are finished reading the story and the paper has passed you, you may excuse yourself to the entrée table and help yourself to the glorious buffet that everyone contributed to.



Illustration 3 Palate Cleanser. Guests pass the palate cleanser story around the table during the Vernon performance.

Adoption Story

The following is the text from one of the stories that was presented in the Palate Cleanser format.

“It was a hot summer day in the year 1967 when I heard a secret that had to be told to my parents. The secret came from my doctor; that I was going to have a baby.

There was no doubt I was going to be labeled a sinner and that I would have to go into seclusion until the baby was born and I’d give the baby up for adoption.

I cried and pleaded to keep her but that would cause such an embarrassment to the family. I was taken to Vancouver to stay with an aunt.

My baby was born on February 13th, 1968, the day before Valentine’s Day. My little Valentine. The nurses would not let me see her or hold her. I did not understand because all the other girls could visit with their babies. One day I headed for the nursery to see if I could see her. She was put at the back of the room, by herself, as if she was being punished for my sin. Later, I found out that she was going to be adopted by a nurse and that is why they did not want me to see her, because I would get attached and would want to keep her. This was not to be allowed by my parents. She was gone and I had to live with it.

I sang happy Birthday to my Valentine February 13th every year and thought of her every day.

Flash forward 23 years, myself, married to her father and we had three more children. I decided to see if I could find her and put my name in the registry to do so. Two months after I had done so, my daughter did the same thing. Four months later I had a phone call to say they had a match and gave me the information that her name was Caroline and she was now married and I was now a grandma of a little three-year-old boy and she lives in Vancouver. I

phoned her and of course we were both crying our eyes out. We did not want to wait any longer, and she was going to come and meet us the following weekend. When they arrived, I went running outside. My husband was talking on the phone to a client and he hung up on him and came out too. The tears started to flow, and there were a lot of "oh my gods" as it was like looking back in time to see myself looking in a mirror. My younger daughter came running outside, and Caroline looked at her and there was another "oh my god" as she looked like her seven years earlier. My two sons came home and there were many more "oh my gods." All four my children look so much alike.

The family is now full.

Thank god. I now have four children and eight grandchildren."

Main Course

Main Course Introduction Transcript

I hope everyone's appetite is satiated and you have had a chance to get to know your neighbours. As you finish off your meals and happily digest, I would like to present three main course stories for your listening pleasure.

Storytelling as Sustainable Cultural Practice

“In a fractured age, when cynicism is god, here is a possible heresy: we live by stories, we also live in them. One way or another we are living the stories planted in us early or along the way, or we are also living the stories we planted – knowingly or unknowingly – in ourselves. We live stories that either give us meaning or negate it with meaninglessness. If we change the stories we live by, quite possibly we change our lives.” (Ben Okri, Nigerian storyteller, quoted in Thomas King 153).

We live in an oral landscape. Our thoughts and beliefs are shaped by the stories we have heard, we hear, we remember and we tell. It has been this way for a long time for we are an oral species. Only recently in human history have we become fixated on the written word.

Previously, we lived and learned by orally communicated stories.

Stories were a technology developed by humans over thousands of years by which we could share information (Cameron). Stories were how we learned and how we connected. They continue to be relevant, because “performance and storytelling are as much about agency and efficacy as they are about appreciation, entertainment, and pleasure” (Peterson). This is why it is imperative that we as artists, academics and community members celebrate storytelling as central to our culture. Much like how our environmental landscape needs sustainable practices, so too does our oral landscape.

Human beings are hard wired to empathize and connect through storytelling. Researchers from Princeton University recorded brain

activities between two storytellers and twelve listeners, which demonstrated that the teller's brain activity "is spatially and temporally coupled with the listener's activity" (Hasson 14425). Not only does the listener's brain activity mirror the teller's, but it also anticipates activity demonstrating a physiological empathetic link (Hasson). When that link is created, there is a willingness to accept new ideas and to see the world from a new position.

When that link is broken, there can be serious health side effects. This is best demonstrated by looking at the dinner table. The main premise behind Social Potluck is that the dinner table is the 'most important performance venue' we have as a society. The dinner table is where the family establishes its story, and this is usually done through storytelling. "Family storytelling is an effective tactic for family formation and cultural survival" (Langellier). Daily stories such as what occurred at school today add to the common collective story that a family creates together. Knowing the family story provides a foundation from which children can grow, making them resilient to the challenges they will face in life. That foundation is built through repetition. In a study involving the impact of family meals on negative behaviors, it was confirmed that the "frequency of family meals was inversely associated with tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana use; low grade point average; depressive symptoms; and suicide involvement

after controlling for family connectedness” (Eisenberg 792). That is why regular family meals are “significantly related to nutritional health in children and adolescents. Children and adolescents who share family meals 3 or more times per week are more likely to be in a normal weight range and have healthier dietary and eating patterns than those who share fewer than 3 family meals together. In addition, they are less likely to engage in disordered eating” (Fiese 1565). The dinner table ritual is in serious jeopardy. A 2007 National Survey of Children’s Health reported that half of American Families do not eat daily meals together (Data Resource Center for Child and Adolescent Health). From a public health perspective, families need to start eating together again. The oral foundations need to be built so that the physical health of children can improve. Through the act of eating we literally consume stories, embodying them with our food. The repetitive act of eating and listening repeats and reinforces the body’s (as well as the mind’s) memory so that we physically store stories. Once our oral foundation is built, it is safer to venture into the oral landscape.

As we drift away from the table, as families and as communities, we risk the same health concerns identified by Eisenberg creeping into our culture because it is the small cultural acts that contribute to our wider cultural health. Former circus strongman turned cultural

advocate, Jon Hawkes, champions small culture acts, such as communal dining, as being essential to maintaining our cultural health:

Continuing health needs constant care – this should be the purpose of public cultural intervention. Not so much a focus on progress, development or excellence as on vitality: -culture springs, first and foremost from human interaction – the tangible products of these interactions, no matter how wonderful, are ultimately secondary to the daily exchanges between people; -making culture is a daily public event – not just in schools, in the media, in the ‘culture houses’, but also in the streets, shops, trains and cafes; -by our behaviour are we known – this never-ending public process is a society’s signature.

Thus a healthy society has a healthy culture and health is meaningless in the absence of life. Culture is not a pile of artefacts – it is us; the living, breathing sum of us. (23)

Storytelling is a mode of communicating that all citizens have an ability to do and understand. It is both a professional arts practice and what we know of as part of our vernacular culture. “Storytelling is a form of performance in which we use our imagination and intellect to understand others and ourselves” (Vannini); therefore, it is essential

that communities continue to tell their stories. Social Potluck provides an opportunity for these stories by establishing a structure that is based on interaction and acceptance. Storytelling becomes the method by which to learn about the different experiences of community members. “Performance and storytelling serve to illuminate and enter into dialogue with “the other”—other persons, communities, and cultures” (Peterson).

Social Potluck is a small project that provides cultural participation and facilitates the celebration of the oral tradition that already exists within communities. It is only one meal, but it is a meal dedicated to the importance of sitting down at the table as a family and as a community to break bread and share stories because “[c]ommunities need access to, and facility with, the tools that come with arts practice in order to find meaningful ways to express their values. Actively involving communities in arts practice (as against product consumption) is the essential starting point to the exercise of generating community-owned expressions of what matters to them” (Hawkes 24). Participating at the dinner table is a cultural, social and physically beneficial act that aims to strengthen the community’s health for the long term. To quote artist Michael Hebb, this is “heady shit for offering up a little stew.”

Creating the Performance

The structure for the final performance is that of a five to eight course meal. The number of servings depends on what stories are collected and how they work together as a whole.

Courses can be added or eliminated as needed. Each step must service the idea that the table is the most important performance venue we have. This is done while fulfilling the project's obligation to use the material offered. Creating "courses" from stories provides an opportunity to address a variety of issues such as the number of similar, challenging stories and, on occasion, written stories. Breaking the stories up into sections also provides an opportunity to present the stories through a range of performing techniques.

All the participants who contributed stories are invited to the final performance along with a guest. They are asked to bring a dish of food to share as their admission fee. Separate tables are set up for Main Courses and Desserts. I usually set up a place for tea, coffee, water and whatever drinks are provided. Depending on the location, some people bring wine or beer so appropriate glassware should be considered when booking a location or renting a facility.

The location for the performance needs to be large enough to accommodate approximately fifty people seated at long tables put together in the shape of a "C." I arrange the tables in this manner so there is no clear stage or playing area (See Picture 4, 5 and 6). The audience faces each other because they are the most important people in the room. They are the content.

This layout requires a room no smaller than 28' x 36'. Electrical outlets and refrigeration are beneficial but not necessary. In fact, the whole performance could take place outdoors, under a large tent in case of inclement weather, and a portable barbeque could be used for any cooking that needs to occur.

The dinner starts with an “aperitif of gossip” to whet everyone’s appetite. Once guests have deposited their food contribution, they are directed to find their seat. At each place setting is a name card with a participant’s name on it. Inside the card is a note thanking them for participating as well as a small piece of gossip selected from a story told by one of the participants sitting at that table. The gossip gives a piece of information that begs for more of the story such as “By-the- way, someone at this table couldn’t get served in restaurants.” I chose aperitif pieces from stories I would not be telling during the performance and placed them near the person who told me the story. I did this in the hope that that person would have the opportunity to tell their story to those seated around them during the breaks.

Once everyone is settled, I give a short toast where I thank the participants, explain to the participants’ guests how the project has worked so far and establish how the evening is going to work (See Picture 5). At this point I reconfirm my role, much like I did when I hosted the small dinners, to establish mood and to set the ground rules.

Appetizer stories follow the toast. To do this, I offer small appetizers such as cheese on crackers or bruschetta on a platter to the participants. Some of the appetizers have a note beneath them indicating a short story I will tell. I walk around the outside of the tables offering appetizers and telling whatever stories are revealed. After the story is complete, I continue passing out appetizers until the next story is selected. The stories selected tend to be shorter stories with a few tasty nuggets. I try to include a variety of stories that represent the range of stories collected in order to give a feel for what the rest of the performance will entail. Depending on the length of the story, I serve between four to six appetizer stories.

I follow the appetizers with what I call “Traveler’s Soup.” In both sets of the test dinners, I recorded a large number of stories associated with travelling. Usually they followed a familiar pattern which had people planning on a destination. Either on the way or at the destination, they encounter some crisis which they eventually overcome. They are great stories, but the similarities highlight how universal these occurrences are - which is why I thought I would try to combine them in one story. To add an element of suspense to this synthesized story, I decided to improvise it while making soup. My thinking was that we are all comprised of a completely arbitrary soup of stories.

The appetizers allow for a glimpse of the stories that were told but the soup mixes them up and creates something new. I attach plot points to ingredients that I get the audience to pick out of a hat. I then have to try to tell this story and cook with the ingredients at the same time, guaranteeing both the soup and the story will be mixed up and unusual. Not all ingredients will be used, which means not all plot points will be referenced. It also means that no two soups/stories will be the same.

The structure for the soup story follows the process for making soup. A character (oil or butter) travels in a mode of transportation (spice or ingredient that benefits from frying) to a new place (ingredients), is faced with some kind of crisis (ingredients), solves the problem (ingredients) and makes their way to the community the Social Potluck is taking place in (stock), before concluding with a lesson learned on the trip (cream, yoghurt, lemon juice, etc...). Since every community is made up of snippets of stories and experiences, I like the metaphor of our community being a soup.

After making the soup in Vernon, I realized that by having too many plot/ingredient choices that some stories would not be mentioned, so in the second iteration of Social Potluck in

Kelowna I increased the number of steps but narrowed the ingredients so that there was a better chance every story I selected to take part would contribute in some way.

By picking the most outlandish facts from the stories, the resulting improvisation is often quite ridiculous and hard to tie together. My struggle becomes the plot of the story. Most of the participants have heard at least one of the stories, so they become invested in the result and enjoy watching me try to tie things together. Thankfully, every time I have done this piece, the soup has turned out to be quite tasty even though I have had some strange combinations.

At the story exchange dinners a number of guests wrote their stories beforehand and read them to us so I created a Palate Cleanser. I found there to be something oddly alienating, yet touching about having someone read their story. It certainly highlighted the difference between oral and written art forms. While a written story did not sound as genuine as what was being recounted orally, the content of the written work was almost always more challenging. There were stories involving the loss of family members, adoption and family secrets. I suspect that if these stories were told instead of read at the dinners, they would have felt equally strange. By writing down a traumatic experience, the teller was able to give themselves some distance from the story. To perform orally a very personal story that was written down felt disingenuous, so I decided that the audience should read the story themselves. The act of the audience quietly reading a story would also offer a nice break in the tempo of the performance which was why I called it a palate cleanser. To facilitate fifty people reading a story at the same time, I printed the stories in long strips. Then I got the audience to silently read the story, as they passed the paper along the table. In the end, the entire audience is silently reading and surrounded by paper, just as some stories surround

families and communities but are rarely spoken. This communal silent reading was one of the most effective pieces in the performance as it was both a private and shared experience.

There were often tears afterwards.

The Main Course is the core of the performance, but rather than make it complicated as I have done with the appetizers and even the soup, I want it to be grounded in simple pleasures. Before the story or stories begin, the audience is asked to get up and help themselves from the buffet. They are given time to get food, talk to their neighbour and relax. Once settled, I tell one, or more, of the longer stories in a simple and straight-forward way while people finish their meal. In Vernon, I had a small table set up in the centre of the tables, which I then sat on to tell the story).

Depending on the stories collected, another palate cleanser or a short funny story can be added here.

Dessert. After the stillness of the Main Course, I present a dessert stage to facilitate more interaction between the spectators. At the first performance, I asked people, one table at a time, to get up and get a dessert for someone at another table. Anyone who doesn't want a dessert is free to refuse a dessert if they do not want anything. Then, those who received a dessert stand up and select something for another guest. This continues until everyone has a dessert. At one of the Kelowna performances, it was someone's birthday and their partner had brought a cake. Instead of choosing desserts, we all sang happy birthday and blew out candles. The activities are flexible, but I like them to be sweet - just like the tale I use for the dessert story.

Tea and Coffee. I usually use the tea and coffee serving to conclude the evening. This often involves a recap of the project, but it can also include stories. In Kelowna, Catherine

Wellner, a professional storyteller, attended and related how a story she thought she had told poorly changed a woman's life. It was a lovely example of the power of storytelling, so I used it as my conclusion. After the tea and coffee story is complete, people are invited to help themselves to tea and coffee and stay to continue telling stories and chat with the other guests.

A final Bed Time Story is optional. I did not tell one in Vernon but in Kelowna I told one story which was supernatural in nature. It was very emotional and beautiful, but it didn't really fit within the dinnertime structure, so I added it as a bedtime story, an addendum of sorts, before sending people home to their beds.

The many servings, as indicated, are flexible and act as a guideline for building a show. How the stories are told depends on the content. What the structure provides is a skeleton. Within each course there is flexibility to play, adapt and challenge expectations as long as each step works to reinforce the table as the central object. Other artists could use song, movement or whatever medium they work in to build their potluck show as long as it keeps in mind the central idea which is embedded in the structure; these stories came about because people sat down at the table to share.



Illustration 4 Table Layout 1. *The layout of the tables before the performance in Vernon. Note the name cards on the table. Inside they contain small “aperitifs.”*



Illustration 5 Table Layout 2. Presenting the Toast in Vernon from outside the circle of tables.



Illustration 6 Table Layout 3. Performing Soup at the central table.

Jerusalem

I am a temple. I am the holy of all the holy temples in all of Christendom. I am the Temple Mount. I am the third most holy temple in Islam. I am the centre of so much... hatred and conflict.

I am surrounded by the City of Jerusalem. I rest in the state of Israel. I am administered by the Muslim faith.

As I look out I see you walking around my boundaries - tourists, the curious and a young woman. I can tell she is Jewish. I can also tell she has certain questions about faith. Because of her religion she is permitted to walk around the outside of my walls. For certain hours each day.

But I can tell she wants more than anything to go inside. To come inside me.

And so, I decide to intervene...

And as she walks past the guard, he is confused for a moment, and he asks her, "Are you from Turkey? A Muslim from Turkey?" To which this mischievous woman replies, "Yes!"

And in her best Arabic said, "God is great and there is no greater God than Mohammed."

Then this guard, confused as to what he is doing, guides this woman inside. This woman who obviously does not belong. He gets scarves to cover her up and takes her down to the Dome of the Rock. This woman is amazed... by me. This is a holy place. She realizes this is not a place for religious do's and don'ts. By being here, she has broken many rules.

She is overwhelmed by the energy. She sees small groups praying here and there. Some have brought their sick to absorb the good energy.

And down by the rock the guard leaves her. There is no one else there but another woman.

This woman looks over at her and says, "Would you like me to teach you how to pray?" My

little friend says, "Yes, please." And they pray... inside me. A believer and a non-believer.

Share in the ritual.

When they are done, the Muslim woman turns to my friend and says, 'Peace to all the children.'

My friend replies, "Peace to all the children of Palestine."

Her eyes open. The woman replies, "Peace to all the children of Israel."

Tears begin to form in my friends eyes.

"Peace" the Muslim woman says, "to all the world."

"Peace," my friend says, "peace to all the world from Palestine."

The women cry and they hug. They unite. Two cultures together.

They, in that moment, show why I am here.

Dessert

Dessert Introduction Transcript

If there is a second palate cleanser then it would occur between the main course and the dessert after which those that finish reading the palate cleanser can help themselves. What follows is another option.

Now that we are at a point of calm, I want to tell you a sweet little story I heard but before we do that you need something sweet in front of you. Since we are all friends here I would like the table on the left to look around the room and find someone who looks interesting, someone who you think might have an interesting story and go and get them some dessert and introduce yourself. They can refuse the dessert if they do not want any, have allergies, or do not like the offering. Whoever receives a dessert, then needs to get some for someone else in the room. This process will continue until everyone has a dessert in front of them. Don't be shy and please make sure nobody is left out. So, table at my left, you may begin (See Picture 7).



Illustration 7 Dessert. Setting up the dessert table in Vernon.

A Sweet Accent

Once upon a time, there was a mischievous young woman who had as her grade eleven French teacher a woman by the name of Mme. Tetro. Mme. Tetro was very eccentric, very nice and very particular about the French language. Mme. Tetro was also famous for making the most amazing cakes that she would bring for staff member's birthdays. And, if you were lucky enough to have a class with Mme. Tetro that day, she would bring leftovers to class. Unfortunately, this young woman was never in class at the right time, so she never got to have any of Mme. Tetro's famous cake.

One day she saw Mme. Tetro walking into the school with a big chocolate cake. This girl did not have French that day, but she did have a spare, which meant that she did not have a class to attend. So, determined to get a slice of this famous cake, she recruited two of her friends to sneak into the staff room and steal a slice while classes were in session. They planned it so someone would stand guard while the other two snuck into the forbidden staff room. The two made their way into the staff room and to the fridge only to find the cake was completely untouched, they hadn't had any yet. The girl and her friend were so filled with adrenaline, and so determined to get a slice that they grabbed a knife and sliced off a chunk of cake the size of their head and hightailed it out to the smoke pit where they stuffed their scheming little faces with cake.

Once they were done, the girl began to feel bad. During the next class, they could hear Mme. Tetro in the hallway "oh, mon gateaux" and she felt even worse but she couldn't confess. This young woman eventually graduated and moved on, but the guilt stayed with her. The guilt stayed so much that she decided to make it up to Mme. Tetro the next time she was back in town.

By now Mme. Tetro had retired and moved into a retirement apartment. The young woman didn't know exactly which building let alone which apartment, but she knew within which block to look. So, this young woman decided to just get a cake and go to the block where she had heard Mme. Tetro was living and ring buzzers until she found her. It wasn't much of a plan, but it was a plan so she went to a local grocery store to buy a cake. The person behind the counter asked if she wanted anything inscribed on the top of it, so she decided to get "I'm sorry" written on top in French. There are a number of ways to write I'm sorry in French: Je m'excuse or Je suis désolé, which was more personal. She decided on Je suis désolé. The girl at the cake shop didn't know how to spell Je suis désolé and this young woman struggled to remember, which way the accent went. She knew there was an accent somewhere.

As she was standing in line to check out, she heard a tiny little voice from behind her say "Excuse me but the accent aigu is facing the wrong way." And there, behind her in line..., was Mme. Tetro. Not only was she right behind her but, ever the French teacher, she was correcting this woman's French.

Once she recovered from her shock, the young woman said, "You probably don't recognize me and you probably aren't going to believe this, but this cake is for you. Many years ago, you were my teacher and I stole a huge piece out of one of your chocolate cakes, and I wanted to bring you a cake to say I am sorry." Mme. Tetro scrunched up her face and wagged her finger saying, "oh, that was you, you naughty girl." But she said it with a smile on her face. Mme. Tetro was delighted. Delighted to be remembered, delighted at the gesture and delighted because she had guests coming that afternoon and now she had a cake AND a story to share.

Tea and Coffee

Tea and Coffee Introduction

Before we finish for the evening I will tell you one more story course before you get your tea or coffee. After that I will finish with a short bedtime story for your trip home. Once the bedtime story is complete, you do not have to go home right way. It just means that I have completed my presentation. Feel free to stay, chat and tell stories as the rest of the evening is yours.

If I do not have a chance to thank you in person afterwards I want to thank you for coming, for sharing your stories and your food. Thank you for your generosity. It has been humbling and inspiring.

The Future

Since completing Social Potluck I have focused on exploring the variability of this type of project. Because Social Potluck is a structure rather than content, there is a great deal of flexibility in how to proceed. I believe that Social Potluck can continue in its current format and would be an ideal event to offer to towns, neighbourhoods, social groups and even businesses as a way to facilitate community building, neighbourhood building and team building. There is a certain irony in having created a project that critiques the commodification of the dinner table experience and is yet a marketable commodity.

Nevertheless, as I continue in this practice there are a few aspects that I see as potential areas to change and adapt: the exchange, the performance, the topics and franchising.

Many participants highlighted the story exchanges that took place at the small dinners as the most enjoyable part of the project. These intimate exchanges can function on their own.

While I believe that by performing at the end of the project I make it easier for people to share their story, I do not think that it is essential. I have already devised projects that focus on the exchange without any performance in mind. I created an *Artistic Trail Mix* project for *International Trails Day* in Vernon, BC, in which I set up trail mix stations along a designated trail. Each station had an item that typically goes into trail mix (peanuts, roasted almonds, raisins, sunflower seeds, etc.). At the start of the trail, each hiker was given a paper bag. As the hikers made their way along the trail they came across various stations which were hosted by a volunteer. The station host offered their item in exchange for a social activity such as “say something nice to a fellow hiker,” “tell me a story about your first encounter with nature,” “imitate your favourite bird song,” “write down your favourite hiking path in the journal provided,” etc. Some participants came for the project while others just

happened to be walking along the trail. Trail mix was chosen as a working metaphor because participants could pick and choose which ingredients they wanted and which activities they wanted to participate in. In the end, most people wanted to try every station regardless of the item. At no point were they told they were performing and nothing was recorded. The intention was to get people to stop and rethink how they interact with nature.

I found creating a structure where participants had their own experience difficult because I could not assess how each station ran or even observe the exchanges. I found this level of 'letting go' very frustrating but according to the verbal feedback I received everyone was delighted to have participated. Some people travelled in packs, some stuck with friends they knew and some experienced the project by themselves. They made the experience their own. I simply provided the platform.

The advantage of setting up structures for cultural exchange is their flexibility; they can be adjusted in terms of duration, topic, cost and the amount of planning required. The disadvantage is that the artist has almost no control over the experience and is no longer a participant. My job is to offer the structure, "the content is completely filled in by the participants" (Fletcher 23).

The other half of the Social Potluck project is the final performance, which is about celebrating the content that was created. The main limitation of the performance comes down to me as a performer. I have limitations. While I endeavor to create a varied performance and, I believe, there is a pleasure in the virtuosic nature of condensing a week's worth of stories into a two-hour one-man performance, I acknowledge that the spectator's experience could be elevated by expanding on the final performance. The obvious way to expand the performative options in the final performance is to use more than one performer. Currently, I

am preparing a new round of Social Potluck projects called *The Funeral Café* where I will work with *Inner Fish Performance Company*. I will host dinners where stories will be exchanged based on the theme of ‘funerals.’ Once stories have been collected, *Inner Fish Performance Co.* will be responsible for creating the performance based on the stories. I will perform with the company, but *Inner Fish Performance Co.* will be responsible for the artistic choices. By having more people contributing to the creative process, I anticipate the performance will have more variety and flexibility. This is untested. I am concerned that by involving more performers that the intimacy of the project—the trust that is developed between me and participants in the exchanges—could be jeopardized. By having a “troupe” involved in the performance rather than just me, the balance of power could be tipped and result in a reluctance for the participants to share.

There is a great deal of flexibility in how a Social Potluck project can be put together. It can just focus on the sharing; it can be the work of one person or many; it can be an exploration of a place or a temporal space; thematically the stories can be about any topic or only one topic. *The Funeral Café* will be looking for stories that are told at funerals; stories that people would like told at their funeral, that they wish they could have told at someone’s funeral, or that they heard at a funeral. The idea is that if “the truth about stories is that that’s all we are” then it is at our funeral, where we are remembered through stories that we truly exist. It is more complicated than that, of course, because the stories reflect those who tell the stories as much as those who the stories are about. By focusing on stories related to funerals, *The Funeral Café* project will reflect the people they are about as much as the people who tell the stories. It will be a celebration of how a community sees itself and how it would like to be remembered.

Thematic choices can be more political in nature, but they can also be more problematic because what the project may be about to the artist may not be what drives people to participate. It is important to be aware that the artist's motivation and the participant's motivation may be different. This is why it is important to embed the intention of the project in the structure. I was approached by one of the Social Potluck participants who teaches at an Israeli/Palestinian school who wanted to use the Social Potluck structure. She saw it as a potential peace project where families could come together to share stories and bask in their shared humanity—still a community building project yet with nobler ambitions for a more fractured community. Her concern was in how to pitch the idea. Should she try to get people to come because it is a peace project? Or should she sell it as a community storytelling performance project? Based on my experience, I encouraged her not to say it was a peace project because I discovered certain words create a selection bias that is hard to overcome. I had called Social Potluck a local food/storytelling/community performance project and I got some people who came because it was a food project, some came because it was a performance project, some came for the stories but only a few came because it was a community project. In the end, what really helped draw people, especially in Vernon where I am fairly well known, was the idea that this was a “help Gabe create a new performance” project. By calling Social Potluck a peace project, I was concerned that she would get the people who were already active in the peace initiative. For her project to have the effect she wanted, she needed people to come who wanted to take part in something interesting. Peace would hopefully be the by-product.

The project relies on the lead initiator, whoever it is, to make the project their own. Once another artist uses the Social Potluck structure it becomes their structure because they

facilitate all of the interaction with the participants. How they do that becomes central to the experience. This is because work that endeavors to engage the social sphere is an extension of the artist. Certainly this is true in my work. My projects are an extension of who I am—the way they are constructed, the factors I consider and the way I act as host and performer. The line between Gabe the performer and Gabe the community member disappears because my actions have a larger effect on me, my family and my future. Contrary to my performance training, I am not a persona or a character, I am simply portraying myself. Because of this, or rather, because of who I am, the project challenges in a gentle way, choosing to celebrate rather than create tension. Another artist may use the same structure but impose a different energy with different results. They will become the work even if they are using my structure. Social Potluck by another artist will still build community, still celebrate storytelling, still break down barriers, but it will no longer be my project. I encouraged this woman to go ahead with her peace initiative and advised her to be herself, to make the dishes that speak to her and to tell the stories as herself.

I hope that this woman is successful and that she is just the first of many more artists, activists or community members who will create their own Social Potlucks. Also, I continue to see Social Potluck as an open source idea. I do not hold a patent or expect to collect a royalty on the project. I did not invent dinner table conversations, community potlucks or storytelling. Each Social Potluck will be vastly different depending on who participates as artist(s) or guest. All I ask is that anyone holding a Social Potluck tells me how it went so that I can hear their story.

Unintended consequences

Once upon a time there was a storyteller who was leaving her home in Rochester, New York for a new life in Seattle, Washington. The local storyteller's guild held a storytelling party for her. She wanted the last story she told her peers to be memorable. She learned a Russian folk tale about a chicken that was always getting its eggs stolen by a mean giant until one day she had had enough and she fought back. In true storytelling fashion, the chicken defeats the giant. During her day job as an elementary school librarian, the storyteller practiced the story and the children loved it. Unfortunately, when she told the story at her own party, it fell flat. Afterwards she felt like nobody was moved or interested in the story. She was embarrassed to have had her last story be a flop.

Four years later, she attended a storytelling conference being held in her old home town, Rochester, NY. One day at the conference, a woman approached her out of the blue and said, "I want to thank you for the story you told four years ago." Well, the storyteller was confused because she had told a lot of stories over her years but the woman went on to say, "The story you told at your going away party, the one with the hen and giant." The storyteller couldn't believe it but the lady insisted and said "I'll show you tomorrow." So, the next day the woman was back with something in a large bag, but first she said, "You know, when you told that story, I was at a point in my life where I was allowing myself to be pushed down by the giants in my life and allowing them to steal my eggs. After hearing your story I decided that I was going to take my life in my hands and fight back, which is exactly what I have done, and I couldn't be happier." Then, she reached into her bag, and said, "I had this commissioned for my fortieth birthday," and she pulled out a statue of a woman who had a very feminine figure and was very sexily dressed with a low cut gown. The statue's

body looked fabulous and on its shoulders, where you would expect a woman's head, was the head of a chicken. The woman had had the statue made to remind her always of the inspirational story that had changed her life. A story that our storyteller thought had no relevance or meaning to her audience.

Bed Time Story

Goodnight Transcript

Ladies and gentlemen... friends, this brings me to the end of Social Potluck. Thank you again for your patience, your generosity and your stories. Until we meet again, may your table always be full of food, stories as well as new and old friends. Thank you and goodnight.

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