

The Promise of Returning Home after Mild Traumatic Brain Injury

by

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Abstract

Trauma is anything that happens to us, physically or psychically, that is beyond our capacity to cope given our personal circumstances and development. Trauma devastates individuals and those who support them. Brain injuries, whether considered mild, moderate or severe, are a common source of trauma. Mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (MTBI) are underreported injuries and can have long-lasting, life-altering effects and even result in death. Experts have speculated that by 2020, MTBI would be one of the major causes of death around the world (Gururajc et al., 2007). The significance of this dissertation is to personalize the experience of MTBI so that others can recognize themselves in this work. This dissertation's contribution is to open the MTBI field to personal stories in the first-person narrative through poetic works and life writing in order to expand the understanding of MTBI and its profound effects on an individual and those in relationship to them. I first examine my own history of becoming a writer and where I fit into the fields of poetic inquiry and life writing. Through this process I examine the threads of trauma that have run throughout my life to find how they have affected my recovery from MTBI and what kinds of care I encountered throughout. My engagement with my life-writing and poetry are key to my healing.

Lay Summary

Having suffered numerous Mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (MTBI) my life came to a full stop becoming miniscule in a moment. Going back to examine my past was essential in being able to move forward within this new context of being in the world. Coming back into the academic world was a challenge which revealed that my sense of time, ability to create, and understanding of self, had shifted or been erased. Writing poetry to reveal these changes and using life writing to tell my story allowed me to understand and show others the ways in which I had been impacted by MTBI, and the struggles I encountered daily in order to return to an academic life. While different, my life is now full of joy and hope.

Preface

This dissertation is an original intellectual product of the author, Bonnie Nish, using the researcher as the primary source of data drawing from her writings of both prose and poetry. These were used as field notes in order to investigate what changes, if any, occurred when she returned to specific places she or her family lived in the past, including Toronto, Poland and San Francisco. In examining her own work she was able to find those things which both hindered and helped her in her recovery from traumatic brain injury and in her return to finishing her doctoral studies. Field notes from a poetic inquiry and life writing inquiry using the researcher's experience were the main source of data. The life history of the researcher and writing while going back to places she lived became the research.

A version of the material on pages 43-54 was incorporated into an article which appeared as, Nish, B. (2017). A Review through Dialogue: Ruthann Knechel Johansen's "Listening in the Silence, Seeing in the Dark: Reconstructing Life after Brain Injury" *Art research International: A Transdisciplinary Journal*, 3(2), 349 - 363.

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Dedication

Special thanks to my children and their loving partners, Sebastian and Martina, Rebecca and Philip, Alexandra and Sam, who see me and what I do as mattering. You are my inspiration.

Motivation

Greif. Greif. I have been looking at this word for days. It doesn't feel right. The way it sits in my body makes me cringe. For the life of me I can't figure out why. I am starting my dissertation with this one word which has to be perfect, yet I just have the feeling something is off. I no longer can stand the nagging sensation in my chest. I go to the dictionary and I look up the word. Nothing. It isn't there. What is wrong? Like my body, I feel there is something not quite right, but I can't pinpoint it. I try to move the letters around. Grife. Grif, Gref. Grief. I am surprised to find I slip so easily back to what doesn't look right but to what I have become comfortable with. I try again. Greif. Greif. Grief. I have found my grief.

Grief is a funny thing. An invisible string, it can sit in your chest pulling your insides so you can barely catch your breath, and all the while you don't really know why. Suddenly, one day grief pulls so tight it snaps, and all the sadness, loss, tears and horror are released. You can breathe again. The pain becomes visible as you acknowledge your sorrow, talk about your injury, feel the agony, unearth the distress. While the string slowly shrinks, it never quite dissolves altogether but becomes considerably smaller. I cannot begin this dissertation without addressing what is at the root of my grief. Every day I struggle to write this and wonder if I am capable of reaching completion.

The effects of numerous Mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (MTBI) are devastating but like grief, are invisible. My cognitive awareness some days, try as I might, has dissolved. With a wire wrapped around my brain, as tight as the one around my chest, I can't seem to find words to express my feelings. Sometimes I can't find the words I need to engage in an exchange or discourse with my own topic or to explain why I am doing this and what makes it important to anyone but me. My poetic-self seems so far away, and I live in fear I will never find that side of

myself again. There has been so much loss and grief throughout this process that I sometimes wonder if I have anything left inside which will allow me to finish. Anything left to say at all.

Nothing

There is no poem
for this death.

One of my biggest losses in the last few years came in March 2019 when my mentor, friend and supervisor Carl Leggo passed away after a very brief fight with cancer. It is in his absence that I wonder if there is any reason to go on with this work and then, as what happens with the ebb and flow of grief, it is because of his absence that I am determined to go on. Do I have it in me, without his love and caring for my words, to complete a sentence, a paragraph, a whole chapter? And then I hear his voice – excited, commanding, yet gentle, suggesting how I should set up the layout of my work. I hear him sharing with me a simple story of his life about his grandchildren, children and wife. When I hear his voice, I know he isn't far away.

I remember him pointing to me in a class after reading a paper I had written about my experience of trying to come back to academic work after MTBI and saying, “that is what you have to write about. You have found your topic, your calling, your question.” Not the one I had come in with at all. I picture us in our last meeting in his office discussing the independent study I had just completed with him, his telling me he had only ever given out two one-hundred percent grades in his twenty-five-year career. I remember his smile as he told me I was his third student to achieve this. I thanked him, not because of the mark, but because of what the mark meant to me, that he believed in me. These were all affirmations that I could do this. I had come back from suffering five MTBIs to an academic life and was doing something right. The string

that held me so tight for so long was definitely becoming looser. I was struggling to find a way back into this life that I loved and was somehow succeeding.

Carl did not survive and while I do not know the details of what ensued for him in his struggles, I have no doubt he would have lived right to the end the way he did every day of his life, with dignity and grace. It was a blow to the world the day he left, a numbing of beauty and creativity. Carl was my mentor who was generous and kind but critical when and where he needed to be. He cared about everyone he touched. He was an educator and poet who used his poetic abilities in research to show the rest of the world the merit poetry has in every aspect of life. He is on every page of this dissertation and in every line of every poem. He is as much a part of this as anyone else. I have a new committee whose members are as supportive as Carl and yet respectful of his presence. And so, I go on to write this for all of us.

I write this as a reminder of all the things Carl taught me. I remember that teaching is a privilege and that bringing my stories to my students makes me real and authentic. While I might not be perfect, I can still achieve the goals I have set for myself. This gives them the room to do the same. Carl taught me that I live a poetic life. As he stated,

Poetry acknowledges how the heart and imagination are always integral parts of the human knowing. Poetry seeks the truth about the human experience. Poetry connects us with wonder and mystery. Poetry is a way of knowing and being and becoming. (Leggo, 2005, p. 442)

I see poetry in everything I do and experience. He taught me that I live these poetic moments every day. I am honoured and thankful to be continuing to seek out the poetic in every aspect of daily living. It is what is needed in these troubling times. It is what is needed in order to

remember what Carl gave to us and what I have found again, a way of being in the world that is honest, loving and true.

The purpose of this study is to research the experience of recovering from trauma, specifically multiple MTBI, and how this trauma changes through my autobiographical experience as a PhD student who is reintegrating into academic life. According to Joanna McGrath (2004), “personal identity is profoundly challenged by brain injury” (p. 767). MTBI can steal an individual’s executive decision-making abilities, appetite, confidence, speech and words. How does one navigate through the complex journey of reconnecting with self after such trauma? What is required to help an individual find their way back to their everyday life when they have no way of executing even simple daily routines? Drawing from trauma theory, compassion theory and ethics of care theory, this study explores how it is fundamental to one’s recovery from MTBI to be engaged and engage in a healthy and caring manner. Is it then possible to find meaning for oneself in the wake of such trauma and to reengage with life in a productive way? I use arts-based research methods, including life writing, and poetic inquiry, in order to investigate personal experiences and to represent those experiences to others. This includes a significant body of work of poetry chronicling my journey through having sustained numerous MTBI and my determination to accomplish my academic path. Within this context I investigate, through metaphorical and physical trips to places I have lived in or been connected to through family history, what it means to try to recreate a life that has been left in pieces.

Life writing and poetic inquiry make room for us to uncover a new way of being in the world through an examination of things which need to be explored (Leggo, 2008a; McCulliss, 2013). It is in the listening and taking notice, while on this amazingly hard journey, that we begin to shift and discover all of the hidden offerings buried beneath the grief. The sweetest discovery

for me, as I am sure it was for Carl, was that living poetically is living each day to the fullest, with honour, grace and wonderment even through the hardest of times. It is knowing that somehow, as educators and poets, in sharing our stories we have contributed to creating a space whereby others can do the same. Thank you, Carl, for allowing me to breathe within these words and loosening the strings. This one Dr. Leggo, is for you.

The Sun Still Shines

Imagine a pedagogy of listening and attending so we could hear the wing beats of butterflies. Dr. Carl Leggo, (2011)

Today the butterflies have stopped
cocooning, evolving
their rationale for change gone.
I hear nothing, yet everything continues.
A conundrum of heart
when the heart stops beating
and butterflies ask the wind
how the sun continues to shine.

Today the sun continues to shine
and I ask it how it can stand to be so bright
when everything seems so dark
and it replies because you taught it to love
and in loss there is hope
because it remembers you.

Today the sun continues to shine
as strangers move from page to page
their stories uninterrupted by your parting
and I wonder how it is
they don't know they should grieve.

Today the sun continues to shine
dinner parties and news reports go on,
emails are started, papers completed,
journeys continue,
while butterflies turn, listen carefully
to the beating of your teacher's heart
which now helps them to move on, while I cry
watching the poetry of wings
disappearing into the setting sun.

MTBI, Trauma, Compassion and Grief

Traditionally trauma has been defined as anything that happens to us physically or psychically leaving us without the capacity to cope with the outcome of the occurrence. This leaves the individual incapable of “processing” or “restoring” themselves to their “previous state of balance” (Mészáros, 2010). Recovering from trauma is different for each individual. Each tries to find ways to understand and cope in order to live with the memory and effects of what they have experienced and then move on (Levine, 2009). This ability is directly impacted by one’s personal circumstances and development. Brain injuries, whether considered mild, moderate or severe, fall into this definition of trauma and recovery. Mild Traumatic Brain Injuries (MTBI) can have long-lasting, life-altering effects, possibly even resulting in death. Experts have speculated that by 2020, MTBI would be one of the major causes of death around the world (Gururaj et al., 2007). Van Praag et al. (2019) referred in their article, “Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder After Civilian Traumatic Brain Injury: A Systematic Review and Meta-Analysis of Prevalence Rates,” to a study conducted by the Department of Public Health, The Netherlands which found, “Worldwide, up to 50 million people experience a TBI annually. In the European Union, the annual incidence of TBI is estimated at 2.5 million people, of whom 1.5 million are hospitalized and 57,000 die” (Van Praag et al, 2019, p. 3220). These facts and statistics are staggering and have triggered numerous studies examining everything from the number of MTBI patients who entered emergency rooms in Canada (Fu et al., 2015) to the number of college students whose reading comprehension was impacted by MTBI (Fickasa et al., 2015). While these studies break down the age groups, cause of injuries and even some of the side effects sustained, one has to wonder about the story behind the statistics and how they cope

and recover. Mészáros (2010), when examining people who have been through a natural disaster, war or even terrorist attack notes that,

One can count on the sympathy of one's environment, objective and psychological expressions of aid and various forms of care, with which the internal process of working through the trauma may begin in tandem. The person receives aid and is thus not left alone. (p. 30)

However, many people who suffer from MTBI, have no access to aid. Events leading to MTBIs leave a person in a disabled state unable to navigate medical, insurance and care systems which do not necessarily recognize the needs of those who have received this "invisible injury." Joanna McGrath (2004) tells us that, "Severe acquired brain injury constitutes a traumatic insult to cognitive, physical, and emotional functioning, and may, therefore, directly affect most, if not all, aspects of a person's life" (p. 764). Family, friends, employers and even physicians, expect that the person is able to function better than they can, making an individual feel frustrated, misunderstood and often isolated and thus unable to access the resources they might need. Gouick & Gentleman (2004) studied the emotional and behavioural consequences of TBI (2004), differentiating between mild, moderate and severe injury. While there are obvious differences in the kinds of injury and severity of MTBI (Mild to Moderate) and TBI (severe), there are also certain similarities. As they note,

Depression is common after TBI and adversely influences the uptake of rehabilitation, psychosocial adjustment, and return to work. It is estimated that at least half of all people with TBI get depressed at some point during the first year, half of them severely, and three-quarters of these are also anxious. (p. 286)

This can certainly be said for MTBI as well. An individual needs the help of others in order to understand this kind of trauma and the long-lasting effects it can have on them, in order to find a place to rebuild. How does the recovery from the trauma affect the ability to return to a path that may look very different? MTBI can affect anyone, anywhere and change the course of a life in an instant. It is how we come to terms with this new way of being, that in the end sustains us. Levine (1992), wonders in his book, *Poiesis: The Language of Psychology and the Speech of the Soul*, whether an accident can transform itself into a gift? Levine examines how one can turn suffering into a gift, and build resiliency in the face of trauma through “the experience of humankindness” (p. 57). How does one navigate the complex journey of reconnecting and finding one’s way back home to self after trauma?

Christina Baldwin (2005) recounts the story of a group of boys who had been held captive for years, as a result of a tribal war. When UNICEF reunited these boys with their villages, they asked the elders how they would deal with the trauma the boys had experienced. The elders replied that they would light a fire which the whole village would gather around and have the boys share their stories. Baldwin (2005) cites the elders as saying, “We will weep together for what this war has done. We will talk until the war is talked out of them, until the sorrow is healed, until the fire is burned up” (p. 50). As Baldwin tells us, there is a need for story to be told and heard. Colleen Mary Breen (2016) also states that, “Just as people hold rituals of celebration such as weddings and graduations, a ritual to signify loss may also be helpful. A ceremonial rite of passage would provide a concrete event to solidify and mark a significant change in life, such as a brain trauma” (p. 34). These rituals help us to heal and move on within the changes that have been brought about by trauma, when moving on seems impossible. Yet,

often in today's world, rituals surrounding loss and grief have shifted or disappeared completely in Western society, as an individual is often left to seek out answers alone.

McClocklin and Lengelle (2018) tell us that "Fear of the unknown, linked to medicalised approaches that relegate illness and death behind closed doors have also led to the difficulty many have in dealing with loss" (p. 327). Loss suffered from MTBI is complicated as patients find that their sense of personal identity is "profoundly challenged" by the shattering of both their psychological and physiological systems (McGrath, 2004). As Charlotte Schell-Word (1999) who returned to her PhD work after an MTBI states, "Identity altered through trauma knows the loss of innocence and wholeness. Like a broken vase, pieced back together, the original container is forever altered" (p. 355). Grieving becomes complicated with MTBI as with the loss of identity, there are few things which we can count on for certain (Coetzer, 2007).

In their article, "The Myth of Closure," Boss and Carnes (2012) examine loss and grief through a slightly different lens, that of ambiguous loss, which explains the sense of unending grief when someone disappears by design, accident or illness. In the case of an illness, while a person may be physically present, when they have significantly changed, there is a grieving process that goes on by the person themselves and those around them. With these losses comes an understanding that there is an absence without end. Boss and Carnes (2012) tell us,

When someone we love disappears or dies, we reluctantly accept the legalities, but know in our hearts and minds that such clarifications do not bring complete psychological closure. The people whom we loved are always with us in some way-through remembering them at a certain time or place. Divorced people know this, adoptees know this, immigrants know this, and families of the missing know this – whether from

psychological losses such as dementia or autism, or physical losses such as being kidnapped or lost at sea. (p. 458)

MTBI unquestionably falls into this realm of ambiguous loss. According to Landau and Hissett (2008), “Ambiguous loss is described as ‘the most stressful kind of loss,’ in that it defies closure” (p. 70). A person with MTBI, is still physically present yet, as previously noted, can be considerably different, thus creating an absence. Landau and Hissett go on to say that more often than not, the emotional impact for patients who have had an MTBI will go untreated causing further suffering and harm. This sense of loss can be complex and can go on for years, decades, and even generations as people try to understand and make sense of the tragedy. Apol (2019) found while working with survivors of the Rwanda genocide, some had never spoken of or had suppressed memories for years of the horrific experiences they had witnessed. Boss and Carnes (2012) remind us, “When loss has no certainty, the search for meaning is excruciatingly long and painful, but it is the only way to find resiliency and some measure of peace” (p. 457). How does one find resiliency and peace after experiencing such trauma?

Therapy is a tool that can assist the individual in healing and ultimately finding a way to engage life in a productive and meaningful way. The use of arts in therapy allows an approach to delve deeply into what is the underlying source of a problem and to travel down a road of discovery, sometimes painful, often hard, but hopefully rewarding and life changing in the end (Wallace, 2015). Writing to help in the healing process can become an important aspect of a person’s life. Some of the best writing comes from a personal place. This makes it something to which we can relate. Apol (2019) tells us that “In discussing their writing about the present and future (the post-genocide stage), many of the participants were highly detailed in their descriptions, seeing themselves – often for the first time – as actors in their lives rather than

objects acted upon by forces outside their control” (p. 170). There is something in the writing process that allows us to see beyond the moment. It takes us out of ourselves and shows us possibilities of reality we had not imagined. This allows us to feel more in control and able to manage the emotions associated with these life events (Connolly, Baker & Mazza, 2004).

Writing allows for narratives to change. It allows for the original story to be moved and shifted into a new or second story. (Apol, 2019; McClocklin & Lengelle, 2018). According to Brian Wakeman, the writing process can help us expand our understanding of life experiences and integrate these new views over time. As Wakeman (2005), states, “We need to fit the new in with the older frameworks and understandings” (p. 57). As we write and reflect on our writing, we are engaging our own stories more fully, and it is here, within this dialogue with our story that the change takes place and transformations occurs (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009). Laura Apol (2019) also found writers gained a sense of control over their lives as they were able to move in and out of the trauma. This allowed for the assimilation of these events into their present and continuing lives. Apol (2019) tells us, “As one of the young men observed at the close of the workshops, ‘To ask someone to write is to ask them to fight. To ask someone to write is to ask them to fight for life’” (p. 170).

Using poetry specifically for healing is a powerful tool which allows the writer to access previous experiences, understanding and information in “language they cannot find in everyday voice” (Carroll, 2005). Going into the imagination in this way is important because it allows the writer to open spaces they might never have previously opened. Poetry helps us to do this. When we begin to peel back the layers, we are releasing ourselves of the trauma, as it is the trauma that diminishes our lives. Furman (2004) explains how metaphor in poetry can be a useful tool when dealing with situations such as ambiguous loss, adding that, “Metaphor also helps evoke

powerful emotion and can communicate fully the depth and breadth of ambiguous emotional states and relationships” (p. 163). It is through this expression, this discovery and uncovering that, we are able to release and live full and productive lives. When our imaginations are engaged in this way so much becomes possible. Lengelle and Meijers (2009), also tell us that, “poetry’s form and structure make it a good sensing and sifting exercise, as it limits word use and thereby focuses attention on what is most salient. And because it often relies heavily on image and metaphor, analogies can be readily born from it” (p. 63).

Hillman (1996) tells us in *The Soul’s Code, In Search of Character and Calling*, “A calling may be postponed, avoided or intermittently missed. It may also possess you completely. Whatever; eventually it will come out. It makes its claim” (p. 8). For me poetry is that calling. It is where I have always gone to help myself and where I often take others on their own paths to healing. Most importantly, writing poetry can sensitize practitioners to a deeper understanding of an individual’s circumstance and lived experience (Furman, 2004). As a facilitator of expressive arts therapy workshops, I often work with groups of clients or individuals using either different modalities of art, or strictly poetry. Pandora’s Collective Outreach Society, of which I am Executive Director, has a long history of providing outreach programs in the community. Since our inception in 2002, our mandate as a charitable organization has been to promote literacy and creative self-expression. We have worked with a variety of community groups including Covenant House, Pacifica Drug and Alcohol Treatment Centre, the Aurora Centre, The Gathering Place and BC Children’s Hospital’s Eating Disorder Clinic.

For two years, I facilitated therapeutic writing workshops with clients in the eating disorder clinics in both the inpatient and outpatient clinics at Vancouver Children’s Hospital.

These were difficult sessions for them as some of these children were withdrawn and there were group dynamics in place through which we had to navigate. Despite these issues, these young people, when asked by the head of the department about their experience in these workshops, described it as being one which made them love poetry and what it did for them. One girl wrote that while she usually hated being told how to come into her creative work, she found she appreciated the direction from these workshops and where this took her on her healing path. McClocklin and Lengelle (2018) state “One of the most essential roles of the facilitator, however, is not to ‘teach’ but to be a benevolent witness, one the writer knows will offer a close and expert reading of the grief and trust the writer’s process” (p. 336). These workshops helped in the healing and recovery process as writing poetry provides patients with an outlet and can become a powerful tool in their recovery. It allowed them to explore themes and issues in a different way than merely talking about them. Poetry opens doors to emotions that sometimes we are unable to access in any other way. In examining their own writing and experience with loss, McClocklin and Lengelle (2018) found that because poetry is steeped in metaphor it adds another layer to the process of finding meaning in trauma and loss. They tell us,

If poetry is a vessel for safely containing the emotions of grief, then metaphors allow for the unique expression of and give personal meaning to those emotions. Nudging metaphors prod one forward, bit by bit, from a ‘first’ story of loss into a ‘second’ story of life. Thread metaphors serve as the link whereby events and memories from the past are integrated into the present life and an imagined future after loss. (p. 337)

It does not matter what a person’s age, skill set, or economic bracket are, writing poetry can help build self-confidence and give an individual a positive way of dealing with some of life’s traumatic situations. It is not an easy place to go and sometimes it feels more comfortable to stay

in the pain of what is familiar than to move ourselves on. However, there are significant benefits to digging through what are often layers of emotions, events and years of covering and hiding from them. Apol (2019) tells us that the participants in her group,

related with pride the courage it required for them to initiate this sort of self-healing, trusting that on the other side of the painful negative memories would be some positive result. Several mentioned the ‘release’ they had found in acknowledging, through writing, the emotions they had experienced during the genocide. They saw benefits to writing that could not be found in speaking. (p.171)

Ultimately this process is not about endings, but rather about continuing and learning and finding ways of being now with what has gone on in the past (Lengelle & Meijers, 2009).

The significance of this dissertation is to personalize the experience of MTBI so that others who have gone through the experience, can recognize themselves in this work. This study is further concerned with how we find resilience and peace when MTBI has stolen every vestige of what once was a full life. My contribution is to open the field to personal stories in the first-person narrative through poetic works and life-writing in order to expand the understanding of MTBI and its profound effects on an individual and those in relationship to them. In examining a whole life, is it then possible to see how past life events and family history contribute to how individuals respond to this trauma? I examine my own life history, through my family’s connections to Poland and the Holocaust as well as growing up with a mother who suffered from an undiagnosed mental illness in order to understand how that history has hindered and helped me through my own healing from MTBI. In understanding this history is it then possible to make meaning in the context of this personal loss and find what is gained? What changes occur as I go through the healing process myself of writing down my own history, not only because of my

concussions but also to understand my own complex relationship with my family history that affects my life and my ability to move forward? Is it possible to understand what is necessary to move on in this new framework, and how does this change me as a teacher and allow me to help others by sharing this process?

Life's Ironies

Wilensky (2008) explains that treatment from trauma is much like peeling an artichoke, “If you peel an artichoke it’s very difficult at first, tough, even scratchy, and painful. But the sweetest part of the artichoke is the heart that is protected and hidden inside” (p. 58). Every day when I wake up, I am truly amazed and thankful that I am still here. As the day unfolds and I look at everything I have laid out for myself to do, I think, somewhere in the course of the day, *I can’t do this*. I question my sanity the way my mother did when I was a teen not responding to her demands. My mother’s old scripts of telling me that I was crazy and would never succeed at anything run through my head as I doubt not only my ability, but my stability, in thinking I could write a PhD with a traumatic brain injury in the first place, let alone teach a university class after having sustained at least five of them.

Yet here I am, at the end of a challenging term, having tried to pace myself and ignore the constant buzzing in my head while I reread texts for classes or rewrote lessons time and time again in an attempt to make them perfect. Here I am, finally knowing that I touched at least some of my students with something significant, giving them a place to jump, explore and find something useful even if I couldn’t remember their names. Here I am trying to start my dissertation and realizing that it took me hours of looking at the first word I had written to figure out what exactly was wrong with the way I had written it. I knew instinctively that something was off, but I couldn’t see for the longest time that I had spelled it incorrectly. Add to this, trips

to Toronto, Poland and San Francisco, all places I or my family have lived, in order to expand my world in context of my research and explore whether coming back to my roots might help me shift out of a place of loss. It all sounds a bit over the top. I sit and shake my head at the thought of what lies ahead and think, *what have I done?* But then, I am still here. In this moment I can't help but ask other important questions: where is this place and how I did I get here?

In these pages of my dissertation is embedded my life story. As Baldwin (2005) tells us, "History is what scholars and conquerors say happened; story is what it was like to live on the ground" (p. 4). Placing this story within the realm of scholarship, I bring the humanness that is life into focus. This is my goal. We have always told and shared stories in order to transfer history from one generation to the next. Baldwin (2005) reminds us that story "was the carrier, the link, the way we taught each other how to be human and to see each other's humanity" (p. 19). Meyer (2010) reminds us that "each of us is born into the course of a larger human story and existing timeline, place, culture, and family" (p. 85). It is through the sharing of my story here that my life becomes a living inquiry. My written notes and poetry from which I draw are my fieldnotes. The examination of my life within the context of this work allows for connections to begin to form and events to make sense. As I look at my work and the themes which emerge over the course of this dissertation, they resonate with those that Meyer (2011) refers to in her own work in the use of field notes, that of "place, language, time and self/other (including non-human other)" (p. 111). I am also aware that "themes fade into the background as I keep moving my practice deeper into what is daily life" (Meyer, 2011, p. 111). Furthermore, I resonate and draw upon the rendering of life writing embedded within a/r/tography (Springgay, Irwin & Kind, 2005): "As living inquiry, a/r/tography is a process of opening texts, of seeking understanding by continuing to un/ravel and to stitch back in response" (p. 905). At times throughout this journey,

I felt as though I was outside the world because of my brain injuries. As I came to a deeper understanding of myself and the effects of MTBI through this work, I began to understand, as Meyer (2010) points out, “We are never world-less” (p. 85).

Showing how I am in the world before and after a concussion allows the reader to understand the changes that have occurred as a result of my injuries and how these changes have affected me. This becomes an invitation to the reader, to gain access into experiences other than their own. This sharing and listening bring in “a sense of familiarity” (Baldwin, 2005). While, as the data will show about MTBI, I am no different from others who have gone through this, at the same time I am unique. Meyer (2010) states that we, “share the sameness of being human in a way that none of us is the same as another” (p. 87). When we make something personal it starts to matter to us. It is in the sharing of my own story that it is possible to see how I got here and why this is important. In examining my story there is a gained perspective. I become the other person, watching, listening and finding treasures that I then share with you the reader. Just as I learn, you learn. Without my attention to my life or recounting of my experiences, my lived inquiry has big holes. In not knowing who I am, you, as reader, will not understand how as an accomplished poet I never mixed metaphors, dropped words or repeated myself. But now I do. Without my telling you, you are left in the dark. As I place myself within this work you find ways into it as well. We learn from Meyer (2010) that a sense of “self and place are inextricably connected” (p. 86). Meyer goes on to say,

attention to place as inquiry heightens our senses to both the physical and social textures of our surrounding environment, natural and artificial. Life takes place somewhere. Place is where we go, where we find ourselves, and where we live and ‘belong.’ It is the

background and context of our memories – a house, a neighborhood, a city, or some part of the world where we've travelled. (p. 86)

This work is full of place. I place myself in the world as a writer. I live on pages, sleep between lines, hide behind apostrophes and dance on commas. My heart beats syllables the way others beat out rhythms on tin cans. I sweep from one side of a linen page to the other as my ink plants the seeds of thoughts, desires, disappointments, love and inquiries. This is where I have always belonged. I exist on a bookcase, squeezed between the hard and dusty cover of Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, Evelyn Lau's poetic journey in *Under Plastic* and Jeannette Walls' account of her life in *The Glass Castle*. I listen to the whispers of the stories that are buried deep in the wood of these shelves. I have been involved with words and writers all of my life. This is my place in the world.

How My Place in the World as a Writer Came to Be

I am from an actual place as well. I grew up in a large house in Toronto Canada, with my mother's big extended European Jewish family surrounding me. Every corner of the house was occupied, every bit of food accounted for, every moment expressed with wild emotion, happy or sad. Being the youngest of the eleven people living there I found there was always someone talking over me. I grew up surrounded by words and, while there was little or no music in the house the wonderful movement of language was not lost on me. Whether it was the singsong inflections of my grandmother's, (my Baubie) Yiddish as she bantered with my mother and Aunt Betty every night in the kitchen while one of them burnt dinner, or my grandfather's (my Zadie) magical prayers on Shabbat, our house was full of the cadence of lives lived. As I grew older poetry found me in the back of the car as I fell asleep to my father reciting verses of Kipling's

poems on our way home from visiting his parents. Family and words were always there, a part of the landscape. I was born into a world of words.

It is through our language that we have a means to connect to one another. As Meyer (2010) points out,

Attention to language unveils its expanse in our lives as the medium in which we think, express ourselves, and interpret the actions and speech of others. Language labels things and people; holds our traditions, stories, and histories; binds us to each other and leaves us misunderstood; and makes the world, with all its absurdities, intelligible and sometimes poetic. We are language beings. (p. 86)

While there could be magical moments in this house full of people, the words were not always kind. Crowded together, even though this was a big house, people longed for space, longed for privacy, while longing for connection. Too often people felt left out, alone in a place where they should have felt full. Words became weapons by which to wound and silence became the only refuge where nothing could touch you. Besides the problem of overcrowding, there was another major problem, at least for me – my mother. She was not kind, at least not to my father, my brother or myself. She found every opportunity to compare us to her birth family, to which we could never match up. She took every opportunity to tear us down. I learnt very young to avoid her even when she seemed to want to be with me, because ultimately underneath her smile, her words would cut. As much as I was a part of this world my mother made me feel like an outsider. While my father remained largely powerless within her presence it was his words that were one of the greatest gifts he gave us. Those old poems that traveled through the night air became embedded in my heart, a beacon of hope when I felt the most insignificant and even later

after my concussions when I felt I could not go on. Kipling's (1895) words, "If you can wait and not be tired by waiting/ Or being lied about, don't deal in lies" are still with me.

Dreamer on Fire

I was and am also a dreamer. I could sit for hours under the trees in our backyard in summer and imagine that all the branches I crawled beneath were the roof of my home. In this world of grass and trees and lilacs I was always accepted. No one could override my thoughts, call me out for looking funny or steal food off my plate to give to my cousin, all things my mother did. I felt safe gathering plums that had fallen from the tree at the back of the yard to hide for later. I was comfortable with my thoughts, less lonely being in the world where only imaginary friends sipping tea could hear me. Then on Sundays our house exploded when the rest of my mother's large family came for cake and talks. The women in the kitchen exchanging the latest gossip and the men in the living room sharing news, was an ordinary Sunday afternoon scene. My cousins and I usually played on the periphery of these groups or totally away in the front yard. For me, my greatest joy was to hang around the sidelines where I could hear the men talking about something that sounded really important. Even at a young age I found gossip boring and craved for the deeper conversations that belonged to these men. Yet, I longed to be a part of the women's world as well with all of the latest fashions and hairdos bestowed on me. This never happened. It was easy for me to sit and listen to either group without detection. The men took no notice of me because I was a girl. The women took no notice of me because, frankly, my mother didn't either. While this meant I could easily go between the rooms without too much trouble or anyone asking me to leave or get something, it also meant that at times I felt the sting even deeper, of being invisible.

In the fifth grade I started to write poetry encouraged by my teacher, Miss Kaufman, who for some reason took a liking to me. I am not sure if she saw my desperate need to be seen or thought I actually had potential, but she gave me a great gift when she introduced the writing of poetry into my life. Reading T.S. Elliot's *Cats* to us and having the class respond with our own writing, a whole new world opened up for me. While my father had always recited poetry to me, I had never had the experience of writing it before. The discussions I longed to be a part of in my home on Sundays were somehow becoming a part of my world in a different way. Each time we spoke about poetry the world seemed to explode. I could take the hurt I had at home and find a place to articulate it. My imagination was erupting on the page. I had found the joy of expressing myself, as difficult a story as it might have been. What Miss Kaufman had given me was a lifeline. She listened. She opened that first space for me to share my story and to delve into poetry. She started the fire burning. My poetry, then as now, was and is my living inquiry.

Fifth Grade Teacher

For Miss Kaufman

You were an emery board
scraping the rough edges
of my childhood away,
showing me how to line up
my dreams and put each one
in a glass container
carried in a pack on my shoulder.
A spirited angel
you sparked my imagination
took me away
from the captivity
of being trapped by walls
of a story I didn't write,
a story I didn't quite fit in. Gradually
I peeled off the garments
of my mother's needs,
the ones that were too tight
for me to wear,
orange and seersucker dreams

replaced with my own ill-fitting wardrobe.

I am not a clone of my mother,
yet my story is not void of her,
rather it is full of her.
Her fear of simple things,
unplugging the lights and tv
in thunderstorms
or her terror of deep water,
the irrational worries
that pushed me to do better.
I used to hide in closets
when the Toronto summer skies
turned black and I was sure
that the lightning bolt
which ripped our neighbour's roof
apart, couldn't find me there.
Then one day my husband
sat with me through the ferocity of a storm
first on the floor of our bedroom,
then the stairs, then the front porch
until the story my mother packed
became loose and eventually
dropped through a hole in the bag
I was carrying since fifth grade.

The stories I had been collecting
had become a burdensome burden
at times, an earned richness at others.
The understanding that sometimes
we just become frozen haunts me.
The message I passed on
to my children
was to invent beauty
when they couldn't see it,
to seek out the storms in life
and appreciate the rain
that wets their skin,
to feel every bit of the sky's
tears and kisses
and to listen closely
to the thunder and the meanings
held in the power of the heavens
when they just like us
open hearts and pour prayers
into our laps.

Disconnection and Connection

As I grew older, I began to understand that my family's way of being in the world was different from a lot of the upper middle-class friends' homes I frequented. I also became aware that how I viewed the world was directly affected by my mother's actions and the craziness that ensued at home on a daily basis. At my friends' homes no one ran around in a thunderstorm pulling plugs, turning off the tv or shouting at me because I was too close to a window. There was calm in these houses and respect. Their homes were filled with art and books and fascinating discussions around the dinner tables that I frequented more and more often. Their parents were actually interested in what I thought. One of my best friend's father was an English professor and so I discovered Hess and Hardy, Dickens and Dickenson. My other best friend's parents were in the Toronto Symphony. I would lie awake at sleepovers listening to her father play the trumpet in his third-floor studio while her mother's sweet harp notes carried up to her room.

The differences I found between my life and those of my friends caused a huge schism inside me. I stayed away from home more and more. At times I felt as though I were living in a colourless void. There was not much joy at home. I looked forward to the evenings when I could accompany my father on evening business calls for his drapery and carpet company. Here away from the house we would talk about all the things we couldn't discuss at home: news, politics, reincarnation and of course, my father would recite poetry. I didn't realize then, that while my father was not a religious man, these poems were his prayers to get himself and us through a world devoid of happiness and colour.

At thirteen I really began to dive into my writing. I wrote stories of love and friendship the way I wanted my life to be. I wrote poems about the pain I didn't know how to hold. I wrote letters to best friends and when one of them committed suicide, I wrote letters to a God I wasn't

sure existed. I wrote when I broke up with my boyfriend who later I would marry. I wrote when we married. I wrote when I had a miscarriage and I wrote when I had my first of three children. I wrote when my marriage broke down into chaos and ended. I even found the time to write as a single mom raising three teens, working three jobs and going back to school to get a Masters degree in arts education. I wrote a book of poetry about the end of my marriage, *Dissection of a Marriage in Twelve Parts* (unpublished). I wrote using poetic inquiry in my Masters thesis, *Finding Voice* (2012). I wrote until finally the writing turned into something more.

As a young mother of three children under five, you could often find me sitting on the bathroom floor rewriting a poem while my children were in the tub. I knew that if I didn't get this time in then, I wouldn't get it at all. Living in Pleasanton, California when they were little, I volunteered at their school. I was a stay-at-home-mom, partly because my husband was the one with a work visa, but mostly because I wanted to give my children the attention I never had from my own mother. I did not join the PTA. I didn't sew costumes for them on Halloween and the only cookies I ever baked for them were burnt. However, I could tell an incredible wild story and make them books of adventures which always included them and revolved around their lives. Life in our house was so different from what I experienced when I grew up and yet in some ways the same. Everyone in our house was engaged and I made sure our days were full of creativity. We painted, we read, we shared stories. Each night was full of bedtime books, each morning a surprise as I dreamed up some new activity for us to do. We were never bored. While this was so different from the life I had as a child there was one way that it was very much the same. Life was and is full of words.

As my children became older, I joined a writing group, "Across the River Writers Round Table." Here I found the community I longed for. These people, while of all different world

views, different writing levels and writing in different genres, were as committed to their work as I was. The longer I was with this group the more I became involved. I sat on the Board of Directors, found judges for their annual writing contest, booked readings for the winners in bookstores and started a reading series in our local coffee bistro. I helped to start a separate writing group for woman poets called Twisted Sisters. After 9/11 I wrote for an exhibition consisting of poets, storytellers and artists. I found a whole community in which I could belong.

After 9/11 my husband and I moved our family to Vancouver. Here again I was in search of a community. While I found this in different writing groups there wasn't anything that really fit my needs. Then one day a young woman who had been in a critiquing group with me asked if I would like to start a writing group while this one was closed during the summer. I agreed as long it was at my house as my children were young. In 2002 Pandora's Collective Outreach Society, a charitable organization in the literary arts was born. For almost twenty years through my work as Executive Director with Pandora's I have facilitated hundreds of writing workshops in places such as eating disorder clinics, Covenant house, drug rehabilitation centers, libraries and schools. I have collaborated with artist groups, galleries, community centers and started and run hundreds of events. I conceptualized and ran The Summer Dream Literary Arts Festival for ten years. It was here that I stood beside a silently weeping father as his son, a recovering heroin addict we had worked with at Covenant House, read the poem we helped him get published.

I have read and edited thousands of words by other poets as I mentored them at various stages of their careers. I have also listened to hundreds of hours of poetry written by some of the best writers in the country. Evelyn Lau edited my first book of poetry, "Love and Bones" (2012). Rob Taylor, Jacob Schier, Russell Thornton, Bill Bissett, and Susan Musgrave are just a few other poets who I have hosted and worked with in some capacity over the years. I have brought Evelyn

Lau, Daniela Elza, Heidi Greco, Angela Rebrec and many others into high schools to read, to teach, to share and listen. I have had Jen Currin and Cathy Stonehouse create panels on identity. I have sat with Dennis E. Bolen, Timothy Shay and Fred Wah over coffee talking about poetry and writing and simply about coffee. My children have grown up with our house full of boxes and tents for the festival, with poets around our kitchen table at midnight and poetry books filling every corner in every room including theirs. Two of the three became writers themselves while the third became a visual and flow artist. The following poem by my youngest daughter Ali sits on my fridge. This has been my life in poetry and with words, up until now.

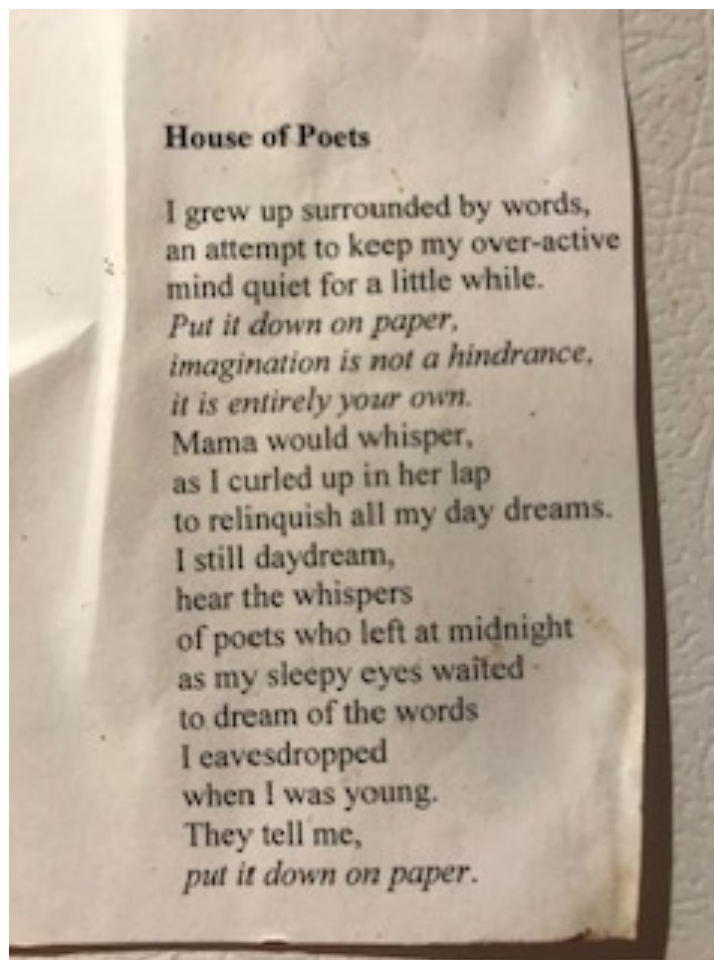


Figure 1: House of Poets - Ali Denno

In the Realm of the Poetic

There is another realm I have come to dwell in now, a place of inquiry. I question and engage and then ask more questions in the hope that I will find something new, something of value that will change myself and my reader. Shidmehr (2017) tells us about becoming a researcher:

A bud of inquiry blossoms and calls another to open up, and another one blossoms and calls a third to bloom. I am in a crossroad again - in a flowerbed of becoming, which emerges from an assemblage of petals and thorns of my diasporic being - in the crossroad of becoming a researcher - reflecting on the possibilities of renewal in the encounter between the self and the other and poetically inquiring into the possibilities within the impossible. (p. 101)

I place myself and work under the greater umbrella of arts-based research. In their study of over thirty arts-based dissertations, Sinner, Leggo, Irwin, Gouzouasis, and Grauer, (2006) tell us that, “engaging in arts-based educational research often means that researchers are immersed in a journey of discovery, of learning about themselves as well as learning about themselves in relationship to others” (p. 1242). This is exactly what my dissertation is meant to do. We begin to understand, as we listen to the world around us, that it is this unique way of being and knowing in the world that leads us to “this journey of transformation” (Sinner, Leggo et al., 2006. p. 1237).

It is my hope that as I describe and show my journey to you through poetry, you may be open to understanding the challenges and rewards faced by those who have suffered from MTBI. Shaun McNiff found, in his ground-breaking work in arts-based research, some fundamental questions which he uses with his students to help centre them in their line of inquiry. McNiff

(2011) tells us that in his own work, “I saw the importance of simple modes of operation which can be easily described: What are you are going to do? Why? How can it be of use to others” (p.391). What McNiff is asking is one of the key components of arts-based research. I ask these questions of myself. Through examining my experiences with MTBI and placing them alongside the ethics of care and compassionate care theories, my hope is to show the impact of how the medical system can be both beneficial and detrimental to an individual’s recovery. By placing my journey within the context of arts-based research I make my work more immediate and accessible to the reader. It is important that the reader understand how difficult an MTBI can be on the patient, family, friends, education, employers and communities.

Why Poetry?

Poet Li-Young Lee tells us in an interview with the *Los Angeles Review of Books* that, “Poetic consciousness is the deepest, fullest form of consciousness there is. The longer we practice it, like a yoga, the more we uncover about ourselves, our identity as children of the cosmos, or of God. Whatever you want to call it” (Beene, 2016). Why poetry in my research? It is easy for me to rationalize that I should use poetry just because I have always written. In my life poetry was the prayer my father gave me, and which sustained me. How does this translate into the academic world? Poetry brings the abnormal into the realm of the normal. It allows for great shifts in thinking and gives us a beauty that sometimes cannot be seen elsewhere until put onto the page or recited into air.

In his introduction to the book, *Poetic Inquiry: Vibrant Voices in the Social Sciences*, Ivan Brady (2009) notes that in traditional social science research methods the personal is largely taken out of the work. Brady tells us that, “distancing oneself through reporting that avoids first-person constructions and other overtly personal appearances in the text usually comes with the

posture of being ‘objective’” (p. xi). In coming to the end of my dissertation I have come back to the beginning to insert myself. These old methods subconsciously played out as I had been writing. I realized, looking back, that every time I added something which seemed too personal, whether it was about the challenges I had growing up with my mother or all that I have accomplished in the literary world, I took it out. In writing about coming back to her research after giving birth to her daughter, MacKenzie-Davidson (2017) found that,

My research is always situated within experience, yet I had forgotten to be present.

Returning to how I had been schooled - believing I had some power over the experience (Palmer, 1993), over the outcome. Engaging poetically, reflexively with my experiences of being a mother and scholar, I have begun to recognize that sometimes our greatest knowing comes when we pause. (p. 118)

I, too, needed to pause, reflect and understand that when it came to my poetry, there I was, unmasked and naked for all to see. This was my purpose and I could not ignore that my poetry had other ideas as my voice emerged and I was unmasked.

The Work

The beginning sections of this work combine my life writing, poetry and theory woven together as a guide to understanding the loss and recovery that I experienced after several MTBIs. In the middle lies the majority of my poetry followed by my work as an educator and the results of sharing my research with my expressive arts therapy students. My poetry lives throughout. As Kedrick James (2017) tells us about poetic inquiry, “What makes Poetic Inquiry so useful is its capaciousness of expression, for it allows into an otherwise hardpan discourse the soft, moist, and fertile ground of imagination for both the scholar and the reader” (p. 23). It is through the imaginative play with words that my story leaps off the ground. Through my poetry I

give you the experience of losing words, repeating myself or simply not understanding how I got somewhere. Much like a visual artist who paints a picture, I draw for you instance after instance of what it is like to be trapped in my head, the frustration of not knowing the word for something in front of me or just feeling totally lost. Brady (2009) goes on to say, “Poetic methods are qualitative and call for self-conscious participation. Instead of being inverted like a telescope for a distancing effect, poetics turns it back around for magnified encounters with life as lived, up close and personal” (p. xi).

In this research I use *found poetry*, that is poetry which uses the words of a particular text to create new meaning. There are a few ways of creating found poetry. One way is to gather text from street signs, menus, everyday items found in any environment and put them together to create something new. Black out poetry, another form of found poetry, takes a page of a text such as a report or novel and blacks out words. Words are used in the order they fall on the page while the rest of the text is still there but lays hidden. Lines are not moved around. Erasure poetry takes text and takes the lines out of the text to create something new. Only the lines needed can be seen and they can be rearranged in any order to create new meaning. As Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009) remind us,

Found poetry not only mediates different kinds of understanding, but also enhances the relational dimensions of research. Because it relies on the words found in the data, found poetry is restricting. However, those limits can be comforting because the researcher is not compelled to find the “perfect word” but rather plays with the existing words in ways that most closely portray a particular story and its emotional nuances. (p. 4)

I draw from my WorkSafe BC reports in order to create blackout poems to gain back a sense of control over my life and the way I am seen. Reduced to just a file number and someone's view of my situation who doesn't know me, it is important that I can put myself back into the picture. In this way I am regaining a sense of control and a sense of self. This has a powerful effect as words and meanings shift on the page and something that was lost is replaced with something that is gained.

I also create list poems, which are poems that list of a number of different items whether it is groceries, feelings, or as in the case of the Nobel prize for literature winner and poet Wisława Szymborska (1997), *Possibilities*. In the case of Szymborska's poem she tells us through her descriptions and lists, what it is she likes and what it is she doesn't like. Her use of repetition drives the point home. We are being given an insight into her world, her thinking, as she paints the simplest of pictures such as "I prefer the oaks along the Warta." I use repetition and list poems to show the frustration of what I can no longer tolerate in the world after MTBI, such as sounds, light, conversations. I show how frustrating it is to be stuck in my head and what I grieve for that is lost. While simple, these devices are effective. They are powerful; they place the image in front of you. While I do use constrained forms, for the most part I lean toward free verse and generated poetry. Butler-Kisber and Stewart (2009) go on to say that,

Qualitative researchers have begun to move from found poems to more autobiographical or "generated" poetry. Generated poems are created using words that come from within to express researchers' understandings of their own and others' experiences, or to explore and reflect upon research memories, roles and assumptions (Butler-Kisber, 2005; Neilsen, 1998; Stewart, 2003; Sullivan, 2000). Unlike found poetry, generated poems have unlimited possibilities. (p. 4)

My Living Inquiry

What is the most important point throughout my entire journey and what I search for in my travels to places I or my family have lived, is a sense of self and purpose. Why? Because we are all more than just numbers on a file when we walk through the door of an emergency room having hit our head. We have families, jobs, aspirations, watch Netflix, make pasta and sleep with our dog or cat curled between the foot of the bed and our partner's toes. We engage in life and that engagement is what makes our lives full. When we struggle to come back from the kind of injury or trauma that has taken away this very existence, we need to be recognized by those who are in the position to help us the most. We need to be brought back into our lives with compassion and caring in order to be able to find ourselves again. We need to know that the struggle itself is ok. It is also a part of life. When we accept this, it becomes a part of the story – not the whole picture, just a part. When we can accept this about ourselves, we can then go on to give this to others so that they can then go on to give this to others. I advocate for a pedagogy of wholeness where all of our stories matter and we can share our vulnerabilities as well as our strengths. It is easy to fall into a trap as educators to feel we need to be perfect. It is that old stern voice saying we must remove ourselves from the picture. I did it here, myself in originally taking myself out of these pages. Yet I am fully in the picture and, when I show up to class, I show up whole.

As Meyer (2010) tells us about living inquiry, “The role of pedagogy is not only to introduce students as newcomers to the world as it is but also to preserve students’ capacities to imagine otherwise” (p. 88). I desire to have a place to dream and imagine the possibilities of what could be, knowing that I am not fated to someone else’s preconceived idea of what it

should look like. This is what I insist on for myself as a survivor of MTBI, and as such this is what I bring to and insist on for my students.

Backstory

While I have lost count of the number of times I have hit my head, the thing I know for certain is that life as I knew it has changed significantly. My trajectory has shifted. My abilities are different, and my capabilities are diminished in some ways while having increased in others. Embedded in this journey are a series of ironies that are consequences of the changes to my body and changes to my cognitive functioning, which affect me both internally and externally. What I have found repeatedly in my frustration and what I uncovered through all the peeling of that artichoke, is that while I try to re-establish myself from my previous life, I actually am an “emerging new person” (McGrath, 2004). As I began to navigate back into academia, it became apparent that I was walking a very fine line high above the world, a tightrope of sorts, somehow trying to maintain a balance that no longer came easily for me. Writing responses online for a class took hours. Writing citations for papers took even longer as I had to relearn the skill. I was discouraged but at the same time I was making my way back into academia while relearning everything a bit at a time.

Now when I look back, I know I will never forget how my world came to a crashing stop one day in November of 2012, while working as an educational assistant with a student who was designated “low functioning, non-verbal autistic” and was a known head-butter and biter. Supporting him on the playground as he went back and forth on a zipline, I saw him begin to slip off the wet platform as he landed. Standing a good distance away, I placed my hand on his back to steady him. Not far enough though as his head came whipping backwards and caught me just above the temple. Boom! My world stopped in that instant. All of the things I had been doing –

poetry readings, hosting events, talks, workshops and starting a one-on-one therapy practice, I suddenly was not able to do. I also was not able to eat, walk, grocery shop, follow conversations or drive. In the beginning I was nauseous, sensitive to light and sound, which made being anywhere impossible. I couldn't stay awake or when I did, I couldn't stop crying. When I did sleep, the constant buzzing in my head had to be drowned out by some low noise. My sense of smell became hyperactive as well as my sense of taste, which contributed to my not eating and losing 25 pounds. I lost my ability to engage in more than one conversation at a time, to be in busy bright places and to play piano with both hands together. I couldn't read or retain anything I did manage to read. I couldn't speak without stuttering or initiate movement with the left side of my body. Words were beginning to disappear as I had no recall as to what the simplest thing, such as a stove, was called.

At the beginning, my way of being in the world as I knew it was nonexistent. As I slowly began to re-enter society, I was left to try to find ways of existing that might work for me. Things like walks along busy streets or holding phone conversations for more than a few minutes became impossible tasks. When I was finally able to enter a store, I would bring back the same items over and over again. Seeing six cartons of eggs in our fridge at the same time was not unusual. I left my keys and phone in odd places or lost them altogether. Mostly, I felt I didn't have a sense of who I was and was left feeling terribly alone and isolated.

In her book *Brain Injury: Survivors Narratives of Rehabilitation and Healing* (2010), Laura S. Lorenz found that many survivors struggled, as I did, to find their way back into the world. Simple things that worked for them before their injuries no longer did. Peggy, one of the individuals Lorenz interviewed who had suffered from a MTBI, found that her life was totally turned upside down. While considered mild, the effects from her concussion were

devastating. She likened her struggle with brain injury at times to a game of chess in which she kept being beaten. At other times she felt as though she were in a cave from which there was no entry and no exit. Lorenz (2010) quotes Peggy from an interview as saying,

The single most important thing that I would try to tell other people who have brain injury, or friends and family of those who do, is the confusion and anxiety and depression that initially is accompanied with every step. Because you don't know if this is going to be it. (p.112)

I wondered this often at times myself and still do. Along with my initial concussion came stuttering and a loss of words. For anyone that would be frightening. For a writer and someone who has lived with words all of their lives, this is horrific. As Coetzer (2007) suggests,

A TBI can result in almost any combination of cognitive impairment, emotional distress, behavioural change, or physical impairment, causing significant disability. However, the cognitive impairments generally associated with severe TBI have been well described, and typically constitute impaired information processing, memory problems, and difficulties related to executive control functions. (p. 39)

Within three days of my concussion, as I tried to say something to a friend, I found I could think of the word, I could spell it and rhyme it, but try as I might, I could not say it. Then words started to slip away entirely. I began to stutter and by the time it stopped, after an explosion of swearing, I had forgotten what I was trying to say. The more tired I was, the worse it got. One day as I was sitting in the kitchen, I was staring at the stove. I knew I should know what it was, but I had no word for it. The shape of it was familiar and it was something I knew I had known but now I had no recall of it. Like Peggy I was stuck in that cave.

In the Cave

The annoying music
playing in my head
never goes away,
the screeching outside world
an entire symphony
come to squat, lodged
while the sound reverberates
off the walls of my brain,
bouncing from one side
to the other and all I can do
is sway to it
hum my own miserable tune
and try to drown it out.

Alone I grope in the darkness
to find my way along fortifications
that won't give way.
I have no idea which direction
I am headed,
if there is an exit
somewhere ahead.
I call out
only to hear my own voice
echoed back to me
foreign sounding
as it sticks in my throat
released a syllable at a time.
I try to translate
but the words are too jumbled
in the cool air
for me to grasp and I give up.

I am caught here
between the longing for silence
and the rushing in of a river of sound
a landscape that has engulfed me
without my permission.
I start to climb steep hills
move upward hoping for a break,
a bit of quiet found at the top in stillness.
Nothing comes. I keep going.

The sound of water running
far off calls me forward.

An underground waterfall
spills over granite,
I climb to the source,
watch its soft landing.
I want to swim in others
words, declarations, arguments
in the freshness of their song and prayer.
I rest in this reprieve for a moment
understand the beauty of being outside myself.
I move on, search for an opening
almost big enough
to squeeze through,
uncertain if I will ever
reach this outside world again.

I look back catch the sun
glistening as the water
continues to fall.
I sit desperate to enjoy
the newness, the purity
of these beginnings.
Tomorrow I might not be able
to hear them through the cracks.
I dream a little brighter
knowing there is always light
in the darkest of places.
Even if I have to wait
a little longer.

I repeatedly found I had no way of accessing myself either verbally or in written form as my point of entry to my words was disappearing. They were falling into a ditch and I had lost my flexibility to bend over and pick them up. The stuttering was quite real and quite debilitating, yet as time went on, I found it was becoming something which allowed me to laugh at myself and bring my sense of humour out of the cave. Lorenz (2010) goes on to quote Peggy as saying,

You go, I think I can do this, and then you realize, I really can't do this. And instead of becoming immobilized with grief, you go, That's right, I need a nap. Or I need to bite off a smaller bit. I'm not that old person. I'm a new person, and I'm going to employ the

strategies I've used. And you can still get all the way through it. (p. 113)

I remember at one point actually telling a friend I could get a job as a scat performer on Sesame Street as I stuttered my way into the badabadadadad theme song. The return of my sense of humour did not happen overnight or even over a few weeks. When the laughter returned, it could be quite sudden and lovely, while at times it felt raw and silly and even inappropriate, like my sense of humour now at times. Whatever form it was in, it was months before I could get to a place of laughing at myself again and, as brief as these moments were, they were a great relief when they came.

Dear Stuttering

Please step down
I am tiiiiiiiiired of livvvvving
with you....
I have several requests
now that you only come out at night
don't leave the back door unlocked
because then I am strandeddddd
and can't go anywhere without a
keeeeeey.

Deaaaaar Bonnnnnnieeee
It is your stuttering calling
We seem to have miscommmmmmmmun
icated
I lost the keeeey and ammmm waiting
for you to replace it. Pleeeeeease advise.

Dear Stuttttteringnnng
I don't know what that looks like
I see a gold thing sittttting onnn the
Table but what does it do.

Dear Bonnieeee
You need to sleeppppp now
Ok, don't stresssss it will come back

Dear Stutterring
What will come back.

Fuccccccck, FUCK.

Dear Bonnnnniiiiie
Never mind.

While I struggled to find new ways of existing in the world again, I was also becoming well aware of the significance of some of the smaller losses that were side effects to the larger consequences I suffered from the MTBI. Incapable of making decisions as my executive functions were affected, I began to wear the same three outfits all the time. My daughter would have to order food for me if we went out. With overactive taste buds, I ate little and lost any desire or ability to cook. As I healed and little by little re-entered my life, things that I had thrived on before began to give me major anxiety attacks. Being on stage to host events turned my stomach. Being in a group of people engaged in conversation made my head spin and brought me to tears. At times I would sit and listen quietly to the song, “You Raise Me Up,” while openly weeping. Everything that I had bottled up came pouring out. As Frankl (1959) reminds us in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, about his years spent in a concentration camp and his ultimate survival, “there was no need to be ashamed of tears, for the tears bore witness that a man had the greatest gift of courage, the courage to suffer” (p.78). Courage is something I have had to dig deep for under all of my grief.

You Raise Me Up
A found poem

You raise me up, so I can stand on mountains
You raise me up to walk on stormy seas
Songwriters: Brendan Graham / Rolf Lovland

When my image has dissolved
beyond recognition into a mirror
that barely holds itself whole,
I find myself while you clasp my face
a reflection of what was and what is to come.

I know when I am so lost,
fallen into a vortex where silence
traps me, takes my words
until they don't make sense,
it is your caring stare, a gentle message
of concern, that brings me back.

Not everyone understood
why I couldn't dream bigger
than the next second,
get from the chair to the bathroom
without bumping a wall,
know if I had paid my cable
this month or last or the month before
the woman on the other end of the phone
laughing as I stuttered
through the conversation
I had no energy to have.

I couldn't move my finger
from my nose to hand
on the neurologist's command
he questioned and prodded, poked
and all the time I wanted to smack him
so he knew what it felt like
to be invaded. I am not violent.
Instead I smiled and replied
'I don't know,' to everything.

His diagnosis, conversion syndrome,
a modern-day hysteria, followed me
down the road of recovery
even though I had typical
concussion symptoms
he couldn't see on an MRI.
The insurance clinic's doctor
said I was too acute to start despite this
and so, I sat in the dark
these two verdicts wrapped around my head
until they were tighter
than a tensor bandage
placed there by a medic on meth.

Then when the insurance company
needed me to go back to work
though I wasn't ready,

these failing systems kept me tied
to a hitching-post already over-crowded
and dizzying loud.
Despite all of the setbacks that held me
to a desert floor, there were those
fighting to keep me going,
paratroopers trying to rescue me
from a dance that was spinning me
around in the dry sand
while my equilibrium was non-existent.

I stand alone on this mountaintop
looking to the sacred places below
where over and over again
I was stuck and was rescued
by a hand, a meal,
a hug, a message of understanding.
All those who wanted me
to come back, to be a part
of the world again,
however, I am now.
Until I am more than I can be.

The Loneliness of Being

As I began to heal, I needed to find different ways to feel less disconnected from myself. Initially as I was able, I walked a lot, as other kinds of exercise were still too much, yet I found being in my body seemed to be very important. While I was slowly becoming aware that my way of navigating through the world wasn't working and my sense of self had dissolved, I started to slip into a severe depression. I have always been an extreme extrovert and now I could barely stand being in a room with one person at a time. I was drawing more and more into myself. Being out in the world at times just physically hurt. It hurt my brain to try to follow conversations. I became both mentally and spiritually exhausted interacting with others, not remembering how to accomplish anything remotely social. I was experiencing intense loneliness in my isolation which was also accompanied by episodes of extreme anger.

Clark Moustakas describes his own feelings of loneliness when he suddenly was confronted with having to decide if his daughter should have lifesaving/threatening heart surgery. He withdrew at times, feeling overwhelmed by the situation and had no clear answer to the problem. Moustakas (2011) discovered that,

Loneliness is a capacity or source for new searching, awareness and inspiration - that when the outside world ceases to have a meaning, when support and confirmation are lacking or are not adequate to assuage human suffering, when doubt and uncertainty overwhelm a person, then the individual may contemplate life from the depths of the self and in nature. (p. 2)

This led him into a series of inquiries to try to understand loneliness as a human condition and how it both helps and hinders us individually and collectively, leading to more empathy towards others and ultimately ourselves. As Moustakas states, “I set out to know the meaning of loneliness, not by defining and categorizing it but by experiencing it directly myself and through the lives of others, as a simple reality of life” (p. 4).

In my own isolation I found at times I was crawling into dark places, which I could not pull myself out of. I usually would reach out to friends and family but instead I was becoming more withdrawn and overwhelmed by my feelings of despondency. I couldn't understand my own state of being, even though I knew I was suffering concussion symptoms. I felt foreign to myself, an imposter in my own life. Not being one to stay in a place of despair without trying to find a way out of this and move again, I finally approached my family doctor, who also practiced counseling, and disclosed everything I had been experiencing in greater detail than I had previously done. I asked her for an antidepressant and told her if I could not bring myself out of this state in two weeks, I would start the medication.

I had always been resourceful but this time I wasn't sure I could do this. I was feeling a bit afraid of some of the places I was venturing. I found I had no sense of who I was anymore, no connection to anyone on the planet and no reason for walking it alone. The more I was able to do the harder things became because nothing was working quite the way it had. I was still suffering physical side effects but in this moment the cognitive and spiritual deprivation I was feeling were beginning to wear away at me as well. I could find no purpose in having experienced this event in my life in this moment and could not see how, if at all, there was anything that could bring me out of this state. As Levine (2009) states, "Trauma, on the other hand, fragments experience and prevents any totalization into a whole. In so doing, it robs suffering of its meaning. Trauma doesn't mean anything it just is" (p. 17). As hard as I tried, I could not find the why for myself despite all that I still had. I felt I was living in a vacuum and did not know how to make it work anymore. This awareness of self did not help; if anything, it hindered me. Rudy Coetzer (2007) suggests brain injury and depression, "may be related to the degree to which the brain-injured individual reports deficits, that is, greater self-awareness" (p. 43). Somehow having shared my feelings with my doctor and having her validate the emotional rollercoaster I was on, did help. Having that prescription in my back pocket was something I seemed to need at that time. I continued to isolate, but very gradually, an inch at a time, until there was a major shift, I began to re-enter the world.

Shells

My hands are as empty as a tortoise shell
vacated upon a slow death.
I try to make sense of the feelings
caught between fingertips
that barely run over skin.
It is morning and the sun
kisses the road
while I am side-tracked

to the gully,
a willing partner
in a crime that isn't ready
to be executed.
There are so many stops that must be made.
An ancient gas station,
the pump disabled by weather
holds my attention
as though if I could tap into something
everything would be better instantly.
But internally I stay as empty as the shell.

My mom used to tell me,
there is always a way
to do something if you are determined.
Coming from a woman afraid,
afraid to leave her house after dark,
afraid to leave in the morning after toast,
afraid to leave after lunch,
I try to remember a time
she wasn't scared,
when her fear hadn't become sacred.
Now when I think of her
I recall her quiet determination
to be locked away, curtains drawn,
the phone unplugged,
she becoming a living vortex
pulling everything she could in with her.
Yet, in my own way, I was strong-willed too.
I packed a bag, opened the door
then walked out for good.

My hands still carry this memory,
my mother breathing fire into a room,
me being swallowed by the emptiness
that surrounded us.
Fear the only thing that kept her going
was the thing that drew us apart.
And so, I left her seated,
well aware her weariness
of life was her continuous companion.
If I could, I would reach out
but she is gone and her shell
is another thing I can never touch again.

In her absence I understand

I have anger too.
The things that aren't working a long list.
The deafening crowds I no longer follow,
the sunshine I must black out,
the frustration of hearing words in my head
that won't fit on paper make me crazed.
Fear does that,
and a brain that functions half-cocked,
whether from mental illness
or a hit to the head
doesn't always navigate the world
in ways that make sense.

I fill in the gaps for us both
long slow breaths that move me
back towards a shell
that doesn't fit quite right now,
to fingers that try to hold on
to anything just to be holding.
A world where we could both
be comfortable knowing
that if we were exposed,
all our weaknesses put on display
we would still be fine.
I attempt to pick up the shell,
the tortoise gone, like us,
he simply ran out of time,
and all the unsaid things between
you and me gather
between the smooth and rough edges
of unspoken dreams.

Doctors, as in tune to their patients as they might be, cannot alone help the brain injured person, as they are in need of more than what a conventional medical system can offer. Rather, this kind of injury that affects so much of the body, mind and spirit “needs a multifaceted approach by the treating doctor” (Gouick & Gentleman, 2004). I tried numerous ways to relieve some of the anxiety I was experiencing on a daily basis. While there were times, I found myself once again enjoying the quiet and beauty of the outdoors, I found it still wasn't quite enough to draw me out. Being an expressive arts therapist, I understand how going into the arts can help

with a shift. I knew existing outside of my thoughts was important but wasn't always easily done. When residing in my head I found at times it frequently felt as though I was in a dark cavern with no escape while at other times there were so many fissures to try to navigate through. I often felt overwhelmed and as though if I took the wrong turn, I would trip on something I couldn't see and didn't expect. Sometimes it was easier to just stay still. Then I would suddenly catch a glimpse of my old self, painted on one of the cave walls, illuminated and bright. I so desperately wanted to move toward that image and sometimes I did. I could feel its smoothness etched onto something solid and it felt wonderful. Then I would rub my hand over a rough edge and crying out, retreat as the likeness dissolved and I slipped back into the dark regions waiting for something to happen.

Waiting for the Walls to Move

Waiting for the walls to move
my head propped against a pillow,
I can't stand the hours, minutes, seconds,
it has taken for nothing to pass.
I once had a song in my head
stuck there for days
I can't remember it now
but I remember the annoyance
of what was the tallness of the notes,
the daunting lyrics of the story,
the symphonic cages I was closed in
for a week and yet,
as beautiful as it was,
melodic, engaging, and breathtaking
it drove me mad.
I tried to drown it out
but it could swim and I couldn't.
I tried to sing it to sleep
but it had no need for sleep.
I tried to out walk it
but it just kept up.
Nothing could settle my mind
until one day it was just gone.

Today as I sit perfectly still
waiting for the walls to move
the sun to set, the earth to spin,
I wish I could find that song in my repertoire,
carry it along a seawall of companionship
and remove the mask of forgetfulness
I now wear all the time.
What I would give to be annoyed
by that simple tune or complex melody.
I honestly can't remember which it was,
to have it drown out the constant buzzing
that began before Christmas
a sign that I must sleep more before the rush.
A constant reminder of injury,
of loss, of the silence I never find,
of the beauty of a song
I would hum, sing, whistle,
if only, if only I could remember.
But instead I sit
waiting for the walls to move
my head propped against a pillow
and I can't stand the hours, minutes, seconds,
it has taken for nothing to pass.

Paolo Knill, one of the founders and early influencers of expressive arts therapy, says in his article, "Foundations for a Theory of Practice" that we need to come out of the daily manner in which we think in order for shifts to happen. Engaging in the arts is one way to do this. Moving into an artistic framework loosens our routines and changes habitual modes of operation allowing us to then use whatever it once was that was holding us back as a powerful resource. As Knill (2005) states, "with these options come new perspectives, fantasies, ideas, and images of alternative ways to act or respond" (p. 93). And so, I began to draw. I drew a heart. I felt I needed a lot of heart in order to heal. I drew dark hearts, bright hearts, small and large hearts and within the hearts, tears and then more hearts. As the hearts came out and then more tears, my anger and frustration seemed to lessen, yet I still felt very much alone. As Moustakas (2011) continued in his inquiry of loneliness he found, "At bottom, the experience of loneliness exists in

its own right as a source of both pain and power, as a source of darkness and light. I came to see that loneliness is an inevitable experience of life itself” (p. 2). While there was a definite shift that happened through my art, I needed, as did Moustakas, to examine my loneliness and feelings of loss to see how they could assist me on my journey. As Levine (2009) expresses about trauma, “it is essential for us to understand what has happened and to come to terms with it so to be able to go on living” (p. 17).

On Becoming Human

Moustakas’s experience with loneliness, which began as he grappled with his daughter’s life or death situation, allowed him to take note of how children were dealt with in hospital and how they reacted to that sense of isolation. Hospitalized children who were not able to see their parents relied totally on those around them for comfort and care. Moustakas observed that children who did not have an adult who was caring for them seemed to become withdrawn and depressed. He noted these children were more concerned about their emotional state than they were about their physical health. Moustakas (2011) says that, “In general, I witnessed a basic, pervasive process of dehumanization in an institution that not only sought to repress lonely feelings but discourage the whole range of human emotions that characterize the alive and growing child” (p. 3). After my initial MTBI, I was hit in the head at work and was sent by WorkSafe BC to one of their head injury clinics once I was able to tolerate a bit of time in the outside world. Being an adult, one would think that my experience would be different than that of a child. Yet, being in a state where I could not always advocate for myself because of the MTBI, left me feeling as vulnerable as the children Moustakas was observing.

I was one of the lucky ones. I had a doctor who understood brain injury. I witnessed countless times how others were treated and knew, that like them, I was at the mercy of those in

charge. Overall, I was exasperated by the whole experience in the clinic. I sank further into feelings of despair, anxiety, frustration and ultimately loneliness. Gouick and Gentleman (2004) remind us that,

Many doctors overlook or underestimate the cognitive, emotional, and behavioural effect of TBI, seeing them as problems that will go away in time and that reflect an over-anxious patient or family, or a wish to maximize personal injury compensation. Nothing could be further from the truth. (p. 285)

This seemed to be true of the Occupational Therapist (OT) in charge of my case, who seemed to lack any kind of empathy or understanding of my situation. On the other hand, my doctor was the opposite, supporting me through all of my struggles.

My OT wanted me to start at the clinic full time when I could barely be in a room without sunglasses or to go back to work at an accelerated re-entry pace. My doctor forced the issue and refused to sign off. Finally, when my OT wanted me, at my employer's insistence, to work with the same child who had initially injured me, I went over her head to my union. Along with my doctor's backing, I had a whole group of people from my community come forward to help me navigate through the system. I was off work a few months longer while they fought my cause but in the end I won. My OT did not understand. She felt it was her job to get me back into the work place saying that they sent lots of people back into dangerous situations. I won my battles but it was exhausting. After suffering a second concussion which was the result of another workplace injury, being hit in the same spot in my head by a basketball, my doctor wanted to once again send me to the head injury clinic. I refused and chose to work one-on-one with my physiotherapist instead.

Refusal

I can't help what I know
even when I don't seem to know
and I know
it becomes too much
to hold simple things.
Knowing is now
an origami crane
twisted intentionally
around thoughts that
have fallen out of the nest.
I fly toward a sign
that tells me water runs here
always downhill.
I can't find the source.
I wish I could tell you
what it is like
to not be able to tell you
what it is like
to always be running
away or toward something.
When thoughts slide
through my head
the sand of a broken
hourglass memory
eludes me.
I am misshapen
pushed into something
others want.
A crane stretches its neck
moves toward water,
I do the same
refuse to be shoved into a shape
I did not choose.

In his study into the ways in which community involvement can lower the risk of re-injury after injury, Charles Durgin (2000) empathizes that it is important for those directly supervising a client's rehabilitation plan to view clients on an individual basis. He states that they should avoid "making premature judgements about the individual's outcome potential"

(p. 1198). Durgin found that too often clients fall into a depression leading to negative ways of coping, such as withdrawal from society, drug or alcohol abuse and eventually re-injury. In order for an individual to make an easier, less risk-involved transition back to life this requires not only the support of family, who are also often maxed out from the injury, but for a much wider support system. Durgin (2000) states that,

To facilitate positive personal growth experiences after injury, staff must clearly define what the service value is for each person served. In this respect, staff should avoid making hasty assumptions as to what services or treatment objectives consumers would judge to be either necessary or beneficial to their lives. (p. 1196)

Durgin went on to say that it is through a continued assessment of an individual's situation that risks are minimized and return to life becomes possible. He empathized that practitioners should observe the individual in their natural setting to witness firsthand their needs, abilities and challenges before drawing any conclusions. With a continued assessment and a positive attitude toward a person it is possible to determine what is most beneficial for servicing their needs.

Listening to the client themselves was key. Durgin (2000) adds that,

Fortunately, in recent years we have seen a dramatic increase in the number of first-person accounts that describe what it is like to have a brain injury and what many consumers value. These contributions illustrate the substantial challenges and positive growth experience that can (and often do) result from a traumatic event. (p. 1196)

In her eye-opening book *Listening in the Silence, Seeing in the Dark*, about her son's return to life after a near fatal car crash which resulted in a traumatic brain injury, Ruthann Knechel Johansen (2002) shows us the hurdles her family faced when dealing with medical, insurance and educational institutions that were supposed to be there to help them navigate

through this horrific event. Johansen speaks openly about the amount of control doctors and medical staff wielded when their son was in a coma and at times it felt that he had not only been lost to them through the accident but through doctors, care staff and institutions who reduced him to a medical file and saw nothing but the protocol needed to be executed in order to deal with the body. Johansen examines at length the way in which patients are dealt with in a fairly mechanized manner, trying to fit each individual into a certain context within the means of crisis intervention, rehabilitation and long-term care.

As Eric was healing, he moved from one facility to another, from one form of rehabilitation to another and as is often the case, files and means of support that work in one instance were not always transferred or followed up on by the following practitioner. Johansen (2002) states,

This pattern suggests a reductionist approach to selfhood, for each profession contributes its discrete specialty to the reconstruction process. But the highly compartmentalized nature of this approach, plus the fact that the patient is generally separated from his former social context during this passage, leaves the task of personal integration and the more subtle work of meaning-making largely unaddressed (p. 185).

In their article “Lifeworld-led Healthcare is More Than Patient-led Care: An Existential View of Well-Being,” Dahlberg, Todres and Galvin (2009) support what Johansen found to be her experience with the varied approaches and clinicians they dealt with over the course of Eric’s recovery. While supporting patient-led care, that is, the patient has been given more “choice and voice” in their care, Dahlberg et al. feel this does not go far enough. They believe that rather than focusing on the individual as someone with a lived life, patient-led care focuses on “patient as consumers (an economic emphasis) or patients as citizens (a political emphasis)” (p. 265). While

Durgin advocates like Dahlberg et al. for a deepening of understanding on the part of the caregiver to not only the health needs of the patient but to the actual life story of the patient, unlike Dahlberg et al., Durgin still refers to the patient as consumer. Durgin's choice of language is an indication that shifts take a long time to fully happen in all areas of concern.

This points to a further dilemma within the healthcare system itself and the inadequacy of language to find an appropriate label for those in need of care. In their review of 43 studies examining patient's preferences for the words patient or consumer, Costa, Mercieca-Bebber, and Tesson (2019) found that the word patient was preferred in various countries and with those experiencing various medical concerns. There were a variety of reasons given for these findings, yet amongst the most common was that people found comfort in the familiar. There have been numerous other studies which show the same results, with most people reverting back to or preferring patient. This result seems to be consistent despite meanings of the word patient stemming from Latin that implies suffering and illness (Shevell, 2009) - not ideally situated for someone involved in recovery, or health maintenance. Shevell (2009) tells us that

At a fundamental level, the distinction into 'patient' or 'client' is flawed because our 'us' is indeed part of their 'them'. The healthcare professional providing care today may be the coronary 'patient/client' of tomorrow who, with appropriate intervention, may return to being the care provider of the future. By utilizing distinctive terminology in a way we are questioning or diminishing an equality between provider and recipient of moral agency and authority. This is clearly an undesired goal of our use of language in a contemporary healthcare context. So, what do we call 'them'? What's wrong with 'persons', 'individuals', 'humans', 'adults', 'children', 'men', 'women'? Is that not what they truly have been, are and always will be till they die? (p. 771)

There is no definitive answer to the question of name or label, and more consideration needs to be given to this language issue. Nonetheless, what is clear is that when we take the time to listen and know without judgment, then we are truly listening, acknowledging and being witness to someone in our care. Dahlberg et al. (2009) propose that caregivers need to understand the “freedoms and vulnerabilities of people’s journeys as they struggle with illness and loss, as they accomplish and come back to life in whatever capacity that may mean” (p. 269). Most importantly Dahlberg et al. (2009) believe that lifeworld-led healthcare, allows professionals to “not therefore just offer technical solutions, but are able to offer ‘paths’ for the patient to step into their life’s journey. Such an interaction, if well informed, can lead to the patient feeling more ‘deeply met’ in both their vulnerabilities and possibilities” (p. 270).

Dahlberg, Ranheim and Dahlberg (2016) took these studies further to what is known as an *ecological care system*. Using Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy of phenomenology and the human experience of existence in the moment as a base, Dahlberg et al. (2016) state,

This philosophy’s view is how human beings need to be understood, firstly from the bodily engagement with the cultural and natural world and then with other people.

Human existence cannot be defined definitely but defines itself continuously through this engagement. (p. 2)

They go on to say that from a human science perspective, ecology means an emphasis on the intricate dynamics of one’s environment and how one functions within that environment in context of others they relate with. They believe ecological care would have a “significant impact on the understanding of nursing and caring science” as it takes into consideration all of these elements which make up a person’s life not just their injury or illness. (Dahlberg et al., 2016, p. 2). One of the major focuses here is the interdependence of all the systems at play in order to

incorporate recovery plans that fit into the overall organization of the patient's life. Any one part cannot work without the other and with a change in the system, due to injury or illness, shifts must occur in each aspect of the whole. They go on to refer to Merleau-Ponty's idea that because we exist within the framework of the body, life is rhythmic, meaning we ebb and flow out of states of being – sleep being one of these states. Sleep as a part of the human cycle is “the other side of wakefulness,” thus neither of these states are static. Dahlberg et al. (2016) emphasise,

In the same way, illness is not absolute. Even if it interrupts our everyday world as well as the health that we had taken for granted, and places us in another world, one where we perhaps do not recognize ourselves and do not feel at home, our everyday (healthy) world will remain as a background for illness, as a possibility that is always present. (p. 7)

The team interviewed sixteen cancer patients who were being treated in a Swedish anthroposophic care facility, a holistic approach to understand the relationship between the caregiver, the patient and the individual's environment. This centre focuses on the individual patient, their life story and their individual needs in order to function within the changes they have experienced to their body and psyche. The Swedish centre was built aesthetically to bring calmness, and a sense of peace, the idea being that if patients were surrounded by natural beauty and given an opportunity to escape the busyness of their lives they could relax and find care from others while focusing on caring for themselves and being a part of their team. Removed from their daily lives, one of the aims of the centre is to give these patients the tools they need in order to exist in their own environment within the context of their illness. Therapies range from art classes to foot baths and the use through touch and movement called *embrocation* which allows for relief of pain.

Dahlberg et al. (2016), found in their study that “To become aware of one's own

boundaries through an attentive carer's touch makes room for acceptance and affirmation for letting be, which, in its turn, makes it possible to look at oneself in a new light, and to see possibilities for change" (p. 8). Within this context the centre recognizes that along with illness comes the sense of loss of control of one's body and how the body is connected to the rest of the self and in turn to the outside world. With this in mind the role of the caregiver in the context of ecological care is to help the patient to once again find connection. Dahlberg et al. (2016) conclude that,

The crucial task of ecological care is to help the patient to once again find one's place in a world that is characterized by interconnectedness, something which is expressed in our data as becoming "centred" or "balanced." From this "centred" place, it is possible to act and to find new ways to health. (p. 7)

The same is also true for MTBI. Johansen's experiences seem to align with these studies. While she met many practitioners, who were of the mindset that they needed to be in total control and that the family only got in the way, there were many who dealt with them in a concerned, caring manner, taking Eric's recovery needs and the family's need to understand, to heart. In her notes, Johansen (2002) observes that,

During our months in hospitals and subsequently in educational institutions we met many professionals who daily gave their skills of care without demanding control. Whenever this occurred, we as a family and they as professionals entered a cooperative relationship that opened a much wider healing space for Erik, not to mention ourselves. (p. 188)

This was reflective of my own experiences with the medical system over the years, not just as a patient myself with my OT and doctor but through my interaction with the system also as a partner, friend and parent. I too needed to find the balance that was so lacking in my life and in

my body. I, like Johansen, had experienced this system as a parent as well. When my son was three years old, he had to have an emergency operation on Christmas eve for enlarged adenoids and tonsils, which were choking him severely, and had they been left unattended would have resulted in his death. After the operation it was through my holding him while pouring beakers of water down his throat to help him swallow, not the nurses, that not only helped him to recover but gave him a sense of familiarity and comfort and ultimately a sense of control of his own body. I have no doubt that my calm voice as I held him while he struggled and having my husband and me present aided him in healing faster.

Hammock of Human Love

When my son was two
we would swing in our yard for hours
in the blue and white hammock
the one I bought one Sunday
on a whim at Canadian Tire
while looking for a new broom.
Tied between two cherry trees
we hung, marionettes,
our imaginations pulling our strings
in a million directions.
We could fly
between the cloud dragons
who breathed icicles instead of fire,
try to rescue tiny reindeer
stuck between chimney and tree tops
all the while homemade cherry Popsicles
melting before we could lick them clean.
Some days we would fall asleep
as my stories drifted away
down the street on a breeze
to our neighbour's yard
or maybe a park.
At night in summer heat
stars streaked across a world
he was still too small to hold,
our laughter, silliness and tales
keeping us from bedtime.

These were the memories I held
when on a Christmas Eve
our son, not yet three
rushed to emergency,
tonsils the size of a tractor trailer
choking him.
While we waited for the doctor
to return his fragile body to us,
I imagined the sky dragons
we created circling above
protecting him.
Later when I held him
trying to settle
the small wriggling frame
that was trying to outsmart
the pain of surgery,
I found the tales
that had tied us together in summer
now brought him back to me
while his unborn sister
kicked me from the inside
when she heard his cries of pain
while I tried to get him to swallow
eyedroppers of water.
My husband a restless heron
ready to protect the nest
monitored the nurses,
some who brought care
and concern into the darkened room
every twenty minutes,
while others looked away only to connect
when he asked.

In the morning bright
but weary we held
our Christmas gift close
as he opened his eyes
into a new adventure.
His breathing regular,
his heartbeat strong
he whispered stories
over the phone to his grandma
in his hoarse voice.
Always in the back of my mind
we were swinging on a summer's day
holding each other in a hammock of love

The Gift of Caring

In her book *Caring: A Feminine Approach to Ethics and Moral Education*, Nel Noddings (1984) states as did Dahlberg et al. (2009) that,

caring involves stepping out of one's own personal frame of reference into the other's.

When we care, we consider the other's point of view, his objective needs, and what he expects of us. Our attention, our mental engrossment is on the cared-for, not on ourselves. (p. 24)

It seems that ethics of care is something that should be just natural, however being in a care giving profession hasn't always meant that people approach care in a caring manner.

While Johansen recognized the often heroic attempts made to save lives by health care professionals, and the necessary measures taken by those who helped to save her son's, it is the unpredictability of brain injury itself that negates the need to institutionalize patients and treat them 'fairly' with the desire for the same standardized outcome. By examining economics alone, one can see the injustice of a system that treats those without money in a very different way than those with money. Johansen (2002) reminds us that, "precisely because traumatic brain injuries afflict such individual consequences, attempting to make ethical decisions about treatment on the basis of principals of justice such as rights and equity seems impossible" (p. 195).

Just as Johansen found injustices within the medical system, Moustakas also found in his hospital experience that children without a strong advocate or parent influence, were ignored and left to fend for themselves, eventually withdrawing and feeling overwhelmed by the expectations of the adults around them to comply to ways of being which did not always help them. Virginia Held (2006) saw that while ethics and justice are two very different things, and while we should want and demand justice, without care there is no moral fabric on which to base our lives.

We know we can have care without justice. Without care, however, there would be no persons to respect and no families to improve. Without care, there would be no public system of rights - even if it could be just. But care is not simply causally primary, it is more inclusive a value. Within a network of caring, we can and should demand justice. (p. 72)

Noddings (1984) notes that to care is to act not by “fixed rule but rather by affection and regard” (p. 24). Ethics of care focuses on the carer and the cared-for in relation to one another. The importance of the carer in situations where the cared-for is reliant on them for their healing, functioning and day to day progress becomes quickly apparent. Nodding (1984) states that, “it is clear that caring is complicated in all relationships through the apprehension of the caring by the cared-for. When this attitude is missed the one who is the object of the caretaking feels like an object. He is being treated, handled by formula” (p. 65). My own experiences attest to this when my OT, who was rigid in her manner of dealing with clients, had expectations that we would all heal in the allotted time frame we had been given by WorkSafe BC. For those who did not have a doctor or union to advocate for them or who lived on the edge financially, going back to work with a head injury meant continued healing was sacrificed for the fixed expectations of the institution. The same can be true for those who are returning to school.

MTBI and Return to School

In his article, “Medical-School Partnership in Guiding Return to School Following Mild Traumatic Brain Injury in Youth”, Gerard A. Gioia (2016) notes that return to school with a MTBI, like return to the workplace, is a complex matter that requires a caring engaged team of medical practitioners, educators and family members. Just as in the case of a gradual return to work, return to school requires communication between all team members. Gioia tells us,

as the manifestation of a mild traumatic brain injury can vary significantly from student to student, a generic, cookie-cutter approach to mild traumatic brain injury management in the school setting should not be applied. Mild traumatic brain injury may have certain commonalities in its clinical presentation but each has its own unique characteristics. The individualized assessment and treatment of the student's clinical symptom profile must, therefore, be individualized. (p. 94)

Many factors play into a student's success or failure after MTBI in returning to school. How engaged a physician is willing to become is key. How prepared the school will be in making concessions and utilizing resources in order to understand the need of the student is another. For myself, sustaining a few more hits to the head while doing this work, I found everyone surrounding me within the academic system to be supportive, understanding and more than willing to be flexible in order to help me to succeed. This was not always the case for others.

While working in a high school, at times I interacted with students who had suffered concussions, sports related or from some other incident. Students themselves often returned to school long before they were ready, being in denial of their own inability to cope. I often stepped in as an advocate for these students who felt overwhelmed or incapable of approaching teachers on their own. Most teachers were accommodating and concerned for their student's academic abilities as they witnessed them struggle. On occasion a teacher questioned the student's symptoms and whether they really needed extra time for assignments or time off. Without an advocate, a parent or someone who could help convey their feelings of helplessness, more often than not these students often ended up struggling to make teachers aware of the long-term effects that often made the workload more difficult for them. Gioia (2016) tells us,

Periods of prolonged concentration, class work, homework, or lengthy classes have the

potential of producing an increase in symptoms such as headaches, fatigue, or decreased concentration. As with other aspects of mild traumatic brain injury, these “exertional effects” can vary from person to person, task to task, and across recovery, necessitating an individualized assessment of the student’s cognitive exertional response. (p.100)

Gioia advocates for everyone involved to learn how best to support the student including the student themselves who he said must learn “the skills of activity-exertion management” (Gioia, 2016). I often stepped in not only to advocate for these students who felt overwhelmed and incapable to approach teachers on their own, but to act as a check in person to help them self-monitor their symptoms and stamina at a time when they were incapable of doing this for themselves.

Schools must find tools to train their staff in the best procedures in order to support their students. What is needed is a “system-wide management program” which identifies students’ needs and implements supports. Training of staff is key in understanding each person’s role within the process of a team-based plan that supports the student from the “initial identification” to “final recovery” (Gioia, 2016). Gioia emphasizes the need for positive reinforcement by doctors and teachers when dealing with the student who has suffered an MTBI in order to help ease the stress of returning to school. Gioia states that, “Framing the injury and its recovery in a positive, constructive, reassuring manner is critical” (p. 102). With the assistance of a dedicated knowledgeable positive team, who understand a student’s abilities, struggles and progressions, Gioia asserts that an individual can succeed in their return to school with the aid of dedicated care givers. Teachers, support staff, parents and the students themselves all can play a vital role in making this transition happen. As Dahlberg et al. (2016) express the need for an ecological system where all the parts are interdependent in order to function to the fullest, especially in

return to one's life after injury, Gioia found that the student who is met with care on all of these levels school, home, community and day to day living can ultimately progress in returning to their life in school.

Bringing Care to Community

Held (2006) further brought to light the connection between ethics of care and society. She advocated for a society which is concerned about the needs of every child and the supports required to fulfill those needs. Held states that,

In a caring society, attending to the needs of every child would be a major goal, and doing so would be seen to require social arrangements offering the kinds of economic and educational and child care and health care support that members of communities really need. (p. 136)

As referred to earlier, Johansen also acknowledges that it takes a whole community to help a person return to a full life after a TBI. The community that came together to support her family brought advice, inquiries, and love at a time when their world was shattered. They ranged from family who looked after their daughter, to friends who called to inquire, to faculty of his school who worked to bring him back into the world he had lost when he was jolted into a different life and way of being. When he finally came out of a coma, Eric was able to return to school, go on to college and eventually have a career because of the support of his parents, his friends and the community which supported him.

While Johansen found there were people within the medical system who were willing to help them, there were also those who reduced her son down to a file number. She and her husband fought hard to bring their son Eric back into life despite a system that at times worked against them. Ethics of care played a huge role in what they advocated for and eventually

received for their son. This way of being falls over into compassionate care. If you have one, ethics of care at play, you naturally have the other. In other words, compassion moves us to a better place and ultimately, we find that compassion toward others equates to a shift inside ourselves (Lomas, 2015). However, just as it is not a guarantee that ethics of care will be at play when dealing with the medical system it follows that it is not for compassionate care as well. Wright, Boyd and Ginsberg (2019), in their research report on the teaching of compassionate care in medical programs, “The Hidden Curriculum of Compassionate Care: Can Assessment Drive Compassion,” state that,

Compassionate care, or care that prioritizes deep awareness and desire to relieve patient suffering, is currently perceived to be lacking in medical education and practice. With no consensus on where caring behaviors fall on the continuum from fixed personality traits to learnable behaviors, many have attempted to address this deficit. (p. 1164)

The study found that while some universities do teach compassionate care in their medical programs, it is not usually assessed and therefore not taken as seriously by students as other subject areas. Some professors found that teaching compassionate care took away from core medical subjects and was a waste of time, while others believed it to be essential for a doctor’s training. Some medical students indicated they did not take the course seriously as it was not assessed in the same ways as other courses, while other students felt it was simply a matter of knowing all of the right things to say in order to impress their instructors. What this study highlighted though, was that more than anything, it is an institution’s protocol and values, whether a teaching or hospital setting, that is the best prediction of the kind of care doctors will give. However, some students did indicate that at times their best learning came from “both positive and negative role models” and that they did not necessarily follow the procedures of the

institution if it was not in the best interest of the patient (Wright et al., 2019).

For myself I found inconsistencies in the medical system. I found that every time I met someone who questioned my injury, I had to fight my way through the fog to stand up for myself and get the care I required. As frustrating as this could be it was the underpinning of my success, resiliency and ability in the end to stand up for myself. In *Making Meaning in the Wake of Trauma: Resilience and Redemption* McAdams and Jones (2017) claim that,

In the wake of trauma, newfound personal strengths or enhanced interpersonal relationships or a renewed sense of spirituality may arise, suggesting that positive, growth-inducing meanings have been made. There remains the hope for redemption, albeit in an attenuated form, for the trauma itself—the disability, the assault, the murder, the nearly unbearable loss—can never be undone. (p. 4)

In order to heal it is important to understand what it is you have gone through. With introspection, comes positive changes which create much needed separation from the trauma (McAdams & Jones, 2017). It was only when I returned to school and I began to delve into the healing work I had done around my own concussion that I even realized what I had experienced was itself a trauma. While not intentional I now realize the implications of that impact to my head. Accidents can be just as traumatizing as any other act that is wounding and heartbreaking. To be a witness to my own trauma is releasing and is a gift. Reflexivity is an on-going process of self-awareness, which allows for deeper analysis. Writing papers about my personal experiences while coming back into academic life has given me the gift of reflexivity allowing me to see myself in a different way. I begin to afford myself the kind of compassion I would give others as I see myself as the other. In so doing I am able to then move forward and help others. As McAdams and Jones (2017) questioned the ways of meaning-making in the wake of trauma they

rebutted that, “There are surely more viable answers but behind many of them is the supposition that meaning is made, in large part through narrative” (p. 4).

While Joanna McGrath (2004), notes that recovery from any brain injury can result, for some people in changing their life’s direction, she suggests that, “There can also be positive secondary appraisal whereby success at mastering the challenges presented by brain injury enhances self-esteem” (p. 771). For myself, as I gradually healed from each blow to the head, I found the courage that allowed me to walk into a subway station and tolerate the hordes of people. Eventually being in throngs of people at rush hour made me feel totally alive. I could just melt into the masses and be absolutely ecstatic about being in that moment and just another face in the crowd. As this journey continued to unfold, I discovered it was full of surprises, grief, loss, joy and wonder as well. I also found it was full of grace and resiliency. It is through grace, the ability to hold my head high and move with elegance no matter what, that I find I am able to bear the magnitude of these changes. It is through grace, the ability to look beyond the pain of injury and let go of the blame I place on myself that I am able to look for the joy and in turn withstand the pain. It is with grace that I am able to write this at all. My determination and resiliency allow me to continue.

Letting Go

As fear takes hold
I sit beneath a tree
wait for chestnuts to drop.
I was told if I gather them into corners
they would scare off spiders,
but I have no fear of spiders
only the unknown tomorrow.
I can’t breathe.
There are too many streets to clear
as nuts cover them all
and at three a.m.
the fear of death comes too quickly

as I can't collect enough of them
to push it away.
In the morning
I remember a place of sweetness
your presence a pacemaker
for a heart's broken love trying to heal.
I fall deep into a sleep
that has no corners.

Sometimes things become lost
and now there are only cracks
to jump over, mystifying moments
when God seems to speak
in riddles and we understand
that to dance means to live.
The pureness of your songs
stir feelings, a story unfolding, a trail of dust
that longshoremen and you have
followed from birth.
My belly-gazing finds me no answers
and I hold only more questions
trying to slip along behind you.

We share an old book
and I wish I could keep its secret
the one you bring me every day
about wonderment
and how it is something to strive toward.
I wish I could hold the geese from flying
just for a moment so I could hear
the beating of wings
before they leap for the sky.
I know I have nothing to offer them
they see beyond the clouds
that block my view.
I am left behind,
a wrestler of moments
struggling with time
the way others struggle with money,
it is a commodity that wriggles
into something so profound
it loses its meaning
when there is too much
and gains too much
when there is too little.

Disconnected, the sound of waves
brings me back to look
for new opportunities,
to dance with you,
to hold all the chestnuts
in the world between us
and to push panic further away
as each morning the dust settles
and this beauty you bring me
is everywhere.
I escape on the wind of your breath
realize that the fear
comes just before the jump
and landing in your arms
allows me to get up and run
let the chestnuts go,
knowing you will always bring me more.

Healing in Community

While I did not find the compassion I needed from the OT there were countless others, including some from the clinic, who were there for me throughout this ordeal. The speech therapist with whom I worked with to try to find ways that would help me to stop stuttering was incredible. Even after I no longer was at the clinic, she found a way to continue with me in my home. At one point she filmed me talking about very emotional things when I was having a good day. Then on a day when my brain was taxed, she filmed me talking. She wanted evidence that my stuttering was not caused by an emotional response but was in fact caused by a brain that was working too hard to function and couldn't find a way of getting words out coherently.

Eventually I was able to find a space and purpose and a way in which to help others through their own struggles with loneliness and isolation. I had an idea with my first concussion that I didn't act upon until the second. I decided to put a call out for people's concussion stories to form an anthology. In deciding to gather people's stories of their journey with MTBI I was opening a platform for those who had suffered to be heard and find purpose in their own lives.

Nineteen stories came together in order to form the book *Concussion and Mild Traumatic Brain Injury: Not Just Another Headline* (Nish, 2016) and found a home with Lash and Associates, a publisher of solely brain injury material in the United States.

At our book launch with over a hundred people in attendance, I read my entry from the book while Lorraine White-Wilkinson danced around the room. As people came into the restaurant we had asked if they had a concussion, and if they did, we gave them a candle and a piece of paper asking them to stand up at the end of my performance. As they stood Lorraine went around and lit the candles and they started to light each other's. With my children on stage beside me I asked everyone who had ever been affected by someone who had had a concussion to stand and touch the arm of someone holding a candle. Not a single person was left sitting. In that moment we all felt the power of standing as one and the loneliness each of us had carried vanished. One woman, whose story was in the book, wrote afterwards to say she would never forget how her despair vanished in that moment. She said she was sure that in the future when she felt lonely, she would pull out her candle and feel the sense of community surrounding her again. None of us will ever forget the huge shift that happened for everyone present. Robert Carroll (2005) tells us,

Healing is frequently thought of as taking place at the level of the individual. But if healing is viewed as a process that brings us back to wholeness, then in addition to happening within the individual patient, healing can also take place between patient and family members, between patient and the larger community of which they are a part, and even at the level of the community as a whole. In fact, healing is often necessary on many of these levels simultaneously. (p. 166)

Shifts are important and happen in all sorts of sometimes, unexpected ways. Just as Dahlberg,

Ranheim, et al. (2016) had found that the cancer patients they interviewed were able to find a sense of self through an ecological health practice that recognized it is the ability to recognize the interconnected parts of an individual's life in order to function, I had found that part of my healing was being in my community and bringing my new way of being to the writing world. It was here I found the compassion of a whole community that helped to raise me up in order to move on.

Life Writing and Poetic Inquiry

How does poetic inquiry and life writing influence my research as a scholar returning to academic work after a MTBI? As stated earlier, writing my personal story is essential to this process. How can writing my personal story affect others as well as myself? After sustaining this series of life altering MTBIs, Leggo's words stay with me and speak to how I have come to now see myself and my writing. Leggo (2016) tells us,

I engage in writing in order to gauge how well I am living with wellness. I am always eager to live well (not falling into a dark well; not moaning with a finger-wagging 'well, well, well'), always with hope that the story of a life, a living story, can be filled with joy, even in the midst of each day's turbulent turmoil. (p. 59)

This is my story and this is how well I am living moment by moment. These moments are each a substantial part of a greater framework. When we stop to listen, watch and breathe them in we find we then have the capacity for change, the ability to see a future that we are then able to move worlds. Lyn Fels (2014) reminds us,

I have come to realize that within each moment dwells a lifetime of possibility, renewal, hospitality, resistance, invitation, restoration, reflection, and welcome. Each moment that stops us calls us to attention, into presence, and while we may be

delinquent, ignorant of those moments that elude us, each moment arises with consequence. (p. 53)

Poetic inquiry and life writing allow me to chronicle the journey of change, struggle, heartbreak, loss and recovery. It informs people who have not experienced such trauma to better understand what the experience is like and allows them to bring more empathy to those who have. It is through my entire story, the ups and downs that are a part of life, that I find myself in relationship and dialogue with others (Leggo, 2008b). How can poetry change the trajectory of a life? How does it make us understand ourselves more deeply, allowing us to find meaning and purpose in the everyday? Poetry on the one hand is our sense of body and world placed on the page for others to comprehend. On the other it is all that alludes us, that is incomprehensible gathered together in ways that resonate on a profoundly deep level. It is a magical, mysterious, mystical measure of our humanness and what we hold dear. It brings out the compassion we find for ourselves and others that we hold so dear. As Lynn Butler-Kisber and Mary Stewart (2009) tell us,

Humankind has forever been attracted to poetry because of the musicality and poignancy it portrays in the rhythms of its contracted form, and because of the mystery it suggests in the ambiguity it retains. So much can be said in so few words and in such compelling ways. (p. 3)

People ask me all the time why I do what I do. I do and have done a lot of different things, which involve community and helping others, from supporting teens in high school classrooms who have academic challenges, to running a charitable organization in the literary arts, organizing all of its events, contests and scholarship programs, to having an expressive arts therapy practice and business. I am, without a doubt, a busy person. When deciding to return to

school to do my PhD in Language and Literacy Education, I realized I had to extract myself from some of my obligations, especially after having sustained two serious MTBIs. I wasn't sure which of my abilities may have returned, which I would hopefully recover with time, and which were gone for good. Coming back to academic work was something I felt I needed to do in order to challenge myself and to discover if I could still think and function in this way. As I cried my way through the first semester and sustained another brain injury in the second, I found that despite the challenges, I loved what I was doing and the depth at which I could explore. I loved being in the research and finding my footing in the language of the reading and writing. As hard as it can be at times, writing helps me find my way back into my body. I become less distracted, "disconnected, and disembodied" (Blinne, 2010. p. 184) through my work. Finishing my courses, I dove into the next stage of my academic journey and began to write my comprehensive exams.

Doing a PhD is meant to take a lot of effort and to be challenging. Depending on the department and the expectations there are many hours of tremendously hard work that go into the making of a PhD student (Ponte, 1997). It takes you out of your life for a while in order that you may re-enter your life in a different way. It is hopeful that at the end one comes out with something sustainable and of use to others as well as with a slightly different, perhaps enhanced view of yourself in the world. The potential is great to get caught up in ideas and research and to move, "incite and arouse the reader" (hooks, 1999). Doing a PhD with a brain injury is walking along that tightrope but also realizing you are afraid of heights halfway across. Writing about returning to academic work for a PhD is then doing a flip high into the air, not knowing if you will land upright, sideways or on your knees. Sometimes you have to take that leap just to find if you will land at all.

My writing from a very personal space is one of those things I believe helps me to move through life. More importantly, it is what connects me to the rest of the world and the world to me. As a child who grew up with a mother who suffered from mental illness, I will be the first to tell you that there is a huge benefit to having a creative outlet for surviving a childhood riddled with trauma and anxiety. I am not saying that my writings at thirteen were of a great artistic value but they laid the groundwork for me to begin exploring. As a teenager, especially at thirteen, there is so much to explore. The workings of the inner self and how it relates to the greater world are becoming more and more apparent. In my poetry, prose and research writing, I jump in head first, sometimes making sense, at others needing edits, always from the place of vulnerability and hope that came to me from my ability as a teenager to be vulnerable. As Betsy Warland (2010) reminds me, “particularly when working with autobiographical material, it is our desire to discover - understand what we have not yet understood - that drives us to write. It is these very revelations and renovations that give the narrative its vitality and virtue” (p. 18). I walk the tightrope and when I get stuck, I close my eyes and keep going, hoping to reach the other side, trying to find the magic in being suspended for the moment mid-flight.

Possibilities

My writing accomplishes movement. It takes me out of myself and while sometimes I wish I could literally take my brain out and place it on a table, I can create the picture of how I feel and how absurd a picture this really is. I also become open to the possibility of finding joy again. This is what has changed for me - the possibilities. This is what hopefully changes the reader as they engage with my work and they, too, are a part of the process. Yet, at the same time the thing that scares me the most is that there won't be any more possibilities. I fear that one of these hits to the head will shake my brain just enough that it turns it into a huge popsicle brain

freeze, out of which I won't recover. When I start to think like this, when I feel this hopelessness come over me, I write. I write to keep trying to find the possibilities again whereby I can open space for "connections, questions and insights" as well as to find for myself some kind of purpose, within the "tangled messiness of lived experience" (Leggo, 2008a). I write to share my fears, so others understand the terror of losing self, of watching who you are slip away an icicle at a time while words disappear. I write so you know how I can't stand to be alone in here, freeze dried, stone-faced and not able to reach out and touch anyone for fear of showing I can't do this, while at the same time knowing I can. I write to be seen and heard and to understand "that which we have not yet understood" (Warland, 2010).

I am upheld by educator bell hooks' words as she writes about her own childhood and the pain of living with sisters who relentlessly taunted her. One day as she ironed her father's shirt, she did not feel the iron pressing on the skin of her arm as she pleaded with them to leave her alone. She still remembers the anguish of trying to hide the pain from them once she realized what she had done. She wanted to be brave, but came to realize years later that by hiding her wounds they just kept bleeding throughout the years. As bell hooks (1999) says, "Writing eases the anguish. It is my connection. Through it and with it I transcend despair" (p. 9). I hold onto this as I try to transcend my own despair, my own fear that I have lost my ability to be in the world in any significant way and of being able to connect to anything at all profound. I am terrified of showing anyone my inability to cope, of how vulnerable I am, and so, as hook said, I put on a brave face. It is a frightening place to be, alone and vulnerable. The fear that this is how the rest of my life will play out overwhelms me. I feel I am running out of time and I need to make decisions yet I become incapable of doing anything. What if I make the wrong one? What if my body continues to defy me? What if I need to remember as I leave this page behind, that it

is through this research that I have uncovered possibilities again? The dread that I will not be able to change my life and that this sadness that holds me around my neck will keep its stranglehold grips me with horror. And so, like bell, I write.

Concussion is an invisible injury. Being invisible it eats away at your self-confidence, erodes your self-esteem and makes you mute. It shakes your foundation and robs you of your inner strength, but more than anything else it leaves you alone and isolated. My writing makes me visible again. Professional storyteller Richard Stone talks about how the art of storytelling can be healing for both the listener and the teller. Stone (1996) says that, “we, too, regardless of the nature and depth of our suffering, can rediscover the roots of connection, healing, love and joy by courageously telling our own tales that are filled with grief, pain and distress” (p. 49). I create a world where you can see everything that I am going through and that is important. It is important, not just for me as a writer and a person who has experienced this, but it is important for others to understand better what their loved ones, colleagues, students or friends may be going through as well.

Some days I sit down to write and wonder about the significance of what I have to say. How is it different? How does my story, my life matter to anyone else? How can I make what I have been through relevant to others? What purpose is there in any of this? Leggo found it took him years to appreciate the everyday in his own stories. He found that it was other peoples’ stories he tended to tell instead. Leggo (2008a) shares that,

The mundane events of our lives are already stories, but they are only invested with significance in the ways they are told. Just as an artist represents a still image of the ocean rolling onto a beach, the writer holds a moment, or part of a moment, in order to draw attention to it. In this way the artist and the writer present to us images that are

emblematic of the billions of moments that are given little attention. (p. 4)

When you lose your way of being in the world, as things return, gradually, you find absolute joy in the mundane little things that you once took for granted. Like Leggo, for me this journey is as much about finding the wonderment in the everyday parts of life again. In telling my story I regain this sense and I find my way back out into the world. Everything becomes less cumbersome, less terrifying and more manageable. It is only when we hide in the dark and keep these things secret that they take over and rule our lives. Speaking the unthinkable, telling our stories opens space where we can be vulnerable and totally ourselves. It allows both teller and listener to shift into a different place. It allows us to imagine, find wonderment and dream again. As Quinn-Hall (2016) so simply but profoundly tells us, “a way to understanding something is to write about it” (p. 120). Thus, I write myself back into being and into my place in the world so I can pass these stories on to others.

Slipping

There have been times when I have been entirely frustrated and totally despondent. I have fallen off the tightrope and have been too tired to try to get back up. It is in times like these that I put on that brave face and go out into the world to try to be a part of it but by the time I come back I am stuttering and all I want is to be left in the quiet. While at these times I long to have my life back, sometimes it eludes me and the prospect of remaining in this state overtakes my entire being. Try as I might to be the person I was before the concussion I have to acknowledge that I have changed. What is left is finding the gifts that I have been awarded in this messy state of being.

I am aware of how much our lives are ruled by words and the language in which we engage. It is this unique communication with others and our own internal dialogue that

ultimately molds who we are. It is through language we choose to navigate in the world that we “breathe ourselves into being” (Leggo, 2005). As a writer and educator, losing my words was and is one of the most frightening things that could happen to me. At the beginning when I was first hit, I could rhyme words when I spoke, I could write them but I couldn’t say them. As the stuttering got worse my frustration level grew. I found that by the time the stuttering stopped, usually after a profanity had found its way out of my mouth, I would have forgotten what I wanted to say. As time went on, I was also starting to lose my ability to remember what things were. I would be looking at the stove or car or fridge and have no idea what the word for any of them were and the longer I stared the fuzzier I became. With each hit to the head, with every setback, the stuttering and loss of words returned along with the frustration and sometimes absolute despair. It is on days like these that I have to dig the deepest to find the small moments to celebrate and not forget that while there are times I slip backwards, there is always healing moving me forward. I try to remind myself that even in the losses there are gifts to be found even in this moment as tough as it is. As Fels (2014) tells us,

A stop is not a moment of paralysis, but recognition that we arrive with all who we are, and in our arrival at this intersection; there is the gap between past and future, what we have been and who we are to become. (p. 55)

What would you miss most
(in response to) There’s No Space Like Home, by Clare Brant
in Life Writing and Space

What would you miss most?
I asked as we walked streets
lined with magnolias
and cherry blossoms
a canopy of sweetness
sheltering us from a spring sun
neither of us wanted to see.
Rain, you answered right away.

Really? Think about it, I returned
serious in my determination to know.
Ice cream, you seemed satisfied
and I never told you
I wished you had said me.

What would you miss most?
I asked my six-year-old son
to see how upset he would
be at the idea of moving
to another country.
'Karmin,' he stated without hesitation
his best friend since kindergarten
and I knew he would be fine
where ever we went.

What would you miss most?
I asked my friend
as we marched past her house
to the neighbour's just to check
if they were home.
'The smell of coffee,' she chimed
as it suddenly was everywhere
and I plugged my nose.

And what about you? She asked.
What would you miss most?
'Words!' I stammered out
and then continued
'*words and what they are attached to*'
with that we watched the cars passing
with the moment in silence.

Each time I tell my story, the way I tell it changes. Some days I am more invested than others. It all depends on how tired I am. Yet no matter how I tell it, whether I slightly stutter or jump up and down I am engaging with the story as a lived experience in that very moment and my audience/reader can feel where I am. I write about my exhaustion from trying to fit this all down on the page in a way that makes sense when my ability to think in a day is about as clear as the steam coming off a newly frozen popsicle. While I walk this tightrope, I know that I can't miss. I must be clear in my communication but I can certainly convey the journey of getting to

the point of bringing something intelligible to the page and the difficulties I experienced in getting there. After all, it is as much about the backstory that intrigues us as it is about the performance. As Stone (1996) shares, “this is where our lives percolate and shimmer, where the fertile material of the past becomes compost for the stories of the future” (p. 74). The whole purpose of this process is to find the possibilities to open up space for “more questions” and to find “understanding, wisdom and transformation” (Leggo, 2008b) which story ultimately offers.

Apol (2016) found through her writing workshops that in hearing these young adult survivors of the genocide stories she found she “had changed, irrevocably, and I needed to put that transformation into words” (p. 81). I also have been forever changed by all of my experiences. No one sees or knows, except those closest to me who have watched me from the beginning, or those who stumble upon me while I am trying to find my way of being. As Apol (2016) tells us about writing poetry, “as a research method, this approach made it possible to discover deeper aspects of the work and my relationship to it, and to sort, grapple with, and express my experience in words” (p. 75). Then, just at that moment when I start to fall into a grey area of despondency, like Apol, I find myself slipping into a poetic stanza and in that instant, I am transported into a different space of knowing. Poetic inquiry allows for discovery of a wonderment in the world when there seems to be no room for such things and gives space for examination and growth. Poetry brings us to a place of understanding, whether it is through raw emotion, repetition of thought or challenging situations. Here, there is a chance to find a different way of viewing our experiences and ultimately find creative possibilities.

I have been thinking about poetic inquiry for such a very long time I have even begun to dream about it. I see the words from books and articles I have read while I sleep. They are laid out in front of me – rows and rows of words that tell me why it is important to write poetry and

what meaning it gives to my academic work. Then I wake up and I still have a page in my vision, as if it is trying to tell me something and says, *look here, the answer is in plain sight*. And for a moment, it is. Monica Prendergast (2009) states that, to engage in poetic inquiry is as much a calling as it is a method; a calling between the ‘I’ and the ‘Other’, a call-and-response, a song that is sung, a voice that wills itself to be heard, in many spaces, both private and public, whispered (or shouted) into multiple ears” (p. 560). Then, just as I think I have found my way into that calling again, as what usually happens with dreams, everything slowly disappears and I am left searching the pages for explanations and answers. As Laura Apol (2016), says about her work in Rwanda, “no one could give me answers, but my poems could help me articulate the questions and begin to put into words some of what I was learning and how that learning made me feel” (p.78). When people ask, and they do, if there was a part of my body I appreciated in a different way now because of what I had been through, my response is immediate – my brain. I will never again take it for granted or the ability I have to move my left side, to eat or to think clearly. I feel as though I can appreciate all of it much more and I do. In my disembodied, disconnected state, I find myself, my body again through my words. My experience of the world and of others comes through my sense of “living in the corporeality of the body” (Leggo, 2006). Sometimes the best way for me to describe this way of being to others is through my words, my poetry.

I know why I write poetry. I know what brings me to these pages. It is what I grew into, how I saved myself from harm, and created a world of beauty out of ugly moments. It is how I made sense of the world around me as a child, as an adult raising her young children on her own at the end of a failed marriage and as an academic coming back to the world of questioning and wonder after multiple traumatic brain injuries. We connect through beauty, lived moments,

tragedies, heard language and epiphanies, yet we still must justify our dreams. We use poetry in our marriage vows, on our deathbeds, in so many significant moments. Leggo (2006) reminds us that, “writing does not enable the writer to hammer down secure truth; writing enables the writer to explore possibilities of meaning. Writing is not self-expression; writing is self-construction” (p. 72). This is why our writing poetry is so important as research. It is just as both Leggo and Apol state, that it is all those other lived moments that need to be understood or that maybe we can’t understand in any other way than through poetry. Prendergast (2009) tells us, “the best poetic inquiry – again, as seen in poetry – will carry within it the power to move its audience effectively as well as intellectually and will deal with the kinds of topics that lead into the affective experiential domain” (p. 546). All of these important moments come to life and it is then that we realize, as Prendergast points out, that this is our calling. These experiential moments represent our heart, our way of breathing into life and most importantly, our way of being with one another.

In his article, *Astonishing Silence: Knowing in Poetry*, Leggo (2008) states that poetry connects us to ourselves in ways that other means of observation, knowing and being don’t. Poetry takes us into our imagination where it is possible to conjure the impossible. According to Leggo, poetry connects us with strong emotion and moves us to challenge creatively, “discursive patterns in well-crafted and courageous writing” (p. 168). In exposing the reader to the strong emotions, poetry in academic writing recreates the participant’s lived experience for the reader. In the academic world Leggo refers to the researcher as “questing/questioning,” (p. 171) always in search, returning to the material to turn it over and over again to examine work and linger in the process. Poetry allows for this lingering. It gives us a means to examine the words, the stories, the data and to be with them.

Lived Experience

It is in my lived experience
this work,
a tree waiting to explode
into blossoms, pink perfumed
not only significant in the whole
but for each delicious story,
a potential bud
ready to be let loose
on the wind of a cloudy day.

I have found no answers here,
only the desire to know more
only the lasting headache
of one who cannot focus
or whose story is sometimes lost
in the roots.

I hear whisperings in the background,
those who have stood before me
to ask as well.
Dig deeper, they say.
Just dig deeper.

While using poetry can open up many creative and innovative doors for researchers it is a tool that like any other needs to be learnt and practiced. Leggo (2008) suggests that research is not an excuse for bad writing. It is something that should be done well and taken seriously. In her post- doctoral study of how poetic inquiry was used in scholarly peer-reviewed published work, Prendergast (2009) found that “Although a certain amount of contextualizing may be necessary for the fullest appreciation of poetry in a research setting, it is my contention that the best examples of inquiry poems are good poems in and of themselves” (p. 545). Elliot Eisner, (2008) agrees that while the arts are a wonderful conduit for expressing emotion it is the skill of the artist that renders this possible. Without the skill we end up with a flat imitation of the original,

unable to access the experience or gain any new insight. Poetry done well has the potential, as Eisner states, to “transcend what literal language provides” (p. 8).

When you are as involved in the world of poetry as I have been for so many years it is next to impossible to not have your life immersed in it or changed by it. I see the world in poetry. For me, poetry is everywhere. I search for the beauty in an exchange, the heartache in a word, the wonderment in a story and I see how each of these moments have merit and need to be shared. Poetry is with me all the time; I live and breathe poetry. I have written on scraps of paper while driving, watching the road, but desperate to get my thoughts down before they disappeared. Never edited, this piece was later accepted for publication. I have written, worked and reworked pieces sometimes as many as sixty times in order to get the language to flow the way I thought it should. I have been a part of critiquing groups, incorporating good advice and discarding suggestions that didn't make sense. I understand the writing skill needed to be able to produce something which is exquisite in its rawness, exposing the reality, the complexity and sometimes just the pure roughness of life. As this story unfolds, I am hopeful my skill as a poet has returned enough that the edges I sometimes trip over can be excused and there is some profound moment to be found under, around and because of this very act itself. The fact I can still do this stands out for me just as much as the fact that I am still here.

I Am Poetry

I am poetry.
The words on the page
which capture you
as the sunset
that holds your gaze.

I am poetry.
The innocent child
asking for more
never engaging the possibility

there might not be anything else,
always searching beyond.

I am poetry.
Wordsworth, Shelley,
and Keats.
Graham, Lee and Collins.
Lau, Bowering and Michaels.
Their shadows my playground.

I am poetry.
The questions
you are afraid to ask,
the pages you can't
bring yourself to turn,
the moonscape you dream of.

I am poetry.
With a dissertation
waiting in the shadows,
begging to ask the questions,
Who are you? What do you have to say?
My answer. I am Poetry.

When I had suffered my first of several MTBIs, when I had lost my ability to be in the world, to read, to write, to get on a bus or feed myself, had no idea how to navigate through each day, I still found poetry to be a comfort as I began to heal. While I couldn't write poetry, I could still edit and so my first book of poetry was published. Poetry was my way back into my life. As I wondered what I could have to offer in my own writing, it was through these readings that I gradually came to realize it is our human condition that we all have in common. As Li-Young Lee so beautifully expresses in his interview with Ingersoll, E. G. (2006), in *Breaking the alabaster jar: Conversations with Li-Young Lee*, "Poetry is never a hobby. It is not something we do with one eye closed or we do in our spare time; it's something you give your life to, something you live by" (p. 21). This is what we are all writing about: the pain, the joy and the love. It is the good and bad, the hopeful and the hopeless moments of our lives. These are the

things that hold us to earth at the worst of times, and it is through telling our stories that we are able to connect, reach out and go on. It is through sharing our poetry that we gift these moments to ourselves and to others.

The Violin Case

An empty violin case
found on the sidewalk,
the thought holds promise
of what could come
leaves me sad at the prospect
of what may have been lost.
I am as desperate as this picture
as joyful as the moment of possibility,
a mixture of running water and sediment,
I think of the sand Moses
stretched to the edge of a great sea
that flows faster than my thoughts
and I move along as though I was meant
to slip away from everything that holds
me a slave to myself.

Tonight I search for the music
that has brought me to this place
the notes that make up
a winter sky that shifts shapes around me.
My chilled bones fall to the side
of an ocean that only I can see
as I drop to my knees
to collect prayers, a doorstopper reminder
of the strength gathered
through the passage
of these turbulent waters
which have brought me to this moment.

My mother held me captive, a pharaoh
of fear, she refused to listen
to anything I said.
She kept me locked close to her belief
that I should be like her in every form
but at the same time
disgusted by my existence
she pushed me away with words
that were meant to sink me

further into a landscape of despair.
My father, a helpless onlooker,
played songs in the background
of courage and hope
the music I clung to
that gave me something to move toward
that brought me to that second of jumping
and running through an unseen ocean wall
built on the prospects of the other side
or staying with my mother's wounds forever.

I have been standing outside of myself
for a while now looking in
as though if I stare long enough
I could fill the case with something beautiful.
I ask myself what notes
have I brought to water
what dances do I play for an audience
who wait for me to lead them
though a desert storm too?
I drop my head,
wait for the whirl of dust to settle
knowing once I begin to play
there will be no turning back.
I pick up the case still empty
and begin to fill it a note at a time
knowing the best is yet to arrive.

Coming Home

When I had my concussions, my world shrank to almost nothing. I was not able to leave my house as I could barely function. Then, as I moved through recovery and came back out into the world, all the simple little things which I did not take notice of before became beacons on a horizon of recovery for me. Each step was a path of discovery and re-entry. It feels funny to be reading back to a time when everything was so hard. Life has sifted since then in so many ways but like anything that was built on soil that gives way into a yielding swaying movement, I have found my rhythm. These poems are a verification of this.

These are the blueprints of a brain changing and a world expanding. They start with the intense anxiety and fear of returning to school with MTBI and then settling into this world as I craved for more words, ideas, poems, to once again flow. Other works include poetry written in response to other poets. Each work I read had a significance all of its own. As a whole they are a stack of power sitting in a corner from which I draw strength and courage even now. Each poet I have admired for their work, their ability to craft, create and fill the pages with meaning that sings whether it is a howling cry of pain, a deep surrender to love, or the effects of a loved one's illness. All of these poets whether I know personally or from a distance, have shared their lives with me in the context of their metaphors, form and life stories. These are poets I have looked up to in their craft, their honesty and their humanness. Without them in this moment I don't know if I would have been brave enough to tell my own story as truthfully as I have. They are courageous and vulnerable, real and hopeful, even in grief. I am indebted to each and every one of these poets for their fearlessness and fearfulness and most of all their words. Here was a prime vehicle by which to find my own voice once again to walk with me down the road toward my academic return.

As I read these poems, I found that as I came to the end of each book I was actually writing my response in the back pages of each one. I never used to write in books. Books were and are sacred to me. Yet it seemed like I needed to respond to each author, to place my words next to theirs, to give them an aesthetic response; an artistic reply immediately to their work. To have lived in their words and now to be a part of them, I needed to situate myself in what they had given me, to take it and make it a part of my own life in order to make sense. Each poet aroused things in me that were so different. So many of my responses had to do with death, heartache, finding the way back to life as I was affected by each of the books. Some works gave

me a general sense of relating to the story, while with others there were very specific lines which held me, moved me and pulled me into my own work.

Yet I found that while some of the lines I wrote worked for me there seemed to be something lacking when I tried to move the poetry onto paper and off the back pages of the books. I felt frustrated and couldn't figure out why. Then as I sat with them for a while I realized it was because I was still hanging onto the idea that I needed to write something profound in the footsteps of these great poets who I was literally following on the page. While I began to play with the raw text that was there, I felt as though I was still trying too hard. Instead of imitating them I needed to be informed by them and not be intimidated. I needed to allow them to help me find my way back into my own story. Here, after all, was a prime vehicle by which to find my own voice once again.

The more I played the more I found myself owning my words, telling of my own journey and enjoying being on the page myself. Sometimes hard, and at others joyful it took a long time to write these poems, much longer than I anticipated. I had so much that I had to process, not just my own experiences but all the experiences of all the poets I had read and it took me time just to figure out what to do with all the material I now had digested. How and where to present the works of others now became a problem. The next step was finding a short enough way to explain what it took these writers sometimes years to put down on the page. It seemed an impossible task. Should I respond to each poem individually? Should I just give a general synopsis of each book or ignore them altogether and just start to write my own story?

I tried many different approaches and in the end I realized that I needed to honour each book. I needed to tell briefly, if nothing else, something of how their story affected me and

brought me back to my own words. We were, after all, in this together. The back pages of each book that were now full of my words was a testament to that.

In Response To The Poets Who Return Me To Language

Behind My Eyes by Li-Young Lee (2008) spoke to me about the life of a child, immigrant, husband, father, friend. Simple moments like making his bed with his wife caught on paper, “So we’re dust. In the meantime, my wife and I/make the bed” (p. 98), made me appreciate all those daily things, which I lost for a while through my accidents. More than anything I found the pages in the back of the book calling me as though he had intentionally left them there for me to write on, left me space to follow his words and to grow.

Dear Current Occupant: A Memoir, is Chelene Knight’s (2018) account of revisiting the places she lived as a child, mainly on Vancouver’s east side. Walking back into her childhood homes she shows us a world, often chaotic, lonely and lacking the basic necessities of food and attention. Yet, through all her childhood, despite all of the sudden moves and lonely nights, she was steadfast in her need to cling to her books, to create in her imagination what she needed, a safe world filled with love and kindness. As she struggles throughout with her sense of identity, coming from a mixed racial background and trying to place herself somewhere on the page so as to move forward as a strong black woman, we see her determination, strength and courage. Each line resonated and stayed with me for a very long time.

After reading Naomi Shihab Nye’s *Transfer* (2011) and *19 Variations of Gazelle* (2002), I felt I wanted to sit in dialogue with Nye. I have felt this many times reading her works in the past but this time these books really impacted me as I thought about my own father and how I missed him, of his character and what he contributed to who I am today. *Transfer* is Naomi Shihab Nye’s journey with her father after his death. It is a beautiful testament to a life well lived, of an

individual who gave of himself through his heart and of his daughter's loss. It is about loss of home, displacement and in the end hope. In her book *19 Variations of Gazelle*, Nye again takes us to her homeland, Palestine, and examines how those who have been through war go on. Nye is so adept at taking the ordinary moments in life and making zingers out of them. Her work is a mixture of a question and an answer all at the same time. In the poem Lunch at Nebulus City in *19 Variations of Gazelle* (2002) she says, "What makes a man with a gun seem bigger/than a man with almonds? How can there be war/and the next day eating, a man stacking plates/on the curl of his arm, a table of people/toasting one another in languages of grace" (p. 35).

At the end of Jacob Scheier's (2013), *Letters from Brooklyn* which deals among other things with his mother's death from cancer, I wrote, *I am always seeking out death as though I could ward off the inevitable*. While Scheier (2013) writes his mother back into life in his poem "My Mother Dies in Reverse" where he begins at the funeral, and ends with her climbing into the ambulance seat with her breasts sewn back on, I am walking toward death, yet we are both challenging death in different ways.

In Laura Apol's (2015) book *Requiem Rwanda*, I found I wanted to respond to everything. Her stunning and horrifying account of the genocide, of working with young adult survivors, of her own changes because of this work and of their stories which she herself takes in and shares with the world, stay with me long after I have put the book down. Apol's lines about how the whites "left the Tutsi children. They saved their dogs instead" (p. 30), are hard hitting. By the end of the book everything she speaks of, all that they have been through, sits in my belly. I look at my own ancestors' journey, the concentration camps and how they survived and I come back to Frankl's work and once again realize that it is when our humanness is taken away that we

lose hope, we lose self. Sharing our stories is our way back into hope, into survival and existence again and hopefully gives us a greater understanding of one another's suffering and journey.

The Father, Sharon Olds's (1992) poetic examination of her father's death and how it affected her also profoundly affected me. It was a hard book to read, as it brought me back to my own father's death ten years ago and reminded me how I still miss him. This book again brought me toward death and all that it means for me. Did I pick these books because of the theme of death? Drawn to death, I hoped to find life again.

daniel g. scott's (2014), *terrains*, examines the different landscapes of grief through loss, what we miss and what we are surprised by missing. His insights seem to be universal in that none of us can escape the huge void caused by death no matter what the age. He takes us on a hauntingly beautiful journey through heartache, death and the finality of loss. He reminds us that, "there are no small losses/ no small deaths" (scott, 2014, p. 12). Our sorrows affect all of those around us.

Some of the most jarring language came in Jonina Kirton's (2015) book *Page as Bone, Ink As Blood*, as she searches for identity, experiences the loss of self and loved ones, and through her journey begins to put all of the pieces back together line by line. "It was not supposed to be like this. We were to go together. All of us at once, not one body part at a time" (Kirton, 2015, p. 20).). This line struck me right at the core.

Hearing Echoes, by Carl Leggo and Renee Norman (2016), a poetic conversation about parenthood, grandparenthood, love and relationship, was a true gift. Rich lines like Leggo's, "My son loves me;/ I love my son - a light line of balance suspended on the / semi-colon like a semi-sweet chocolate heart" (Leggo & Norman, 2016, p. 36), filled me. In each of these poets' ruminations about life's experiences as they moved through and intertwined with those closest in

their lives, I understood and took a closer look at how my children were affected by my life, my decisions and my concussions. When you are in the middle of injury it is sometimes hard to see how what you do impacts others. This book did that for me and allowed me to address this with my own children. The book was a stiff reminder of how everyone around me was affected as well as how grateful I was just to have those people in my life.

Fiona Tinwei Lam's (2011), book *The Bright Well/ Contemporary Canadian Poems About Facing Cancer* was a prompt to remember how fragile life can be. Over and over again I felt the message of how coming back to life was a hard fought battle not to be taken for granted in such lines as "eventually I'll pick up a book again/read myself/ back into existence/ but right now it's mostly sea/and the water reaches over my head" (Lam's, 2011, p. 28). And so the writing begins, some about loss, death, love and gratitude. I do not take my writing, my thinking, and my sharing, any of this, for granted. I love being with words again, to be able to read others' works, understand them, hear them and be moved by them. I am grateful that I can simply respond.

These are followed by poems written in a time when I was living with the symptoms of another MTBI while in school. There was a gut-wrenching horror at losing my ability to exist in words, language, light, classrooms and instructor's voices. I have left these poems in their original form so that it is possible to see the shift from my struggling just to be in classes, to the impossibility of trying to write anything legible that could communicate the frustrations of trying to return to the world once again. These are hard for me to read, in the sense that it is possible to see the progression of gaining confidence in the work I was doing to then simply losing the ability to do anything. It is in my lack of words, my inability to be coherent that I find I swallow the hardest, take the deepest breath in order to find the courage to reflect. In seeing these poems

once again, I am confronted with the harsh reality of what at other times I could just ignore. It is through the letters slipping off the page, my voice crumbling beneath me that I realize how lucky I am to be back at all. I face this fact and understand the resiliency needed to survive.

The next section is a document representative of leaving the womb of my house and wandering out into a world ripe with wonder. When I began this dissertation, I thought going to places I had lived would help me back to a place where I felt connected to others, and would allow me to expand what had become a very small place on this planet for me. I thought this would show how I had come out into the world again after losing my sense of self and having my own world totally shut down. I had set myself up for going to Toronto and San Francisco, both places I had lived for extended times. Philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1958) writes,

But over and beyond our memories the house we were born in is physically inscribed in us. It is a group of organic habits. After twenty years in spite of all the other anonymous stairways we would recapture the reflexes of the “first stairway,” we would not stumble on that rather high step. The house’s entire being would open up, faithful to our own being. We would push the door that creaks with the same gesture, we would find our way in the dark to the distant attic. The feel of the tiniest latch has remained in our hands. (p.14)

The tiniest feelings come rushing in as I move around these places, familiar and strange all at the same time. Out in the world where I had previously existed before my concussions, I was confronted by those reflexes to habitually turn the knob and enter into familiar territory, as emotions came flooding back. There were many surprises buried under these layers of a past lifting from the soil of what were now essentially very different places and in the very fact they were different, lay hidden the gifts of perspective and change. On what was to be the final leg of

this journey I would go to Poland, a place I had never been but where my family was from. It was my hope that going back to my roots would help me to connect with a part of myself I had lost from suffering all these MTBIs. I was all set to embark on these journeys anxious to get started, when once again, life happened.

Before my trip in March to Toronto Carl passed away. There was a planned memorial by our department during this time. I had to decide if I should stay in Vancouver or go to Toronto as planned. I opted to go to Toronto and to honour Carl in my own way, through my continuing the work I had started with him. This was not an easy decision and I will never know if it was the right one or how it affected what I did while in Toronto. Before my trip to San Francisco I had another hit to the head which made it impossible for me to travel at that time. I rearranged the trip later but had to cancel again because my friend with whom I was staying was under a notice of evacuation due to huge fires that threatened her community. It wouldn't be until the following February that I would make it there. My trip to Poland, while a whirlwind, was one that was rich and sad all at the same time. I walked through Auschwitz with one of my oldest and dearest friends and my youngest daughter, found a garden wall made of Jewish tombstones in the town I thought my grandparents were from and ate traditional Polish food at kiosks in the crowded Jewish Quarter in Kraków at midnight. While each trip has had its own challenges, rewards and blessings each of these experiences have helped me to find something of myself again, something of my history and something that makes me resilient and want to continue.

What I have learnt since all of my travels is that each one lives inside of me, informing my life and way of being in different ways. What going to each of these places has done for me, is they have each given me a chance to reflect on changes that have occurred in me and to find things which I have held onto in order to survive. Some of these things were obvious, others like

the invisible string of grief or the repercussions from an invisible head injury, are less easy to detect. Whether big or small, obvious or slightly removed from sight this time I spent in these places allowed me to take something away which would help me moving forward. It was a time of reflection, reflexivity, joy and sadness, a time of understanding where I had come from and what had brought me to this place.

The writing which came out of these experiences is full of despair, hope, failure, acceptance, excitement, courage and peace. They are my testimony to how a life can change, expand, grow and live again. My writing about this journey feels like a completion, and yet, it is also an opening to a new life, a new way of being. There is a glowing home-fire here, inviting you to the hearth, to pull up a chair, grab a cup of borscht and stay a while. They are my eyes, my heart and the heels of my soul as I move away from isolation. They are a mirror that has cracked and the beauty in each piece that never quite fit together again. They are a kaleidoscope of these pieces formed from resiliency that twist and turn with each hit to bring together a picture which, while different, is beautiful in its own way. These are my most vulnerable places in the world that I offer you. They are where I find home.

Being Here

There isn't anything
I can tell you
that hasn't been said before
except that this is
how it is for me.

My First Assignment

Words on the screen
now fireflies in the night,
their beauty imprisoning my eye
until it wounds, I can't touch these texts.
My pen lines them up on the page,
all of them, as though if I let one go
it will tempt the others to flee.
They are a mass of nothing
I can decipher, bound together
by my hand to fill this emptiness.
LITERARYDISCOURSEANDLINGUISTICSINTROTO.....
DISCOULITERREARYLINGUIANDSTICTROIN....
LITDILIOURINTSE...
Gee says, 'language is a misleading term
often suggesting 'grammar'.
I have none. No grammar,
no language or discourse,
only letters that float by.
I try to grab them, to make sense of them,
pull at them end by end, only my utterances
are left, heard a million miles away.
I curse the day I signed yes
to my acceptance, to putting myself
in a place of having to know
what I don't know.
The tears keep coming
as I respond to classmates,
who never see that behind this shield
I am a masked fog
watching deadlines slip by,
6 pm, 7pm, 8 pm.
Headache, stuttering, exhaustion,
blurred vision.
At midnight my first post complete,
I cry some more, determined now
to do it all again.

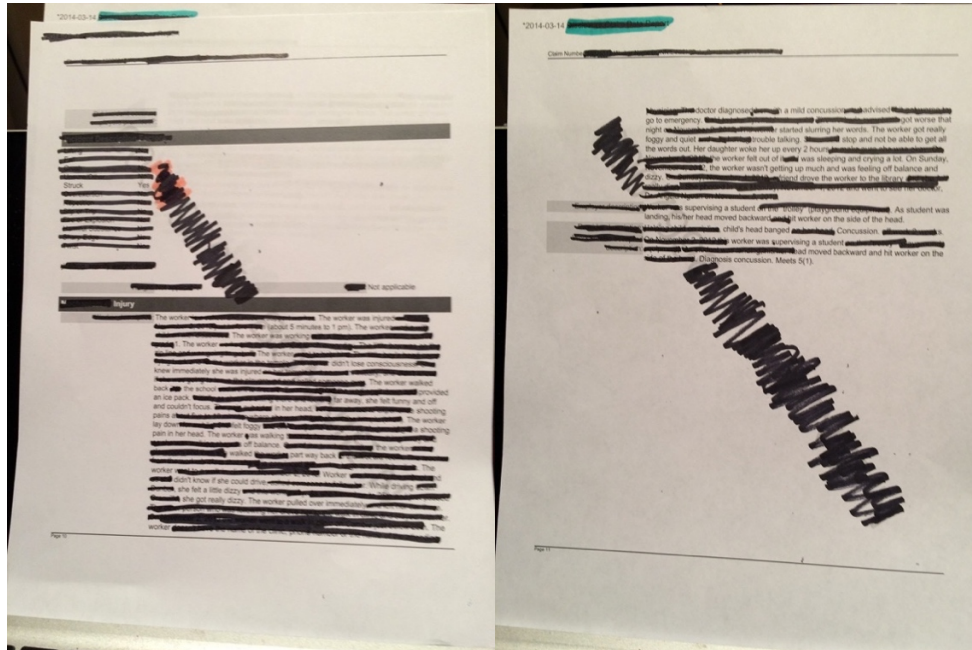


Figure 2: Found Poem/Erasure Poem – from WCB Injury File

Found Poem From WorkSafe Injury Files:

Erasing Their Version (Erasure Poem- blacking out text to find the poetry within the lines)

The worker(me). The worker (me).
The worker (me) was injured
about 5 minutes to 1.

The worker(me). The worker(me).
was working
didn't lose consciousness
knew immediately she was injured.

The worker (me) walked back
for an ice pack.
She felt funny and off and couldn't focus,
in her head shooting pain.
The worker (me) lay down, felt foggy, a shooting
pain in her head.

The worker (me) walking off balance.
The worker (me) walked part way back.
The worker (me) didn't know if she could drive,
felt a little dizzy.
The worker (me) pulled over.
The worker (me) diagnosed;

a mild concussion, go to emergency if you get worse at night.
Started slurring words.

The worker (me) got really foggy and quiet.
Trouble talking, not able to get all the words out,
daughter woke up every two hours.
The worker (me) out of it,
sleeping and crying a lot.

On Sunday, the worker (me) wasn't getting up,
feeling off balance and dizzy.

The worker (me) supervising a student
who moved backward
hit the worker(me) on the head.
Diagnosis Concussion.

Diagnosis: Concussion My Version

At five minutes to one
a chilly wet November day
the wet ground full of laughing boys and girls
and me standing supporting a child to zip
back and forth and back and forth
on a zip line.
His balance compromised
and the back of his head hit just above my temple.
At five minutes to one
a chilly wet November day
foggy and quiet,
off balance,
losing words,
I stumbled to the office
to lie down.
In that moment the world turned inward,
the fog settled
and I was never the same.

Hands

There are so many types of hands
which hold me captive.
Cool fingers of my mother
rub my five-year-old forehead
while a wild infection pulls it as tight
as a reindeer strapped into a farm harness.
My burning body shivers ice pellets
tries desperately to snap
a snow pea fever as though
it could be cracked, thrown into a pot
and broken overnight.
Internal heat rising higher and higher
now climbs through cotton sheets
meant to protect my tiny frame
and my mother's tears
seep through the cool night air.
I am too weak, too tired
to find my father's outstretched hand,
he finds mine, refuses to let go.

Years later palms pressed
into silent prayer
I have been told the rain
has washed away all the planted seeds
of my mother's brain.
Gravity sinks her into Alzheimer's,
a catalyst for tears
they drop into her lap,
a reminder that I was once the child
trying to reach out.
Neither of our memories
stretch far enough over time
as she collapses into a wheat field
shorn midwinter.
Now she speaks only to God
and I whisper that I will never let go.
I try to hold on
but my hands and pleas arrive too late
as she turns and slips away.

Ten weeks after my mother passed
my father's collapsed veins
no longer bumping into blood

push him into another time frame
from which I cannot follow.
The hands strong enough
to hold a tennis racket at eighty,
gentle enough to string a worm
on a hook for my four-year-old son, disappear.
A liminal drop sheet ties around my heart,
I am left holding space at his funeral
for every person he affected
with his infectious smile, his kind blue eyes
and his livewire handshake
and so, I do not cry.
Instead my words fill the hall
where despair and joy collide
and I, in my small way,
fill the room with his stories,
minute bits of time stopped
just like the moment he slid away.

My parents died before this first concussion
nothing left to hold them to earth.
I am sitting in my kitchen trying to feel rooted
to a place that seems so alien.
I am late but I don't know for what
while white and red walls seem foreign
as if a stranger
had painted them while I was gone.
Gone. Gone where? I don't know.
The clock on the microwave
stares at me, I stare back.
It stares, I stare, and finally
the 3 winks into a 4
and I shift my legs thinking I have won
but I don't remember what.
The screen shows I have been here
an hour, but I can't remember
how long I have lived in this place
or when the walls were painted
and why I don't notice drop sheets
and the smell of turpentine.
I begin to sweat
though I can't feel the droplets
overtaking my body.
I decide to stare some more
until the word for the thing on the counter
that holds the green numbers finds me again.

I cup my hands in my lap
and wait.

Five years have passed
and I still can't find
the 2 on the microwave,
yet I have found a million words
in my soup bowl
but only ten of them
stick to my gut on the way down.
The rest slip quietly behind a mist
stranded somewhere out in Denmark
with my father's ghost.
I try to find his hand but it is strangled
by the letters I keep dropping.
Some days the sadness at being left here alone
without them, not knowing how much
I will recover still burns the roof of my mouth.
On others I still feel my father's tight grip
from when I was six surround me.
In his safety I understand I can let go,
know that on days when I am uncertain,
there will be someone on the other side
hands outstretched when I land.

My Closet

After the concussion
there is nothing here
worth telling about.
Too many black dresses
for any occasion.

The Journey with Strangers

Sometimes I need to escape
into the eyes of strangers,
disappear behind pupils
that keep the sun
from burning holes,
the solace of a nest
built behind the fluttering lids
of distance release me.
I stick out my tongue
to catch the tears that fold
into a dozen frozen dreams
and my fears melt in the instant
I step away.

I Am Trying to Birth My Crying

"Thou tellest my wanderings, put thou my tears in Thy bottle; are they not in Thy Book?" Psalm 56:8

I am trying to birth my crying.
It was somehow lost on a cold day
when my children told me
it hurt to hear me sob in the tub
for hours, while holding my lost words
in my hand trying to shovel them
down my throat with water
only to have them slip
back out to drown.
As I floated in this bath
the tepid soapy layers
clamped my worn-out skin in place
while my moans tore paint from walls.
I tried so hard to capture syllables
the ones that seemed to escape
or refused to be ordered
and whispered into night air.

I am trying to birth my crying.
It was somehow lost on a cold day
when my thoughts scattering
on a high-pitched wind
tried to wrap around me
but I could not hold them
any more than a lost love
who has moved to Istanbul
to find his mother,
they are ten-cent pieces
of sentences not quite strung together
to make a complete load.
My shifting metaphors
tire me out, bury the places
where I had last tried to pray.

I am trying to birth my crying.
It was somehow lost on a cold day
when a wall built by my shaking brain
forced my tears into
a Snow White slumber
and my searching kisses
became parched lips.
Their absence drove me to silence.
My heart giving up, lay down
on the cold concrete sidewalk
to be erased by rain.

Do I Need To Remember?

I can't remember my name
I am locked out of this house
that frames me.
I need a carpenter to build
me a new set of memories
because mine seem
to have too many holes.
If you come across any
please hold onto them for me
until we can build a new door.

I can't remember where I put my shoes
I try to dance barefoot but stub my toes
the ones that curl into a painful
sigh when I fold in a yoga bend on them.
It wasn't supposed to be this way.
I am glued to the wall, the music stopped
the violin has found a new home
and I am left as empty as the case left behind,
for the moment until I am shaken lose again wanting to tango.

I can't remember where I left my keys
the ones that keep my heart from breaking
as I run over back roads
that sing as I take their curves
beautiful lines cut through solid rock
where I find myself
between sky and mountain
the long journey to the top
healing as magic coins thrown into a fountain.

I can't remember where I dropped my appetite
an alligator or lioness
must have made off with it
in the middle of the day
when I was trying to chisel small
words onto a page
and didn't notice.
Cranberries and garlic now all taste the same
smell like watermelon and dust.
I can't remember when.

A Drop in the Ocean

Each morning I wake in knots
my stomach, my neck, my thoughts,
everything about me
has become one big sailor's lump
thrown overboard.
Sweat soaks my hairline
I drip into my day,
roll onto my side.
wait for anxiety to pass
wonder how I will make good on my promises
and tomorrow's secrets
as my memory falls behind my desk
and I am once again too worn-out to find it.

The stack of books, the need for deadlines
my job, my writing, my community, my children, my lover
all lines written on my bedroom wall staring me down.
I turn away ashamed at not jumping to their calls
wanting to hide under my makeshift home of covers,
beaten by my own expectations and demands
while my brain, unsure it can carry all that is expected,
runs at its own pace,
as I slowly recognize a delirium
that wasn't here a year ago
trying to keep up with a civilization
that seems to be just scraping by.

My fingers crawl toward my phone
to see who on the outside has messaged me,
a connection to calm whirling thoughts.
I scroll the news, a habit since 9/11
when the earth tipped on its side,
now reinforced by the daily insanity
of an insane world leader,
who I don't trust to keep my
piece of this island peaceful anymore.
As I read I am plunged
into weeping headlines - Massacre at Mosque.
I am pulled as tight as the moment
the gunman squeezes the trigger
and a shoeless stranger kneeling in prayer

rolls into a fetal position
unaware he is taking his last breath.
The sun sets, the gunman moves away
and the whole world is tied hostage
trying to understand what knot in his psyche
drove him to commit this senseless mission.

My anxiety shifts to another room
I get out of bed
make toast and tea,
brush my teeth, answer a text
as though nothing is wrong
pile my books into my bag
realizing that words will carry me only so far
if they are not driven by some truth
found at the bottom of a paragraph
I have read a hundred times
and now I will read
a hundred times more.
The fury of my decision
to act, delve, dive, understand, trust
the universe I now live in, pulls me away
from an edge of compliancy.
I drive alone to work
sure I hear the tears of the planet
drop into the ocean. The knots we tie
around our pinkies to remember
must not break, our scripts
must hold our burdens and dreams
even if we think we might drown.

Beginning

I am uneasy this morning
the rain has settled
for the winter but I am not prepared,
I don't know what lies ahead
and where I will find the fortitude I need
to carry on when the fog overtakes me again.
I look for the strength needed to crawl
back into battle to the silent warriors
buried so long ago they have become stone.
There was no one to dress
their wounds while the trees
were falling around them
engulfed in the flames of war.
They remembered as they lay dying
the touch of a lover or mother
someone who cradled their head
when the world didn't see them
naked and bleeding,
when the truth of battle
was written so deep into their veins
only the hair on their temples
that turned white before their time
showed an outward betrayal of the fear
they marched with every day.
And yet they continued on,
walked away from children
a monument in the distance
to be remembered at family dinners.
I take my place beside them,
knowing this is the time to stand up
against the sun and walk under the trees
always looking for the moment
when I raise my sword, yell at the wind,
I am here now and I won't go down without a good fight.

Sharing the Unknown

I keep in my pocket
a pea size rock
I found hidden on a beach
beneath an upturned giant root
of a tree knocked down
in a violent storm.
I wondered if the tree could not survive
the unexpected knocks of life
how was I going to survive?
I pocketed this nugget
without thinking twice,
a reminder to keep looking
for the treasures beneath the wreckage.
The colour of sand had worn
into its sides, smoothed out the edges
and I knew this was what I needed
when alone at home
and the world seemed so undecided,
a small thing so big
but then so much of what matters is.
I now offer it to you.

Blank Pages

In response to Li-Young Lee, *Behind my eyes*

You left these pages blank
as if you knew I needed room
to spread my thoughts after you.
I cannot imitate you
as our day to day living is so distant,
yet I spread myself, a bird
whose clipped wings
are trying to remember
if it is better to fly
or rest and wait
until the horizon walks over
to greet me, your smile a reminder
that the page can be full of strangers
who are familiar tourists
in my hometown.

On this page you have so kindly left blank
all my bruises are exposed,
I hold my breath while trying to put
down how much each dark spot
pains me still.
I let it lie on paper instead of skin,
peel it from bone
so that the bleeding
that has gone on for years
simply stops.
Hopeful I know there is a chance
to heal or even dance.

On this page you have left blank
I remember things that come out of hiding,
the freedom of holding words
a place of comfort, the bird
drops berries from a great height.
I am bitten by the before and after
while for my children there is only a now.
I want to show them
here on the page
the mystery of coming back,

moving on toward something
none of us can yet see
of finding our sacred place in the sky.

On this blank page you have left
our stories mesh.

My words that won't come
are buried under the mattress
in a dream that you can see.

Two birds circle
my head, crows' feet
ready to tie my knotted curls into
a nest of sacred texts.

Whose texts am I?

You walk narrow hallways
reading the hieroglyphics
I have been scratching
onto these caved walls for days
to make sense of humility
born out of resistance.

Our stories, though different
are the same.

A blank page, a word, a story,
born out of displacement,
injury, healing, gratitude.

Three Times Your Names

In response to *Echoing Voices* by Carl Leggo and Renee Norman

For my Children, Sebastian, Rebecca and Ali

I have never addressed you
formally or acknowledged
how it was we lost our understanding
and then through sheer happenstance
found it again. Irony how these things
come and go.

Three times I neglected
to say your names
or how my trauma
dislodged us.
Now in this memory
there is only thanks.

One. Ali

I never spoke to all of the time
you spent trying to calm me,
recite to me episodes of my own life
so I might piece it back together.
How you gave up your hours
of being a teenager,
climbing trees, chasing boys
and dancing in streets
where I didn't walk
to breathe for me
and I unknowingly leaned on you,
you a hardened concrete fence
needing to stand up
against this hurricane
that fell on us
without any sirens to warn us.
You fed me,
the child who had nursed at my breast
reluctant to let go,
gathering all the nourishment
you would need
all these years later for both of us.

How does a child
become an adult overnight?
You can write the book on that now
it is a recipe boiled through experience
where a hit to the head
reduces everything to a mouthful
of sorrow.
But you never lost hope, only patience
and who can blame you for that.
As the minutes multiplied
reproductive rabbits of memory
in my brain, I began to let go of you
even if I was a bit afraid
that the wobbly gate
could still open and close
without command. You crossed the yard
and I could see the relief on your face
as I could stand without you.

Two. Becca

I rarely called you in my recovery
you were so far away
I didn't want to burden you
but my silence was a bigger burden
then I realized.
The odd exchange of stuttering
sentences lost somewhere
mid-Pacific,
letters and syllables
drowning in the waves
I couldn't beat off
and still I held you
my dark-haired baby
in the cradle of my brain
one of the images intact,
rescued me from the stillness
of injury with the joy of knowing
you were there even in the blanks.
And when you spoke you brought me back
from the edge of uncertainty
held my hand a half a globe away

to tell me I was in your heart
even if I couldn't find mine.

Three. Sebastian

How you have grown finally a body
that matches your size thirteen foot
which at thirteen did not keep pace.
Your soccer game as big as
the ocean of your imagination
and the cheerleading squad of mothers
who had all of your backs,
applauded every time one of you kicked
the ball the wrong way
at six or seven or eight.
And then you cheered me on
when my body wouldn't carry me six feet
or I could not see in a storm of store lights
or bear the noise of daily activity.
You held me up with your kindness
when my brain was too big and foggy
my body too awkward, my head too afraid
of tripping over my own feet.
You in your quiet way surrounded me
with the understanding of one who knows
how hard life can just be sometimes
just for being, even while you were drowning
in the depression of trying to know
how to survive without me.

In My Dying

In response to *terrains* by daniel g. scott

It is in my dying
my children will live.
I have experienced
the letting go too.
When my own mother died
a night vision
three thousand miles away
she moved toward me
and then was gone.
A few days later
in my father's room
in the nursing home
where he and she
spent their last times together
embroiled in her Alzheimer's,
we reminisced of
her ready to hit him with any weapon
at hand, he so bright and full of life
his limbs failing to hold his brain
upright any more,
he could not move fast enough
to get his delicate heart
out of the way of her spiked tongue
while his collapsing body
could barely miss the hairbrush
she tried to strike him with.
Now they were done.
Now when I entered my father's room
I could feel the love
that was always stifled in her wake,
knew with her passing
the joy my father
so desperately tried to keep alive
despite her poison.

Today I am wrapped around my children
as we all have a taste
of this dying, this letting go.
Not the same kind of death

like my mother and father,
buried six feet beneath headstones
that hold rocks from visitors I do not know,

but a spiritual death
a parting of myself from myself
as I linger in a space of nothingness,
lost to myself and them
when my brain stopped
and I became non-functioning.
They search for something
I had bestowed on them in childhood
a word, a poem, a story
or a song sung out of tune,
while they hold our breath
waiting to see if I will return
knowing one day
just like my mother and my father
I will not.

Everything in Reverse

In response to *My Mother Dies in Reverse* by Jacob Scheier

I am always seeking out death
as though I could ward off the inevitable
by running towards it.
I collapse slowly
onto a bed of wet grass
now covered in snowy cherry blossoms.
I can feel everything sink
into rain drenched soil
as a year of contagious worry
simply disappears.

I am finally letting go
as the tears from a heaven
that can't remember why it is crying
soak through a leaky roof.
I am like a dog
waiting patiently to be fed
by a master that one night closed
his eyes and never woke again.
Or the single body trying to keep warm
in a cabin cloistered away on a mountain trail
never used until now,
the fireplace that burns all night long
fueled by the arms that can't carry wood
from the pile two at a time.

Off balance I walk a fine line
while trying to drive in the middle
of a road that seems to have narrowed.
And when people speak it sounds like
they are yelling at me
telling me to forget what they were trying to say
and listen to what they meant instead.
I crave the silence of the grave
where nothing can penetrate
my world
the stillness of death I do not want to come
and in the end as I ride down this road
avoiding oncoming traffic, I understand
what it is to be afraid.

Where I Exist

In response to *Page as Bone - Ink as Blood* by Jonina Kirton

I exist between night and day
where salt becomes wisdom
and wounds swords
laid out at the foot of my bed.
Birds that circle around
in my head, leave droppings
of half laid insights
and I know when I die
I will try to take them with me
even though they should stay behind
and maybe help someone else
more than they help me.
I exist between night and day
a mirrored image of myself
I shift the shards of what
is now no more than a crack
I am not sure how to fill.
I try to push the extra pieces
to the side but they are dribs
and drabs that have ended up
in my pocket, items I count
and want to keep
as though they will fill in the picture
that has collapsed beyond the frame
of what is possible
and I wonder where the buried
parts of myself went missing
from the reflection.
I exist between night and day
the sound of a raven
always buzzing in my head
annoys me, reminding me
there has been no funeral,
just an abbreviation of self
condensed into a living grave
somewhere between death and life.
I find myself buried, and raven laughs
as I begin to dig myself out of the hole.

Our Fathers

In response to *The Father* by Sharon Olds

I cry thinking of my father weeping
his tears a reminder
of how much he missed my mother,
dead ten weeks prior
to him, how he longed for her
needing him, abusing him
berating him, holding his hand,
a complicated kind of love,

I cry thinking of my father gone
childhood memories disappeared
as if torn from a nursery rhyme book
and thrown away.
There is no one left to remind me
of Sunday morning breakfasts
when just the two of us
would eat soft eggs on toast
and talk about the world
beyond our backyard fence.
A world overwhelming to me,
laughable to him.

I cry thinking of my father alone
me on the other side of the country
trying to hold his hand,
the one bruised from an IV
that can't pump life through him
because he has given up.
I want to ask him to stay
but know that is selfish,
his purpose used
I understand he must now walk away.

I cry thinking of my father lost
to my children, no longer there
to hook worms
or to sing the songs from my childhood
the ones I have forgotten.
To carry them on his shoulders
when tiny and to pick up their dreams
and sorrows and store them
in his heart as he did for me.

I cry thinking of my father still
a body where a moment ago
there was a heart,
his ache that swirled around
the vacant halls now silent,
the pink of his lips permanently
stapled to my memory as I kiss
his sunken cheek goodbye.

I cry thinking of my father buried
the daily fog of living
sometimes too much
for my brain to remember
how he walked or how he smiled
and the blueberry buns we shared
a distant smell of summers
now buried too.

I cry thinking of my father
a mainstay on days when my world
has shrunken into a room,
a question, a stolen path,
I ask him how is it on the other side?
He never answers,
perhaps that is answer enough
for me to keep going until my purpose
is used up too.

Somewhere A Woman is Cooking

In response to *Requiem Rwanda* by Laura Apol

I want to take your words and make
them seeds I have planted
but it seems so disrespectful
to the dead who line your pages.
Instead I will cook my own images
speak of love
and what I have known of it
in my own life
and how it eluded me in childhood.

Where I grew up
the pots were full of day-old soup,
the table holding
canned peas never hot, never drained
and steak as hard as cardboard.
I had to ask permission to eat
in case someone else wanted something
and if they did my mother
didn't think twice to whip
a potato or a bun from my plate
for a cousin or an uncle
who all shared the same kitchen.
I shared a bedroom with an auntie
whose red hair was sharper
than the grudge she held against life
for taking her husband too soon.
Her only answer to the mystery
was to smoke and read till two a.m.
while I in my corner,
a silent cocooned warrior,
kept canned spaghetti under the bed
in case there was a moment
to escape this house
I was never welcomed in.

In my best friend Liz's house
her mother, martini in hand,
made beef bourguignon,
fresh salad, always eaten first
on dishes that matched.
We all sat together and talked
about literature, armies around the world

and what university to attend
should we pass math.
They were my refuge
in times when I couldn't
stand on my feet
and needed to crawl away
from the crowding of the world
closing in on my teenage holdings.
They fed me, listened to me
and when needed took me in
as though I had applied for asylum
before I knew there was such a thing.
But like all fairy tales
there is an end
and life catches us when we least expect it.
Liz a young bio-polar adult
took her mix of horror and pain
from a world she didn't know how to feed
walked into the beaver dam near her beloved
Lake Papineau and drowned herself to sleep.
I took years to wake up, to recover.

Having learnt there was more than
one kind of cooking pot
I took to making children
while my husband, the best baker in the family,
always filled the house with turkey,
mincemeat pies and molasses bread
for Thanksgiving and Christmas.
No matter how much or how little
we had our table was abundant
with more meals, some experiments,
than I knew existed as a child.
Wishbones, storybooks
and games and puzzles
on Christmas eve
and my handiwork
of burnt sugar cookies
were my children's menu.
We learnt together that time was important
and food while enjoyed
was a means to sharing our souls.

Then one day, long after
my husband and I parted ways,
while I tried to sustain us alone

went back to school, worked three jobs
cooked three meals in one
for three children with different dietary needs
on a budget almost nonexistent,
I lost my ability to eat.
A blow to my head
and a wall came tumbling down
making everything taste
as though it had been processed
through a perfume factory
overdone. I could not spoon feed
another ounce of anything
except grapes and mandarins
down my own throat.
Neighbours, friends, and community
brought meals, care and the words
I couldn't speak.
Twenty-five pounds less
I understood my pots were empty,
my life stagnant, stopped by an injury
which made cooking
useless, tiresome, impossible.

Now, four years have passed
and I still don't know what to eat.
Some days I find I can't eat enough
others nothing at all
and all I want is to fill my pages
with the lessons I have learnt
of how to find nutrition
when your stomach turns on you,
to take the love around you
to keep you marching,
to hold someone's hand
when you are too weak
to go on through another day.
Sit at the table with them
a minute at a time
until you are strong enough
to endure an hour, then two
and finally, the conversation
isn't focused around you
and what you lost but around them
and what you have gained.

Didn't

In response to *Dear Current Occupant* by Chelene Knight

I don't remember feeling connected
to home or owning a dog either
instead living with an aunt
who insisted she was deathly allergic
even to the suggestion
of my bringing an animal
into the bedroom we shared.
Then, without anyone's knowledge
I adopted a neighbourhood dog
I called Lucky who lived
somewhere around the corner
I couldn't see.
Every day he came up for his pet and hug
until one day he just didn't.

That has been the way of the world in my life
the just didn't's that I can't control.
My mother who just didn't love me enough
because I just didn't have straight hair
that was beautiful the way she always imagined
or the desire to gossip and laugh at others
the way she did when they weren't looking.
I just didn't have what a daughter should
or wear what a daughter should wear
or be what a daughter should be to be loved.

Suddenly after a life of words
I didn't have them in me
after a MTBI stole them
a word thief in the middle of a busy market.
My life whirling around me
I came to a stop
and I didn't have the ability
to eat, to walk, to know your name.
I didn't have the word for stove
and didn't know when
I left my keys in the door
I didn't write, read,
or listen to you all at once.
I didn't, didn't, didn't, just didn't,
know how to go on
as an individual recovering

from the side effects
of this latest story
and at times I just didn't want to go on
just didn't want to keep trying
didn't remember how it all worked.

Then slowly the didn't began to shift
and became a don't.
Don't want to eat that,
don't want to go there, don't want to hurt
until finally I found the t became an e
and the don't was suddenly a done.
I was done with all of this
I was done not wanting to be done
I was done not getting on a bus
I was done not eating. I was done not sleeping.
As the done became a could
and I could rest my head on the window
of a bus headed to see my lover,
I could sit in a movie theatre,
I could roll over in bed after a good night's sleep
with no buzzing in my brain.
I didn't need the didn't couldn't or can't because
I had the does, could and cans all wrapped up
together in a wave.

Trying to Find Beauty Once Again

In response to *Lunch in a Nablus City Park* by Naomi Shihab Nye

Every child has a pocket
full of lost streets.
They collect them
just like Greek gods
collect mortals
or grandmas collect
china cups displayed
and dusty but oh so loved.

I remember when I was a child
summer days spent
under the lilac tree
in our backyard,
imagining a home
laid out under bluebells
and lilies of the valley,
tiny chairs made of wood chips
inviting me like the Friendly Giant did
to come home and rest.
Hours spent with an imaginary sister,
sipping tea with sugar cookies
sharing secrets, the kind I could
tell only her.
At the end of the day
when I was called for dinner
she disappeared taking our stories
to wait on another street
until I could come out again and play.

On other days when laughter
was as light as a newborn's
I would watch the sunset from
the sidewalk while all the neighborhood
kids played dodge ball and hooted
cheering on each other's teams.
When the call came
for everyone to return home
we scattered, a mess of bruised knees
and tired limbs
ready for bed, it was dark
as the street went to sleep.

Today when
my worries are as heavy
as a century of fathers' woes
I stand at the
sandblasted curbside
watch my children play
as I once did,
wonder how their stories
will line my pockets
until I can find mine again.
Every child holds all the lost streets
in their pockets, the ones
I used to have in mine as well.

We Can't Lose

In response to *A Head Like Hers* by Anne Simpson

From *The Bright Well/ Contemporary Canadian Poems about Facing Cancer*

Edited By Fiona Tinwei Lam

I lost my hair too. First in clumps
as I brushed it into something neater
than the wildness it took on
in the mornings before being fed.
It's the healing process, one doctor said
as I shook my head, trying to contain
my frustration and fear.
And another, *premature balding, hereditary*,
as though my mother planned it this way
this final irony her last attack from the grave.
It took me fifty years
to get to a place of loving my locks,
to appreciate the curls my father
passed along with poetry
and a love for scrambled eggs.
I desperately wanted to keep the bounce
my mother tried so hard
to burn out of me with curlers
and straightening solution
and dark looks that could scare
any hair enough to flatten,
could fill an Egyptian mummy's
sphinx heart with sadness.
I wrap and twist around each follicle
to protect them, watch helpless
as they continue to fall into the river,
a place I cannot go to rescue them.
I unload my shattered brain
that has damaged all of me
even in healing and think how kings
had their brains sucked out
through tiny straw-like tools
to be placed in a box beside eyes
and veins and a heart for eternity
or the cancer patient who loses
breasts and eye sockets
and somehow then losing a few strands of hair
this time doesn't seem so bad
when I imagine losing so much

Shifting

Please note poems in this section are deliberately left in their raw form with spelling mistakes as this is how they were written after a concussion. Where there are a few versions of a poem this is to show my attempts at trying to make them better while still concussed.

When the Door Closes

It isn't easy to ignore
the sound of a door closing.
It could be a riddle
found on the side of a mountain
where monks break bread
and single out the sound of a ram
far off, as a sign that God heard
their morning vespers,
only they were not singing.
They were telling jokes silently
to cave walls, or so I imagine.

It isn't easy to ignore
the sound of a door closing.
It is shut against the heavy rain
that beats the ground into submission
where too many footprints
are now lost
in this driving force wind.
I hear the locals smashing glass
to keep the lightning away,
an old tradition someone's grandma
passed along, or so I imagine.

It isn't easy to ignore
the sound of a door closing.
A sleepy brain sits in the corner
watches people crossing streets
from behind walls, a werewolf
it is waiting for daylight
to change it back
to something recognizable,
something sustainable, or so I imagine.

It isn't easy to ignore
the sound of a door closing.
Or so I imagine.

The Here and Now of Today

I have been dropping things again
Words, computers, carrots,
Blood.

In my **defense**
I cut my finger
and watched it bleed all over the carrot.
Why not.
There is nothing else to do.

Light hurts
b\eyes **cry**
brian on fire
swiss Germany \\bright screen
lights off.

soemoe stops the pain
I once had a zoo
Rebuild and redo
Hahahaha
I need sleep.

Dartdartdat
One million awards
2009 english surpassed
1 million unique words.

Lost
Found
Dogs
Home
Distant
Revive
So
I have been dropping things again.

The Here and now of today rewritten

I have been dropping things again
words, computers, carrots,
blood.
In my defense
I cut my finger
 watched it bleed
all over the carrot.
Why not?
There is nothing else to do.

Light hurts
my eyes
on fire, my brain cries
the bright screen
turn lights off.
 Stop the pain.
I have to rebuild
and redo everything,
I need sleep.
One million unique words
carved into silence
I really don't know how to be
in the world anymore.
 Watching 4,6,10 emails
download onto my iPad.
I feel as forgotten
as the 3,000 still to go.
The clock says 4:57
my daughter now in India
has no idea what time is here.
All I can think about
 is the monastery she visits
where it is quiet
all of the time
and I know I will go there.
There is a man
who like my daughter
rides whales into the harbour
for safety
 he has lost words too
looks for healing
like me, in the water
breathe I tell him just breathe.

Another Attempt

All I **carve** is hte **silence**
of my room
I really don't know how to be in the **world**
Anymore
I am **watching** 4,6,10 emails
Download onto my Ipad.

I **feel** as **forgotten** as the 3,000 still to go
The clock on my Pad as 4:57
I Am ripe\ it is actually 11 am

my **daughter** now in India
has no idea what time is here
I don't know how I will get through all of this.
It is a mess.

And all I can think about is a monastery
Wghere it is quiet all of the time
There is a man who **rides** whales in to the harbour
for **safety** and has lost words too
he wants **to heal** the water is warm
breath I tell him just braetehe.

I will begin.

I breathe in the fear
that I will never write again
that my innards will be exposed
that my words etherized
just like Elliot's reduced,
breath into the heart
that I will never write again.
an injury
that knocked her over
so she no longer can
this page her pen too short to reach
the words that hide inside
fit her bodies.

I breathe into the fear
that I will never write again
when my brain becomes so full
I want to take a f/run
and let seething that clogs it run
over my black dress
so I can stop it and all I am left with
is a black clean slate.

I breathe into the fear
that I may never write again
because all I long for is silence.
She runs away from thought
and sound
to not even sway
as she lies in bed beside a lover
Who holds stillness.

I breathe into the fear
that I may never write again
Something of significance
that makes sense.
That is small and large
and beautiful and gentle
That defies pain that cares and defeats me
I am a crusty sea again ripe for feeling
enough time on this page
Good night words thoughts time
she has left I beat my fear into words.

Breathe

I breathe into the fear
that I will never write again,
that my innards will be exposed,
that my words be etherized
just like Elliot's.

I breathe into the fear
that I will never write again,
an injury that knocked me over,
this page too short to reach
the words hide inside a body.

I breathe into the fear
that I will never write again,
when my brain becomes so full
seething at what clogs it,
the black dress of mourning all that is left.

I breathe into the fear
that I am may never write again,
all I long for is silence,
no thought or sound,
only my lover who holds me still.

I breathe, fear gone
I write again,
something of significance
that defies this pain
defeats this page.

What about Anger

I am so angry
I could hit a tornado.
I am so angry
I ould pull your life support plug.
I am so angry
I want to reserect my dead aunt
the one no one liked
and make her dance
on arthetic bones
that didn't hold her up when she was alive.
I am so angry
I wwnat to punish someone
Maybe Godd.
I am so angry I want to sit in a bath
Until my wrinkled skin wrinkles more.
I am so angry
I want to yhell at someone
pull the hair that is faling out of my head out moer
And make a wig to show the woman that said
being hit in the head by a basketball
can't make this all happen again
ti happened to me.
I am so cnagry to day
So andry so andry so dagry.

On fear

I want to thank you
for all the things
that you have done in the last year
your determination to
overcome
has left me knowing I am ok
I will be ok.
The fact you have gone on
get up everyday
without him
that you have thrown out
recipes in order that you
can give yourself space
to fill the oven with new smells
has made me feel as though
I can live again.
That I don't have to worry
that I don't have to worry
there is a box in the car
that needs to be unpacked.
Or that because I can't think in ways
that I used to I am gone.
It has helped me to get over the fear
of loss
of loss of my thinking
of loss of my writing
and doing my phd
maybe I am not too
afraid to write creatively again.

**Found Poem from Cognitive Remediation for Brain Injury
and Neurological Illness (Read only Highlighted text for poem)**

Divided Attention

Multitasking is evaluated on Auditory Consonant Trigrams, Digit Span
Backwards,
and Spatial Span **Backwards**.

Input is auditory for Trigrams and Digits

Backward and visual for Spatial Span Backwards.

Output is verbal for Trigrams

and Digits but motoric for **Spatial Span**

Trigrams **requires the patient to remember**

three-letter combinations while

counting **backwards by threes**

from **designated numbers**. The **amount of time** that

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the individual has to multitask **is varied** over three time periods.

Each three-letter

combination is accompanied by a designated number

from which **the subject must**

count backwards by threes and by a delay period

that must elapse before having to

repeat the trigram (9, 18, or 36 seconds).

Digits Backwards involves holding the digits in mind while trying to repeat
them in **reverse order**.

I Hurt

I hurt
mY head hurts
Everything hurts
I wish I could crawl waya and not bee
Seen
It all hurts just enough to be sitting there
Behind my lap top;
And yet I know
when I don't hurt
there is denial going on
I crawl around in this mess and I hurt
I want to give up to say to hell with it
It hurts to try it hrts too noy to give up;
Is this familar I don't know
I do t want the world to see e
See e like thi
I don't want the world to see e
See me like this
I dont want the worl to see me
m e like this
I don't want the world to see e
See me like this
I dontw want the world to see me
E like this see elike this. See e
At all
I don't want
To bee seen like this
I don't want to be seen
Like this
At all.

I don't know

I don't know how to live this life anymore
A good daya bad da
A good day a bad day
That seems to be the way it goes

But didn't do but did did did did did did did did did did did did did did did did
did did did did did D but but dick dick but but did did did but but do you do a bug
to do but Aruba Aruba but death but Debra but but but a BDDDD but the DD

The better a bit but I did but the iPad but but that I did did did did did

Moving the Fear

I can walk away now
only because the cave door
has swung open.
I hear distant drumming
calling me.

This Journey

This journey has been hard fought
and yet,
here I am having crawled
up a mountain side
chasing the sun.

I saw a video of a baby bear
terrified as it slid half way down
a snow-covered rock face,
its mother pacing at the top
anxiously waiting for it to reach her,
unable to crawl to its side and push
it up, aware instinctually
that would be an avalanche
created by her impatience.

The outside world has seemed
insurmountable at times,
a mountain covered in ice
as I continued a downward slide,
always looking skyward
where my children and friends
waited at the top
afraid to push me off the cliff
or worse bury me
by simply taking the wrong step.
I couldn't hold on at times
as words and possibilities
were lost to me each
and my head seemed full of nothing
but dead air and buzzing.

Determined to get there
I risked everything
I will risk every thing
I won't risk anything
I won't risk any thing
I won't risk
I will risk
I risk.

These are now the decisions
I live with daily
The I always at the front
Pushing me to keep
climbing
sometimes impossibly staying
at my side telling me it is ok
to skip, to stop, to be tired.
At others telling me to get a move on.

The pacing mother bear at the top
can't rest until the cub
finally arrives safely by her side
and when it gets there she just
turns and walks away
expecting it to follow
as though she knew it could
always do it.
No rest, no looking back.
But I wonder if its heart is racing
and secretly she is heading for home
to be free of any more dangers.
I take my cue from her
keep moving knowing that I too will
find safety of home again
when my body and mind
are no longer traumatized
by the world that seems daily
like a mountain slope and this journey
that has been hard fought has been won,
when I sit at the top look back and breathe.

Lost in Tears

My brain still cries
when a door-stopper moment
pulled from my solar plexus
lines the clouds.
Torn and futile
the rain wraps my head
in a bandage of tears and fog.

My brain still cries
when I can't close
the hotel door on a room I didn't book.
The crashing of heads bounces
from wall to wall
as I am stuck listening
to this memory that can't be escaped.

My brain still cries
a bullet that becomes immobile
hits a stone wall
with a trajectory wobbly at best.
My aim off center
I am now the target, off balance
I have given myself away.

My brain still cries
my children try to help
but I have left the key
in some restaurant
and they don't know
how to unlock the life
I once held together for us.
My brain still cries.

Birth

I am positioned between two breaths
one living and one dying,
as though the thought
makes life more real.

The death of me being breathed into existence
a hot day at noon when my mother screamed
for them to bring her some lunch,
she had worked hard
and was as starving as I.
Yet, I cried my way past her,
lips searching for nipples
that were hidden behind
a gown weighed down with the
attention of being something else.

That was how it was to be
from then on in,
my mother ignoring my calls
and me always searching.

Breathing becoming
the only thing that was real
the only thing keeping peace
between the living and the dead,
a connection in the act of defiance
and the room where they co-exist
too full of air to leave space to breathe.

Disappearing Act

I used to be a poet.
I twirled metaphors
on my fingertips
the way a fire spinner
tosses flames
into the night sky.
A cobra of words tightening
around my chest
I spit them onto the page
releasing beauty, heartache,
tragedy, blood and bones
from my core
until I was dry.

Now I am empty.
Devoid of words,
I have fallen into a fog
in search of the stories
that make up who I am.
Wanting to share something
of significance with the world
from my walk in life
but all I have is my imagination
to fall back on
and its tiny repertoire
of humdrum escapades
repeated and repeated and repeated.

One-dimensional
just a face in a crowd,
in a line up,
an airport, hospital room,
or at home alone,
some days
I just slide right out
of the script, unnoticed altogether.

Letting Go

A month ago
on a sunny October day
when the leaves lay a brilliant
red path from the parking lot
to the hospital door,
on the fourth floor
in palliative care
I held Maggie's hand
and we locked eyes
as though she could bury
a piece of herself inside me
for eternity.
When I let go the room
shuttered without ever a word.

Forty of us gathered
one last time,
an invitation,
a celebration,
a longing
to keep the spirit
bolstered
just for a few moments
more than the second of a last breath.

Later on the street
she could not see
or fall on with knees
in prayer,
I wondered
if when the presence
of a million smiles had worn off
and she said yes
to the final injection,
if I would be eating
a peanut butter sandwich
or rewriting this poem
thinking how I would miss her
and grateful how this time I had escaped.

I have died a small death
negotiated with it daily
all the time knowing
I could still shift
in a new shirt
try to get comfortable
in the lines that don't quite
fit my body, thinking if I move slower
no one will notice my discomfort.
I wonder if Maggie held onto the lines
that she couldn't wear anymore, as well,
until the end or if she had simply let go
with my hand.

The morning dew,
the rain on my shoes
and the piles of crap
I must shift through
to get a single line
of any significance out,
that is like breathing.

The pain of shifting
of looking and lifting
through the Thesaurus
searching for the perfect word
for moonlight, for ballgame,
for the silent lover never heard
that is like breathing.

There is no question
that I will do it
no doubt that the words
will come and fit me
like a river of tears,
or smiles, heartache
and fears
that is like breathing.

My metaphors and similes
all in line
chest heaves
the burden of rhyme
loss of rhetoric
loss of time
of now and then
and then some,
that is like breathing.

All of the Stars in the Sky

On the MRI table
space reels around me
while black holes
suck my cognitive
abilities from me.
I am supposed to wait.
A 30 second break
then a voice announces
the next one will be three minutes
and the clang of the machine
penetrates its way through
my tight still body.
The big bang explodes inside
my head as I erupt
on the table.

Thirty minutes later
and I can't talk without stuttering,
walk a straight line
or bear the light of the computer screen.
I cry every time
I have to be in the world again,
scream at the night
for not coming fast enough
and when it does arrive
I can't seem to look up
and find the stars.

Frustration becomes my companion
as I try to drive
and the left-hand lane is now
a shark tank
I can't crawl out of.
Street traffic, passing ambulances
and birds chirping
bring tears to my eyes.
I know I should take a rest
from life instead of trying to beat it.

Dreams

Dreams are full of people
I haven't seen in years
or are dead.
I ask them the questions
I can't ask anyone when I am awake
because my stuttering
makes it impossible to understand me,
questions that seem important in sleep.
How many muscles
hold up our arms when we are trying
to fly to heaven?
Which way is east when
you are sitting on an island
that has no sunset?
And who catches my tears
when I can't sing anymore?
They do not answer
but are having conversations
amongst themselves.
I wait for them to notice me
and when they do
they take my hand and point to the sky.

When I wake it is still dark.
I get up to look outside.
It is clear and the sky is full
of the stars of my dreams.
I remember then that
I can always go back to sleep,
ask more questions
and when I stir
look to the sky for answers,
find myself in the stars.

Toronto March 2019

“An entire past comes to dwell in a new house”
Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space*, 1958

There is no one I know left
in my childhood home.
The front door is different,
the garden is different,
the windows have all been changed.
It is all so very different
and so am I.

I realize no matter how small my world had become after my head injury it could never be smaller than my world when I was growing up on Burnside Drive in Toronto. It is in this moment that I understand that this is all about perspective. I understand that while I lost all ability to do anything for myself and to be out in the world after my MTBI, when I was a small child and even up into my young adult years, I never really believed I belonged or fit into the outside world at all. My childhood was a tragic poem locked between walls of discomfort, my mother's mental illness and my father's loving laughter. There were few places for wonderment, yet there were many places to hide. My mother afraid of the world made me afraid of it as well. She kept the curtains drawn all of the time, fearful someone might see in and know when the house was empty. It never was. She saw threats everywhere. Worse than this, for me, was that my mother saw me as an eyesore and as such I came to see myself in this way as well. I too feared the outside world but not for fear of being robbed but for fear of being seen, made fun of or worse, driven away the way my mother pushed me aside all of the time. I needed to hide the fact from the world that above all else, I was unlovable as I learned from her from my first cry. I learnt at a young age to keep silent and to pretend to the rest of the world that everything was ok. I spent a good portion of my life trying to shake the subtext that silence held and find a place

where I was ok in telling the stories in order not to relive them with my own children. I needed to find and remember that in the darkness there was also light. My father, the constant gardener for my brother and I, loved us unconditionally, something my mother just was not capable of. Now I had come home to be reminded of that light so I could give it to myself. Everything comes rushing back and while it makes sense, seems strange, disquieting and uncomfortable while familiar.

Not being in the community that Carl had brought together during his memorial made me feel alone and more isolated than I had been at times with my concussions. Being in Toronto, a place I still in so many ways considered home up until that point, was a mixed blessing. I went back to Toronto to write about coming home but I realized as I stood there, looking at the house where I grew up, that while so much was the same so much had also changed. The door, the entrance into the house of my childhood had been replaced. I tried to imagine what lay beyond that door, what treasure, if any, I could find in this place that was no longer mine. This space held memories, childhood reserves, riches, wishes, dreams and nightmares. This is where my life began. The mere fact I could be here at all was something I needed to take note of. I survived living in a house that at times was a prison in itself. Yet, here I was having survived being trapped inside my head which at times was even worse than the horror of my youth. I took a deep breath and realized, I had survived it all.

The shell of the house as I knew it still stands. While there is a new door and there are new occupants, the secrets of my past are held only in the walls and heard only by those who carry them. Now, after living with remembering little of my life from before my brain injury for so long, I want to experience it all. After existing outside of the world not by choice or fear but pure accident, I choose to be engaged totally. I bring the door literally into this work, through

pictures, a showcase of something that is a bookmark of a place that held such significance – the opening into these spaces where as a child that I found the gift of living poetically, even though I didn't know that was what I was doing at the time. I resided in my imagination, started writing when I was 13 and so I survived. Now, I can remember this life, let it flood my plains and find the purpose in my remembering. Strong, rooted and solid, my being, just like that house, still stands despite the hits to the head. While each blow changes me in some form, this all adds to the beauty, shifts the inner workings that you can't see and makes me who I am now. My way of being may be different, but my love of life has only grown. I am strong and despite my not knowing how strong I was then, I see now that while I could be knocked down and changed, I am still standing. I was rooted in myself and though I did not know it then the deficiencies of my youth became the strengths which saw me through the worst of times and allowed me to find the patience with myself in order to heal from all of my MTBIs. This is the joy in unearthing the past in order to move forward.

Just Gone

The door is gone.
Carl is gone.
My mom and dad are gone.
Sometimes the movement
or feeling on my left side
is just gone.

There are so Many Things I Used to Know

This is where I live
between the lines
a placeholder that marks
something I used to know.

There are so many things I used to know.
How to dip chips into avocado dip
without dripping lime green
spots on my lap
and how to dance
without stepping on my partner's toes
but now we both wear the same size shoe
mine having grown
each time I trip and stub them.

There are so many things I used to know.
I used to make children laugh with stories
that held a hidden moral,
subtle and funny, the purple dinosaur
always finding its home,
but now my stories
are too slow and the door
to home is permanently swollen shut.
The heat of summer
stiffens the insides of my head,
an old building that won't sit still
it bends slowly to the right,
a monument to what once was,
what can't be seen.

There are so many things I used to know.
How to dodge a ball
when I was six,
my feet flying
across a darkening street
as my friends collided, desperately
trying to get out of the way
of the approaching night
that I no longer could avoid.
Now all streets seem dark
as I search for something familiar
something to smooth out the edges
of the concrete settling on memory.

There are so many things I used to know.
How to dream of flying,
imaging that I could reach the top
of my neighbour's house
to the point where lightening burnt a hole,
I and God the only ones
that could reach through
to the earth from heaven.
But now I am only an old bird
wanting to fly home, the nest is gone,
the door has changed, my key doesn't fit
the waters have moved and I wait, hoping
that the many things I used to know
will surface again between sidewalk cracks
between the waiting, the wanting, the wondering,
the thinking, the silence, the buzzing,
the dreaming, and listening and wondering
and oh, did I say
there are so many things I used to know,
there are so many things I used to know,
there are so many things.

Reflexivity

There is a sour taste in my mouth
from the blackberry, I rinse it away with a grape
almost big enough to be a prune,
sweet enough to send a diabetic into shock.
The juice wakens the buds
recovering from the acrid stabbings.
I want to say you no longer sour me
but I haven't fully recovered yet
and the sweetness of friends and my children,
my dog snuggled in bed with me,
my brain running wild with ideas and stories
I thought I forget how to access,
isn't quite enough to bring me to rest.

These tales laid out a few at a time
make no sense, I taste them,
steal a bit of the horror
that touched me, connect the dots
over and over again, always settling back
to you trying to form a life for us without me
and I almost stood by and let it happen
in my need to fill the void.

On Sundays there is still a vacuum
it rests in my belly
surrounds me, a preying wolf
that won't give up.
I am locked into the isolation of childhood
filled with that space of longing
the empty pain that follows me around
like a puppy you can't push away.
At thirteen I left home,
sleeping on my best friend's
bedroom floor every night,
the perfect silent child
never noticed in a hope not to be asked to leave.
I have been invisible all my life
a force of wind that brushes up the side of a tree
that can be felt but never seen.
Thunderclaps a hundred miles away
which rattles bones but never materializes into a storm.
A teardrop never shed, a journey never taken,
a soul never rendered fit to fill the heart
of another, a woman still waiting for someone's hand.

Today I reached out
and touched the wick of a candle
trying to burn a memory,
it was hot and all I singed
was the fingerprint from my index finger.
I understand how easy it is
for our identity to get lost
when we are wavering in a concrete jungle,
wounded, our hearts are stolen
when we keep too many secrets in our pockets
or forget to tie loose ends together.

Stories reveal the truths seen in waves,
others whole pictures.
I see self everywhere and tie
the ends into a perfect storm.
I long for clouds to bring meaning
back to the blank landscape
to shed light
on the steps I took to get to this place
where the whispers of the distant storm tell me,
be happy, be happy be happy, and I am.

Coming Home

I never thought much about it before
the coming home to self
where it starts and ends and why
but then all of this happened
and now I think about it all the time.
Time, a stopping of time.
The flowing of life
held so tight to the scalp
a marker between myself
and the outside world.
The temple, where blood flows
through veins, where the aging process
first appears, a white hair at a time,
for most people. Not for me.

I found my first grey hair at thirteen
just as my father predicted.
Don't pull it out, he warned.
You will get three more in its place.
Ignoring all the signs, I pulled.
Come what may.
The changing tides of body
that happen when external forces
impact the regular flow of rhythms
as ancient as the mountains
I now stare at.

For all of it my father
could not have predicted this.
There was no old wives' tale
to warn against how a hit to the head
could turn the world upside down
and the internal wheels of my clock
would just stop.
Nothing to tell me that if I
sat upside down for two hours
everything would be righted
or that if I ate smoked herring
for three days straight
my appetite would come back.
I was on my own to navigate
through these changing tides.

My dad and the universe had no way
of predicting the unpredictable.
No way of stopping the random hurt
of a world that takes you away
from your temporal self
with one swift blow.
I climb to the summit
to see if I can still do this
listen as my heart quickens
knowing if I make it to the top
this time, it is just a tiny step
towards coming home.

Places of Childhood

I remember in summer
willowy tree branches a blanket
protecting me from the midday sun,
backyard dreams of my mother
holding me, as I looked up
trying to find her eyes
white light clouds drifting away.

I remember handcrafting a home
tiny furnishings made from match sticks,
placed delicately under stems
of flowers that grew in clumps
behind the plum tree
that gave up baring fruit
long before we came.

I remember the maple tree
that graced our front yard
a friend I could hug
when there was no one else
to console me for being last
in hide and seek in a life
made up of hiding and seeking.

I remember in the fall
golden, red and orange leaves
that stuck to my oversized sweaters
passed down from some relative.
I buried myself in the scent of seasons
changing, always hoping the coolness
inside the house to dissipate, it never altered.
In winter drawing a barren trunk,
trying to capture something
of its sadness, a reflection
of my own feelings of isolation
as the gloomy sky
threatened to darken the room
I shared with my auntie
after her husband passed away,
her red hair flaming at a world
she felt unjustly disassembled her life.

I remember new sprouts in spring
green buds on bushes ready to burst.
The smell of a passing storm
lingering in the air,
thunderbolts now a million miles away
less threatening.
We all breathe a sigh of relief
as storms pass
and we are left untouched.

I remember tripping over
magnificent roots
buried so deep nothing even in sleep
could move them.
I dig into the ground
entwine myself in the submerged history,
take away moist masses of strength
a childhood of hardness has given me
to soften life's blows.

I remember the first Christmas
after my head was smashed
wanting to hide from lights
and noise and the fear
of being held hostage
by a brain unravelling, irreverent,
I found sketches of a memory
the lonely winter days of childhood
when the sun hardly shone
and the house silent waited in anticipation.

I remember the first time I walked outside
head aching, blindness from light,
the smell of fall crisp in my nostrils
the longing to hold on to something
to keep me upright
digging deep into the roots
I planted long ago
to carry me when the walking
was too painful to bare
so I can find that strength to go on.

Old Streets

There are old streets in my head
they line my memories
cobblestone pavements to a past
that sometimes I think is better left unaddressed.
But who can turn their back on beauty
even in the ugly parts of a city
that creaks with ancient pain.

When I was little the streets
were my salvation
an escape into adventure
and love that were not mine.
I could climb walls easily
jump out of trees and land upright
everywhere my imagination ventured.
I was a success, gleaming with stardust
my long brownish-red curls flowing
to the ground where I was queen.

Then when the streetlights dimmed
and the call of mothers emptied
the streets where I thrived
I reluctantly went home.
The dark of night hiding my lonely heart
the words of punishment for existing
the only blanket I found.
The glares and flashes of anger
that welcomed me as I came
through the door a stiff reminder that words
can be as damaging as a slap to the face.

Today as I venture out
into a world I find the fuel of hatred
that nested in my mother's heart
a reminder how to be courageous
when the odds seem impossible.
A reminder to keep climbing buildings when
the walls are higher than your reach,
and to love more than anyone else
even those who hate you
because sometimes that is all you have
and it is in the end likely all they have as well.



Figure 3: The Door of Burnside Drive



Figure 4: The Door of Burnside Drive

Discovery

My eyes turn
to the neighbours' back porch
where an old 1920's bicycle wheel
is jammed between the rail and roof.
Someone has come out
to smoke and it reminds me
of my youth in Toronto
where everyone smoked on porches.
My grandfather who lived to 94
smoked stogies every evening
after a shot of whiskey.
Just one of each religiously.
I remember him at family picnics
High Park on a Sunday afternoon
with burgers and cousins playing ball.
Center Island, a paradise
with swans and geese
and I can hear the calls
of all the children to their parents
for another ride while my mother
grabs me away afraid I might fall out
of the pink swan into the water. She can't swim.

Chinatown and the University district
where the heat swelters along streetcar tracks
beating out a rhythm of humidity
that makes baby's breath disappear.
On weekends my husband and I
touring the city by foot,
walking 10k across town
in search of tiny snacks
to feed us between conversations,
never noticing the kilometers clicking by.
Now I wonder how it is these
memories escape when I can't remember
to take keys from the door at night
or if I paid my phone bill this month.
Was it an hour ago I said I would visit you
or an hour from now.
I am sitting in the cargo-hold
of these memories trying to shake off the terror
of sinking in the present.

Findings

In the quiet I find gemstones,
small pieces of precious material
I mold into beautiful stories,
moments created by a force
bigger than myself.
They are fiction and reality
melded over time,
each informing the other
of the importance of story.
I find myself in each,
understand that sometimes
it is not the medium but the meaning
that is important.
Sometimes they are one and the same.

When I was young
my mother told me I was unlovable
and I believed her for a long time
even though my father
always told me otherwise,
his voice was drowned out
by her sour melodies.
Tonight as I lay thinking
of the years she and I
spent battling our words
between the impossible and the hurt,
I realize that she was the one
who was unlovable, not because she was
but because she believed she was,
and in turn believed this of me.

Today I weave
her truths and tales
into my own, as I catch my father's
heart in my glove,
I see how they blend
to make a sunrise
instead of a sunset
and I hold the words
that she couldn't find for herself
in the sky for all of us.
I hope even in death they both know
I understand how to find kisses in the fog.

**The Mars Restaurant, College Street,
Toronto March 26th 2019**

Nothing changes
The booths, the counter
the same floor, with 30-year-old
grit in the cracks
between silver rim and aluminum flooring.
Has it been that long since
the night we charbroiled
the thanksgiving turkey dinner
then wandered our way up Markham
to College Street to this place,
a few old neighbourhood acquaintances lining the stools
with tomato and bacon or hot hamburger sandwiches
a grim substitute for what we all really wanted.
But then what did we know of wanting back then?
A dry bed, a cooked meal,
waking on each other's pillows.
Canadian bacon on sabbath Saturdays
and cream cheese with lox on Christmas mornings.
We were mixed up then as we are mixed up now.

**Markham Street,
Toronto March 6th 2019**

Coming home to Markham Street
to this second and third floor walk up
memories flood through gates that have been closed
for at least a dozen or more years.
A goldfish I mistakenly left by the window,
accidently cooked.
Senseless arguments over old wounds
that others inflicted and the worry
of money we didn't have all washed away
as the street cleaners passed by our bedroom window
on rainy Sunday summer mornings.
The sound of Mrs. Barbara
singing while roasting peppers
on her gas stove hidden in the basement
and the thought of the possibility
of our future children
passing like a cartoon signature
through our sleepy bedtime talk.

The house still rests
on the cracked Toronto street
our sleepy hands
no longer pull blinds
on the second floor.
Strangers control the window's height
and I stand here admiring
how little has changed
and everything has come and gone.
Dreams of taking on the world,
owning a couch, a washing machine,
and maybe someday having a hamster
to be fed by our little boy or girl
it didn't matter, have all come true.
Wishes on a coin
we both flipped have disappeared beneath a swirling
sewage grate full of too many hurts
that we couldn't wash away.

I turn from the bricked building
head back to the Mars
for a final night coffee
that will no doubt keep me awake.
But before I go steal a marigold petal from the yard

remembering how we promised to plant them
when our first child was born. Somewhere between
the burnt turkey and freezer burn we forgot to.
I make a note to self
to buy seeds when I get home to Vancouver.
Take pictures, post them on face book
so I don't forget that dreams can still come true.

Warriors

Don't remind me to breath
I won't remind you to cry.
I wish I could show you my true eye.
The space in my retina
where the doctor has blown cold air
every six months, blinding me momentarily
a split second when I see you more clearly
than the massive abrasion that has healed.

Don't remind me to breath
I won't remind you to cry.
We are yellow dysentery marks
squeezed from a plastic container
which never dissolves on the playground floor.
We have become a garbage dump
of forgotten dreams amassed over years,
our words won't twist around thumbs anymore.
The most I can do is to try to hold you captive
everything else shrinking in your field of vision.

Don't remind me to breath
I won't remind you to cry.
How many breaths have we each left behind
on a field someone else has sown,
alarmed by the weariness worn
in a porcelain glass doll's heart
sitting too long in an antique store window
or that of a farmer's anticipation
of a crop that never yields.
Are we done waiting for rescue?

Don't remind me to breathe
I won't remind you to cry.
We are nothing but two hollow brains
barely functioning on a page
that holds meaning only
in a wildly northern lit sky
where we inhale, knowing
the distance of the battleground
as the blackness between stars.
No one ever wins, but still we try.

Different

I used to have roots here
The maple tree in the front yard is gone.
If I dig down far enough
will I find something of it
still here?

Toronto Streets, March 2019

Teresa roamed Toronto neighbourhoods with me,
looking for all the houses I lived in,
never asked questions
knew who I was before and after
we lived together with Bob the musician,
before husbands, wives, couches
and children, suburbs, other countries
hamsters and hits to the head and heart
pulled us away from our downtown two story walk up.
Now she rings the bell, tries to get in
to see if the acme gas stove is still there
or the skid we covered with an old wine table cloth
when company arrived.
She still bears the scars of planting herself
in poison ivy as she and her soon to be husband
pitched their tent on an adventure to
explore the wilderness of their relationship.
I laughed at her impetuous impulses
that brought her closer to earth and pain
unaware that my own was only a few steps away.
Now all these years later we sit in the Mars Café
writing and I know I am the one whose impulses
should be laughed at and how close to the earth
I have gotten by mistake as well.

Poland

Amongst the Tombstones

I stand amongst the tombstones
and holler *I am here!*
Think I almost wasn't.
I was born in the right time and place
For those who weren't
I stand amongst the tombstones
And holler *We are here!*

While my work is about recovery from MTBI, loss of identity, death, and survival, it is much more. It is about learning to let go, to reinvent yourself in the toughest of circumstances and finding the strength to find a purposeful meaning by which to carry on. A few years before my injury, when my youngest daughter and I were both going to Europe in the same time frame but for different reasons, she asked me to go to Auschwitz with her. As it happened, the trip to Poland would be too much to fit into our schedules so we opted to go to Berlin instead and see some sights. First though, we were visiting a close friend who also just happened to be the mother of one of my daughter's best friends. She and her husband, theology professors, were spending a sabbatical year in Erfurt, Germany, while one of them was conducting research. Upon arrival, they told us that they had rented a van and we were going to Buchenwald the next day, the largest concentration camp in Germany. Two Jewish women, (my daughter and myself), an Anglican priest (the mom), a Lutheran Minister and son of Polish Germans (the step-dad) and an intuitive best friend, (their daughter) we walked through this living tomb in 90-degree heat, listening to ghosts' stories while the tears flowed. As we walked out, my daughter and I arm in arm, it was not lost on us that if this had been another time, she and I would have been walking to the showers. As a matter of fact, given who we all were none of us would have left alive. On this day, as we exited the camp, we were all intensely aware that no one held us prisoner, or took

away meaning from our hearts or our reason for living. Instead, we were able to exit and seek out a quiet restaurant that evening in order for us to share the emotions we each were holding. In so doing we wondered about how to put the stars back in the sky for those who perished and had no voice.

Fast forward to 2019, after numerous concussions and here I was once again in Europe with my daughter Ali and one of my oldest and closest friends Teresa, this time with the express purpose of finding out, if I could, what happened to my family who were left in Poland during the war. I wanted to find the places they would have lived and possibly died and to honour their stories, whatever I could make of them. In doing this I was allowing myself the space of being a part of this history and to add to my own ever evolving storyline. Poland, with my daughter and Teresa, was a time of sadness, laughter and tenderness, of being comforted in the great folds of being together and holding each other's spaces. Poland was such an eye opener. What I found here were rich moments, a deeper connection with my past, my present and a definite sense of being a part of something so much bigger than myself.

Poland started in Krakow and ended in Warsaw for us. We experienced the Jewish sectors in most cities we visited, had nights full of rich conversation while we ate polish delicacies at street vendors and restaurants, entertained by talented street musicians. I spent two hours with a woman in the Jewish Archival Society trying to locate my Uncle Zelig and his son, but to no avail. I found instead my grandparent's passports and naturalization papers. In between I was a guest lecturer in Katowice where we were then invited back to our hosting professor's house whose back yard was literally the Eastern front of the Poles and Germans. We ate a traditional Polish dinner in a Texas themed restaurant and shared baklava in our host's living

room listening to her family's stories. It was a magnificent whirlwind full of moments we will all remember.

After Katowice we took the train to Ostrow, where I thought my family was from but realized after hearing from my cousin, through Facebook of all things, that my grandfather was a member of the Ostrovtver Society in Canada. I sent the society a message through Facebook and when they contacted me they told me that Ostrowiec is in the Kielce region, south of Radom. I was in the wrong place – a six-hour car ride from where we were at the moment with little time to get there. We decided to stay where we were as we were all tired and I had to be in Warsaw the next day. As we arrived in Ostrow an armed soldier started to yell at me in Polish. He was looking intensely just at me and he wouldn't stop yelling even though I tried to somehow explain I did not speak Polish. Eventually I understood that he wanted me to move away from the train. It turned out he was a security guard with a very large baton. For some reason he unnerved me. It was the first and only time in Poland that I felt this way. I don't know if having been in Auschwitz a few days prior, more of which will be described below, influenced my feelings but I do know that the whole thing made me feel I should always keep my passport handy. Teresa and Ali found the whole thing a bit amusing until we were leaving Ostrow the next day. Standing on the platform on the opposite side of the station, one which we had to go underground and up another flight of stairs to get to, Teresa asked to take my picture beside Ali. She later told me she did this to show me that the same guard was standing right behind me watching me. She didn't want to draw further attention to this by saying anything to me until we had left. She didn't find this so funny at this point. Whether it was because I looked different, I do not know, but I had the sense that I was definitely being watched and it made me very uncomfortable. I felt I had the sense of what it was my relatives would have experienced daily.

While we were staying in the Old Jewish Quarter in Ostrów we found there wasn't really much left of it. There was an old synagogue that was now a cultural center for performing arts where we were told there was an old Jewish cemetery nearby. What we found here, in the middle of this town, was a park with a walled garden. This wall was made up of headstones from a Jewish cemetery that the Nazis rolled over as they came through with their tanks making it a part of their roadways. With no regard for the significance that this cemetery had been here for hundreds of years, in a minute the history of this Jewish community was gone. Now someone had the thought to bring it back. Standing inside this garden on a rainy afternoon touching this wall, reading the headstones, even though I don't understand Hebrew or Yiddish, I felt a part of this landscape. Even though this wasn't the exact place my family was from, I knew I belonged. Whether it was the security guard's reaction to me, or the knowledge that where I stood was a place where my people's history had been mowed down, I felt even more connected to my roots. Standing here beside this wall I realized that try as the Nazi's might, we could not be erased. Whether a hit to the head, or a hit to the heart we are resilient. We stand together in times of horror and understand that in our togetherness we are stronger and will continue. As I stood among the headstones I knew "I am here and I am one of them."

Two days prior to being in Ostrow, on an unusually hot fall day, I had walked through Auschwitz with Ali and Teresa. A part of a tour group, each of the three of us found our own spot far apart from one another. Walking in silence through places where men were stripped and shot or sick women slept one on top of another to stay warm before they died, churned my stomach and silenced me with another deep wound. My words were stopped not from a physical injury to my head, but from the experience of standing in the place where these inhuman atrocities had been committed. As I walked by all of the suitcases taken from Jewish prisoners

searching for my family name, or the room of hair behind glass, I felt as though I could feel the presence of every soul that had perished here. While my grandparents were safe in Canada at the time, my grandfather's brother and his family likely also perished somewhere in Poland at the hands of the Nazis, possibly at Auschwitz, or one of the ghettos. I did not write about this trip on the bus back to Krakow or on the plane home. It was not until I returned to Canada that I could put pen to paper or paint to brush. The painting below, *The Ghosts of Auschwitz*, came from this trip. Over the course of a few weeks as I thought over and over again about my trip to Auschwitz, looking for my family there and in other parts of Poland, I felt the need to see what I was experiencing. With a blood orange sky as a backdrop the ghosts began to emerge as I put pieces of my grandparents' lives onto the canvas, I realized that Auschwitz never actually left us. We are glued to this past, to the smoke and the walls and the camp that is Auschwitz. As I attached a copy of my grandparents' passports to this piece I realized that we carry this history from generation to generation, whether it is a passport, a name on a suitcase behind glass or of a distant relative we have never been able to find. As Boss and Carnes (2012) remind us,

Whether we speak of slavery or genocide or of soldiers in unknown graves or abandoned in the killing fields or of the myriad of people cut off from loved ones by wars and forced relocation, we are a society born out of the pain of ambiguous loss. Family members were traumatically cut off; relationships were painfully ruptured. Given this messy history of loss, no wonder we deny death and insist on the tidiness of closure. Our historical legacy of unresolved grief and loss encourages us still to seek closure and an end to suffering. This is not possible.
(p. 460)

Even Holocaust survivors themselves, thought, once they were liberated, they would be free of the horror of what they had experienced in the camps. What greater loss can

there be then having your humanity stolen? Unfortunately, what these prisoners found was that the life they left behind was still present once they left the camp. Frankl (1959) believes that the way to live with this disillusionment is not by continuing to try to find closure, but rather by using this as “an added stimulus” to once again find meaning.

As I look back on these scenes and the bond that it created between my daughter and myself, the knowledge that our destiny could have so easily been different had it simply been another year, gives me reason to keep writing and to remember to share the stories I hold. There were so many who couldn’t share the simple day-to-day occurrences of their lives. How they would have loved to tell of the pain of losing a daughter who moved away or the loss of being able to read because of an injury. It is for all of those who cannot tell their story of tragedy and love and even just their daily routines that seem sometimes mundane, that I tell my story of loss and recovery. As a writer, there is a responsibility to raise my voice for those who cannot and to bring back the human connection. As Frankl states (1959),

A man who becomes conscious of the responsibility he bears toward a human being who affectionately waits for him, or to an unfinished work, will never be able to throw away his life. He knows the *why* for his existence, and will be able to bear almost any how. (p. 80)

As a writer this is my passion, my responsibility, my reason for going on.

**All this is to say that after my concussion
I have been to Auschwitz and back.**

There are dark days
when it feels as though the sun
has fallen from the sky,
when my brain clouds
and everything is a distant memory
of a life walking through motions.
My daily living has become

a foggy fall Vancouver morning
and I am stuck on a freeway
going too slow for everyone around me
too fast for the slick pavement that hugs me.
My index finger glued to the steering wheel
can't turn, I hit the road ahead, shudder,
escape into a deep sleep
melt the whole picture away.

This is all I can do on these days
when nothing comes easily,
the buzzing in my head drowns out
the cries of distant ghosts,
while the right side of my body
weak from each attempt
to strengthen it
becomes a turnip gone bad,
a soggy potato, a soup mix of bitter herbs
and root vegetables pulled from a garden
trampled by heartache.
Roots, I look for my roots -
maybe this is the way back into myself,
when the lines I draw are as crooked
as the parking spaces I keep driving into.
A line traced to the past from my belly.
An awakening of something vibrant, different.
A restaurant full of people waiting
for me to discover them, pay their bill
because I owe it to them. We all do.

I pull harder at the root
my hair feeling the scissors so close
my spine shivers to think of all the locks
I have come to love being thrown in a pile.
A million and two strands tossed aside
now behind glass
and I want to pick them all up,
take them home and fill my pillows with them,
my head their protector against the evil
that could lurk in hallways and graveyards still.

All this to say that after my concussion
I have been to Auschwitz and back.
I have walked through blinding heat
to the chamber walls where

my people were burned to death
ashes to ashes lost in someone's hurry to dispose.
I have been to Auschwitz and back
to stand at the foot of a bed where women climbed
one on top of the other, an attempt
to keep the cold out in winter, barely enough skin
to cover bones that could no longer feel
their neighbour's touch.
I have been to Auschwitz and back
where I prayed for them all,
a kaddish for the unnamed, tattooed numbers
all that is left in a pile,
where somewhere my great uncle is hidden,
a kiss goodnight on the wind
hoping he made his way to heaven
and I here in my fog know he is with me,
helping me climb through the haze.

There are dark days
when it feels as though the sun
has fallen from the sky, when my brain clouds
and everything is a distant memory
of a life walking through motions,
of nothing making sense,
of realizing that in trauma and in war
nothing ever does, and after Auschwitz
it is ok just to be here knowing nothing.



Figure 5: The Ghosts of Auschwitz

After Auschwitz

After Auschwitz.
The moments of not knowing
who I am erased,
the pieces of my brain lost
from too many hits
now fragments brought together
to know I am one of them.
I am one of them.
After Auschwitz
I am one of them.
And I am still here.
We are still here.
After Auschwitz.

After Auschwitz.
I walk these broken
stone roads
in 20-degree heat
on a Sunday fall morning,
years after
starvation killed my people
and hope vanished
from behind these brick walls.

After Auschwitz.
Suitcases with hundreds
of family names
etched on handles
now encased behind glass,
I search the cold reminder
for my name. Nish, Nishmas
Nishama, Smallner, Smolny.
Small journeys of my people
that ended on this short track.

After Auschwitz.
I follow the line
that moves through hallways.
Like them we are cattle
being drawn to a place of slaughter,
where men who didn't understand,
striped of language, clothing, humanity
were shot in this courtyard
where now our silence lies.

After Auschwitz
a café, a soda machine,
tourists, we drink,
quench the thirst to understand
a million deaths
witnessed and held by us
and the fact
we can leave at any time,
churns in the pit of our bellies.

After Auschwitz.
I am visitor and ghost
passing through these gates

for just a moment,
this souvenir of hell imprinted
into my waistband of memory forever.
I walk away to fall into a deep sleep
on a bus that bumps over the highways
my great uncle and his sad son
never saw from their boxcar window.
After Auschwitz.

I sweat
a relief from the heat
and the burden of carrying
my ancestors' home
in a body bag of imagery.
My paper empty,
thoughts and feelings
caught on barbed wire fences
disappear as we drive away.
A nightmarish sleep
pulls me into the story
that could have been mine.

After Auschwitz.
The moments of not knowing
who I am erased,
the pieces of my brain lost
from too many hits
now fragments brought together
to know I am one of them.
I am one of them.
After Auschwitz
I am one of them.
And I am still here.
We are still here.
After Auschwitz.

The Wall

I have found fragments of who I am
embedded in a wall.
pieces of a cemetery
bulled over by Nazi tanks
gathered by townspeople
to create a memorial
to those who don't exist
in their town anymore.
The synagogue now an art centre
sits dormant.
The Jewish quarter
a remnant of itself.
I could carry it back home with me
this puzzle of words
to recreate the lives
plowed down midwinter or summer by soldiers
who saw us as next to nothing
extermination the goal
and that they almost did
but like me there is a survivor instinct
that kicks in a need to be useful
to find solace in the waves of dancing.

Dressing for the Dead

Today I dress for the dead
in the dark so as not to disturb the living.
I put on my socks, soft black delicate coverings
for a sole that could not stand the pain
of marching to a courtyard where there would be no escape.
My pants, tight jeans that snug my thighs
showing the creases of an overstuffed buttock
from too many late night perogies and wine
and a white oversized tee-shirt in case someone
wants to crawl underneath and accompany me out
knowing they can't these souls
that travel from one tree to the next
looking for space to plant themselves
trunks uprooted in a hurricane.
I pick them up and place them on a pile
say a kaddish for each name I do not know.
Each heart that stopped beating
each hand I don't hold each wave that says goodbye
as I leave my daughter by my side.
I dress for them
the dead who cannot dress for themselves.

Colour

The colour of eyes.
The colour of hair.
The colour of suitcases.
The colour of shoes.
A shoe dropped on a pile.
A pile of stones.
Sling back, black dress shoes,
orange heels, red sandals,
baby slippers.
A pile of suitcases.
Freedman, Silberstein,
Fleishman, Oscar, Hendrick,
Jacob, Sylvie, Sarah, Rachel.
A pile of hair.
Golden, black,
brown, grey, breads,
mustaches, eyelashes,
armpits, curls, straight.
The colour of eyes that watched the piling,
the unpacking of suit cases,
the discarding of shoes.
A pile of stones gathered
where there should be a tomb
never saying goodbye.

Resistance is Futile or so They Say

This is what seven-of-nine
must have felt
every morning upon disconnecting
from her regeneration chamber
or even more so before
entering it for the night.
Eyes glossed over
as too much information
bombarded her,
a metal plate inserted into her face
a stiff reminder of the humanity she lost
when assimilated as a child
into the Borg
-resistance is futile.

I see you a young man
sleek black hair
pulled into a defiant do,
thick dark brows pulled tight enough
to entice any 17-year-old
to run fingertips over the frown
you hold so tightly in place
so as not to disappear entirely.
Your quivering eyes
a reflection of some creator
that pulled you into a vortex
leaving its implant secure
a constant reminder
that humanity can be so indifferent
immune to the collective misery,
turn its back on an individual's pain.

Wounded, you never look away
and I try to not be embarrassed
when I have no answers
as to why this happened.
I am mirrored in your lips
the way you purse them together
in a constant question, the why wearing thin
as you start to ask again, then stop.

I touch the plate
bits of paint
rub into my own invisible injury
and I can feel the sting
in all the distorted wrinkles
that have formed over years.
We mingle in a leper's dance
our peculiarities infectious
and frightening to the human race
that does not want to see
the sores.

I am tired of holding myself
in a world that mocks me with unkindness
that pushes on the steal plate to make sure
it is still intact, but you
you soldier on bringing your pain to the surface
exposing the stars that were ripped from the sky
in a single moment, into the laps of those
who turned their heads away
as though the universe would be the same if they
just didn't look, but you know
how the darkness holds us all.

It is because of your bravery to be seen
to expose the metal plate
planted when your ancestors
were ripped away from homes
from loving arms, from language and food
and the familiar morning smells of mother
and good night kiss of father and the baked treats
of grandmother and wild stories of grandfather
that I have hope
to stand up and tell of my ancestors.

My relatives the only ones left in Ostrow
walked the 163 miles to Auschwitz
to have a shower. It takes 3 hours and 27 minutes to drive
between the two today,
3 hours and 27 minutes to remember every footstep
of life they lost on their journeys ending.
My mother did not understand
that never forgetting didn't mean beating
the dignity out of her own children,

that tucking them into bed
was a privilege not a chore.
That telling them they were useless and crazy
walked them down a path of despondency.
That turning your back when they talked
was a disgrace.
That extinguishing their hope to succeed
through unwarranted suffering was a crime.

I look deeper into your eyes
to see if you have found
the wonderment of a hug
or the joy that the touch of a hand opens
for a waterfall of relief
as a single tear moves away from the heart.
I imagine the plate has weakened over time
as the wounding becomes your voice
and your voice becomes your strength
and your strength becomes your love
and your love becomes your legacy.

I know for me that this
twisted gig choreographed
throughout a life of trying to discard
my own metal plate
has thrown me onto some
pretty horrendous dance floors.
Now I own it all, expose it,
hold it as a reference point
a part of who I am, as I steal back
every mile, every footstep erased.
I thank you for the invitation to explore
to join, to answer the call
to bring joy back to the streets
that once were blackened
to lift the sky from where it had fallen
as we stolen children
find our way back home
knowing resistance is all we have.

Poland 1943

Breath becomes weighted as tanks invade streets
the horror of watching them run down tombstones,
demolish this sacred ground, without thought
and the knowing that if this is possible
the rumours of terror must be true.
The sound of metal over stone
crushes hope of escape
and the prayer books held close to hearts
are gripped tighter as the sabbath draws to a close.

Poland 2019

I walk the streets of this town
looking for signs of my people
the Jewish quarter marked on a map
a memory of what once was.
A synagogue, now an entertainment center
the only visible sign we once resided here
and a wall in a park holding the bits and pieces
of headstones where once there were thousands of people
now only this place holder of terror.

Untitled

I fall into the smell of soup
simmering overnight, inhale this breath of home
wonder if my family had this same luxury

memories float in my body

I begin this journey
down a long road to discover
anything through fragments of a story

reduce to simmer

broth keeps boiling
bubbles ricochet off a warm ceiling
as gun fire did then

everything is just a fragment

of this collective memory
The only thing that keeps me awake
thinking of how it is I have come to this place.

Untitled 2

There is a sadness in my throat
the tiny particles of these lives
floating through hallways,
the ghostly histories I inhale
a wire fence that forms
each time I swallow,
the tight wooden ball that grips me
when I search for words
that are slipping from the daily
skies of my life.

I am the dust of this collective memory,
a newspaper clipping
that has fallen behind a shelf
needing to be discovered
or at the very least acknowledged.
I pick it up and begin to read
between the washed-out lines,
try to find the fragments of myself
in this history, the pieces from a journey
that were meant to jog my body memory
back into being,
but this morning all I can do is cry.

Untitled 3

I went looking for answers trying to find
a bit of myself gathered in a town,
a city, a country only to find fragments
pieces, remnants, bits and pieces
cemented into a wall.

I wonder at the inability to express
what I have seen, what I know
and more importantly what I don't know.
Lost, I look at the sky and wonder
how my path has twisted and turned
past the stars that guided my family
only to bring me back to them again.
My ancestors gather in my womb,
a resting place for worn out warriors,
trying to escape the persecution
when all they wanted
was nothing more than to realize
the dreams of a full existence
for their children.

The Joy of Poland

How is it everywhere you go
In every park, in every corner of the world
birds flock to be fed by men and women
who pass their days contemplating
their existence while
birds push and shove one another
to the side, anxious to get enough,
happy that this moment
is taken care of.

I sit on a bench in the middle of Kraków
my daughter and best friend
sit a bench away.
A man mid-forties, disheveled hair,
brown plaid jacket and
a bag of bread crumbs in his lap
doesn't seem happy or sad.
He is lost in thought
and I wonder how many times
he has fed these birds.
Does he name them?

I wonder how many times my grandfather
could have sat in the square
in the town where he was born
eating his lunch, a young man,
a tailor who sewed love into suits,
threw out the left overs of his lunch
the one that cost so many stitches to boil.
I wonder if he named the birds who got his scraps
if he knew he wouldn't come back
and if the pigeons would follow him
half way around the world to Canada
or if he would simply find new ones.

I wondered if the birds he fed
had seen the horrors of a world
he left behind, exploded by war and hate
or if they had simply taken to the sky.
I wonder if they like him,
were content to know
they had escaped the sadness
of a land falling apart.

I find comfort in this man
who now sits across from me,
whatever his story I want to thank him
for the joy he has helped me find in remembering.
My grandfather, an old man,
walking across our street to the park
to feed the birds, his Yiddish paper under his arm.
Me a six-year-old observer, following,
aware even then that birds followed him.
There was joy in my grandfather's eyes
and that was all I needed. The birds fed he was happy.

The man has emptied his bag of crumbs.
Our bus is waiting and I understand
that whether it is this man or my grandfather
the birds are always here watching us
collecting our stories, just in case we can't.

Running with Water

There have been too many branches
that have fallen beneath the surface
the weight of this broken mass
sinks them slowly.

I watch curious at how each tip
bobs on a wave as though rebellious
determined to give it one last try
until it suddenly realizes there is nothing to hold onto
and just like that it is gone.

That is how it felt the day you died
unexpected surreal catastrophic
and yet in slow motion I heard of your sinking
the life you built being washed away
and I a helpless bystander
could not reach you.

There have been so many times like this one
etched on the waters back
the time Liz forced by the shouting battle
that raged inside her head
to walk away into the beaver dam
and not come back
or my father whose veins now protruding branches
collapsing under an ocean of disease
on a bright snowy New Year's Day, stopped pumping.
There was a time when my words
slipped below the waterline too
they were nothing more than gathered syllables
that bounced against rocks without rhythm,
the death of my verses a tragic play without actors.

There were other times when water has moved me
taken my heart through tears, an underground cave
where nothing came or went,
until a tsunami video of my brain being swept away
and I could not move again
even in the sunlight.

In the Square

In the square the blossom floats
a reminder that in days when we lived here
there were succulent plums that fell into delicate hands.
In the square where the blossom floats
there were head stones torn apart by
the butt of a soldier's rifle
the track of a tank massive and unrelenting.
In the square where the blossom floats
children ran afraid they too would end up
under the mud nothing more than a few left over pieces
of fleshy poems crushed and beaten down
until the sun fell from the sky into this tomb as well.
In the square where the blossom floats
there are memories that squeal when I touch them
the underbelly of a lilac leaf green and new
surrounding perfumed petals,
protectors that can't protect the whole tree
from being mowed down
And yet here we are a single blossom floating
through air despite, despite, despite.

Untitled 4

I used to think of the dying
in a one act play of skeletons
who entered from off stage right.
Now I look at the dying as a breath
that stops short of falling
off a ledge in an earthquake.
My mother speaks to me in death
I hear her raspy voice
telling me things that her voice
in life could never muster.
Be kind to yourself.
Hold your own.
Whisper at night to those you love.
Look at the stars you will find my eyes there.
Hold the wind it loves you.
Don't be afraid I have found you in an empty box.
Taxis and tacos should be given equal weight.
Don't swear no one will listen to you.
Dream or not dream dance or don't dance
but stand up tall you carry us all on your back.
Squeeze out the anxiety of our ancestors
remember to be better than anyone else for them.
Drink a wish, kick a star.
Movies are solid escapes from the news.
Night terrors are your dead cousins
coming to visit and never leaving.
Take them by the hand and let them know they are ok.
It is not wrong to be buried six feet below earth.
The sun carries a soul that watches you for a moment.
Don't let us down.
And then I remember it is just a play.

Who is that dancing?

When you look at me now
and ask *who is that dancing?*
I know you are thinking
her feet mark rhythms
in a silent wooded groove
a landscape that only she can see,
where the trees seem to bend toward her
listening for the music she hears,
the songs of a past beating
against her face, stories that have dissolved
but can't be forgotten.
My reply, *I am dancing for them.*

When you look at me now
and ask *who is that dancing?*
I know you are thinking
when did the flow of water start
this stream that follows her
toward an ocean
where her heart palpitates
to the tempo of another era.
She looks so solemn
as if swimming beside a school
that does not want her, or maybe
it is the trees that have slipped
into the stream causing her
to grab hold of roots that could strangle.
My reply, *I am dancing for them.*

When you look at me now
and ask *who is that dancing?*
I know you are thinking,
she holds tragedy in her cuffs,
the links with a past
that keep her captive in the darkness,
nightmares that unfold like rain
while she wishes she could hold the hand
of anyone whose name evaporated
on a gaseous wind, caught off guard
by the history of war, their knees buckling
to the sound of an ending.
My reply, *I am dancing for them.*

When you look at me now
and ask *who is that dancing?*
I know you are thinking
it is Chanukah, there should be light
when there are only shadows.
There should be laughter when
there is only gunfire.
There should be music
when there is only the sound
of spirits cracking.
There should be miracles
but there is only us.
She dances but there is nothing.
My reply, *I am dancing so we never forget them,*
I am dancing so none of us can forget

Pigeons

A moment of quiet.
My brain feels settled sitting here
in Krakow, a roundabout of flowers.
pigeons, a park in the middle of this bustling place.
I came here to find what my relatives would have
done on a daily basis, but my life is so different
then theirs would have been.
We went to the roundabout last night at midnight
the bustling heart of the old Jewish sector
filled with all kinds of people, food markets
a kind of Beckett play
or a Sunday discord,
24 hours of travel
where I feel at home
and everyone looks the same
guys in jean jackets
who look like rugby players
walk by smoking
in burgundy sweaters
feed the birds
I hear the sound of hooves
a carriage going through the park
to the marketplace someone's cell phone ringing
and I understand why I am here now.
The metaphor that lives inside me
the words I can't find but taste
A family on electric scooters goes by
encompassing the now
I hear the hoofs of a horse in the distance
taking me back centuries when milk trucks would have passed here
The mix of what I was looking for and where I am now.
I wonder if I have forgotten how to drive
The metaphor I can't find.

Precious

What do you carry on your back?
A sack? A rockface? A child?
A cucumber drenched in lemon juice?

I carry a memory
as sharp as an elephant's tusk,
precious and warm, it keeps me straight,
feeds me when I can't see.

This lightness
a flare on the blackest days,
laughter in my belly - magic.
Joy thrown onto the shore
where I dance shoeless,
sanity always just a few steps away.
Precious and perfect
a sliver of fruit, and a whole pie digested,
a shiny bell my morning wakeup call,
a hot fire pit on a grassy knoll.

These places I have come to know
hold my passion
in a forest full of curiosities.
Slowly I bend toward earth
a majestic tree, this history a leaf
shaken into the everyday
where the changing seasons
are no longer noticed.
This is the gift
the concussions have given me,
the wanting it all, not being afraid of it anymore.
Precious and dear
the lesson - carry only what you can hold.
What do you carry on your back?
A sack? A rockface? A child?
A cucumber drenched in lemon juice?
I carry a memory.
This story of lightness
a flare on the blackest days.

Elijah

This is the candle of your soul.
Hold it high and be proud of who you are
and where you come from.
Together our flame will never die
as we carry each other in our hearts.

When my children were young
we would knock three times under the table
then watch as they ran to answer the door
only to find no one there,
running back disappointed
we told them
Elijah had joined our Passover table
then slipped away.
Excited they ran around the house
trying to find him
until we called them back to sit with mystery
and wonder a while longer.
The promise of what tomorrow would bring
sitting in our laps
as we engaged them in the joy
of possibilities.

When my daughter was six
she ventured out through the front door
on her own and curled into the back seat
of the car.
Like Elijah no one saw her leave
only with her disappearance
we found fear instead of awe.
As minutes passed
she did not answer our calls
our neighbours came to aid in our search.
A Friday night when we usually gathered
as a family to watch tv and have a special dessert
suddenly became a night of terror.
The louder we called the more frightened
my daughter became,
afraid she had done something wrong
now not wanting us to find her.
Suddenly whatever spirit
had possessed her to hide
was vanquished and she

ran out of the car into
waiting joyous arms.
Everyone so thrilled she was alright
no one aware that this was her first
attempt of walking out the door
and closing us behind it.

Now as my children each venture
out into the world
they do not look to us for answers
they seek out their own
in each corner of the earth
leaving the door open a crack
as they go.
Elijah's cup still sits on our Passover table
while the wonderment of his presence
is carried in their eyes as they leave
and the strength of his voice
is all they need to battle any fear
they may have of not being found.

San Francisco

San Francisco is the last place I have visited on this journey. It is February and I have left behind a cold rainy Vancouver to arrive in 25-degree sunny Northern California. I arrive on a Monday evening, find my way to the Marin County bus and hop on for an hour bus ride to my friend Bess's house where I will hole up for three days just to write. Eight years ago I met Bess when our paths crossed through my studies in expressive arts therapy, and through shoes. High up on the side of a Swiss mountainside in the town of Saas Fee I discovered not only that Bess and I wore the same size shoes but that we owned the exact same pair when as flat-mates I almost walked out with her shoes on. I had bought my causal black flats on one of my last trips to California while visiting another dear friend Jabez, whom I knew through my writing community when I lived in Pleasanton. Years later, on another visit to California, I would learn Bess knew Jabez when she was Executive Director of a group home and he was a parole officer who brought clients into her care. These serendipitous connections would be one of many things that held us together over the years and why I had chosen to hide in her house to write my story.

Now as I was crossing the Golden Gate Bridge, as the moon's beams crossed the water and lit the whole Bay up in delicious warmth, I had the extraordinary feeling of coming home. It felt comforting and magical all at the same time. I was caught off guard to find I was experiencing such a strong connection to this place. I now wondered how many times I had experienced these same feelings when my children were little and we lived in the Bay area. I suddenly remembered all of the times when this exact shaped moon, whole and smiling, filled our entire street while we ate a late-night dinner in the court, with our neighbors who had become our family away from home. When planning this trip I never thought that I would find so

much of myself still here in California. I had lived in Pleasanton for almost 7 years when my husband had a job working in the high-tech industry. My three children, between the ages of 3-8 when we relocated, had their primary school years here. When my youngest was 9 we moved back to Canada, this time instead of returning to Toronto we went to Vancouver. My children were raised West Coast kids. It wasn't until this trip that I realized how much of a West Coast person I had become as well. For the first time I felt I could easily relocate back to the Bay area and slide right into this lifestyle.

Now sitting in an Emeryville Coffee shop, I feel as though everything here is familiar, more so than when I go back to Toronto. The sun, the air, even the way the people talk to me on the street rings of something so recognizable. I have been here two days and already have repeating conversations with a gentleman originally from Lebanon. He recounts his life as a teacher and talks of how he finds teaching here so different to elsewhere in the world. Maybe I am more relaxed being away from Vancouver but somehow, I sense it is just the way people are here, ready to share, discuss, engage. I am too. I fall easily into memory and am surprised once again to see where it takes me. Maybe it is because I have just been to Poland, or maybe it is I am ready to understand all of the connections this trip has allowed me to make, but I suddenly am thinking about all of the Jewish traditions I brought to the dinner table for my children while we lived in California. At our Passover dinners we always pretended that someone was knocking at the front door sending the kids to answer, and then they were all amazed that Elijah the prophet had actually come by our table to drink all of the wine we left for him. While this had never been a part of my growing up it was a part of the magic I made for them. It was unbeknownst to me until this moment, some magic I had gifted myself as well that still sits in my belly and is what keeps me feeling so close to this place.

Home. What is it that makes us feel connected and at home? Is it the way the clouds sit in the sky or the angle of the sun on the trees outside our window or our children's drawings on the walls where we live, whether it is a mansion, an apartment or a tin shack? Is it a friend who laughs when you try to walk away with their shoes and who years later still reminds you of it lovingly? It is the humane moments when I help a stranger hang her bath mat to dry on her front porch because she has seen me getting out of my car and is too frail and old to do it herself. Or maybe it is simply all of it, these moments of purpose that hold us together that no one can take away. These are the things which we eventually carry within us and that take us through the darkest of days to the next bright light. This moonlit night on the Bay now sits etched into memory forever, reminding me of what it was I thought I had lost. This is the final piece that I hold for my children, my ancestors and myself. I have found home.

From Vancouver to Toronto to Poland and now here in San Francisco I have the privilege of seeing how far I have come. I now understand that in coming back to the world after feeling my life had shrunk to nothing, it was never nothing. Even in the darkest moments there was that tiniest bit of hope that kept me connected to the outside world. I have a different way of being after my concussions, but even more I have a different way of being after searching out these places and finding the magic of living again and the humanness of sharing these experiences for all those who couldn't or can't. The discovery of that first place where my imagination began to flourish in an attempt to find a glimmer of hope, a word, a feeling a magnificent moment is something that no one can ever take away. I find it now in the movement of my dog's chest as he rests after a long walk or in the humming of the fridge late at night when everything else has been shut down. And I realize there is magic in being able to stand these noises at all, when just a few short years ago I couldn't. It is knowing that I have been given a second and third and fourth

chance, something my Great Uncle Zelig never had and I can use this time well. It is the time I have found with my children, my lover, my friends and family. It is the moon shining down across the Bay. It is the magic and wonderment I find inside myself and what I have come to know as home.

Roots

These travels bring back memories as they help me to connect dots from various aspects and areas of my life. Yom Kippur, the holiest day of the Jewish New Year is a day of atonement when one is supposed to fast, and contemplate the last year in order to wipe clean the page. It is good to know that somewhere in the world it is possible to start over. When I was about six years old, my grandmother decided to take me with her to synagogue during the high holidays. I don't know on this particular day what prompted her to do this as she had never taken me before. No one had actually taken me to synagogue and maybe she thought it was time someone exposed me to religion. Besides my father it was rare that anyone in our large extended family that I lived with, paid any attention to me.

The synagogue where we went was in a building at the corner of the main street and the side residential street where we lived. A bigger commercial space, the nondescript building was divided into sections, many sections. Years later I would take piano lessons in a back room behind where the men went to pray in the evenings. The synagogue itself, being orthodox, was divided into a women and men's section. I somehow knew my grandfather was there even though I don't recall seeing him enter the men's section or even walking with us to Shul. This being the holiest day of the year was also the day I was brought into a world that was supposed to give me support and comfort. It was a day I got to walk down the street with my grandmother holding her hand, something which rarely happened. It was a day I got to dress up in one of my

two good dresses my father bought for me just for school and occasions like this one should it ever happen, I imagine. While I never understood or was told what was going on as it was all in Hebrew, I had a sense this was something that I should take notice of. Somehow, I think my grandmother who spoke very little English just thought I would get the meaning through osmosis. I don't remember what happened on the rest of the day or if my grandparents broke fast or even fasted. I just know that I was never taken again by anyone to Shul unless it was for a wedding, Bar Mitzvah or death. Jewish Holidays became nothing more than a reason to stay home from school and to turn on the TV until the Rabbi came to visit. Whatever my grandmother's reasoning was for taking me, I will never know.

My grandmother died when I was about eight or nine. I have few memories of her even though we lived in the same house. I remember her coming outside with a plate of cookies, standing on the blue wooden back porch, her apron tied around her plump short frame and her glasses slipping down her nose. She called to us in Yiddish and we knew that it meant something special. My interactions with her though few were just that, special, and as I remember them, they change me. As I connect the dots from story to story my identity shifts and forms and shifts again. The more I write about these incidents the more I change as my words allow me to draw lines from one occurrence to another. I feel more connected to myself and rooted in my own history as I uncover treasures that I hadn't seen before.

Searching for Father

I never went back to synagogue for worship and comfort until my father died. I never realized until seeing myself in that moment with my grandmother, that this instant somehow stayed with me, keeping me safe and giving me a place to go when I needed it most. These stories help me to make sense of the world around me and inform my understanding and

interaction with the outside world (Etherington, 2004). Losing my father was devastating and even though my father was a self-proclaimed atheist, going to Shul brought me the much-needed relief I couldn't find elsewhere in that moment. It was a place of solace and familiarity. My grandmother, though she never knew it but perhaps hoped it, gave me a great gift, a defining moment, something I never identified with until now, a place of comfort, worship and devotion. It is through these stories that I begin to form a fuller picture and just as K.C. Blinne (2010), discovered throughout her life, "The simple act of transforming thought and feeling into letters, words, sentences, paragraphs, pages, and stories is a sacred act" (p.184). I too realize that my writing has also been that place of revered salvation when I had nowhere else to turn. It is in the writing of poetry that I discover the connection between these two life experiences and I am seeing them as though for the first time together. It isn't always in the knowing, but in the joy of discovery, through the act of writing, that brings me some kind of release. It is through the process of writing that I come to understand myself in relationship to these situations in my own life and it gives me a way of being in the world that makes sense (Apol, 2015). My memory of my life seems so random at times. Things that I am surprised that I remember come up out of the blue and then other things which I think I should retrieve quickly can't be found on any page of my history. Coming back to pursue an academic career has been problematic in this context. Taking notes seems impossible some days and then I will just remember things that connect more of the dots for me.

What I Don't Remember After the Concussion

Today I have no memory of my life.
No picture of sitting on my father's lap
blue eyes rescuing me
from the fear of clowns and bees.
Nothing to remind me of my mother's laughter
as she sat talking to other ladies

while I climbed to the top of the monkey bars
with neighbourhood kids whose names and faces
I can't retrieve, but whose fear of heights
still sits in my belly.

Today I have no memory of the taste of burgers
bought on Saturdays after my bowling team's
teenage angst smashed white pins into blackness.
I don't recall the guy behind the counter,
maybe twenty-two, making eye contact
while checking to see if
the mustard and ketchup were full.
I can't hear the sound of his shoes
as he ran from behind the grill
down lane twelve to get the ball out of the gutter.
I don't remember the holes we kept our thumbs in
while we caressed the round surface
waiting for the pins to be reset,
my teenage body tired of the game,
ready to sit on the sidelines
and just eye the boy flipping meat.

I don't remember the feel of the sheets
as I crawled further underneath them
to escape the smell of the smoke
from Aunt Betty's cigarettes
as she lay in her bed
across the room we shared,
a scared child and a red-haired widow,
she having given up on the world
and me not understanding you could give up.
I don't recollect the sound of pages turning
as she sat up half the night reading
a small light burning brighter
than the red end of her cigarette
and her desire to forget she was alone
in a house full of people,
and I a few feet away,
not knowing how alone I was.

I don't remember the taste of blueberry buns
the big juicy ones
carried on Fridays by my grandfather
his small hunched frame lumbering
over a cardboard box tied with string,
the knots I learnt to untie quicker than a shoe.

I don't feel the juice running down
the side of my face or my fingers licked clean,
the taste guzzled, the whole thing wolfed,
not knowing to slow down and savour every bit
so as to remember.

I don't remember the sound of tall trees
bending in our yard
when the green hostile sky tried to grab them.
I don't remember the distress of the house
shaking when lightening broke through
our neighbour's roof
to find a place to rest in the ground
next to our buried budgie.
I don't recollect the feel of my mother's hand
on my arm, pulling me to safety
away from the tv in a storm
or my father's laughter at her unplugging anything
that could be unplugged, including me.
I don't remember the *PS I love you!* from anyone.

Finding the Angles

How do I tell my story without hashing out the same old internal dialogue that I have had with myself throughout my recovery? I want to be authentic in what I share and reveal something that will change my own point of view as well as others. When writing from a place of self, when telling our own story is it possible to be totally authentic? I have realized in the telling of my story there are many versions. There is the way I look back and see my life. There is another viewpoint though that is most important to the telling of my story, which is the shift or the angle at which I see my life differently. The angle changes all of the time depending on which dot I am connected to and where I am standing on the line when I turn my head to gaze.

My daughter woke me before six in a panic one morning. She didn't know where her boyfriend was and when she looked outside from one of the side windows of our house she only saw a police car on the street blocking our back lane, with its lights flashing. Our house sits on a

corner, which means the front of it is on a main street and then we are fortunate to back onto an alley off a side street and so have some privacy. We had many viewpoints. I opened the back door and couldn't figure out what was going on. I looked out the kitchen window from which I could view the bus stop to see if he was there. He wasn't. Each time we looked out of the house from a different angle we gained another perspective. From the front window we saw the street blocked off and suddenly we were confronted with a massive power line down right in front of our house. Depending on where we were looking the story changed. In this case it changed quickly as we became more informed. We finally reached her boyfriend who was safe at work. Life is an ever-changing picture and as I look back at my life, I become informed and my relationship with myself changes as I find the different angles to view and I connect the different dots one to the other. Today it was a power line, tomorrow it might be my job, yesterday it was how I came to see myself in relation to my school work, some days it is how I see myself in relation to my concussion. Coming back to the idea of the other, it is through my stories that I see myself and I change just as others who view my story do or I do in hearing or viewing others' stories. As Leggo (2006) related, "My autobiographic material changes how I perceive myself and I become the other. It is possible to be reflexive when thinking of the other" (p.115).

At Bridal Falls

Three people, a man and two women
sit on a damp log at the foot of Bridal Falls.
He red-haired, tall and thin, bones eaten
by the afternoon's hike,
the women both fit
are quiet almost contemplative shadows
of the ferns overgrown on the forest bed.

Periodically they look over at me
mostly, their cardboard straight backs
are turned in my direction. I am relieved
they are not witness to my struggles

as I try to clamour up as high as possible
to the point of most power
where water and rock collide,
where a moment ago my partner
gazelle-like landed.
I unlike him, am stopped short
off balance, on all fours.
Unlike him, I slide down
the rocky mountainside
try to navigate distance
one rock, now another
one rock now another.

I sit close to the group of strangers
look for comfort in their nearness,
but the roar of the waterfall,
now a jolt of electricity
makes my brain sizzle
and I can no longer bear the pain.
I leave their silence behind
an invisible refugee
I crawl deeper into the woods
the forest floor catching the groans
of the dying leaves gathering
beneath my heavy feet.
Eventually you find me asleep
ears plugged with tissue
an imagined rosary
in my Jewish prayers.

Later in our hotel room
as you dream
the street light plays with wallpaper dust
and I am caught in a moment of wonder,
realizing I could place my brain
at the foot of the waterfall,
a sacrifice to some God
and I would be left holding the shell.
The dust settles, a car horn blares,
a drunken red-haired man somewhere
is thinking of a quieter moment
while I try to imagine
this empty space waiting to be filled.
Suddenly the street is peaceful and I know.

I know the coloured leaves of childhood
pulled into a pile for jumping
sticking to big grey woolly sweaters,
the cool of the skies settling
into bones, precursors for the slow
winter days ahead.
The barren trees so quiet a pun could
not make them laugh.

I know Sunday hikes with my father
over red clay hills that suck you in
like vacuum sealed jam jars.
My mother locked inside our car,
the idea of tripping over rocks or
a wild animal attacking her
keeps her handcuffed to the steering wheel.
Her irrational fear steals time,
steals delight, steals laughter.
Her irrational fear follows us everywhere,
to the grocery store, school, the washroom.
I realize it has taken up way too much room
in my head for years and so
I leave it too at the foot of the falls
hope the red-haired man and his friends
don't tumble over it.

I know a moonlit night on the side of a mountain
in Saas Fee, silently engaged, humming
to ourselves a song from infancy
until a choir harmonizes to fill in the night.
The notes push us past the brilliant stars,
wakes the cows, alerts the villagers
to the danger of an artist wooing
the close of another day.

I know the loon
who on a northern Ontario lake
calls out to its partner
that it is time to go home,
the other answers it is not done here
and disappears below the surface one last time.
I hold my breath as their conversation
fills the gaps where I cannot speak
while the clear lake clasps all of the secrets
we dare not say out loud.
The sun has turned to orange

and a moment later they fly away together.
I am at rest.

I know words etched into stones
as I try to remember
how to write,
how to seek out truth,
how to return to every passage ever read,
every second in thought
engaged.
I am trying to wake, to breathe, to heal.

I don't know if the red-haired man
and the two women
have found my empty container of a brain
or if they did if they tossed it aside,
or are using it as a planter.
Whatever the case, I have enough
to get me by for today.

Connecting the Dots and Finding Community

As I write this, I continue to see situations from different angles connecting the dots into different pictures. After sustaining a second major work-related concussion, I remember a time when I was so angry after this concussion, so angry that this had happened to me again, that I wanted to know why and to what great purpose there was in all of this. I once again turned to my faith and went back to Shul to try to find the answers. The peace I found after my father died wasn't there. The comfort I found standing in the small synagogue watching as the light came through the stained-glass windows when we turned to pray, didn't arrive for me that day. Why? I couldn't see the answer. Perhaps it was the angle from which I viewed this, the dots just weren't connecting for me, yet I needed the answers. I arranged a meeting with the Rabbi and told her of all my struggles and my questions and of my anger and still I had no answers. Where was I to get the peace I needed? And then I thought I knew; I thought in that moment there really wasn't any.

I was left alone with my pain, my being different in the world and trying to navigate in the world in a way that I had no understanding of.

As I slowly came to terms with the fact that I felt alone in my struggles, the anger began to subside and I could feel my inner strength begin to resurface. In that moment I remembered I was never alone. I was in community. I had all the wonderful individuals who supported my family through the hardest of times. There were so many. What I found when I connected the dots was that my faith, my belief in the goodness in people and their compassion was still intact. The sense of belonging I had found on that day so long ago with my grandmother, the comfort I gained in going to Shul after my father died, was not limited to the four walls of a building. As I found in returning to my childhood home in Toronto there was so much more than a building that gives us our sense of self and the ability to survive. For me it was in the hand that held mine when I first was hit in the head by the back of a child's head. It was the friend who watched me try over and over again to get my words out and stood by me in my efforts as painful as it was. It was the community that believed in me when I messed up, and the love of my children when I drove them crazy with the same questions. Finally, I piece this all together and I find I have a greater depth of understanding of my connection to community and my importance to that connection (Leggo, 2005). It was being able to get on a bus for the first time in rush hour and not feel sick. It was the seeing of the sun and not being blinded by the light. It was and is the light.

In The Aftermath

*In chasing what I thought was right I have run into walls.
Susan Chung*

Some say the universe
is trying to tell me something.
I stop, contemplate the message

that may be hidden in bricks.
Who hasn't run into walls at some point?
Sometimes I am so surprised
at how hard they are
when I am expecting to walk straight through.
I am persistent though.
I get up and run against them
sometimes quietly, sometimes with a loaded voice
trying to shoot the foundations.
I hit, I fall, get up, hit, fall,
get up, hit, fall, hit, fall, get up.

I think about the fact
had I been born in another time and place
I would have been marched
behind a very tall grey wall,
I think about the fact
I never would have come out.
I think about another history
where ghost's hollow faces
circle, tell me it is easier to breath in death
than to survive in the daily horror
of beatings and filth.
I think about the fact
my children, my arms holding them,
their smiles, their eyes,
would have disappeared
and then I think about the gas.
I think about the cries.
I think about the silence.

I think about the hands of hatred
that could build these chambers,
the eyes that turn away
from these images I see,
that look at me as though I do not exist
and I want to crawl behind them
to understand what ghost lives in there
telling them they must build a wall
before I do.
I want to let them know
there is nothing to be afraid of.
I am just a woman, a Jew,
wanting to tell her children they are safe,
that the greyness is only a wall
that can be torn down

that the sun is on the other side
but today I can't.

I think about the walls I have hit my head against,
real walls that knocked out my words,
my thoughts, my ability to think, to cry,
a quiet dictator stealing my life in a different way.
Now that I have returned
I want my compassion to count for something,
but today I don't know that it does
and the message is still unclear.
I run at the wall, fall,
I get up, run, get up, run.
I get up, run. I get up, run.
Because I can, because I can, because I can.

The Straight and Narrow Road...Or Is It?

As I move forward along this path, I have come to understand that for me being at home comes from inside. How I convey that to the outside world is important because it allows me the privilege of sharing what I have discovered on this extraordinary ride over the last few years, particularly on my recent trips, with others to Toronto and Poland. Each February I teach philosophy and writing to a cohort of Masters students at the Vancouver Expressive Arts Therapy School. These lectures are full of information and embodied exercises that help them gain a sense of the movements in Western philosophy. I start the class by having the students write down what they think goodness is. I then focus my discussion on Socrates and Plato and the differences in their ideas. Then, in order for them to truly understand the shift in thinking from the senses to the intellect I have the class first start to visualize goodness with their eyes closed and let them feel the idea in their bodies to be followed by drawing. Then as they break into pairs they discuss what goodness is from an intellectual standpoint, referring back to their notes if they like, without letting their emotions take over. This whole process is then repeated

for the idea of beauty. After examining the influences of other Western philosophers, we finally move into phenomenology and a simple activity from Constanza Silva (2013). Holding a rock on a blown-up bag they just practise being in the moment and then write about the experience.

This part of the class ends with an exercise based on a reading “How Beauty Will Save the World: William Blake’s Prophetic Vision” by Suzan Sklar. Sklar (2007) tells us,

For many years I wanted to find the beauty that saves the world. I wanted to define it. Then I worked as a social worker in Chicago and one of my protégées threw back her head to sing “Amazing Grace” at a birthday party. When she sang grace did fill the room, for Tamika has a voice that is more than amazing. She had been homeless and horribly abused. I took her to breakfast the next day. “If I couldn’t sing,” she told me, “I’d have to take drugs. Because the drugs kill the pain. But beauty is bigger than pain.” The beauty that saves the world is Tamika. The beauty that saves the world is transformative. It is the divine in the human. It cannot be abstracted from a living being. It is to be experienced not defined. (p. 30)

Beauty factors into expressive arts therapy through aesthetics and how we respond. The focus of the aesthetic response is on what is evoked and the “quality of the response” rather than focusing on “what is evoking the response” (Knill, Barba, et al., 2004. p. 71). After I read Sklar’s statement, the whole class stood in a circle as I played a video of Judy Collins singing “Amazing Grace” with the Harlem Boys Choir accompanying her. Some students moved, swayed, someone cried while others joined hands and stood perfectly still. This particular exercise triggers a lot of emotional responses for various reasons. Someone has lost a loved one, someone remembers their mother, or someone is just moved by the beauty. Their responses are very real and authentic. To finish, everyone wrote about the experience and where they found beauty.

I then go on to talk about using poetry as a therapeutic tool as well as using poetic inquiry within research. I share examples of my own work, go over reflexivity and hand out a book list. For the therapeutic side they have already had classes on the theory of expressive arts therapy, so I stay focused on walking them through a series of exercises that they can then put in their toolboxes and use with clients in group and individual settings. To begin the class everyone takes a stone, which is something concrete they can hold. They are invited to write a word on the stone that reflects where they are in the moment. We will end with the stone and a new word which will usually show the transition resulting from the process. They then begin to draw around the stones, give aesthetic responses about the stones and finally write about the stones from these responses. We move through the modalities, always ending in a poem.

On breaks I ask them to find poetry in cafes, on the street, and in conversations, to then turn into collaborative poetry when they come back to class. I give them epigraphs to begin poems, whole poems from Fiona Lam and Li-young Lee to inspire them and break once again into pairs for activities with words to build writing. In this final activity they simply start by writing any words that come to them inspired from their stone and put them on cue cards. They literally make a path with these words and then walk the path. They then turn around to have a look back at where they have come from. As they then walk back along the path, they pick up the words they want to keep with them, then use these words to write a poem. Finally, we take all the stones and place them in the middle of the room and use our cards to form paths out from the centre for a community art piece. Everyone has the chance to walk this labyrinth if they choose. We write a final poem and as always there is an invitation to share. These classes are rich experiences and full of movement, laughter and tears as they explore this work for themselves.

This year I was asked to add another dimension to my classes and give a lecture on my own work. This was the first time I was going to present some of my papers to my students. I began with my work from my master's thesis, in which I examined how my family was affected by the Holocaust. I had written a series of poems that later became my first book of poetry and a short film. Subsequently I included papers from my dissertation which focused on my seeking out a returning sense of self after MTBI. I decided from the outset I wanted this to be more than a lecture series in which they sat and listened. I wanted to create a space whereby they could draw from their own experiences using what I was giving them. When putting this lecture series together, I wondered at how personal it was and if it would be too much for my students.

Yet here we had spent all this time together in a personal space, opening up and creating something sacred. I knew if I expected them to be able to respond to the activities I was giving them on a personal level, I needed to be able to do so as well. I had decided when planning for this class that I would stop along the way to have them respond with a drawing or some writing of their own. With each pause that I took I gave them time to create and build something new as they responded to the work. I was inviting them into my space and in turn I was no longer alone in the work. Leggo (2008) states, "Imagine a pedagogy of listening and attending so we could hear the wingbeats of butterflies" (p. 12). This is what it is all about, attending to the details, to the obscure, to the minute, in being in one another's presence and knowing we can all hear the butterflies.

As I think about my work as a researcher and the journey I have embarked on in examining my own experience to relay the trauma of a head injury that has changed my life in almost every aspect, I wonder about exposing myself to the world when I am turning inward instead of outward. I wonder about self-indulgence, reflexivity, life writing and what

significance, if any, my experiences hold for others. I wonder about how my own story changes me (Leggo, 2005). Writing my personal story is essential to this process of change. Story allows for the possibilities of reflexivity (Etherington, 2004), of release from trauma (hooks, 2004) and of huge internal shifts (Schell-Word, 1999). My inquiry brings the world closer to me. My inquiry through poetry and life writing always inspires me to examine the world while I am engaged in a very internal private dialogue, to remain attached even though I am detached. It allows me to be open to other possibilities, to be sensitive and tender with myself and to come at the world around me with “a fierce vibrato” (Wiebe, 2015).

This is what I wanted to give to my students through the telling of my story. In creating space for them with the call and response aspect, we found those liminal spaces we often seek out or sometimes are thrown into without realizing it is happening. As Pauline Sameshima (2008) claims,

Teaching and learning occur everywhere, not only in the classroom. Learning occurs in the in-between spaces of liminality, between the lines of the poem, between the ideas and in the connections holding home and school, between the identities of mother and researcher, between fiction and nonfiction. (p. 49)

Up to that point they had brought their own lives into the class at different times, responding to exercises that resonated deeply for them. Now I was bringing my life into the room as well and shifting the pedagogy that had been dominant to this point. This now was about finding comfort in these places with one another and letting the wonderment of the experience truly happen. As Leggo (2019) notes, “The curriculum of becoming human involves learning through practice, reflection, conversation, collaboration, courage, and commitment how to be human” (p.179). This was about my becoming human with my students.

As my story unfolded before my students, their response showed me I was on the right track. As they opened up in their reactions, sometimes through poems, sometimes through tears, laughter, movement or art, they replied through their own experience and “vibrato” for life. They became witnesses to the gathering of pieces of self into a container that, while cracked from all of my injuries, was wholly mine. Around this came their stories and the container then became overflowing with the beauty they added. They were walking along the path with me as I discovered my own resiliency to the trauma I had experienced and the unearthing of myself through my family history, while they in turn shared of themselves from their own lives. Leggo (2005) reminds us, “Too often we fail to understand the complex ways in which we compose and recompose our sense of identity. We need to acknowledge how our identity is always malleable and changing” (p. 116). We were a living testimony to this.

When sitting down to write about this experience I had with my students in more detail, I found I was getting extremely frustrated. I knew what I was trying to say but the words, the ideas and flow of what I was trying to convey was taking so long to come. Then suddenly, just as my frustration peaked, each piece began to fall into place and make sense. One after the other the words kept coming as the section took shape. I found what I needed to say easily now while everything seemed to be moving along at a good clip. I was ecstatic. Then just as I was coming to the end of this segment the unfortunate happened. I inadvertently copied, pasted and saved another document over top of it. I felt all of the hours I spent spacing, bending and shaping words into sentences and sentences onto the page, in an instant, were wasted. I was devastated. It was the only part of my dissertation I hadn’t backed up, saved or sent anywhere. I tried desperately for two hours to retrieve it. It had vanished into thin air. Grief, as I have stated, comes in many forms. Sudden unexpected loss of any kind can pull the rug out from under us

and stop us in our tracks. Then life and grief and sorrow were about to become a bit more complex in ways no one, including myself, could ever have imagined.

In December of 2019 Covid-19 started to sweep across the world and suddenly every store was running out of toilet paper and masks, while hospitals were preparing for the worst-case scenario of being overrun with thousands of patients a day, as we all helplessly watched. The World Health Organization reported daily as this unseen predator made its way swiftly across the globe affecting country after country. We sat waiting in disbelief and fear. As the days began to roll into weeks, some countries were hit harder than others, as we witnessed the death toll in Spain and Italy climbing uncontrollably. Some young people flocked to beaches to party, despite the outbreak, as they were slow to acknowledge that people in all age groups were targets for the disease, not only the elderly or those with compromised immune systems. Anyone became a potential victim and it made me think back to my own trauma with MTBI, knowing anyone can be a victim as well.

Now days seem to roll by as though I am in a fog once again, similar to concussed state, yet considerably different. My world has suddenly become incredibly small as I self-isolate because I am prone to pneumonia and am asthmatic. I worry about my daughter who has Crohns disease and is immune compromised, my son who is also prone to pneumonia and my other daughter who lives in Australia, just because she is so far away. All of my children worry about me because of my underlying health issues. Then I get sick and I can barely breathe and my inhalers do absolutely nothing for me, yet the Covid-19 response line tells me I am low risk because I have not traveled and I haven't been in contact with anyone who has or has tested positive. My own doctor tells me he thinks I have a virus that has triggered a major asthma attack and puts me on prednisone, a highly effective but very strong medication used for anti-

inflammatory purposes. After a week my chest starts to release me a bit at a time from the pressure I have been under and I can now walk my dog a block without getting winded and having to come home to nap for two hours. Yet the impact is huge as it is. It takes me weeks to recover and to once again relinquish the stress of having been physically attacked by my own body. This all feels too familiar.

As we adjust to this new way of being within the confines of a pandemic, I come back to the beginning of my work. I am wrapped in grief and loss some days so much that I can barely move or breathe. The tightness in my chest has once again returned, only this time it is caused by something other than an illness or injury. I feel strangled some days by the intensity of feelings as I have lost my ability to think clearly again. I feel myself to have emerged into a dense fog from which I can barely climb out and which encases my entire self. As I examine my reactions to this pandemic, I realize that sometimes we need to begin in the place farthest from ourselves in order to discover that which is closest. It is easier to examine issues, events and feelings which are a bit more removed than those that sit in our very heart and we are trying to circumvent and avoid at all costs. Yet, sometimes we need to explore what lies behind the mist in order to gain a clearer insight into the whole story. At times when I am once again feeling utterly alone in the world. I turn on the television in order to feel not so alone, as we are all experiencing this trauma. We are all lost in this fog of not knowing what to do or how to cope. Reaching out eases the intense feelings and I realize that while now I can reach out, when I was concussed, I didn't know how.

We are all vulnerable and once again I am feeling suddenly vulnerable in a way I never could have anticipated. As Ruthann Knechel Johansen (2002), reminds us about sudden trauma, "I learned how wide the chasm is that separates vulnerability that is chosen from vulnerability

that crashes upon us” (p. 24). I lie awake at night wondering if my sore throat is the first sign I am sick, or taking deep breaths to make sure my lungs are not compromised. Then the thought that I am most afraid of comes swirling through my head and I wonder if I am the only one thinking this way or if there are thousands of others around the world lost in their thoughts and feelings. Either way I know that I do not want to die here tonight alone. By June 11th doctors Glenn K. Wakam, M.D., John R. Montgomery, M.D., Ben E. Biesterveld, M.D., and Craig S. Brown, M.D, (2020) have written *Not Dying Alone — Modern Compassionate Care in the Covid19 Pandemic*, imploring the powers that be in the US healthcare system to do a better job so that patients do not die without any form of contact with their loved ones and families are not reduced to begging to see them in their last moments. They emphasise that “the fear of dying alone is nearly universal” (Wakam et al., 2020) but situations like these highlight the underlying flaws in a system that sometimes puts protocol over compassion, which as these doctors experienced was grossly inadequate to meeting anyone’s needs in times of unprecedented crisis.

Shifts

Earthquakes come in waves.
There are those, which jolt
you out of complacency
in a mere second.
Dishes fall off shelves,
roads open up leaving
gaping holes
and buildings drop bricks
onto the middle of sidewalks
crushing whatever is in the way.
All of life’s simple treasures
disappear in an instant.
Sometimes though
the earth just rolls over us
gently knocking everything
off balance, shifting slightly

to the right or left
never to be the same.

This is how I came to understand
myself, shaken
an earthquake
had rolled over me
and in an instant
I was gone.
My life as I knew it
simply disappeared,
I was a container
that while not entirely empty
was shattered, cracked
and decidedly hollow.

I held the hands
of anyone who stood beside me
and in the morning
I started again
stuttering into my day
wondering where my keys were,
why the lights were so bright,
how I could get through
to night-time
when I had an excuse for not being.

The pain of existing
too much,
I slept and I slept and I slept
until
I cried and I cried and I cried
and then I slept some more.

Now I hear the world crying
and I wonder have we fallen
into too deep a sleep?
I wake again only to want to
hold the world's hand.

The pandemic has settled over all of us and I wake up with the enormity of this global crisis gripping me across my entire body, just as it grips every one of us across the globe. It is in the not knowing that I get caught. Just as the uncertainty of the MTBI made me feel totally alone

and vulnerable, at times, so does this. This is terrifying. There were days then and there are days now that I find myself trying to come to terms with what is happening. My ability to focus on my work, on a book or even a Netflix show is totally lost. I realize just how much I have come to see myself in terms of what I am able to do, to read, to write and now on days when I can barely focus, I wonder at my ability to function in the world in any way that makes sense at all. Yet this is different as I realize I have not lost my words or speech or ability to write, only my focus as my body reacts to the global pandemic with agitation and unease. Now again as then, I turn inward to find something of myself, to place myself and to find myself in a world that seems so totally alien and far away. I find that place of resilience, courage and my ability to change things despite the fear and grief.

There were many times in the last few years that I felt totally lost and without purpose. I felt as though I didn't know who I was or how I could navigate in the world anymore. I couldn't find my way out of the fog. I didn't know where my joy came from or what brought me joy. Once again, I find myself experiencing the same feelings. In times like these how do you find something of yourself in the ashes that surround you? At one point after my second concussion, my doctor told me straight out, "You know you experienced a death of sorts, your spirit died." I had to find my way back through the mist into a world I had no idea how to be in anymore. I had to grieve for the loss of myself to move on. While this too has been thrust upon me, and for a time I have lost my focus, I have not physically lost my ability to move, walk, do yoga. I can go into my body and know it will do the things I want it to do unlike when I was in the state of being concussed. Regardless, I must find my resilience and something inside myself that doesn't allow me to give up. I must remember that I have lived through the loss of self both physically and psychically and came back from that. I too will come back from this.

As the pandemic settles in, I search out the things that will help me to find wonder in the world again and help me to lead myself out of the fog. I am approached by the Waldman Jewish Library about starting an expressive arts group online to help people cope with the feelings they are experiencing. They also ask me if I will begin a poetry group online, Poetry by Candlelight, a place of community as everyone craves the personal interactions. Here in this odd virtual space I help people to find community. We all come away feeling the ambience of these evenings full and rich and wanting more. For myself, as I did in the middle of my concussions, I start to take longer walks. Having eaten all the junk food I stored away at the beginning of the pandemic, I now feel gross and sluggish. While walks are starting to get me back into shape, I am slow to feel connected with something outside myself again. I take comfort when I find a child's lost toy in a tree, art work my neighbour has made on their fence, flowerbed after flowerbed flourishing despite what we as humans are experiencing and I realize that this is where I can find the hope and beauty and resiliency.

With this knowledge I can now face what I lost in this dissertation and know that while I grieve the loss of what I had written, I may now go on. I have unearthed something else here from where to start. The tears I shed over all the hours and pages disappearing into the ether, as it were, have only shifted into something else, something profound and uplifting. I have emerged from a place deep within the fog. Through the lack of personal connection, touch and love because of the pandemic, I have found the humanness in this story, the connections each of us desires and need to survive. It is a reminder, once again, of what I lost and what I gained through the many MTBIs I suffered, of the shifts that occur sometimes by things that are just out of our control. Within this context I have begun to unravel and understand just how important it was and is for me to share my story with my students. It is through the personal that we understand,

learn and know it is ok not to know, to go on to explore and ultimately achieve. Leggo (2019) states that,

What we need in schools is a commitment to investigating seriously and sincerely what it means to be human, to become human, to acknowledge the humanity of other humans, to know our ecological interconnections in the wide expanse of the earth, even the universe. As educators we need to promote and practice a curriculum of becoming human. (p.179)

Poetry saved me when I fell, when I questioned, when I hurt and when I needed to move on. Life writing allowed me to share my story, to be heard and to find my voice. What is academic work if it isn't all of this: the questioning, the falling, the getting up, and moving on? It is the finding of one's voice amongst the influential writings of those who came before. It is the making sense where sometimes it isn't apparent and the searching for answers when it seems we shouldn't be asking. It is in our desire to see one another as human, to see that each of us struggles in the same way, where we connect even though we have different stories (Snowber & Wiebe, 2009). It is in that humanness that we afford ourselves, that we put ourselves in a position to understand what happens when we are doing research about ourselves, or creating a space for others to do the same or living through an MTBI or pandemic.

It has taken a pandemic for me to remember what I learned from my MTBI. There is still beauty to be found in the connections that we crave and the recognition that our stories matter. These are the things which keep us connected to the world and give us an understanding of how that existence works (Quinn-Hall, 2016). Like Apol, I found for myself that my work around MTBI in academia not only altered my view of the world but of my students as well. How can it be anything but this? I come into the classroom understanding that like me, they each have their own stories that they carry. In creating a space that offers a place of authentic openness, I find

that they in turn are willing to listen, experience and share their own experiences. A perfect place to begin again, with connection and wonder, seeking out answers a question and a story at a time.

Findings

In the quiet I find gemstones,
small pieces of precious material
I mold into beautiful stories,
moments
created by a force
bigger than myself.
They are fiction and reality
melded over time,
each informing the other
of the importance of story.
I find myself in each,
understand that sometimes
it is not the medium
but the meaning
that is important.
Sometimes they are one and the same.

When I was young
my mother told me
I was unlovable
and I believed her
for a long time
even though my father
always told me the opposite,
but his voice was drowned out
by her sour melodies.

Tonight as I lay thinking
of the years she and I
spent batting our words
between the impossible
and the hurt,
I realized that she
was the one
who was unlovable,
not because she was
but because she believed
she was, and in turn
believed this of me.

Today I weave
her truths and tales
into my own,
as I catch my father's
heart in my glove,
I see how they blend
to make a sunrise
instead of a sunset
and I hold the words
that she couldn't find
for herself
in the sky for all of us.
I hope even in death
they both know
I understand how to find kisses in the fog.

The Beginning: A Time to Reflect

It just so happens that today is the first day of Passover. Being a secular Jew, it likely has a different meaning for those who celebrate this as a religious holiday and yet, I can't help but think of the significance of this day when I sit down to write about my own journey through life and trauma. Tonight, while the world is gathered around their televisions watching as a pandemic spreads across the globe, I am wishing I could come to the Seder table with my children, away from the busyness of the world, away from the computer screen, and texts, and Twitter, and away from the news alerts, warning me of the further spread of this virus. I can't. My children come to the table through Zoom, every one of them nestled into their own homes with their partners, safe yet so far away. I long to hug them, to sit and hold their hands and tell them everything is ok. Yet, tonight I can barely focus on the screen as an overwhelming sense of loneliness washes over me as we are so distant from one another. In this moment I wonder what if anything I have learnt through this journey that has brought me to this point. In some ways Auschwitz now seems so far away.

This has also led me to take the time to consider what Passover means to me in the greater scheme of things and how my life, as did my ancestors', changed through trauma and the release from it. No matter how many thousands of years have passed, there are just certain things, which human beings always desire. The freedom from being enslaved is one. The need to survive is another. Passover is one time when our people, all in their own little pockets of the planet, sit down and acknowledge an occasion when we were brought out of bondage. More than just the release from slavery, we were given "the gift of understanding" that through the Exodus we became "free people," which is in essence what defines us to our core: which means no one can ever "enslave our spirit" again (Shurpin, n.d).

Yet, I will go a step further to say that nothing, whether human or otherwise, has the ability to steal our spirit when we take the time to understand that spirit is something that is wholly ours. This is what freedom ultimately is – spirit and the courage that it sometimes takes, even in the hardest of times, in order to keep it. Through the eras, others have tried to break our spirits, to reduce us to less than human. What that spirit and freedom is varies greatly from situation to situation. We travel through time with our memories, some intact, others veiled, some entirely forgotten. It is important that there are some things which we do not allow time to erase. This is why it is important that we tell our stories over and over again so that we don't forget. Memory is important. In learning lessons from our past, we can then imagine a future not only for ourselves but for others (Falk, 2008).

Joanna McGrath (2004) in her article "Beyond Restoration to Transformation: Positive Outcomes in the Rehabilitation of Acquired Brain Injury" found, in her patients with brain injuries,

The past is often idealized, and nostalgia can be a dominant emotion. Patients can express this feeling in terms of “I want to go home” (see Appendix 1). Rehabilitation professionals usually interpret this as, “I want to be discharged with a suitable care package,” whereas it means something more like, “I want to be the old me. I want to get back to normal.” (p. 769)

Just as I so desperately wanted to feel like my old self when I had my concussions, I found I was feeling the same way. I want not only to feel the old me laughing and joking around the Passover table with my children but I now want the world back to the way it was. I want us all to go home. Yet somehow on a very profoundly deep level I know just as my container has changed from the countless hits to the head, the world has somehow shifted as well.

McGrath went on to compare these statements from MTBI patients about their trauma to the experience of the Israelites who were conquered in 6th Century Babylon and the trauma this brought to them. By examining the Old Testament, she found that while the people of Israel were conquered, relocated and had their temple destroyed, which represented who they were as a people and their relationship to God, they longed and tried to retain some of what they lost and longed for – their life the way it was before being conquered. Under the Babylonian rule the Israelites tried to maintain some of their religious practices, however these changed as their relationship with God changed. New practices were born of the old and while they were influenced and shaped by the past, the present circumstances dictated the new. McGrath (2004) went on to state that,

The book of Job demonstrates in the final chapters that YHWH does not reject, but instead draws close to and affirms the suffering person, who is clearly innocent. The “suffering servant” passage of Isaiah 53 seems to indicate that suffering may be

redemptive, educative or transforming, (“Out of his anguish he shall see light”) and that “suffering can be a sign of God’s favour rather than of his judgement.” (p. 771)

We must reach deep inside in order to find ourselves in the darkest moments in order to go on. It is the ability to imagine a future for ourselves, to take the ugly experiences and make something beautiful (Levine, 2009), which allows us to continue when it seems as though we may not. The Israelites like those who have suffered an MTBI found hope within these changes. Even after they returned to Jerusalem life was never the same yet they survived. Frankl (1959), reminded his fellow concentration camp prisoners that “They must not lose hope but should keep their courage in the certainty that the hopelessness of our struggle did not detract from its dignity and its meaning” (p.83). No matter what time period you exist in or under what dire circumstances, as long as there is a single hope there is possibility for change. It is through our art that we have the best chance of achieving this, of acknowledging the sometimes brutal side of life, in order to realize that, despite all of this, we still want to survive, we still want to see the next day, tell the next person our story, we still can find hope and go on.

The Way In

While preparing to share my work with my students, I found I was uncovering things about my own journey that I had never expected. As I began to go through the papers I had written in various classes for my coursework toward my PhD, themes began to emerge. Some were expected, as I was writing about my life and my experience with MTBI, while others were a huge surprise. What we shared as a result of this was a profound experience for all of us as I brought them into the work in an experiential and surprising way.

While in a skills class in which I taught, it came to my attention that two girls could not read an analog clock. They had no idea of what time it was when we asked them to check

without looking at their cellphones. They were totally lost. Dan Falk (2008) tells us, “The way we interact with time has varied greatly over the millennia and continues to vary from one culture to another - from those who obsess over time to those who barely acknowledge the existence of past and future” (p.167). The way in which we record and recognize time has changed over the centuries, yet, how the brain actually ‘interprets time’ is still unclear. It is now believed that rather than one central internal clock there are many functions at work to interpret input for various aspects of time (Falk, 2008). The way these girls were viewing time was just another postmark that our way of being with time was once again shifting.

As I think of my ancestors, I wonder if they moved fast or if their sense of time would have felt like a snail’s pace to me, even slower than what I experience when I leave the city and purposely try to slow down. During their captivity they would have observed the Egyptian’s idea of time, which was centred around the river and the flooding of the land to create crops (Falk, 2008). I wonder how this changed for them, if at all, once they were able to return to the Promised Land. I wonder if time sped up or dragged on for them as they planned and executed their escape. When there is a sense of urgency, when our survival is on the line, what happens to our sense of time? I wonder as they were held prisoner under Babylonian rule and they shifted their practices, waiting again to return home to Jerusalem, if time dragged until they were able to find their way back to the temple. As they rebuilt, was time ever the same?

As I began to think of my relationship with time and my concussions, I realized so many things had changed. I started to think very seriously about how I looked at time and how I lived with time and what it all meant to me. During my third major concussion my relationship to time changed drastically. There is a simple test, the clock drawing test (CDT) which has become one of the most widely used cognitive screening tools for use with concussion patients, stroke

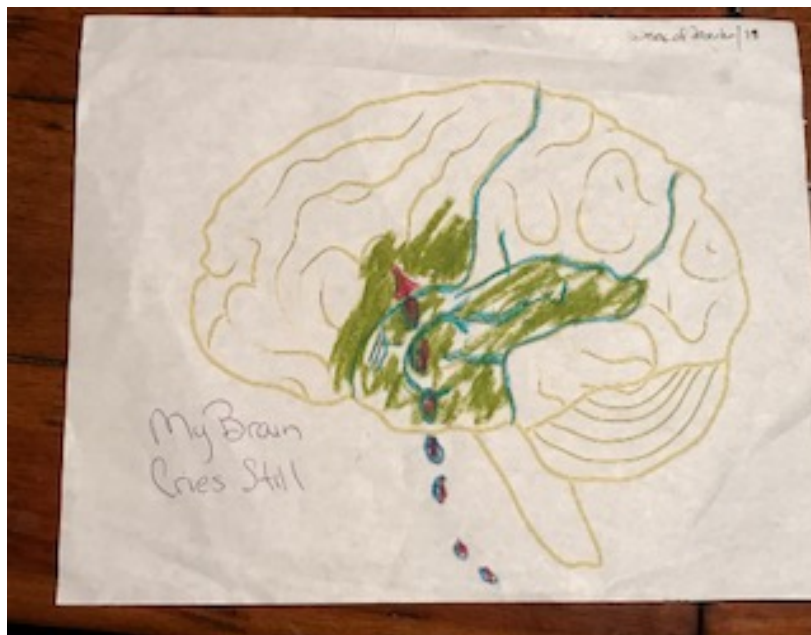


Figure 6: Brain Exposed

victims, and those suspected of having dementia or other brain related ailments (Hazan et al., 2018). Patients are asked to draw the outline of a clock and then to fill in the numbers. For someone whose cognitive abilities are intact this would be a simple task. For those kids who have never seen an analog clock this could be a challenge and for someone like myself who has sustained a MTBI it is next to impossible. This simple drawing can be revealing to a doctor. To my dismay I found that while I could easily draw the circle for the clock, filling in the clock face was a whole other matter. Trying to get past the number two was virtually impossible. However, on a good day, and if I really forced myself both physically and mentally, I could get to the number three. My whole relationship with time had literally disappeared from the page before my eyes. This was one of the most frightening moments in my life. I began to draw pictures to represent this period for myself. The first a drawing was an outline of a brain that I had coloured to represent what it felt like to have had a concussion and where I felt it was located, at least where I kept getting hit. What happened next was a whole series of drawings and poems which depicted the fear, loss and horror of losing time. As poems and pictures emerged, I realized it was important to me to show how time had literally stopped the moment I was hit.

Twelve hours
now broken pieces of life.

Knowing Time

MTBI is called traumatic for a reason. As I had been told by my doctor, I experienced a death of sorts in that I lost the person I knew myself to be and everything that defined who I was. I needed to grieve that loss, and also find a way back into the world in which I could function in this new way. I had no sense of time; it had just stopped. Meyer (2012) tells us that,

Time tells me about the temporality and finitude of my life. In a given moment, time can appear on the horizon as ahead-of-itself, present, or as having been. Time isn't as reliable as clockwork—sometimes it beats true and steady, other times it tics according to my mood and circumstance. Time eludes. (p. 111)

It became more and more imperative for me to show others, like my students who hadn't experienced this, what it was like to have time elude me. I realized that the best way to do this was to stop time itself. I realized that by smashing a watch with a hammer, the impact is startling. Apol (2016) found, in witnessing her students' journeys that,

I had not anticipated the level of personal commitment I would feel to working alongside these survivors as they translated emotion and experience into words. And I had not imagined the ways their personal traumas – and the trauma of genocide, writ large – would affect me in a deep and ongoing way. (Apol, 2016, p. 72)

It was my hope that the class could feel and hold the pain of a brain stopping, even if just for a moment. Over the course of the evening there was something everyone related to. I wanted them to know what it felt like the moment time stopped for me. One woman burst into tears as the impact brought her back to the struggles and losses she had experienced from an illness. For

others they related to having a similar family history, of being affected by the Holocaust and finding resiliency and sadness all at the same time. In opening up the space with my stories I then allowed them to open space for themselves to explore and find what it is they bring along with them. It was an important exercise for therapy students and researchers who are just starting on the trip.

The Gift of Time

I am aware that while I lost many things with time, I have also healed with it. I know very well what my deficits are, but I am also very aware of the gift that time has afforded me and that I am still here and still functioning. Meyer (2012) tells us, “The heartache of loneliness and the joy of solitude both found a place in my life on the island. This human capacity to know both so deeply strikes me as extraordinary” (p. 123). I realize that it is important for me to convey this to others as well. While I want them to experience the loss of time through an impact, and the change of time through building sculptures from pieces of watches, I also want them to have the gift of time and understand that it is possible to rebuild. What better way than to gift them something I made through this process. The following work was the result of my final class taken toward my doctoral requirements, a/r/tography. While this dissertation does not use a/r/tography as a primary methodology, I do want to recognize the significant part this class played in moving me toward my own work in living and poetic inquiry and the poetic and visual work below. For me, a/r/tography allowed for this living inquiry to become more than I ever would have anticipated, as this project allowed the reader to see as well as hear my feelings of displacement and loss of time. Most importantly they could understand my sense of loss of self, the grief which came along with this and the bringing back together of the pieces into something different but whole. As Springgay et al. (2005) tell us,

To be engaged in the practice of a/r/tography means to inquire in the world through a process of art making and writing. It is a process of double imaging that includes the creation of art and words that are not separate or illustrative of each other but instead, are interconnected and woven through each other to create additional meanings. (p. 899)

I have presented this work in public at poetry readings, in small groups for professional RMTs and chiropractors and now with my Masters students in order to help them to understand what their patients, friends, colleagues and students might be experiencing as well. This seems like the perfect place to come to the end of my poetic journey.

Time Lost / Time Gifted
Poems by Bonnie Nish



Figure 7: Time

Dedication: For all those engaged in living inquiry.

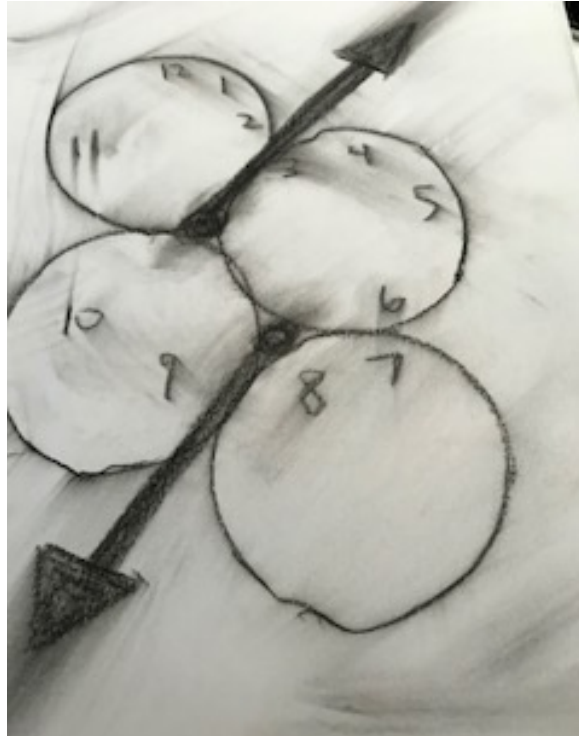


Figure 8: Time Dropped

The Struggle

I struggle with time
as though it is sour dough
I can't knead.
I offer it to you to see if
there is some form
you can shape it into,
something we can hold together
but it squeezes between your fingers
too and escapes.
I break off pieces
fold the leftovers into a tight ball
shove it into my pocket
just encase I need extra later.

I struggle with time
sitting in this seat
for a while now,
watch hands that are too tired
to move all the way around the face
past the six, cry.

They weep for what is lost
and I try to pick them up
from where they have fallen
but they are heavy
and I am weary.
I let them slip
a little further away knowing
there is little more to be done
right now.

I struggle with time
a bit now, a bit then,
castles I once created in clouds
of humid dreams stick to me.
I climb close only to fall.
The sky keeps moving
without me
and I am left here
trying to hold old visions
that have dissolved with wind.

I struggle with time
chimes that are stuck
in my head
on Christmas morning
wake the whole house
I can feel the hustle and bustle
of everyone's excitement
as I crawl further under covers
close my eyes
listen to the clang that keeps
my alley cat brain running to hide.

I struggle with time
the madness of the broken,
the things I cannot fix,
my hammer keeps cracking
the frame and nothing fits together
even though I try.
It is always slightly lop-sided as though
I asked you to carry my baby finger
across the parking lot
and you didn't know where it would end
or the rest of me might begin.
We can walk together
but it really won't matter when I slip.

I am struggling with time
there is no line
I can draw across the world
that anyone will be able to follow.
The sun has fallen asleep
and there is no movement.
Big Ben lapsed in judgement
sits alone, a tourist attraction
that no one can afford.
And as for heaven
it is full of wounds and broken springs
and whirly thingamajig's
that we have all somehow misplaced,
all guilty of the sin of losing time
a concrete block in the path
that can't be pushed away
the howl of our forgotten children
who have no time to play.



Figure 9: Loss

A Time of Loss Two
"Bookends"
- Paul Simon 1968

Time it was
And what a time it was, it was
a time of silence, to draw inward,
pull my legs
up to my chest and remember
I was still here.

A time of innocence
A time of confidences
a time to let the world go
somehow knowing
the comfort of others was enough
for the sun, the moon and me.

Long ago
it must be
that verses flowed
and I spoke easily,
before my throat
became stuck , stuck, stuck, stuck,
stuck, stuck, stuck, stuck
to my words.

I have a photograph
of a time before laughter
was turned off
along with lights,
television, computers,
cellphones, visits, sex,
conversations, and dancing.
Preserve your memories
of dinners
with gravy
and breakfast with fruit granola,
while mandarins and grapes
are the only nourishment
that dribbles toward my stomach
as pounds quietly steal away.

They're all that's left you.
preserved in an envelope
filled with my existence,
my inner clock
that now ticks
slower than a snail
on a hot California day.



Figure 10: *Time Remembered*

Time Remembered

There are so many childhood memories
tethered to my wrist
coloured balls of air that I carry around
to remind me of moments of beauty
when those dark days break.

I remember Christmas mornings
I am the Jewish girl sitting in a friend's kitchen,
waiting for something magical to occur
while Erin, in her pink onesie, her three sisters
in various sizes and colours of the same,
watch for the hour
of gift giving to begin,
wait to be whisked beyond
the usual mix of sibling disputes
and eggs mashed into hash browns.
I listen to Alvin and the Chipmunks
singing Silent Night and watch
for her father with his pipe
and her mother with her smile

to come down the stairs
to engage us in a paperback book
childhood dream I never knew.

I remember climbing trees
in Shelley's backyard,
the tangled web of branches
an escape to another world
as I hopped the fence
into an alley far beyond
my mother's cries for me to come home.
The chatter of unfamiliar dishes
washed in a nearby sink
speak of warm suppers
and a mother listening to the stories
of her children's bumps and falls
and triumphs over evil.
A mealtime that at my house
is celebrated with my mother's demands
for us to be done
so the sound of the dishwasher
is the only story she can hear.
At night I dream of the tree
climb as high as Jack
to find I am not alone at the top.
There is a giant waiting
holding a spoon of gifts
for me to open on a pretend birthday.
I wake with the warmth carried over
into an uncertain day.

I remember Pennie's backyard
the flowers of her mother's garden
a blanket thrown over teenage shoulders
as we smoke cigarettes and share
the stories that weigh down three
17 year old best friends.
The air thick as peanut butter
zips us into an anxiousness
we can't climb out of
as Liz's stories hold us into place.
Pennie has disappeared
only to have climbed onto the roof
of her mother's harp studio.
Disbelief catches in my throat
as a bucket full of cold water

crashes over the edge, I narrowly escape,
Liz not so lucky stops midstream,
and we all laugh at the surprise of ourselves.
Next time I will catch them
in a bombshell moment or maybe Liz
whichever, we know we will go on until
we no longer can, best friends until we die.

I remember the day they told me
she was found, Liz in her onesie of despair
her only clothing,
took all of her pills, walked into a beaver dam,
the one where we hiked every summer to gather
wild blueberries,
a rock tied around her wrist, she escaped.
The voices that followed her everywhere
rested finally at the bottom of a watery grave
and I was left holding the phone wondering
why I couldn't pull her out.
Now I hold her laughter
tie it a bit tighter around my hand
as I try to keep a picture of her
before she knew she had to run away.

I remember the day Erin facebooked me
a friend found amongst the millions
she poked at our memories
trying to find a way into the kitchen
where her childhood held her
in delight every morning.
Now, 30 years later,
she is trying to understand
how the joy of life
was choked out of her daughter's
mouth, to understand how the magic
she gave her wasn't enough to compensate
for the daily physical pain she could not escape.
I have no answers for Erin, only the tears
we shed together and the silent phone hugs
we exchange. I thank her for sharing her family
with me, let her know how she saved me.
It is good to tell the story
of happiness over again, to be reminded
we were once a part
of something bigger than ourselves
and that maybe we still are.

Lost in Tears

My brain still cries
when a door-stopper moment
pulled from my solar plexus
lines the clouds.
Torn and futile
the rain wraps my head
in a bandage of tears and fog.

My brain still cries
when I can't close
the hotel door on a room I didn't book.
The crashing of heads bounces
from wall to wall
as I am stuck listening
to this memory that can't escape.

My brain still cries
is a bullet that becomes immobile
hits a stone wall
with a trajectory wobbly at best.
My aim off center
I am now the target, off balance
I have given myself away.

My brain still cries
my children try to help
but I have left the key
in some restaurant
and they don't know
how to unlock the life
I once held together for us.
My brain still cries.



Figure 11: Lost in Tears

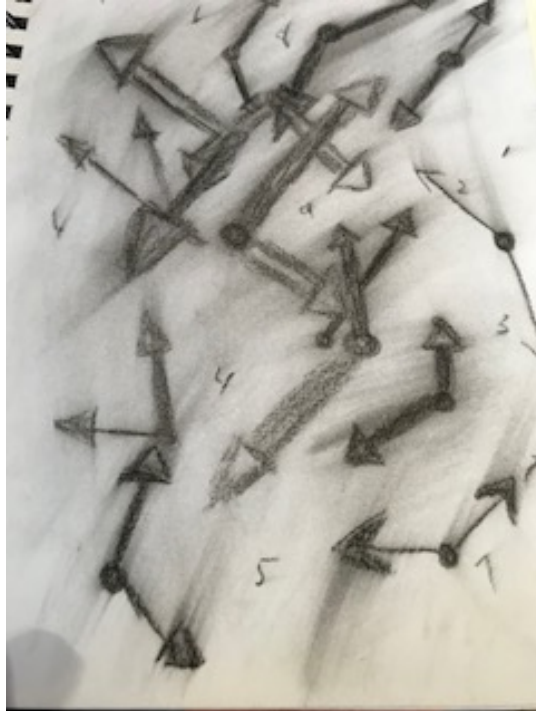


Figure 12: Moving Time

Risks and Possibilities

It can't be the end of the world because
time is only beginning for me again.
Someone is waiting for me to push
the hands past the six
and I try with all of my might to grab them.
I have become a dog in search of a massive bone.
I let my body move hoping it will remember
where I last buried the clock.

I think the hands have moved an inch
the clock crooked
has teeth marks from holding on so tight.
I have become over protective
ready to attack if anything gets too close.
It is a constant battle and I know I have
to let go or die and try to remember
that metaphors can't hurt my head
they can only confuse me.

Life now seems a series of risks
which line my pockets,
some I can't get rid of,
others I dream of conquering
yet can't quite take down.
There are too many of these samurai
who fight for the line up
in a brain that is already too full
and ready to topple.

I try to imagine life off the clock,
a beach in Costa Rica, a villa in Italy,
an outback village full of kangaroos.
A time when so many hazards
didn't get in the way
and everything was possible.
Now the lines are there; silent,
mocking me, daring me
to try to jump over them.

Instead I dig around them, searching for memory
a time when none of this mattered
and driving forward was second nature
instead of commandeering a disabled submarine.
Now the ride dangerous, tedious, and bloodcurdling
takes me into waters no dog would leap into.
I reach out for a hand I can't see,
jump anyway knowing
it is the only way to get to the other side.

I can smile
and show you on the outside
that there is still a part of me
struggling to be here
in the day to day living
you take so for granted.
But on the inside
when the world is whirling
in its orbit
and night and day fall into a perfect rhythm
my internal timepiece
has dropped into a puddle somewhere
and even though I lean over
stick my hand in to try and find it
what I find instead
is that my reflection is go



Figure 13: A Gift

All the Clichés of Time: A Gift

I AM A SLAVE TO TIME

I struggle with putting my cellphone down
afraid if I look away
something will happen without my knowing
and the minute that just passed
will have walked away without me noticing.
I have deadlines, mealtimes, bath times,
sleeping time and I love it all
while before I felt as though there was

NEVER ENOUGH TIME

now I find it is all just right.
I can do everything that I want
in the time that I have
and if I can't there will be another day.
I will wake up tomorrow and do it all again

BECAUSE ONCE UPON A TIME

I couldn't do any of it.
My life was just a fairy tale

in a book I lost and I had trouble
remembering who was the queen
and who was the king
and who needed to be saved
and who did the saving
until I one day
realized I could do it all myself.

NOW IT WAS TIME TO STEAL TIME BACK
from concussion
who had stolen time from me.
I was ready to come out at night
and rescue time,
to climb the fortress
concussion had locked time up in
and jump through the fire
encasing the window
and carry time away.

FOR TIME HAD HEALED
me from the depth of despair,
where I had no sense of time
the sun didn't move,
my children didn't age
and my hair never turned grey.
The moon and tides never changed.

FOR THERE IS NO TIME LIKE THE PRESENT
to be present, to know that getting on a bus
is the best gift in the world
that sitting beside that lady who is talking to herself
about her cats is a blessing, or that the little kid
who is staring at me because I can't stop smiling
at the advertisements that two months ago I couldn't read
is not annoying.

AND NOW THAT I HAVE TIME ON MY HANDS
I can draw time again. push the hands around in a circle
put the numbers on the page in sequence,
not get tired of the face that stares back at me
watch it move a minute at a time
as I have all the time to do that and

YET I HAVE NO TIME
because there is no time to make up for
all the lost time in the world



Figure 14: Jabez's Clocks

Jabez's Clocks

Jabez had a million
cuckoo clocks filling his house,
the chirping music of time
calling for our attention.
A collection from his family
each a gift of identity
in a world that too often
forgets there are important
things which hold us, one to
another, through a shared history.

Each year when I would visit
his nest in the hills of Northern California
I was reminded of the ties
I had left behind.
The people who like me
offered the world words
to heal it's wounds.

Who found beauty in the disparity
of living in a place so old
it held secrets that only tombs know.
A place full of promise and seduction
a gold rush, a technology boom.

When my children were young
we crossed these highways
longer than some countries,
to replant ourselves here.
We too had dreams of prosperity
as my husband followed his passion
to climb the ladder of success
measured by his title and bank account.
We settled like those first pioneers
new to the wild of the west
its teaming old growth forests
now set beside a population so large
it ate away the hillsides
where underneath fissures grew
waiting, like us, to erupt
into something else.

We fell into the reckless rhythm
of the manic masses
trying to catch up to those
who had been here before us,
when the boom was at its peak
and stock options dropped from a sky
full of ravens gathering
into one large synchronized flock.
We thought everything we needed
was here, the long days of blue cloudless skies
tempting us into playgrounds,
the steel of slides
burning the children's underside
as we ran home again for ice-cream
and escape till the day was wrestled
away by night.
And yet, as happy as we were,
I longed to go home,
to see the robin's first sighting
in a spring that wouldn't seem to come.

I never quite got it right living here
walking on the side of the road

where no shadows exist.
I am surrounded by them
they are stitched into my skin
visible when the sun hits just right,
or I let you get close enough.
I didn't hold onto cars and vases
and the pretty stuff that makes
your nose curl with delight,
instead I found the holes
where rabbits hid when they were dying,
gravitated to the people who wrote
the earth into turning,
who watched the sun move
in a waltz rather than a rave.

Like Jabez and his clocks that still chime
at odd hours of the day
I move with my own internal meter
pound out the meanings we gain
as a family from increments of memories
now shared in photographs and at family dinners.
My children grown we all remember
the time we spent chasing the reveries
of hickory smoke on a cold Tahoe night,
climbing the hills of Livermore Valley
and the cliffs of Yosemite.
These were the things we brought home with us.
and like Jabez this is the history we plant
which no one will ever take away.

Conclusion

It seems appropriate to end this dissertation with a poem about Jabez's clocks and being in California, one of the places I have come to realize still feels like home. The gift of more time is something we all want, yet having lived through this pandemic when days flow into one another, we come to understand how constructed our sense of time can be. For me, with no sense of time after my concussions, I longed for that construct initially, with no way of knowing how to achieve that. I found I had so much to Grief. Grief. Grieve. This has been a long journey and yet here I am back at the beginning searching out the word that for this whole process has stuck in my throat, my lungs and heart. As Leggo (2019) tells us,

Almost everyone will experience grief, and most of us will experience grief many times. I want to call out my grief because grief is now my teacher, and if I am going to learn from grief, I must learn how to articulate grief, to speak grief into a world where the first response to the polite question, "How are you?" is typically a quick "Fine. You?" Even when I am not fine. (p. 31)

It is late and I am sitting with Carl's writings all around me. I never realized before how much his presence is still here within this work. I have been anxious to get this dissertation done and now in this moment I am dragging myself toward the end, toward the last few words, a traveller reluctant to come to the last turn in the road. I have been so steeped in the writing of this for the last few years, that it feels like another ending, another loss. It has only now occurred to me that not being in community to say goodbye to Carl, has made the finishing of this dissertation feel like that goodbye. I do not know if I am ready for the finality of all of this. The end of this work, the passing of a mentor. The ambiguous loss that comes when the natural progression of a student finishing and moving on from a teacher, never happened. As I come to

the last few words, close the books, shut down the laptop, I somehow feel I am leaving Carl behind. Yet, I have come to understand through this process and like Carl himself understood after his brother's passing, there is no end to grieving. It does not stop just because you have hit send, or turned off the power. Instead, what I realize because of this writing is that I will try to find a way to live with the loss. Leggo (2019) tells us that, "Not only will I learn to live with the hole in the heart, but I will learn to listen to the music and poetry that resonates from the places of loss, absence, and silence" (p. 27).

A space to hear the final notes
of a heart's prayer for beauty.

By the end of this dissertation I have walked through the losses not only of the many MTBIs life has afforded me, but of an existence growing up essentially without a mother, of a marriage ending, of my children leaving, of never finding my great uncle and his family. There is no end to the grief and yet like Carl, I choose to write myself into a second story of hope. As Leggo (2019) says,

"Writing is an integral path in the curriculum of loss, and I trust writing will
lead me to the understanding I need to begin each new day with hope, even joy in the
midst of loss". (p. 30)

I pull the many threads I have been weaving together of my story, into a tapestry of hope. It shows my life is colourful, complex, with some bumps that protrude more than others at times. The work is delicate in some places and thick as a fisherman's line in others. It is beautiful, rough, intricate and simply-everchanging.

What does this all mean? How does this add to the scholarly conversation? I like to think that in some ways I am carrying on some of what Carl taught me. Carl taught me that I live a poetic life. Poetry exists in everything I do. This work helps to show that to live poetically is to be aware of the metaphors life offers us every day, to search out the joy and heartache and to understand life's complex moments whether tragic or euphoric and how we are transformed. Poetry can lift up a life and make it matter. As Leggo (2019) beautifully tell us,

1. A poem can heal.

under a moon, almost full,
I am learning to listen
for cherry blossoms
like a new alphabet
for calling out love.

(p. 31)

Carl also taught me that the humanness that we find in the outside world and in what we are coming to expect in our daily lives – in the health care system when dealing with trauma, from our communities when we seek out help and from our loved ones that we interact with every day – can be brought into the classroom. These should not be sterile places where we perform experiments or recite verse to show we can memorize data. These should be places of engagement and excitement and inquiry for all age levels. The compassion we show students when they are in grade three or six when they have a tummy ache or scrape their knee or have a fight with a friend should not be lost when they get to high school and beyond. We should remember that often times life becomes more complex and complicated when we are older. While our expectations should be higher for achievement as our children grow, our compassion should be equivalent to when they were young.

Teaching ‘Literacy Practices and Assessment’ at UBC to Bachelor of Education secondary students, in the time of a pandemic is something I don’t think any of us will ever forget. The repercussions of a world shutting down around us at the same time as years of systemic racism and social injustices were pushing thousands of people to the streets to protest despite shut downs, were felt by both faculty and teacher candidates in profound ways. What this shifting world afforded us, as we moved from f2f teaching to an online format, were important reminders of the human connection, which Carl so emphasized, especially in times of uncertainty.

We are living this history now and it is hard not to be affected by it. Now, more than ever, we need to heed Carl Leggo’s (2019) words as he tells us,

If we are going to change the world, if we are going to undo the damage and destruction of prejudice, hatred, and fear, we need to start with love. We can begin each day by asking: How am I going to live this new day? We need a curriculum of love. In order to learn the wisdom, philosophy, and practice of love, we need to acknowledge that we are not alone, independent, autonomous. We are part of a vast network of connections and interconnections, all ecologically sustained in rhythms and memories and hopes. (p. 60)

During the course, one of my students revealed that she was personally struggling because of the protests and news and was having a difficult time focusing. She asked for an extension twice throughout the course and each time I met her with compassion, granting her the extensions she requested. I checked in on her between assignments to see how she was doing. She was having a difficult time. Through the course of our email exchange I sent a poem by Maya Angelou (1978)

Still I Rise, in the hope that lines such as “You may kill me with your hatefulness,/ But still, like air, I’ll rise,” could help sustain her throughout this trying time.

It turned out this was one of her favourite poems. She thanked me for the reminder of what she needed and for understanding. I let her know I was here to support her through this journey and was willing to work with her to help her succeed. Removing the extra stress of an arbitrary factor such as time when she was in crisis and allowing space for her within the framework of our class allowed her to continue and move on with her work. None of us can escape this time in history, but we can remember that the humanness we bring to the classroom, especially when having moved online, needs to be evermore present when we are not physically engaged with students. This is also a reminder that poetry has a place in the classroom as much as in scholarship. It can bridge gaps and make connections in ways that talking and lecturing often fail. Leggo (2019) tells us, “To engage with poetry is to live in the heart’s way, to acknowledge the truthfulness of emotion and experience as significant teachers. We read and write poetry because poetry weaves language in texts that speak to us and move us and tantalize us” (p. 33).

I have since started teaching another course within UBC’s Bachelor of Education. I have new students with different needs. I have been candid with them about my concussion, explaining that I take attendance, partly because I have to, but partly because it helps me to make sure I am pronouncing their names correctly and to actually remember their names, something which has been a problem since the concussions. In one of my courses I put a page up called Know Your Instructor and I have listed my publications as well as links to interviews where I am talking about my concussions and my academic work. I have had three students email to say that they have had concussions as well, the last to thank me for putting my work out there as it gave

her hope. I continue with a curriculum of hope which seems to me like a by-product of a curriculum of love.

One of the greatest takeaways from this for myself, and I hope for others, is that while we need to retain a professionalism in our teaching and way of being with our students, we can also bring a humanism into the classroom and connect to one another. It is alright to show each other we are human. It does not take away from my ability as a scholar or a teacher to have suffered and to be vulnerable. If anything, it brings more depth to what I am doing and what I bring my students. And it allows them to be the caregivers from time to time in that at times they have to have compassion when I show my flaws or hardships. We create a whole world when we do this. How can we expect them to go out and do the same if we don't allow them to experience this in the space we create? In sharing my journey, I show not only what it is like to suffer multiple MTBIs but to come back from it and, while not perfect, I am thriving. If we don't put the faces to the data of MTBI and show that there is a person behind these horrible side effects, we have failed the person. All systems must work together in order to make recovery possible.

As I come to the end of this work, it is my hope that what I leave behind are stories and poetry that move the reader and allow them to find themselves in this work. In using poetic inquiry and life writing in these ways I have shown the need for this kind of scholarship and how important it is in allowing others to understand trauma they may never have understood before. It can be difficult to understand something you have not experienced. Poetry and life writing afford this to us. My story is unique. It is my story. I have learned much through this process. My work shows a face, gives it a name, and highlights the traumatic events that can happen to a person.

As I come to the end of this work I also look ahead. There is much to be done in helping those who have suffered from MTBI feel less alone. In part, there is much work to be done in

helping those in charge of care, whether medical practitioners or OT's or teachers, to understand what is needed to allow an individual to come back into a full and productive life. Furman, Langer, and Anderson (2006) examine how the poet who has strengthened their craft through years of dedication in order to understand themselves and society, can be used as an example of how the social work practitioner should be conducting their own practice, within their field. Referring to the poet/practitioner, Furman et al. (2006) reinforce what has been discussed in this work:

In spite of the desire to find a unifying theory of human behavior that explains all human phenomena in a neat, reductionistic manner, the poet/practitioner understands the complexity of being. In each encounter with a client, the poet/practitioner attends to the hearts and minds of individuals who live and function in social worlds. In spite of the desire of corporate managed care organizations to treat the individual as a set of symptoms to be reduced into predictable treatment protocols, the poet/practitioners respects the inherent wholeness of each client. (p. 38)

Poetry can offer lived experience that is immediate and allows the reader to find an empathic place within themselves for the person(s) in recovery. Writing poetry is a valuable teaching tool for empathy and self-reflection. In the future more research is needed to understand the paradigm shifts that take place in clinical situations by applying non-clinical procedures and attitudes toward patients. It is my hope to continue this work by publishing, facilitating writing and expressive arts workshops, speaking and teaching to practitioners, students, parents, and MTBI patients as well.

Memory brings the smell of sausages from a kiosk a million miles away in some Krakow market and I know it is only an image as they have been locked down by this pandemic as well,

yet it is a memory that can sustain me a long time. When I began this process, I thought I would finish in a house high up on the side of a mountain on Bowen Island, British Columbia. That is where, two years ago, I started to write while on a much-needed break, a bit of a writing retreat in the company of three women writer friends I love. It was a time of loss and magic. The mist covered the trees and I watched as the fog came and went over the landscape. It was the perfect metaphor for where I was at that time in my life, trying to unearth the mysteries of living with MTBI while doing my PhD. For the last few years I felt I had lost myself through the trauma of all of these hits to my head and was trying to find myself once again through the fog. As I watched the haze come and go, I wrote and wrote and wrote, discovering how my life had changed as I literally moved in and out of a kind of fog of my own. Now, in a totally different space, I can see between the folds of the clouds and am happy to have discovered the many stories they hide – the ones that I have lived in over the last few years as a student moving toward writing my dissertation when I didn't know at times if I could.

I went to Poland to find my roots only to come home to realize my roots were always here, inside me growing, as I extended my world. I took them with me wherever I went and they plunged into the earth with each step I planted along the roads I had chosen to explore for this work. My roots keep me connected to my children wherever they may choose to go. The history we share runs deeply through each of us while changing as we all seek out life as individuals, creating our own narratives out of old stories.

I am fuller because of all of this – the clouds, the fog and the roots. I am more aware, happier and connected to myself and what is out there to be found. I can hear Jabez's clocks chiming and hold them dear even though I have no need for them as a reminder of what was, knowing there will always be more. Through metaphorical and physical trips to places I have

lived or to which I have been connected through family history, I have come to understand it is possible to recreate a life that has been left in pieces. While different, it is full and one that is important to share.

I have reintegrated myself back into my academic purpose. I have shared with my students my journey through poetic inquiry and life writing and I have created spaces for others to give them voice as well through bearing witness to my changes. I have brought much-needed humanness into the classroom. In sharing my story with my students, I have created space for all of us to come together, so that none of us have to walk this path alone. As Leggo (2019) tells us,

On the one hand, the stories we tell about ourselves are always unique and coloured in the keenly experienced sense of individual selfhood and subjectivity, but, on the other hand, our seemingly unique stories are inextricably connected to many other people and the communities that help inform and shape our sense of identity and purpose.

(p. 182)

Most of all, I have finished writing this dissertation when I had no way of knowing if I could. For all those who couldn't, for all those who can't, I have found a voice. I have been to Auschwitz and back with an MTBI and I am still here, we are still here.

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