

LASTING IMPACT: THE COMPASSION OF STRANGERS

by

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lasting impact of compassion from strangers. Eight participants graciously shared their experience of a period of suffering, the unexpected compassion they received from a stranger, and the lasting impact it had on them. Six people participated in a single interview with the researcher and two participants chose to write letters to describe their experience. Each interview was transcribed. An arts-based methodology was used. I approached the study as an a/r/tographer, utilizing poetic inquiry, photography, contemplative spaces and life-writing as ways to explore, describe, and understand the multi-faceted experiences of the participants.

The compassion of strangers was unexpected and had a lasting impact on the participants. It broadened their perspectives about strangers, helped build feelings of gratitude, and positively altered their sense of self. Inherent in the eight experiences were threads of suffering, compassion, unexpectedness, interconnectedness, gratitude, and self.

Lay Summary

The purpose of this study was to explore and understand the lasting impact of compassion from strangers. Eight people graciously shared their personal stories of suffering and the compassion they received from a stranger. Together we explored the impact it had on them and how this has lasted over time. Within the eight stories were common experiences of suffering, compassion, unexpectedness, interconnectedness, gratitude, and self. The compassion of strangers was unexpected. It created a moment that affected how the participants thought and felt; it changed their perspectives. The participants discussed their sense of gratitude and their recognition of the interconnected nature of our world.

I studied the stories as an artist and researcher. I used poetry, photography and life writing as ways to explore, contemplate and understand the stories and as ways to engage the reader.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, J. Selman. The study was approved under the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board [certificate # H15-01297]. The poem 're search' has been published: Selman, J (2017). Finding POET/ic inquiry. In P. Sameshima, A. Fidyk, K. James, & Leggo, C. (Eds.), *Poetic Inquiry: Enchantment of Place*. (pp. 309-312), Delaware: Vernon Press. All photographs were taken by the author.

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Acknowledgements

One of the most beautiful gifts in the world is the gift of encouragement. When someone encourages you, that person helps you over a threshold you might otherwise never have crossed on your own.

O'Donohue (1999, p.62)

No PhD happens alone and I would not have reached this place, nor done this study, if it weren't for my committee. I am grateful for their boundless support. They encouraged me to explore, leap, and take risks and have guided me through a strong and creative program. I am thankful for the opportunity to have worked with them. I want to thank my Chair, Dr. David Kuhl, for agreeing to chair what became an unusual PhD. David, your unwavering belief in and support for me over the years is akin to the compassion of strangers; having lasting impact. You have helped me welcome and befriend the stranger within and shown me that compassion does indeed lead to hope. To Dr. Carl Leggo, your invitation to me to take up poetic ways in my writing and in my living has been a gift. You were instrumental in moving this PhD (and me) in a new and welcome direction. To Dr. Paddy Rodney, for (ad)venturing into this new territory with me and helping me see how this work and arts-based ways are relevant to, and much needed, in health care. To Dr. Marv Westwood, you have taught me to never let go of my voice. Your keen insights and expert teaching have given me new skills and new understanding.

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I want to thank the eight people who shared their experiences of compassion from strangers. This study was made possible by your willingness to share your story and have others hear them. Thank you for your participation.

I am thankful for treasured friends: Joe and Gillian Hohmann for their ongoing support and giving me time to recharge each year at the False Narrows. To Liz Drance and Dave Harrison for providing me writing space on beautiful Gabriola. To my fellow PhD students at 'the barn' – Kilim, Wajd, Marcelo and Sarah, I am grateful to have this shared experience with you. We have laughed, shared highs and lows in classes and in our research and writing. In short, we created memories. This PhD experience would have been a lonely endeavour without

you. And to my many other friends and colleagues and to my family, thank-you for your patience, interest and distractions that helped keep me on track, balanced and encouraged. Lastly, to Issi and Claire who always remind me of where my heart needs to be. Walking alongside you puts a song in my heart.

Dedication

To Issi and Claire

May you never let go of the thread.

Epigraph

on the road to Jericho

the thieves
seized me
and acted mercilessly

the priest
heard me
and practiced hypocrisy

the Levite
looked at me
and privileged sanctuary

the Samaritan
saw himself
and saved me

(adapted from Luke 10:30-34, RSV)

Prologue



Figure 1. *Untitled*

But suffering held in a supple heart can break the heart open to compassion instead of breaking it down into cruelty. When we live with broken-open hearts, our suffering leads us to love life more, not less. Then we can become light-bearers and life givers in a world of too much darkness and death. How to keep our hearts supple is one of the most important questions we can ask.

Palmer (2016, para. 5)

The eight people in this study have told of their suffering held in the supple hearts of strangers. For one their story took place as far back as 35 years ago, for another it was last year. The compassionate acts they experienced from strangers have had a lasting impact on them and their lives. Something changed for each of them and a new beginning, a new way of seeing happened; their suffering touched, softened, and eased by a stranger. Hearts ached less; seeds of possibility were planted. This study is an exploration of the intimate accounts of lives affected and influenced by suffering and by the compassion of strangers. The accounts reflect the fabric of our everyday social interactions and the pivotal moments that occur across a person's life time.

To experience compassion one must first experience suffering, for compassion is a response to suffering. Suffering risks breaking a heart into pieces, suggests Palmer (2016). He asks if there is a way to attend to suffering that lets hearts stretch and break open rather than apart so we respond from our suffering with love and compassion rather than passing on our pain. The participants in this study met people with compassionate hearts – hearts turned 'inward and outward'. Perhaps broken open in knowing their own suffering, strangers reached out and helped in a moment of distress. Their attention to the suffering of another had a lasting impact. These stories are filled with a sense of otherworldliness, divine moments, changed perspectives, and finding hope in times of despair. The participants talked about their experiences of gratitude, of a desire to pay back by paying forward, and of renewed faith in humanity; as one participant shared "I am more now." I see the participants as the 'light-bearers and life givers,' working to keep theirs and others' hearts supple (Palmer, 2016).

Compassion compels us to notice – to notice the suffering of another and to notice our own thoughts and feelings of concern about that person's suffering; it is through our concern, we become motivated to act to alleviate that suffering (Gilbert, 2009; Halifax, 2012). Compassion is a response to suffering that connects people, lessening the isolative and hidden moments that suffering brings (Cassell, 2004). Suffering can threaten who we know ourselves to be and lasts until the sense of impending destruction to self and to our relationships passes (Cassell, 1991). Suffering then moves us into the arena of vulnerability (Edwards, 2003) where we can be reminded of our common humanity. To know and give the light of compassion is to know our own suffering; the darker, harder, vulnerable parts of life. Compassion requires us to recognize our own experience of suffering in another and lean in. It is a bridge that links us to each other.

When the singular nature of one's suffering becomes conjoined with another's compassion, one is recognized as being (Malpas, 2012). Compassion is one way, I have learned through these stories, for the world to enter the heart and keep it from breaking apart.

I hadn't planned on researching compassion. I entered my Interdisciplinary Studies Graduate Program with a different topic and a different direction in mind. I had planned to study health care leaders' understanding of work relationships and how that affects the moral distress and moral agency of health-care workers. I have worked in health care about 25 years; 14 of them in various levels of management. I had grown curious about the connections and disconnections I had seen in the levels of organizations. I had witnessed the moral distress of staff and seen colleagues struggle with burnout and fatigue. Health care work is difficult; over the years, we can become increasingly vulnerable to the suffering of those to whom we give care. This can lead to all sorts of fallout for ourselves and for our patients. This was what I wanted to study; I wanted to make a difference. In my first year of studies, I completed a qualitative pilot study on managers' moral distress and their relationships to superiors. I was keen. I had set my course, gathered a strong committee around me. But we cannot always see where life is taking us and by the summer of 2013 things had changed for me.

That summer proved pivotal in taking my PhD in a new direction. By then, I could have been a participant in my own study. These are difficult memories. I sit tonight writing at a kitchen table that overlooks the False Narrows that is formed by shorelines of Gabriola and Mudge Islands—the traditional territory of the Snunéymux. This place became a haven that summer. That summer I was the water.

at slack tide the current stills gathers itself then runs back the length of the
False Narrows gathering speed it skirts around rocks stretches the rubbery
blades of bull kelp marking the sub-tidal reef the salt water floods pulled by
the invisible arms of the moon eastward into the night always one must plunge
through dark to reach sunrise¹ in morning light the herons fish the shallows
poised with a stillness I could not imagine I longed to be like them but that
summer I was the water

I was running hard like the Narrows, filled with anxiety, frustration, and distress at what I could not fix at work. It was hard to slow down, and finally I was caught in an eddy and became a drowning medical worker (Frank, 2010). The demands at work were as high as always, but I

¹ Sittser, J. (2005). *A Grace Disguised: How the Soul Grows through Loss*

had less control over my work. An ever increasing number of policies and procedures, budget restraints, and pressures to discharge patients quickly, meant I was less able to be responsive to individual needs of staff, patients, and families, less able to make the decisions I thought were necessary. I struggled to support staff members who were stressed and strained. I watched patients struggle to get the kind of care they hoped for and needed. I knew my work; I was not afraid to speak up. I knew what needed to be done but I could not get there. Each day became more challenging to get through. I was facing situations where I did not agree with what was happening and yet felt unable to do what seemed right. I spoke up but felt unheard—powerless. These situations can wear away at the souls of health-care workers and leaders. They were wearing away at mine. I found myself on sick leave; a few weeks rolled into months. Then the hospital went through a restructuring, and I lost my job.

I had already lost interest in my research topic by the time I left work. I remember sitting curled in the chair by the bookcases that were in the office of my PhD committee chair, lost in my thoughts. David asked me kindly if I was still interested in my topic. No, I shook my head. My own disillusionment and frustration with health care combined with the dark nature of moral distress and compassion fatigue had put me off. “Too dark?” he asked. I nodded. I was desperate for light. I needed to be away from health care, not studying what was amiss. I was no longer in a space where I wanted to research and attend to the painful stories shared by health care workers. To bear witness to the suffering of another requires one to approach from a place of empathy and compassion. When the stories of another hit too close to home, we are at risk of over identifying, of moving from empathetic concern into empathetic distress where our own feelings and emotions are unbalanced and our actions become as much about alleviating our own discomfort as the other person’s (Bateson, 2012; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). My research topic, although important, was too close to home. I wanted to be like the heron—standing still, composed and with purpose in the early morning light.

I spent that summer in the Gulf Islands—Mudge, Gabriola, Quadra, Hornby—following the tides. I visited friends, spent time by the water exploring the pools left by retreating tides and watching kingfishers, eagles and herons fish. The rhythmic nature of the shoreline provided me a place to be still, sheltered from the winds that had caused these upheavals—a place to gaze at the horizon. With my camera in hand, I began to re-engage with a thread of creativity I had long left behind. Photographing the landscape and the flora and fauna of the islands brought me out of

anxiety and into the present moment. Photography became a path into mindfulness and a way of connecting with something deeper inside me. I realized I longed for creativity in my PhD.



Figure 2. *Untitled*

My committee supported and encouraged me wholeheartedly as I looked for a new area of research. I spent the fall and winter reading and exploring, making lists of the things that interested me. I read about and explored ideas of suffering, compassion, mindfulness and hope. I thought deeply about relationship, creativity, and spirituality. These were all avenues not only into research, but also into a deeper understanding of myself and a way through my confusion and anxiety. In my mind, I was still focused on doing my research in health care as this was the only landscape I knew and research in that domain would help move my career ahead, but my heart wanted a new vista. I wanted to explore something different and unfamiliar, but I didn't yet know what. Rohr (2016) wrote that liminal space is the "threshold – where we are betwixt and between the familiar and the completely unknown" (para. 2). The roles I had played daily in work were gone and what I had seen for myself as a path forward in my PhD, I had discarded. I felt uprooted and impatient with myself. I wanted to hurry through all the uncertainty but found there was no rushing the work done in liminal space. I needed to slow down and go beneath the surface to find the way. Liminal space, I believe, acts as a pause in the rushing stream of our lives. It is like a back eddy where water circles back on itself, a place where fish both rest and

feed. I found myself paused, reflecting on how I had arrived in this place and searching for what might be next. This time was more than just about figuring out a research question, it was about (re)claiming self. It was a place that asked me to face fears, to find answers to difficult questions and to embrace the stranger within. It was, then a place of tension; between risk and safety, between leaving and embracing. In his poem “New Beginnings”, O’Donohue (2008) writes that the heart knows the seeds of a new beginning before you are fully aware. It watches the emptiness grow and sees how, until courage is summoned to move forward, you

play with the seduction of safety,
and the same grey promises that sameness whispered (p.14)

These lines resonated. I felt and knew that greyness. I wanted to “trust the promise of this opening” (O’Donohue, 2008, p.14). I pinned the poem to the wall next to a photo of a flower opening. I read it daily for a while, fed on its wisdom. The liminal eddy gave me space to kindle imagination, to gather courage, and to embrace the possibilities that were waiting ahead. I look back now, with greater clarity as to what was happening. And I am grateful to my committee who guided me through the confusion.

I began to imagine myself as more than a health-care leader and I began to think about doing research outside of health care. I continued to read and be drawn towards studying compassion; a subject imbued with light. Did compassion lead to hope? I wrote in the margin of my book. David asked me “when in your life did this question about compassion start?” I thought of recent events; the compassion I received from unexpected places after my close friend died and during the summer I ran like the Narrows. “Further back” he urged. Nicaragua, 1996, and the kindness and generosity of those who had far, far less than me. Generosity that meant that they, who had little, went without. “Further back?” he questioned again. Age 14, sitting on my bed, in my orange floral wall-papered room reading a biography on Mother Teresa, caught up by the magnitude of the devotion of the nuns to the poor. I remember being filled with awe, imagining what it meant for those who were being cared and helped, to be seen. Is this really where the question began? I am unsure. Catalyzed by questions, connections and insights, we trace threads back through our lives to construct, de-construct, and re-construct the stories we live by. Seemingly innocuous moments, experiences, interactions, books we read, movies we watch stay with us and can seed change, dreams and direction. They weave into our stories, helping us make sense of our lives.

I read a story called “The Good Conductor” by Bernard Hare (2010). Hare was on a train headed home to see his mother who lay dying; he wasn’t going to make the connection with the last train of the night. The conductor sensed he was upset and pressed a few times to hear what was wrong. Reluctantly and angrily, Hare finally told him. Hare made it home to see his mother that night because the conductor took it upon himself to ensure the second train was held back. Hare writes how the compassion of the conductor became a catalyst for him changing his life around. Hare’s story made me think about how compassion can be experienced and how it can affect us. I thought about how we don’t always know what effect our actions will have on the strangers we meet. Compassion is most often received from those we know and who are close to us (Ekman, 2014). Our compassion towards strangers seems more dependent on the centrality of them in our lives (Ekman, 2014). The conductor took an opportunity and while he may never know the impact of his actions, Hare has never forgotten. Hare came to value the compassion offered him and he let it be a catalyst for change and growth. Compassion is considered an emotion but is also held as a value, a moral imperative, a universally held experience and, most importantly, a precious necessity (Halifax, 2011; Goetz, Keltner & Simon-Thomas, 2010). Hare’s story stands apart as to how strangers can also positively impact our lives. We all need good conductors in our lives and we need to be them.

As I honed in on this topic, people would ask me if I had had an experience about compassion from a stranger. I don’t recall one, but I have experienced a deep compassion that has had a profound and lasting effect on me. In times of suffering, we need others; as if borrowing the strength of another helps sustain us until we regain our own strength (Cassell, 2004). This was my experience. Such compassion helped me to find threads of self and cast light to my shadow side. “In the kindness of care, the divine comes alive in us” says O’Donohue (2004, p. 7). This is perhaps one aspect of the healing nature of compassion.

Weems (2009) suggests that there is an “importance of thinking deeply about an experience you’ve never had (p. 133).” I wanted to know about the experience of compassion from strangers that changed lives. We hear stories, such as those of Hare’s Good Conductor, and of those who give of themselves—from small kindnesses to acts of heroism—but we don’t often hear the other side of the story—how that act of compassion was received and the mark it made. I grew up in elementary school listening to the parable of the Good Samaritan (see Appendix A), learning to help and be like the Samaritan. But what was the experience of the man the

Samaritan helped? We are not told of his experience. If we knew how kindness might be experienced as compassion, how our compassion might have a profound effect on another, would we be willing to let our hearts be touched by the suffering of another? I imagine we might.

As I settled into a new research area, I continued to read about compassion and attended conferences on compassion. There is currently extensive research being done on compassion: what it is, what comprises it, the neurobiological underpinnings, and how we might become more compassionate people and reap the benefits (Bateson, 2009; Gilbert, 2005, 2009; Neff 2011, Singer & Bolz, 2013). The work of researchers in the sciences and social sciences underpins much of my knowledge for this study. And yet, as I have charted a course through this topic, woven in the threads of my own experiences, I believe that our understanding of compassion needs to be connected with work done in a broader research context of the humanities and arts. We need multiple ways of knowing about compassion and suffering; many threads of light shining in and reflecting out. Suffering remains a mystery of human existence (Wilkinson, 2005). Suffering, and the response of compassion, are complex and nuanced. Margaret Somerville (2006) writes:

To reach a complex understanding of an issue, we might need to consider notions of objective and subjective; the knowable and the unknowable; the individual and the collective; duties to act and obligations to exercise restraint. We can undertake an analysis within these tensions, in the spaces between and among them, for it is there that room exists for complex understanding.” (p.201)

I began to sort through these tensions as I looked for a way to bring creativity to my research and find a way to study compassion from strangers within an arts-based approach. I had been reading about narrative methods when I was introduced to arts-based research by Carl Leggo. He loaned me a stack of books, which landed me in a new research terrain. I sat at my desk, sifting through the pages of arts-based research books, taking notes and wondering about this new research horizon. I was curious, but when I came to a chapter on poetic inquiry my imagination was captured.

I remember standing at the small bookstore in the mall the prior winter, looking at the poetry books, not a genre I usually read. The clerk approached and said “here, try this one, it’s my favourite.” She handed me a book of poems by Mary Oliver. I went home and spent hours lost in the keen observations and honesty of her poems. I used one that year in a course

assignment, setting the poem to photos and music. I bought another of her books and then another. Mary Oliver's poems drew me in, not just to her subjects, but to the art of poetry. They took me back into memories of reading and memorizing poems as a little girl with my Nana and forward to the next moment where I found myself considering poetry as a research method. As I read about arts based research and poetic inquiry, I took copious notes. I began to play with the words in my notebook and formed my first found poem:

re search

map it out
chisel away
a boundless exercise
no shortcuts explore

research begins
in story
revisit revise
life's fabric

inquire in the world
to lose one's way
in fluid space
surrender

envisage voice
imagine the arts
as dissertation
a method of heart

There is a feeling of delight that comes for me when a poem spills on to a page, falls together and the best word is finally found. It wasn't until a few months later that I dared to begin writing poems borne of my imagination and experience rather than from words found on the pages of my notebook.

I continued though to want to find a sense of place for myself in my studies and to be confident in my decisions. I found myself weighing the possibility of indulging in something heart filling and creative over researching a topic in health care that would be more likely to lead to different work after my dissertation. The latter seemed the more sensible practical route, one I

would usually take. My topic of compassion of strangers seemed fanciful, mysterious in what it would produce, and I often worried about what kind of contribution could be made from such a study, equating contribution with utility. I felt I was walking on a shale slope, wondering if the next step would give way. I revisited a wide variety of ideas, always returning to wanting to explore the artist inside me and to explore something more imaginative. At times I fell in love with the freshness of this topic and the creative approach; it felt indulgent and risky and I felt light inside. I sat back and considered what happens when we don't take risks—how we fence ourselves in. So I continued to explore arts-based methodology and how it would work with this topic. I wanted a research method that would give more voice to the individual experiences of the participants and engage my creativity. I wanted to use poetry and photography but I was not sure how. I needed to be lost in order to find my way. To arrive at an understanding of arts-based research, necessitated my letting go of familiar ways of thinking. Initially I had believed my research might use a traditional qualitative method or perhaps even a mixed methods approach. Then I realized that neither of those was sufficient. I have been schooled in the social and health sciences, first loves of my academic and career work. My undergraduate degrees taught me the methods of quantitative and qualitative research, and I have spent much time reading scientific and traditional social science studies. This was my foundation and understanding of research. But we need “knowledge in different shapes” says Leavy (2015). We need, says Somerville (2006), to embrace ‘complexity, mystery and spirit’ (p.207) in addition to the ‘mind, will and technology’ (p.207) we have come to value so highly because we need the former for there to be a richness, a sufficiency, to life. The domains of research bumped up against each other and the tensions and borderlands of epistemology required some exploring.

Arts-based research and the approach of a/r/tography, challenged me to think of research in new ways. How does one “know” through art? “The limits of language do not define the language of our understanding” say Barone and Eisner (2012, p.158). How do aesthetic works create knowledge? How does knowing through the sensory, kinesthetic and imaginary (Gerber et al., as cited by Leavy, 2015) fit it into my view of academic? Eisner (2008) writes:

Knowledge as a term is a noun. Knowing is a verb. And knowing may be a much more appropriate descriptor of the processes of inquiry made in pursuit of a problem that will not yield to a set of rigidified procedures. Inquiry always yields tentative conclusions rather than permanently nailed down facts (p.4).

An arts based inquiry seeks to “describe, explore, discover” (Leavy, 2014, p.296) rather than seek a final meaning, or a measurement. Arts-based research’s goal is to make sense of the world through forms of representation such as poetry, theatre, and music (Barone & Eisner, 2012). Stock, Sameshima, and Slingerland (2016) suggest that the varying artistic renderings generated from a research inquiry are mimetic in nature; a ‘re-presentation’ that generates rhizomatic understandings and opportunity for dialogue, insights and questions. Arts-based research then requires meaning and knowledge to be made relationally. It requires an interaction and an engagement between the artist/researcher, the art and the audience (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2008).

I drew encouragement from the continued conversations with my committee members and other arts-based researchers. I read widely—not just journal articles, but memoir, and poetry, learning from the work of others. As I became more serious about using an arts-based methodology for my topic, my committee began urging me to trust the process I was in and to take a leap and fall fully into the work ahead. Was this PhD process meant to include lessons about trusting? Yes, but perhaps more than that, it was about learning to have courage. As I pressed forward I finally let go of my initial ideas and let my doctoral and research processes unfold. “Trusting the process is based on a belief that something valuable will emerge when we step into the unknown” (McNiff, as cited by Wilson, 2008 p. 27). I let my understanding grow through being and doing the work. I saw the need to follow an intuitive course rather than to look for prescription and clear answers. I wrote in my research journal:

There is nothing linear here...it is about letting go, letting myself dissolve into the work, find answers through the work. If I hang on too tightly to wanting to ‘understand’ I might never know.

I waded further into the unfamiliar waters—reading, having conversations, asking questions and finally attending a poetic inquiry conference. My confidence and understanding grew with each step. The poetic inquiry conference was instrumental in helping me visualize how my research methodology might unfold. Throughout that conference, I had a growing sense of having found a place for myself as a researcher. A place where others also believed that tapping into imagination and embracing new possibilities was called for in research and, as I was to find, provided a fuller way of being and understanding the world around me. I began to see new possibilities for myself. It was time to step across the threshold. In fact, it was time for me to

leap.

In 1986, on the island of Tavenui, Fiji, a simple sign marked the longitudinal line of the international date line. I have a picture of myself standing there with one foot in today and one foot in tomorrow. I entered my PhD studies standing firmly in the familiarity of ‘today’—the scientific and traditional qualitative research methods I knew best. Over many months, with the patience and teaching of my committee, I broadened my understanding of research and began to see the possibility of tomorrow—the opportunity for an arts based research project. In reality, the dateline leaves the longitudinal line above Fiji and zigzags around the South Pacific countries and down around New Zealand. I, too, had criss-crossed through methodologies, asked questions and questioned myself, fell back into the familiar then stepped forward again. Slowly my tomorrow of arts-based research dawned and became this study.

travelling epistemologies

an imaginary line separates today
from tomorrow or yesterday
straddling ahead or behind
like Cartesian divide body and mind
where does the soul reside?

I zigzagged across the South Pacific
that winter or summer depending
on hemispheres north south left right
followed the route of Captain Cook
crossing cortical divide

I visited exotic islands where lemons
were like oranges and rum was cheap
wandered beaches in Fiji and Tonga
danced too long in Samoa
missed the plane to Vanuatu

where I might
have fallen in love sooner



Figure 3. *Untitled*

“There’s a thread you follow...” (Stafford, 1999, p. 42)

Thread. The word comes from the Old English word *thrāwan* meaning to cause to twist or turn (www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary). Threads twist in and out throughout the course of our lives. We speak of the fabric of our lives, of experiences as adding to the tapestry of our lives. At times we may feel ‘threadbare’, worn away, ragged. But threadbare makes visible the threads, the ends of silken or coarse filaments. Threadbare exposes the weave; the warp and weft that makes the cloth, the shadow and light in us.

My goddaughter keeps folded in her room the hand sewn quilt I made for her when she was two years old. She remains fond of it, and the worn tattered edges where little hands clutched are evidence it was well used. The cotton I purchased in England, brought to Vancouver and saved for 18 years, waiting for the right project. The quilt serves as a thread for each of us; a thread that we use to trace who she was as a child to who she is now as a young woman. She asks me to patch the quilt, repair the threadbare edges so it doesn’t wear away on her. I am reluctant. I want her to always see the threads that run inside her, to hold on to them, to see them as precious.

What lies in each of us, the uniqueness that is me or you, starts with a filament of DNA, spun in helix form. The psalmist, David, tells us of the Divine story and says we are ‘fearfully and wonderfully made’, ‘knit...together’, and ‘woven in the depths of the earth’ (Revised Standard Version Bible (RSV), Psalm 139, v. 13-15.). There is something holy in us. Newell (2008) suggests that when we look into the face of a baby, we are looking into the face of the Divine. We find our way by the thread that is knitted into us. Our experiences, along with how we story them, twist in like the filaments that give colour and texture to thread and which, in moments of attention and rootedness, we outwardly express.

My doctoral work is an exploration of many threads; threads of images and words, of contemplation and engagement, of knowing and unknowing, of suffering and compassion in the lives of those who participated in this study, and the thread that runs through me. Traversing liminal space is as much about ‘letting go of’ as it is about opening to discovery. Leaving old ways to find new ways forward meant discarding the hats and coats that hide the shimmering self (Buechner, 1991) and allowing myself to reclaim the thread. Wilson (2008) writes that “as we surrender and let go of control, we are able to be transported to a new place” (p.47).

start a new chapter

*explore this wild life
of carefree gardens
and forsaken places*

*in liminal seasons
linger let go*

*your story begins
where words end*

I chose to approach this study as an a/r/tographer; weaving together self as artist, researcher, teacher. Through writing, poetry, and photography, I have been seeking meaning in the unfolding questions offered through the stories I heard. Suominen Guyas (2007) suggests that “research, theory and knowledge are an adventure into one’s intellectual and emotional capability; an adventure about learning, un-learning and re-learning the possibilities of human thought” (p.62). A/r/tography is a living inquiry. It is an active process that urges the artist/researcher/teacher to live life deeply; where inquiry will come from reaching into the ‘messiness of daily living’, reaching beneath the surface to what is unseen; and where words and images give rise to new meanings and then circle back in a process of continued exploration of self and research (Springgay et al, 2005). I wrote in my research journal:

I am braiding together my old and new perspectives on research, the old and new location of me as researcher from social sciences to arts based inquiry, and in identity—who I was and who I am now. Knowing, being and becoming...opened up by poetry.

I am learning how I might live more heart-fully, more deeply. An enriching experience that requires intention. I think of the challenges of calling myself an a/r/tographer. New identities twining together. Who am I as artist, researcher, teacher? How do they inform each other? Can I define myself or call myself these three words when they are only recently consuming my time? Consuming my time and also consuming me. I have been exploring what it means to me to be an emerging artist and an emerging researcher. In my clinical faculty position, I have begun to find moments to bring poetry and arts-based ways of knowing to the students I teach. I have them write found poetry, drop snippets about the use of art in research, challenge them to think of the necessity of many ways of knowing, and how they came to what they know for the

skills of living. Beginning steps in the moments afforded me. Brief conversations tell me the students are curious. But it is the 'a' in a/r/tography that troubles me most. I am educating myself and practicing the arts of poetry and photography but am still hesitant to call myself an artist. It is a word I've reserved for those engaged more fully in a practice. It makes me ponder how easily we define others and the restrictions this causes. Moore (1992) writes "when we leave art only to the accomplished painter and the museum, instead of fostering our own artful sensibilities through them, then our lives lose opportunities for soul" (p.290).

I have, on my shelf, a small bag of muskox fur given to me some years ago by a friend, Kathryn, a knitter who asked me to clean it and spin it for her. It is filled with small pieces of plant matter, unusable in its present form. Muskox wool, known as qiviut, is the most expensive wool in the world, softer and finer than cashmere. But this qiviut had been free. Small tufts of undercoat lovingly picked off the tundra in Cambridge Bay by her friends. Because it is qiviut, I haven't cleaned it, haven't made it into a fine bat for spinning, haven't spun it. I am waiting until I have the skill to work with it. Kathryn waits too, perhaps has forgotten about it. I say to myself, I haven't practiced enough, recently enough. I worry how precious it might be to her and that I will not do a good enough job. I forget the fact that if I tried, that might be enough. I forget that Kathryn, now living near Montreal, would be pleased to knit a few yards of uneven soft wool onto the edge of a scarf. Wool that represents connections to friends and to her life in the West and the far North. Kathryn gifted me an opportunity to join her in the excitement of muskox fur that was free. I missed seeing this, until now, trapped by expectations imagined and assumed. It is the same with this arts based research. There is a gift here. I see that to move forward, I need to be willing to explore and experiment. I learn that it is all right to be at the beginning and to believe that my skills and abilities are enough to begin to do the work.

The muskox has become an unexpected yet delightful part of my writing process. As I write my thesis, I am cleaning it, carding it, and spinning the fleece into a soft yarn. Each step is rhythmic and coordinated, and it seats me back into myself, allowing me to find words. I experience the ability of art to open me, broaden my thinking, and to uncover my voice. The muskox becomes another thread connecting me as artist/researcher/teacher.



Figure 4. *Untitled*

The map of arts-based research is a topographical one. One follows the contours of the research and the data—no one route to traverse, rather an intuiting process. McNiff (2008) writes:

Perhaps a defining quality of art-based researchers is their willingness to start the work with questions and a willingness to design methods in response to the particular situation, as contrasted to the more general contemporary tendency within the human sciences to fit the question into a fixed research method. (p. 34)

I believe that the stories in this study, and perhaps this is true of all stories of compassion, lend themselves to an arts-based approach. They call for an aesthetic response that allows for imaginative possibilities. Choosing to represent the participants' stories aesthetically lets them become a springboard for dialogue and reflection. Working with the stories and creating the poems, photographs and writing has led me to new understandings. Our senses help us make meaning. The processing of written word and spoken word (reading the poems aloud) may occur in different parts of the brain but both processes give rise to the formation of mental images and these help us make meaning (Barry, 2006). We are transported by images to our emotions and memory. Viewing photographs and images also provides an aesthetic experience that touches emotion (Barry, 2006). Emotion, memory, cognitive processes and perception are inextricably linked, spiralling together to let us make meaning. The poems and photographs in this study are, then, a way for us to attend with our eyes, our ears, our imagination, and with a felt sense of empathy; empathy—a root from which compassion springs (Halifax, 2011; Singer & Klimecki, 2014). I want to create a way for readers to enter into the experience of the participants, to participate vicariously in the stories (Eisner, 2008) and to find their own meaning. The

differences of understanding and meaning-making are fodder for dialogue (Frank, 2010) and a shared way forward.

I began by collecting the stories. Eight people volunteered to participate in this study. The participants lived in three different countries, and heard about the study through flyers placed around the city and by word of mouth. I knew two of the participants. I screened each participant by telephone before they entered the study to ensure his or her story met the following criteria: compassion came from a stranger, defined as someone who was not known and who was not acting in a health care (hospital or clinic), educational or religious work setting where compassion was expected; the act of compassion must have affected them significantly, such that they could identify a lasting impact; and, the compassion received occurred during an identifiable time of distress or suffering. Compassion was not defined for them, as I believed it was important for the participants to decide if what they experienced was compassion.

I met five of the participants for individual face to face interviews, completed another interview through Face Time and two others wrote me letters detailing their stories. All participated in the University of British Columbia's Behavioural Research Ethics Board consent process. Each interview was an open-ended conversation and was, with consent, recorded and later transcribed. Each participant told his/her story, and throughout the conversation, I asked open-ended questions pertaining to their experiences of suffering, the compassion they received, the stranger, their reactions and the nature of the impact of these experiences on them. I followed with probing questions, as necessary, as my aim was to search for details and to ensure my understanding of their experiences. The letters were different as there was no opportunity to ask questions or to probe or clarify the experiences. I also gathered participants' consent to be photographed along with any memorabilia or items that were significant to that time in their lives. I discovered that this was not a fruitful approach and was an uncomfortable experience for both the participants and myself. And although I took photographs during three interviews, I later chose not to include the photographs in the study. As I furthered my understanding of a/r/tography and my process I saw the photographs as illustrative in nature which was not my intent, and they lacked the artistic and mimetic qualities I desired.

Immediately after each interview and reading each letter, I wrote in my research journal documenting my first thoughts and observations: what was happening for the participant; what was happening for me; what I heard and thought; and, what I wanted to ask more of in the next

interview. These first impressions became valuable when I started to work the interviews, and later, when I needed to see where I had come from and where I was going. They became a way to situate myself back into the interview, allowing me to connect back to the person in each story and to remember the emotion of the stories.

I worked with the stories one by one, reading each transcribed interview many times. This allowed me to not only become familiar with each story but to focus on different aspects, words and ideas. I asked myself questions of each story:

- what was the suffering?
- what was the act of compassion?
- what was the impact?
- where did the event lead the participant?
- how was compassion described?
- where were the metaphors, the juxtapositions?

These questions gave me a starting place. It seemed necessary to understand the participants experience and to begin to further understand how we integrate and make meaning of the events in our lives; the significance of a single branching point as the beginning of a change process and the cumulative uploading effect of multiple events (Westwood, personal communication, 2016). But these questions were not enough and I searched for a way to understand with an aesthetic sensibility what was also happening beneath the language of the stories. I returned at various points in the research process to the interview tapes and listened to them, wanting to hear the nuances and pauses, and searching for the spaces and the silences that held emotion. As I began addressing the stories through poetry and photography, the stories began to yield more.

Over many months I wrote found poems from the interviews. Using poetry to examine the participants' stories allows me to look closely at their experiences:

“Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for a magnified encounter with life as lived, up close and personal...”

(Brady, 2009, p. xi)

I used the notion of *vox participare* (Prendergast, 2009), working to reflect the participants' voices through the found poetry. Using the words spoken by the participants to create the poems, evokes the essence of the lived experience. I used both erasure poems and free-form found poems as defined by Walmsley, Cox & Leggo, (2015). For the stories of Kevin, Martin,

Dita, Annie and Tracy I created erasure poems, which are defined by using words in the order they appear in the transcript. For Veronica, Natalie, Danielle, and one poem of Annie's, I used free-form found poetry, a form of poetry that uses words from the transcripts but reorders the words for purposes of meaning or smoothness of voice. The poems were not written to re-tell the story of each participant but as a way of exploring different moments and experiences within the stories. I chose to present each participants poems framed by 'curatorial statements' to briefly introduce each participant and provide some context about their experiences. Some stories, it seemed, naturally lent themselves to the poetry. Others were less fluid, and I wrote fewer poems. Why this was became another question for me to consider. What did it mean then, for the voice of those participants? How do I then share their experience in the fullest way possible without forcing a poem? I wrestled with notions of equity, quantity and quality. I wanted to give equal opportunity to each story and to honour each participant's experience. Because I could not create more poems didn't make their experience any less important or profound. What would the effect be on the reader, or on the participant should they read it? How might I present them? Was I bumping up against the limitation of found poetry? How does the singular story support the collective story of the impact of the compassion of strangers? The stories although distinct and unique echo each other.

As I worked with the stories and poems, questions related to suffering and compassion also surfaced. How does the experience of compassion free us from our suffering and how does it change our perspective? As participants shared their stories, new insights and meaning occurred both in the re-telling and in the conversation we had; description and metaphor, created images that gave way to strong emotions about events and new thoughts. This occurred even though months, years, even decades had passed from the events. The stories we tell are not static but can create new momentum. I thought of the notion of 'finalizing' (Frank, 2010). Finalizing, Frank says, gives no room for further stories that may change the direction of the story of the story teller; "no one meaning is final and no one's meaning is final." While these stories are complete, they remain unfinished. The dialogic nature of story telling suggests that no meaning is final (Frank, 2010) and that there is continual meaning to be made in the re-telling of stories.

Photography became a way to create a contemplative space for myself to consider these questions and to find new insights using another medium. Although I initially had envisioned my photography as illustrative of the stories, I quickly realized something different.

Photography gave me a medium by which to explore interpretations, and thereby became intrinsic to my process. Using photography shifted my relationship to the stories and provided a perspective to view the stories and my own reactions to them. I draw on Sameshima's (2017) notion of parallax. Her model for research engages a multimodal approach, noting that in interdisciplinary and educational research, different viewpoints shift the way we see the object under scrutiny against the background. Shifting our subjectivity and situated-ness allows for shifts in the constructs of perception, interpretation and learning (Sameshima, 2017). Looking at my research material and utilizing various artistic methodologies opened the data to more complexity, more interpretive possibilities and ultimately dialogic learning (Sameshima, 2017). This was part of identifying the boundaries of the interview and seeking out ideas. The poems and photography are a way in; a way to "dwell with...rather than analyze or interpret according to a theoretical process" and allowing me to "write from particular moments" (Walsh, 2012, p. 274). The images I took throughout my study represent a meditative engagement and response to the stories and to my unfolding methodology. Photography lets me explore the hidden spaces between the words of the interview (Sameshima, personal communication, 2016). The photographs are shaped by my own affective responses. Instead of being literal or metaphoric, the photographs and poems are extensions of the ideas and questions that arose from the stories as I lingered with them. In this way, the photographs and poems are mimetic renderings of the interviews--open to ongoing researcher questioning and ruminating (Stock et al., 2016). They are untitled in order to leave them open to readers' own interpretations and responses.

The middle section of this paper is a weaving of language and images that create threads of engagement and contemplation. The thread of engagement is the aesthetic poetic exploration of the participants' stories—the found poems. The second thread weaves between and is comprised of images and fragments that give a space for the readers' own contemplation. As readers, our responses to text and images are many, always individual and are not limited to the verbal. They include emotions, awareness of paradox, flashes of insight and discovery, and glimpses of transcendence and ineffability—responses not easily worded (Suhor, 2002). This second thread is an invitation to consider a *Lectio Divina*, a space for contemplation and meditation on written text. Originating in the Judeo-Christian faith, a *Lectio Divina* "is a contemplative way to read a text" (Mesner, Bicknel & Walsh, 2015). A *Lectio Divina* is usually read four times. Rohr (2016) suggests the following method:

With the first reading, *listen* with your heart's ear for a phrase or word that stands out for you. During the second reading, *reflect* on what touches you, perhaps speaking that response aloud or writing in a journal. After reading the passage a third time, *respond* with a prayer or expression of what you have experienced and what it calls you to. Finally, *rest* in silence after a fourth reading (para 2).

Silence can lead us into thinking, to encounter ourselves (Carafna, 2006), and into soulful knowing: "The soul's way of knowing is not through analysis but contemplation" writes Miller (2014, p. 72). Contemplation is no longer linked solely to religious practices (Suhor, 2002) and has entered into the secular world. So here I follow the lead of Mesner et al. (2015) and I invite you to use the "Lectio" as an opportunity to slow down, linger, absorb, embrace and open to what is unfolding on the pages, through the images and inside you.

Let the fragments of language, image and silence be a thread for discovery.



*COMPASSION
SUFFERING*

Figure 5. *Untitled*

Compassion is an empowering power, an offering, a blazing fierceness rather than an interior emotion, and it has an efficacy for transformation.

Johnson (1992, p. 270)

The Stories

Kevin

It was the 1970s and Kevin was 16 years old. The need to belong, the longing to fit, answering the question ‘who am I?’ are all hallmarks of adolescence. Kevin left home for those reasons, setting off on his bicycle with a plan to pedal his way across the USA. Tired of the struggle to fit in at school and the tension that characterized home, Kevin said, “I had to do something and my world had to grow somehow.” On the third day, his bike broke down and with little choice he began to hitchhike. A family picked him up and offered him a place to stay for several days while he got his bike fixed. But Kevin decided to try hitchhiking rather than ride his bike. Often cold, broke and hungry, Kevin discovered travelling the road was a metaphor for life – full of highs and lows. He shared many stories with me about the kindness and compassion he was offered over months. His interactions with these strangers started to shift his perspective of others and of himself. He saw examples of families different from his own and people saw in him qualities he didn’t know he possessed. He experienced elation and despair at how his situation could turn around in a moment by the willingness or unwillingness of another. As he experienced compassion, he says he became more aware of both the light and the dark in the world. “Compassion from strangers” Kevin says, “is compassion without expectation.” For him, it rests at the bottom of the “compassion mountain”. At the top, he says, lies the “otherworldliness” of compassion from someone who loves you.

in review

I look back
remember

at least I've lived some kind of life
had all these experiences
turned out decent

my world's
the internet now
I love it
I'm not ashamed
it's a fascinating world

I'm so glad there was no internet then
I might never had these experiences

sunday's lesson

sixteen hitchhiking
on a Sunday it's raining
service was just out

I look presentable
don't look like a slob
trying to smile

nobody stopped
one person after another
passed me right by

should I expect them to stop?

hitch-hiking

rain cold
miserable hungry
it's getting dark
then somebody stops

in five minutes
the whole world has changed
I'm inside a warm vehicle
elation people are great

I'm thrust into a normal life
with normal people
normal situation
I'm 'part of the family'

but it's not normal
something's lacking
I don't see their faults
I don't see their baggage

they're strangers
when I'm with this family
I don't know them
it's perfect

compassion

the main thing
is
action

doesn't matter
if they want to please God
score points in the afterlife
if their conscience will bother them

it's action that counts

the people who helped
took a risk
their desire to help
stronger than fear

it's about action

groups of kids
families
tough guys
little old ladies

helping a stranger

Martin

Martin describes several difficult experiences in his adult life. The economic downturn of the 80s meant Martin lost his job and consequently his house; and then he went through a divorce. “I lost everything”, he quietly says. He recounts the feelings that go with such deep grief and loss; feelings of thoughts and emotions spirally downward into a ‘sea of madness.’ Martin rebuilt his life, remarried, and found new work. He then experienced the death of his second wife, along with several other close friends and family members, all within a short few years. He describes being set adrift again on a sea of emotions. Throughout these periods Martin had several experiences of compassion from a stranger. He relates how these moments became moments of connection, like a hand reaching down to rescue him and an integral part of ‘getting through’ the difficult times. Martin describes how each experience felt like the death of his ego and how he has grown into a more trusting person.

when all you've ever known is lost...

float drift
on raft death
disaster grief
one after another

madness
a sea of madness
no end
no place to go

shipwrecked

after death paperwork

at the government offices
the civil servant
looked like Nurse Ratchet

oh boy here we go
this is going to be a long process
register her death
cancel her stuff
pension plans
technical things

Nurse Ratchet looked
at me said "right"
took everything
under control
filled in all the forms
sign here sign here

I said thank-you
for the grace of strangers
to help

giving back

we talked about spouses dying
adjusting to life daughters
outdoorsmen

Ray's got Parkinson's
lost his ability to smile
I didn't know when he was telling a joke
or if I told a joke
whether he got it

the disease robs the brain
he started to do
the Parkinson's dance
but he says
he count's himself lucky

he can barely speak
we don't talk a lot anymore
I phone him up
hiking? yeah
fishing? yeah
I'll go up skiing he likes to ski
because it happens so fast
it cancels the Parkinson's

that's just what I do

he's lived with that disease
for twenty five years
he's still going strong

Dita

Dita sent her story by email, writing from Indonesia. Dita was out travelling with a friend in a rural part of Indonesia when she took a spill on her motorbike, sustaining an injury to her leg. Still able to drive she continued on her trip but as the pain in her leg and ankle worsened she stopped to rest at a roadside eatery. On seeing her limping and in pain, a stranger offered some first aid and assistance. She assumed she would have to pay as was her experience 'nothing without money' but the stranger refused. This took her by surprise and moved her to tears. Dita's experience changed how she saw the strangers in her travels. She says the compassion she was offered deepened her faith in humanity and it has freed her to be less skeptical of strangers and their motives of money.

“humanity sans money”

individualistic
opportunistic
is the jargon
in a megapolitan city
people being tricked

strangers trick
extract money for kindness
be skeptical
be suspicious
they are only after money

I was injured far from home
at a small eatery
he helped said
no need for money
it's not all about money

Veronica

Veronica asked if she could send her story via email. She heard of my study while travelling through the Downtown Eastside of Vancouver. Veronica was in her twenties when this story took place. She had earlier been involved in the sex trade but had moved East to be with her husband. Upon discovering him to be a liar and a con she decided to return to the West Coast. She wrote about a harrowing trip, hitchhiking across Canada in winter, where the drivers who picked her up threatened her if she didn't have sex with them. That is until she met a man who treated her respectfully and drove her across the country paying for her room at night and who didn't take advantage of her. Veronica says when he left her in BC she knew he had been real because of the tire tracks in the snow as he left. She has experienced this kind of compassion two more times and believes this is her "guardian angel" watching over her.

guardian angel

my husband
he'd been lying
how much he'd lied
four years he lied

I waited for money
he showed up
no money spent it all
four years he keeps lying

I hitchhiked Ontario to BC
rides from scumbags
dark days from hell
scared long way to go

then *he* stopped
“young lady it's your lucky day!”
hopped in wasn't sure
if it was my lucky day

fed cigarettes,
my own door at night
he didn't pull something
lucky day

we stopped every night
for the Young & the Restless
he was kind and respectful
luckiest of days

he was actually real
a man that had helped
most decent of humans
a privilege to meet

Lectio I

An invitation to linger

While it was still dark.
While it was still night.
While she could not see.
While she thought death held sway.
While she grieved.
While she wept.
While it was still dark, resurrection began.

Richardson (2017)



Figure 6. *Untitled*

windswept

gale winds wild
bend sapling spines
relentless roots ache

salt soaked words
etch story ring memory
in belly of heartwood

storms blow through
trees twist skyward
claim light lift birdsong



Figure 7. *Untitled*

The Stories Continued

Annie

Annie worked as a teacher, enjoying an active life until she became sick with a very rare and life threatening illness. It was a disease that altered her how she looked and how she lived her life. At the time of our interview, Annie had spent seven years in and out of hospital with life altering complications. Annie's life had changed dramatically and she lost much of the independence she once cherished. A close friend donated a kidney and for a short while her condition improved, but her illness was unyielding. She was no longer able to work, or drive and had a seeing-eye dog to help her get around. Annie's experience of compassion from a stranger took place shortly after she had been discharged from hospital. She had come home so weak that she couldn't care for herself and even walking across a room was a slow and challenging process. Annie felt like giving up. It was at that time that a parcel, from a stranger, arrived in the mail, containing a small thoughtful gift and a note. Annie said that the thought of a stranger caring about her and taking time to put a gift together had an immediate impact on her. She realized that if a stranger believed in her then she needed to care and fight more: "It woke up the warrior in me" she said determinedly.

illness

normal
healthy
job life
everything's good

then

sick
doctor to doctor
a mystery
mayo clinic

emergency
work up
crisis
might not make it

transplant
million bucks
got up
danced

rejection
official diagnosis
bleakest of times
really heavy

damn it
damn it
damn it
damn it

I don't feel like
I'm ever
going to be
normal again

disfigured I became exposed
transformed pretty to sick
soon nothing to nobody

the way I looked
if I smiled at someone
they looked right through me

just have to deal with it

people were unkind
brutal comments from strangers
made life hell

don't ask me like that
I'll give you an ignorant answer
"shark bite"

just have to deal with it

infectious disease doctors wear
hoods masks gowns rubber boots
I'm a pariah bleakest of times

the nurses argue
you take her I took her last time
terrified I might crash

just have to deal with it

world's most expensive drug
I need it for life
approved one year

life has completely changed
a white cane I've lost independence
I'd like to be out in the world

just have to deal with it

two and a half weeks in the hospital
will I make it?
I can't brush my teeth
I'm too tired
to put toothpaste on toothbrush
kicked down by disease such a battle
am I going to survive this?

others scream from their pain
people are dying
a ward for the dying
surrounded by dying

I have to get out
I need to get home
if I stay here I'll die

dialysis

half a life

you're here but you're not

very sick

very tired

lethargic

slow

stupid

thick

no respite never a good day

always behind the eight ball

is my life over as I know it?
what's happening to me?
I've lost so much
how am I going to carry on?

this parcel from a stranger
came in the mail
happy paper
small things a letter
it changed everything

a complete stranger
believes *in me* cares *about me*
my heart did a flip
spread warmth in my chest
all over my body

woke up the warrior in me
to care fight a bit more
I'm going to do this
I'm going to start
I changed that day

an epiphany
a stranger gave me hope
for myself
for the world
that one act taught me a lot

what is that person
carrying today
always something
everyone's carrying
around something
blinders on
busy busy

life is way slower now
a much slower pace
I see more clearly
being blind
more aware
I am more now

Natalie

Natalie story takes place in the interior of BC. An adventuresome skier, Natalie, her family and close friends, were cat-skiing, searching out fresh powder. They were on the second day of their trip. Describing a perfect day with ‘bluebird skies and fresh powder snow’, Natalie was taking her turn down the mountain when an avalanche occurred. She was buried under the snow in the middle of the mountain. Those skiing with her, including the guide, were stuck at the top of the mountain as the snow below was swept away leaving sheer rock below. Across the mountain, another group’s guide saw what happened, raced over and set out to rescue her. Natalie described her experience and the feeling of incredible gratitude at being rescued.

i.

avalanche training
meh not a problem
not scary
just the way it is
like doing a CPR course
it was fine

ii.

rolling snow
a little snow coming at you
a lot of snow
the snow the sound
this is an avalanche

swept head over heels
whooshing down the mountain
I'm not I can't
I've no control over this
I can't get myself out of this situation

all of a sudden

WHUMP

SILENCE

iii.

please find me
please find me
please find me
please find me
please find me

iv.

poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke
poke

I felt that poke

v.

DIG

adrenalin pumping
six minutes
six feet in concrete

vi.

people were there
tail guide from another group
he really saved me

jubilant
absolute jubilation
how did you find me?

life changed that day

Danielle

Danielle and I met on a course in the States. On hearing about my study, she approached me, visibly moved, asking to share her story. Danielle's story took place 30 years ago. At the time, she and her husband, and son had just moved to Germany. Everything was unfamiliar and she did not speak German. One evening, her young son was out biking with his dog when it began to fight with another dog. Her son fell off his bike and was injured. The dog's owner brought him safely home. Danielle reacted badly to the sight of her son bleeding but reflects now on the grace of the stranger. The story took place standing in the kitchen of their new home.

*everything is new here
the hours are all different
my husband is away*

*my son
has blood all over him*

*it was dark out
figured the man
had something to do with it*

*the protective animal in me
yelled at him*

*what I believed
had nothing to do
with what was in front of me*

compassion is...

a visceral thing
not intellectual

a heart deeply opened
turned inward and outward

a gem
raw unpolished

a pool
of wisdom calm

'I matter'
felt inside my skin

Tracy

Tracy was married to her second husband, a man she describes as manipulative and abusive. One evening, Tracy saw him threatening her daughter. Tracy intervened and the yelling match quickly escalated. He threw her across the room, breaking her cheekbone. She called 911 for help and the police and paramedics came. Tracy says she was overwhelmed by the gentle compassion offered and created by the “soft voices of the big men” who helped her in the ambulance. She describes it as pivotal in her starting to reconnect with herself and to take her children and leave her abusive marriage.

if you ever touch one of my kids again...

he walked away
I wasn't satisfied

he threw me across the room
why did I push that one button?

police ambulance fire truck
they took him away

the paramedics sat with me
big guys show up to help

put me in the ambulance
soft voices checking on me

comforting support
I could just let go

it was like I'd fallen into this other world
slid into a giant hammock

didn't have to do anything
didn't have to know anything

didn't have to argue
didn't have to justify

didn't have to try anymore
just float an amazing grace

Lectio II

An invitation to linger

May I live this day compassionate of heart,
clear in word,
gracious in awareness,
courageous in thought,
generous in love.

O'Donohue (2008)



Figure 8. *Untitled*

otherworldly

that winter it snowed
erased streets parks
in opal stillness

night after night
we walked
under a thousand tears

under a moonless sky
snow choked
the wonderful sorrow

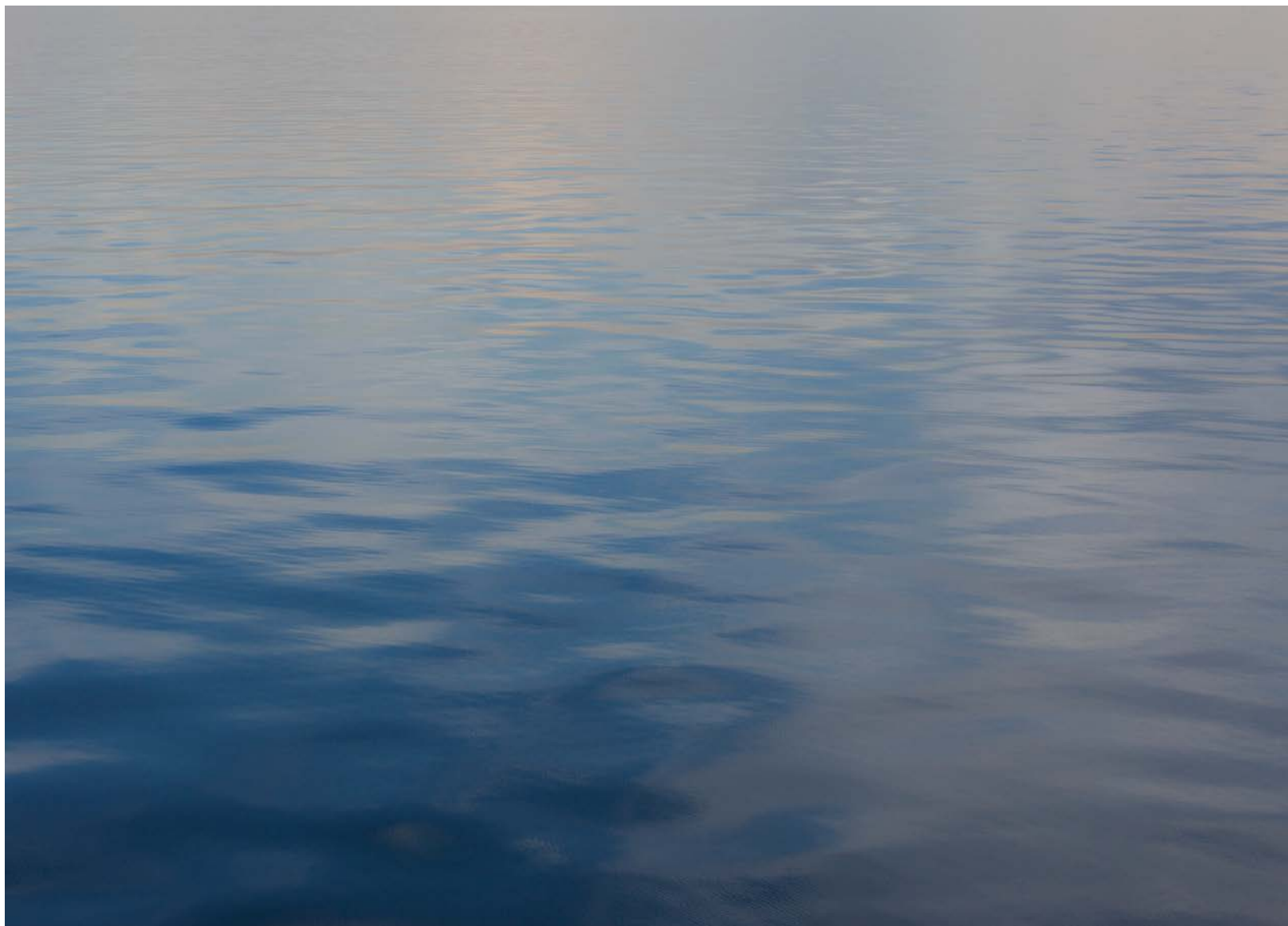


Figure 9. *Untitled*

Epilogue

he came towards me
I searched his face
what more can I bear?

eyes reflect
what the soul sees
I wept

*The Samaritan bound my wounds and took me to an inn he nursed me through the night and
in the morning he paid the innkeeper saying care for him I will cover the cost when I return*

who is this man
who held my heart
in his?

The wounded man lay on the road violated, betrayed, and ignored until the compassionate action of a stranger saved him. This is the Parable of the Good Samaritan, which asks who are we most like as neighbours? The ones who took advantage, passed by, ignored, or the one who reached out? But there is another story to consider here. What of the heart of the wounded man? We don't know much about the wounded man's recovery; how body, mind, and soul were healed and how he made sense of his experience. Did such trauma leave him bitter and angry? Was the compassion of the Samaritan enough to keep the wounded man's heart soft? What happens to people's humanity when subjected to violence and suffering (Wilkinson, 2005)? The experiences of the compassion of strangers in this study reflect the possibility that the wounded man's heart stayed soft, yet strong, and that the compassion of a stranger can keep a heart supple giving room for growth to arise out of suffering.

There is little doubt that the Samaritan saved the wounded man's life. The work of the wounded man is to weave this event into the tapestry of his life. We don't always understand in the present moment. In looking back, we may (a)mend the fabric working the threads and discover new understanding. The participants in this study faced a similar task. A time of suffering and an interaction with a compassionate stranger served to have a lasting impact on each of them. Each told me a story and through our conversation uncovered, even re-covered, meaning. The compassionate actions of strangers have had a lasting impact, altering threads of

perceptions, beliefs, values, and ways of being. These are some of the sweet fruits of compassion to be harvested.

Summer is folding into fall here on Gabriola, and the fruits of harvest are upon us as I write. Vegetable gardens are ripe for the picking. Globes of yellow and red tomatoes peek out from curled drying leaves, beans play hide and seek in the tall staked vines, and sweet corn is found at the roadside stands. The blackberry bushes are picked over, their luscious fruits filling pies and jam jars in island kitchens and islanders' bellies. The blue-purple plums are losing their tartness and are ready for gathering. But it is the deciduous trees, turning the banks of the Narrows yellow, that hint at the coming colours.

in autumn
leaves scatter
coloured fragments
of summer memories
winter winds water eyes

Compassion, I believe, folds into suffering, letting light flow into the darkness so the colour can be seen again.

colour is the language of light...light is the greatest unnoticed force of transfiguration in the world: it literally alters everything it touches and through colour, dresses nature to delight, befriend, inspire and shelter us (O'Donohue, 2004, p.82) .

The participants' stories are filled with the colours of compassion. I re-read them while on Gabriola, having not looked at them since writing the poems many months ago. I am curious as to what might startle me now that didn't before. Further along in my own development as a/r/tographer, I wonder what more these stories might teach me? I want to attend to them with all the senses that I used in carding and spinning the muskox. What threads have appeared as I wrote and photographed and spun? I look more closely at the rich and coloured tapestry that together these stories form.



Figure 10. *Untitled*

To recall comes from the French word '*rappeler*', meaning to 'call back.' When we call back, what answers is not always expected. In recalling their stories of compassion the participants found hidden meanings and insights. Some told me that they spent time remembering and considering their experiences before the interviews. Another tried hard not to think about it as she wanted to see what came up as we talked. They considered the event and the impact and the situation that led them to the moment of receiving compassion from a stranger. Each of our conversations sought to understand the meaning of the story for them today:

I do not recount the past simply for the sake of recounting the past...when I recount a story, I seek to hold it in the present in order to understand how better to live now and tomorrow.
Leggo, 2009 (p.211)

I search for the threads running across the stories, the poems, and photographs as they weave in and out of each other. Working with the stories, poems, and photographs is akin to a continued conversation. Stock et al (2016) explain that meaning can be derived by examining the relationship of the renderings of data in reference to each other. This is the concept of intertextuality where one text echoes another (Leggo, 2007; Stock et al., 2016). The stories have meaning in relationship to each other and to the poems here, to the work I have read and to my own work. And they echo my own experiences of suffering and compassion and those I have witnessed in my work in health care. They tug on who I am as a friend, a family member, a citizen, and as a researcher and scholar. As an a/r/tographer, I have become part of the living inquiry, and part of the fragments of the stories that I write here. Baldwin (2005) writes:

and in the act of listening to story, we accept an invitation into experiences that are not our own, although they seem to be. Story weaves a sense of familiarity. We are simultaneously listening to another's voice and traveling our own memories. We are looking for connectors, making synaptic leaps linking one variation of human experience to another. (p. 7).

The grace of the storyteller is to let another be touched by the story and find meaning; the grace of the listener is to honour the storyteller and the story. I want to lean into the stories with an open heart. I want to hold the stories open to possibilities as I listen for what the stories have to teach us. For these stories are intimate and sacred. They speak of the personal and collective; pain and joy; and, about leaving and becoming.

What is this thread of suffering?

*madness
a struggle
no place to go
I'm disoriented afraid*

please find me

Suffering is an experience that takes us inward to a place where we come face to face with our own vulnerability. I heard stories of illness, abuse, injury, searching, grief, and imminent death. I heard stories of loneliness, confusion and desperation; of physical and psychological pain; and, of fear and anger. Suffering, says Cassell (1991), is filled with dark, isolating moments. These were difficult moments and emotions for participants to recall.

O'Donohue (1997) writes:

There is a solitude in suffering, when you go through suffering that is lonely, intense and terrible. Words become powerless to express your pain; what others hear from your words are so different from what you are actually suffering. Everyone goes through that bleak time. (p. 102)

They searched for words and metaphors, to describe their distress while at other times their silence and tears made visible the wound. I look at the words in the transcripts that make me pause. I listen to the silences in the taped conversations. "Suffering denies words" says Malpas (2012). What does silence whisper? I remember the participants' faces, the inflection in their voices, the hesitancy. These expressions reflect the experience of their suffering. Suffering lies beneath the facts and events. It lives between the lines of poetry and chokes the spaces between words. Suffering is the catch in the voice, the watering of eyes, the glance towards and then away, the sharp inhalation and holding of breath. How do I share with you what hung in the air when our talk turned to painful moments?

sacred space

at the table
we wrap hands around
warm cups of tea
story fills the air then
words slip silent
remembering
gathers in the body
silence whispers sorrow

These stories reminded me of how hidden our suffering can be from those closest to us. Suffering threatens connectedness (Malpas, 2012) and we need, as Martin related in his experience, the hand reaching in connecting us back out to the world. Although we may tend to secret our suffering, or be at loss of how to explain what we are going through, we long for another to help lessen suffering's isolative nature (Cassell, 2004); a Virgil to accompany us through our descent and ascent as he did in Dante's *Inferno* (Alighieri, trans. 2012). Suffering then is relational. It calls on those around us to notice and to assist, despite how it may be affecting our ability to relate with others. And it calls us into relationship with ourselves and who we know ourselves to be as it presses against our integrity (wholeness) and our identity (Cassell, 2004).

Each participant found a way through moments of distress and despair. As is the cyclical nature of our lives, some revisited familiar territory such as grief, loss, and abuse more than once. For others the illness and the struggle it presented never left, but a way to move forward was found. The stories speak to the temporal nature of suffering (Cassell, 2004), to the wide variety of suffering we face, and to the resilience that is in us. If suffering is integral to the narrative of compassion, then we hope for compassion to always be integral to the narrative of suffering. In the isolation of suffering, compassion creates connection. It is the hand reaching out beckoning us into the light.

What is this thread of compassion?

*a gift
a heart of courage*

Compassion was the offer of food, the filling out of forms, first aid rendered freely and the respect of a stranger. It was a gift in the mail, frantic digging in snow, care for a child, and the creation of safety. But these stories also exemplify how compassion is more than the face of action; more than the sum of its component processes. Words describing compassion litter the transcripts: warmth, kindness, safe, spiritual, reaching out, reaching in, a container, care. Compassion was an invitation to connection, no matter how brief; the caring for another, no matter how different; a step propelling each person forward and through their distress; and, a shout into the dark of 'you matter.' Compassion from a stranger is, then, about the positive

regard for another—the sacredness in the “I – thou” that acknowledges relationship (Buber, 1971).

Compassion is not a relationship between healer and wounded. It is a relationship between equals. Only when we know our own darkness well can we be present with the darkness of another. Compassion becomes real when we recognize our shared humanity. (Chodron, 2001, p. 50)

Recognizing our darkness, the part of ourselves unknown to us, is recognizing the stranger who is in us. In offering compassion to another, just as we might offer ourselves compassion, we acknowledge our common humanity (Neff, 2011).

Compassion comes from the Latin root ‘compati’ meaning ‘to suffer with.’ “[E]ven our own suffering can never be completely removed from the suffering of others. Not only does our suffering implicate others, but the suffering of others also implicates us (p.11)” writes Malpas (2012). The participants said that compassion gave a sense of connection; connected them back to the world and to their selves. And they found that helpful. I asked the participants how they would define compassion. All mentioned compassion required action. And while clearly having an outcome of connection, acting on compassion required other qualities. Being compassionate was seen as needing ‘to step outside yourself’ (Natalie) and that, says Martin, requires courage: “It takes courage to go over and do something about the compassion you feel.” You “give of yourself in a moment or time where you cannot think about yourself...it involves stepping outside of ourselves,” says Natalie. Courage combined with the desire to help led to stepping in. Courage comes from the French word ‘coeur’ or heart. Danielle explains that, to her, compassion is embodied, visceral, and she points to her heart saying “a heart turned inward and outward simultaneously.” “They were taking a risk, helping a stranger, but their desire to help this person who is asking...was stronger than their fear, stronger than any reservations” remarked Kevin. A heart of compassion is a heart of courage. “To be courageous,” reminds philosopher Whyte (2015) “is to stay close to the way we are made” (p.40). Close to the thread that runs through us. Courage then becomes a part of keeping our hearts supple, and open. To connect to our compassionate nature, and to hold compassion as an enacted virtue requires courage: “Courage is what love looks like when tested by the simple everyday necessities of being alive” (Whyte, 2015, p.40).

For the participants, the compassion they experienced from strangers became a catalyst for change. Whether an immediate impact or as a seed slowly germinating, the experiences

formed a branching point; an event, major or minor, that one can look back on and describe as shaping his or her life in some significant way (Kuhl, 2011). The participants easily answered the question of how these experiences impacted their lives. What stood out across the stories as significant in the creation of the branching point is the fact that the compassion came from a stranger. Their presence and actions were unexpected and the effect was to startle—to create a stop. “A stop,” writes educator and performing artist, Fels (2015) about Applebaum’s concept, “is a moment of risk, a moment of opportunity...A stop, ephemeral, temporal, elusive, calls out to us, *listen, this moment matters*” (p. 112).

What is this thread of the unexpected?

right out of the blue

he took a risk reached over

I was surprised

a stranger might care?

it meant everything to me everything

such an impact

just out of the blue

As the participants looked back, each spoke about the unexpected and unanticipated nature of compassion coming from a stranger and how it surprised them. Its effect was to create a stop – a moment that has mattered and influenced, a moment for further consideration (Fels, 2015). As we sat and talked about these moments in the interviews, it became evident that these moments still held importance. They continued to resonate with the participants, and emotions of warmth, gratitude, happiness, and even regret at not being able to go back and thank properly were evident. There can be a delight in the unexpected. These moments are powerful and continue to have influence. “I’ll read you the letter [from the stranger] because it’s incredibly powerful. I won’t get through it without crying. Even thinking about it makes me cry” explains Annie. Veronica writes that she only knew the stranger who helped her was real because, as he left, she saw the tire tracks. While the actions of the stranger were welcomed, knowing it came from a stranger mattered. The stranger mattered. The participants did not remember the stranger’s name (if known) but they remember how the stranger looked, how they acted and what they did. Natalie recalls the quiet unassuming nature of the guide who rescued her. Martin

paints a picture of the clerk who helped him. Assuming she would be like a “Nurse Ratched”, he was instead met with kindness and help, which surprised him. It led him to think about the grace of strangers. Tracy tells of the presence created by the ambulance drivers. Annie did not see the stranger who sent a parcel but the letter that was enclosed had a name and an address. She decided to write back. She continues to correspond with the stranger although they have decided not to meet, preferring to leave some mystery to the relationship.

We most often expect and receive compassion from those closest to us, where it often serves as a building block to relationship through acts of reciprocity (Trivers as cited in Goetz et al., 2010), but there is no such relationship with a stranger, no such underpinning. The connection between participant and stranger was time limited, even ‘fleeting.’ It caused surprise. Danielle describes it as a ‘startle’ that woke her up from habits and patterns of relating that sometimes cause her to miss things. Annie was startled too, thinking the parcel and care with which it was put together was sent to her by mistake. And Dita expected to be asked to pay for the help offered to her as was her prior experience. We want people to help, yet the bystander effect suggests people are reticent to get involved (Ricard, 2015). Moreover we often grow up learning to be wary of strangers. Yet here are strangers who leaned in and who helped, perhaps unaware of the lasting impact they were having. The stop, the moment, led participants to new understandings about themselves and their perception of strangers and served as a reminder of the interconnected and interdependent nature of our world.

What is this thread of interconnection?

*have more faith in humanity
see the best in people first
people are hurting
everyone carries something*

The participants said that they thought more about and acted more kindly towards strangers. They spoke about the interconnected nature of our lives and began to develop new perceptions around strangers. Annie said:

When you have compassion from a stranger, the biggest thing is ‘Wow’. It gives you hope because you think that people don’t care about each other if you don’t know each other. When something like that happens it just tells you that people do care about each other. You can be a complete stranger and someone will care about you because you’re a

human being and you're going through a hard time. That was very powerful to me. I had never considered that before. I thought, "That's a very powerful way to live."

The positive interactions with strangers, broadened positive assumptions and participants talked about how they have come to expect the best in people first and that they saw strangers as someone who could be trusted. For Dita and Martin, the moments of compassion from a stranger served to restore or create a more optimistic belief in humanity. And there was more understanding of how strangers are also burdened with their own hurt and struggles, thus letting them hold unkind interactions more lightly. The essence of compassion is seeing the suffering of another within our own. The thread of suffering affects all.

Even if we feel as if we are the center of the world, that world remains the world of other people. (Ricard, 2015, p. 80)

Strangers play a consequential part in our lives, bringing unexpected colour to our lives and opportunity for positive emotions. "Tell me," I asked Natalie, "what is it like to experience compassion from a stranger?" "Oh my God, gratitude, it's gratitude" she answered.

What is this thread of gratitude?

*I like to give back
show I care
pay it forward
turn around
live a full life
of kindness and gratitude*

"Gratitude is the fairest blossom which springs from the soul"

(Beecher, as cited by Watkins, 2014, p. 65).

Arising from their positive experience was a well of gratitude. Gratitude is "an emotional response to a gift" felt towards another (Emmons & Crumpler as cited by Tsang, 2006, p. 198). Gratitude is then a response that can connect us to each other. It is a state that helps break us out of negative affect and moves us to focus on others and the greater good (Watkins, 2014). Each participant expressed feelings of gratitude, whether in their written stories or their interviews. When we talked about gratitude tears often flowed, and voices changed. All were thankful for

the compassion they received, grateful to have been helped, to have been given hope, to have been rescued and to be alive. They wanted to thank the stranger, but the stranger was gone. Feelings of gratitude became a way to open their heart to others. When we experience gratitude we can begin to broaden our perspective of others, including strangers (Chang, Lin & Chen, 2012). Because the opportunity for reciprocity did not exist, gratitude oriented the participants to give back by paying forward. Annie began giving boxes filled with small items she hoped would bring inspiration to other strangers who were ill; Natalie talks to the strangers she sees on the street, the pan handlers for example, approaching rather than avoiding, sometimes to the alarm of her family; and Martin pays in advance for the next person when opportunity prevails. Mary Oliver (2006), in her poem, “The Messenger”, reminds us to keep our mind on what is important, that is “on loving the world.” “I realized” said Annie “we need to have compassion for the people that we don’t know.” Gratitude opened participants to their own compassionate nature, fostering compassion for others, and for self. Gratitude in the midst of trauma and afterwards can help us cope and helps bring coherence and meaning to difficult events within the arc of our life story (Watkins, 2014). “Gratitude may be one means by which tragedies are transformed into opportunities for growth” (Emmons & Shelton, 2002, p. 467).

What is this thread of self?

I am
grateful
compassionate
trusting
worthy
giving
brave
seen
free

“There is no self without other” (Cassell, 2004, p.39).

Woven in these stories are examples of how the participants feel they have grown through their suffering and through the actions of a stranger. Each event, each story was unique and the participants see their experiences as relevant to who they know themselves to be today.

The acts of compassion helped the participants make meaning out of adversity. For some, the impact was to disrupt their current thinking and present them with an alternative. Annie found her insights were immediate. The care of a stranger was like a “flip of a switch” and “woke up the warrior” in her and she decided with grit and determination to try to help herself. She felt that if a stranger could believe in her, then she needed to as well. Compassion from a stranger changed the story she had for herself. In re-telling her story Annie realized that the moment had given her hope amidst a devastating illness: “it gave me hope for myself...it gave me hope for the world.”

For others change was a process that unfolded over time and in a more cyclic way. Martin had repeated experiences with loss and compassion and he talked about the death of the ego and rebuilding of his soul: “you (re)grow back, you become a different person....you still have the same memories, but emotionally you are different.” Tracy believes that the compassion of strangers freed up her own ability to be more compassionate. She describes feelings that had been ‘turned off’ were ‘turned on’ again. Kevin found his conversations with strangers challenged how he saw himself as they attributed qualities to him he saw as foreign and enhanced his sense of self. His experiences, he says, allowed him as an adult to be a compassionate teacher and to be the compassionate stranger to other young travellers.

We learn about ourselves in relationship to others, including strangers. Our coherence—how we understand ourselves, occurs within a web of relationships and suffering threatens that integrity and those connections (Cassell, 2004). An act of compassion is a recognition of the being of the other who is suffering (Malpas, 2012). As Annie related, compassion from a stranger is about someone caring because you are a human being. And it can transform: “I am more now” said Annie.



Figure 11. *Untitled*

“To remember requires language, to heal requires story” Baldwin (2005, p. 80)

“I don’t think I’ve ever told the whole story with all its detail to anybody before...it’s freeing...it really helps to tell a story and let it go” says Tracy. Our stories can keep us or set us free. How we live our stories, and how our stories live us, is worth considering. “A story not given a voice stays underground” writes Baldwin (2005). If we speak and share our stories we find them “always part of a network of communal and collaborative stories, a network that knows no beginning and no ending” (Leggo, 2010). We move through life on, and in, a river of stories. Stories, like poetry, linger with us and continue to influence us long after we have heard, experienced or told them. A few of the participants tell me their story is “a good story.” Why did the people chose to participate in this study? What makes a story good? What makes a story last? I think a story lasts when it holds meaning for the teller or the listener, or when it becomes part of how we explain how we came to this moment with this sense of our self, or when it brings a thread of how to live amidst complexity. There is, perhaps, no definitive answer. The participants’ hope is that their stories will help not only me in my work, but someone else who may read it.

Ordinary stories of our ordinary lives have extraordinary gifts coded in them—for the one speaking and for the one listening; for the one writing and for the one reading” Baldwin (2005, p.31).

Leggo (2012) asks not if a poem is a good poem but what is this poem good for? As I linger with the stories and poems, I think about this too. What are these stories and poems good for? I hope they can be an opening to a dialogue about how we might live as strangers; that my writing about them will spark conversation, questions, imagination, and more stories. These stories seem to have no end to the insights and questions they generate.

Interpretation seeks not to say: all the story is here, analyzed and stated in clear, explicit terms. Interpretation seeks not to stand over the story, speaking about it. Interpretation aspires to be an ongoing dialogue with the story. (Frank, 2010, p. 104).

Stories such as these will continue, I hope, to hold meaning for the participants and for us. I wonder why it is that the grace and compassion of a stranger continues to surprise us? What is our hesitancy about strangers? Zajonc (2006) writes that “our search for individual identity has the accompanying downside that we dis-identify with other people, groups and nature.” Perhaps, and yet these strangers did the opposite by choosing to lean in. They were Palmer’s (2016) ‘light bearers’ working to keep another’s heart supple. These stories lead me back to the Good

Samaritan where I imagine the wounded man's continued story. His story is both personal and part of the collective and his experience unique and shared (Galvin & Todres, 2009). I imagine him going home, slowly coming to the fullness of the impact of the compassion given to him by a stranger, threading it into his life story. His heart filled with gratitude, light returning to his eyes, he gathers and shares the fruit:

Compassion is one of the most beautiful presences a person can bring to the world and most compassion is born from one's own wounded-ness. (O'Donohue, 2004, p. 180)

The transition of the seasons has become a source of constancy for me through my writing. The long grey days of winter have been slow to give way to the newness that comes with spring. These days I find myself settled, more like the heron, fishing in the morning light. I have gone back to work in health care, restored by the soul-filling, creative time provided me by this work. And I watch what happens around me at work. We move quickly in health care, rushing to see one more person, or to finish one more task before the end of a shift. Atwood (2006) writes that in our need to go faster and faster, we have left our souls behind, "that's why we can go so fast: our souls don't weigh us down." Have we bartered our souls in exchange for efficiencies? It is a risk. The occupational therapy students I teach continue to ask me how to protect themselves from the pressures and burnout they see? Not yet even graduated, they are already concerned. We stop and talk about what makes us resilient, the difference between empathy and compassion, their soul/essence/I am that needs always to be attended. We talk about signs of burnout and the ingredients of self-care. To attend to patients and families compassionately requires us to attend to the souls of the health-care providers. "When we think of work, we only consider function, and so the soul elements are left to chance" writes Moore (1992, p. 183). But health care and our social service systems are ultimately about people, about suffering, about helping and healing, and so are about relationship. If what Moore states still holds truth, and I believe it does, can we afford to continue to leave soul elements to chance? We walk mostly as strangers into the lives of patients and families we meet each day. They need, and we need, our hearts to remain supple. Even the briefest of compassion from a stranger can have a lasting impact.

Yet it is only when the world enters the heart that it can be made into soul.

Moore (1992 p. 286)

Reflection

Poetry is philosophy, inquiry, prayer...Poetry cuts deep to the bone, makes vivid the flesh and sounds of the world and the pilgrimages of the mind and heart.

(Neilsen Glenn, 2016, p. 99)

I hadn't planned on doing this study and I hadn't planned on using an arts-based methodology when I entered graduate school. And yet, this is what I did. Reaching across faculties, the Interdisciplinary Graduate Studies program offered a unique opportunity to bring together a committed committee who were willing to let me explore and who kept on seeing something that I couldn't yet see. Simply put, they believed in me. Embracing photography and poetry as part of my creative research process let me broaden my understanding of research and of knowing. They give me another way to act and to reflect on everyday life. Photography and poetry require me to be just who I am in this moment. I am more of a curious scholar now, gathered in and opened up by creativity.

Poetry served as a net to gather what I could of myself. (Stewart, 2012, p. 44)

A/r/tography is about the "in-between" spaces of art-making, research and teaching (Irwin & Springgay, 2008, p. xx). I am learning that in-between spaces are filled with puzzlements, disruptions, ambiguities, uncertainties, possibilities, openings, and transformations. And I am learning that in-between spaces call for commitment, enchantment, curiosity, engagement, contemplation, imagination, and hope. As I engage all my senses, I learn to write with "heartful and playful imagination" (Shira, 2010, p.10).

The sun beckons me out from behind my desk and I can't resist. I crave the heat that has finally arrived. My thoughts turn easily from writing to my garden. My neighbour and I head to the local nursery to choose plants for the empty pots at our front doors. I search out the large begonias, their big brightly painted flowers set against chartreuse leaves are a delight to my eyes. I pick the brightest colours I can find—hot pink, yellow, and orange. I add some nasturtiums and bacopa to my cart. Planting a riot of colour makes me happy.

Once home, I turn out last year's soil, too root bound and dried out to be nourishing. I bring over soil collected from another part of the garden. I discard my gloves and plunge my hands in, feeling the coolness of the soil and the fullness of it settling under my nails. I mix the soil with compost that is filled with remnants and ruminations of previous years plantings, the nutrients for this year's growth. The dirt spills from the pots over the walkway as I use my hand

to dig the holes for the new plants. I work slowly. Planting is a sensory experience filled with textures, colour, and smells. I take my time deciding where to put each plant in the pot as if I am arranging words in a poem. I am learning to attend to what I am doing with the mind of an artist, trying to live more (he)artfully, perhaps even poetically (Leggo, 2004).

In the backyard a new bed, just dug, waits for my attention. I am impatient, knowing this writing takes precedence. Since last year, I've slowly been transforming my yard into a bee friendly garden. The new bed, though, will be my perennial ode to the hummingbird; filled with salvia, hardy fuchsia, and agastache. There is much still to do, but I have learned to be patient and make sense of the tangled growth, plant by plant. Along the fence though, I let the sweet honeysuckle grow wild and unruly.

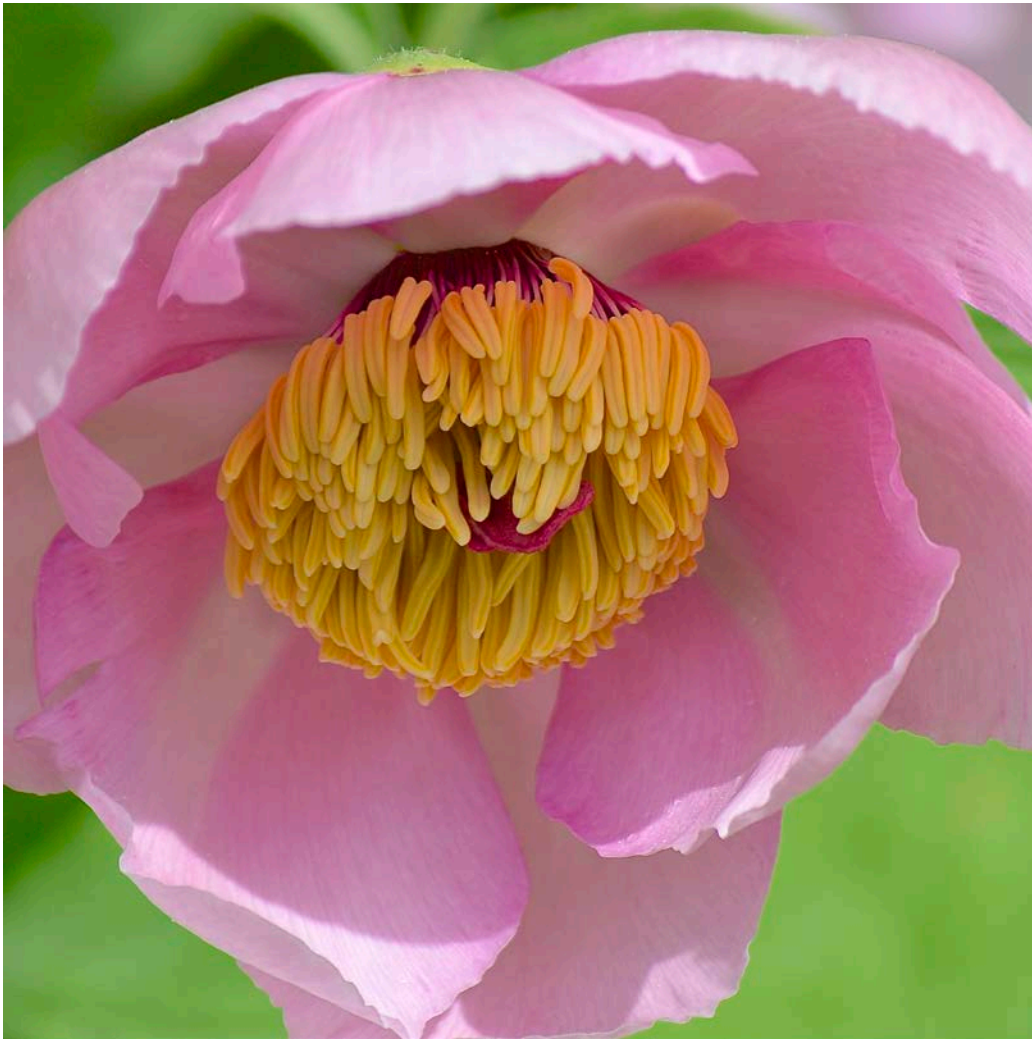


Figure 12. *Untitled*

Once the soul awakens, the search begins and you can never go back.

(O'Donohue, 1997, p. 7)

This creative research process has been an unexpectedly heart-felt and soul-filling work. I have discovered another part of me, always there, but unknown. Perhaps quietly wanting to emerge, it finally called for attention. I know more of the 'whole of who I am' now (Palmer, 2007). My committee has encouraged me through these years to welcome the stranger in me. In his poem "Coleman's Bed", Whyte (2007, p.288) writes:

Find that far inward symmetry
to all outward appearances, apprentice
yourself to yourself, begin to welcome back
all you sent away, be a new annunciation,
make yourself a door through which
to be hospitable, even to the stranger in you.

To welcome the stranger is to embrace who I am becoming more fully, and to acknowledge who I was before with self-compassion. My writing, poetry and photography are languages of the soul and became the creative paths back into myself, letting me (re)fill my soul, (re)find a sense of self as well as a sense of place. They serve to gift me with new ways of understanding who I am now in my own storied life. O'Donohue (2004) writes that creativity is about seeing what lies hidden inside us:

When we are creative, we help the unknown become known, the visible to be seen
and the rich darkness within us to become illuminated...When we discover our creativity,
we begin to attend to this constant emergence of who we are. (p.143)

The stranger within each of us is called by many names—the shadow, unknown, unconscious, a wound. When we bring light and invitation to this part of us we move further into understanding our identity (who I am) and also our integrity, where we choose that which is integral to our sense of self (Palmer, 2007). It is ongoing work. As with stories, there is much to lose in finalizing ourselves. The shadow then, is a place for silvering. The recesses of our interior life offer rich ground for growth if we are open to it. It is about letting go of perceptions and casting off the language and description that limit us, turning instead to imagination and possibility (O'Donohue, 2004). Although filled with uncertainty and vulnerability, I have found this offers a way forward for me as well as a way to hold fast to the thread running through me.

To change the shape of ourselves is to change the shape of the shadow we cast.

(Whyte, 2015, p.205)

fishing in a circle of light

in lake's dark womb
silver forms secrets in
lentic winter waters

light casts long
sinks line beneath
chatter of wind on water

in amniotic fluid
wild silver dances
birth dreams

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Appendix A

Luke 10:25 – 37 The Parable of the Good Samaritan
The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version (RSV)

25 And behold, a lawyer stood up to put him to the test, saying, “Teacher, what shall I do to inherit eternal life?” **26** He said to him, “What is written in the law? How do you read?” **27** And he answered, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your strength, and with all your mind; and your neighbor as yourself.” **28** And he said to him, “You have answered right; do this, and you will live.” **29** But he, desiring to justify himself, said to Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?” **30** Jesus replied, “A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, and he fell among robbers, who stripped him and beat him, and departed, leaving him half dead. **31** Now by chance a priest was going down that road; and when he saw him he passed by on the other side. **32** So likewise a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side. **33** But a Samaritan, as he journeyed, came to where he was; and when he saw him, he had compassion, **34** and went to him and bound up his wounds, pouring on oil and wine; then he set him on his own beast and brought him to an inn, and took care of him. **35** And the next day he took out two denarii[a] and gave them to the innkeeper, saying, ‘Take care of him; and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.’ **36** Which of these three, do you think, proved neighbor to the man who fell among the robbers?” **37** He said, “The one who showed mercy on him.” And Jesus said to him, “Go and do likewise.”