WRITING HOME

The Lived Experience of Constructing Home in Older Age

by

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I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that any help in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

Signed: .......................... Date: ..........................

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ABSTRACT

This thesis charts a quest to learn more about older age, about self and about how older people make sense of and construct what is home for them at their time of life. Home is a central theme which transcends binaries: it is a central concept to the way people live their lives as social beings. It affects the person's sense of belonging and connection, identity and selfhood. Looking back on the period when I began this project, I can distinguish that it was a time of upheaval and transitions in my own life; a search for home, a time of endings and beginnings, of brushes with mortality and flights on eagles' wings. Thus, working reflexively, my story became an integral part of this project.

Critiquing the constraints of the reductionist traditional methodologies of research, this study uses emergent, feminist post-structural and arts-based approaches to tell the stories of home of eighteen people aged 80–97 and to explore their experience of home not-home in their present 'place of living'. The approach is eclectic and draws on data from in-depth interviews, observation, casual conversations, photographs, participant and researcher art work and researcher reflexive journal-writing to describe multiple narratives of the lived experience and meaning of constructing 'home' in older age.
PROLOGUE

This is a layered work of stories, myth and poetics, life and literature, and this characteristic layering is reflected in the exploration of my topic through the unfolding process of writing, storytelling and art-making. At the same time as I began my thesis work I commenced a journal in which I began to inquire into what I was doing (being?) as a researcher, a life being lived, a person reflexively seeking understanding of self, age and home. Extracts from this are included and provide a kind of 'trail' (Koch, 2004) throughout the project, tracking my decisions, responses and even methodological developments. The result is an unfolding work which blends all these elements with a significant body of academic literature and invites the reader into a space of exploration and emergence, an invitational space where your story also bears telling.

The theoretical paradigm of this project is concerned with the political, and with the power of social discourses in creating and interpreting personal experience in a post-modern world where truth is to a large extent subjective and constructed. It is concerned with the notion of the 'Other', those who live on the periphery of the dominant culture, and the broad range of conditions from oppression and marginalisation through social control and regulation, to openness and plurality that 'otherness' describes (Foucault, 1972; 1980; Cixous, 1981; Butler, 2004). It is particularly concerned with the medicalisation of the ordinary experiences of ageing (both the embodied and emotional/psychological) and with the current economic trends towards privatising and managing biomedical aged care (Biggs & Powell, 2001, 2004 Nay, 1998).
As a counsellor I found the reflexive research approach to be particularly suited to research concerned with human well-being and the fields counselling and psychotherapy (Lees, 2001). Since therapists must constantly reflect on their own subjective clinical experience and engage in professional development and supervision, constantly re-evaluating and re-searching their practice, it is a method that offers a way of overcoming the research-practice (praxis) gap within counselling. I believe that using art, story, myth, metaphor and image as part of the method of inquiry complements the power of the in-depth interview to create new and rich perspectives, while conceding to 'partial understandings', in contrast to the search for objective truth of the scientific method. A rich bricolage – 'a complex, dense, reflective, collage-like creation' (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994: 29) – is generated, which acknowledges in breadth and depth the multilayered understanding, interpretation and nature of home and of older age.

The data reveal a qualitative difference in feelings of being at home between those who live independently in their own home and community and those who live within aged-care institutions and these differences have to do with being recognised as an individual who has choice and a voice to speak needs, wants and personhood. The structuring of the aged-care industry based in the biomedical or individual model, driven by illness concerns and economic constraints, is seen in contrast to the view of older age as a valid life stage and final transition which can be affirmed and supported by and within community and society, wherever the person may live. An alternative lifestyle in which to age, that of a religious community, is explored, pointing to a model of ageing that still exists largely outside of the influences of the market economy and to possibilities for retaining positive perspectives and practices towards the ageing self.
The findings of this study have ethical implications for counsellor, nursing and care staff working with older people, as well as for policies and working practices geared towards the older person within society and particularly within the aged-care industry. It has implications for the skills training of professional and non-professional care staff and for policy-makers and managers within health services and aged care, not only for the planning of services but for the approach to building, managing and staffing such facilities. The thesis concludes the narrative reframing of home and older aged with a number of recommendations for professionals and policy-makers.
A beginning is that which is not itself necessarily after anything else, and which has naturally something else after it; an end, that which is naturally after something else, either as its necessary or usual consequent, with nothing else after it; and a middle, that which is by nature after one thing and has also another after it.

CHAPTER 1 BEGINNING

An mBrionglóid / The Dream

I came on a place and had to stay that I might find my feet, repair
the mark of human hand, and repossess a corner of my country.


Fáilte chuig an mBrionglóid. Fáilte chuig an sean-droichad adhmaid áit a
shiúlaim. Is mise an tsiúlóir agus is mise an droichad, áit a bhfuil sí ag
siúl, an droichad atá ag síneadh thar an dorchas anáithnid uafásach. Is
mise an compánach fireannach an tsíulóir aislingeach agus is mise an
dorchas freisin. Is mise an aislingeach agus mise atá ann i ngach gné
den bhrionglóid. Ta gach uile asam.

Siúlaim ar an sean slí adhmaid síonchaite, in airde le dorchas thart
timpeall, mise i dtosach agus an fireann ós mo chomhair, ag dul chun
cinn. I dtosach siúlaim ar an slí daingean ar mo shuaimhneas, go
fiosrach. Ach go luath feicim bearra idir na cláracha agus tagann eagla
orm. Tugaim coiscéim thar na bearraí, thar an dorchas mhór.
Leathnaíonn na bearraí. Leathnaíonn na coiscéimeanna, go dtí go
shroichim an deireadh. Táim i mo sheasamh ar an gclár deiridh, bearra
leathan idir mé féin agus mo chompánach. “Sé sin an clár deireanach”,
arsa mise dó. Tuigim anois nach bhfuil aon rogha agam ach léim a
thabhairt anuas den tslí isteach san dorchasas. Is cúrsa baolach sin agus
tá fhios agam ma bheirim greim lámha ar mo chompánach de réir gach
dealraimh go mbéimid gortaíthe. Le m‘intinn socraithe tugaim léim san
dorchasas, ag titim, ag titim anuas tagann eagla móir orm. B‘h féidir go
mbuailfidh mo chorp ar rud éigin. Cuirim meall orm féin is mo ghéaga is

Is mise an aislingeach ar an droichead. Táim athbheirthe.

Welcome to the dream. Welcome to the old wooden bridge where I walk. I am the walker and I am the bridge where she is walking, the bridge spanning the great darkness, the unknown. I am the male companion, the animus of the walking dreamer, and I am also the darkness. I am the dreamer and I am every aspect of the dream. All is of me.

In the dream I walk along the old wooden walkway high up with the darkness all around, myself leading and the male companion behind. We are moving forward. At first I walk on the firm way calmly, curiously. But soon I notice gaps appearing between the boards and I become afraid. I step across the gaps, across the huge darkness below. The gaps widen and the footsteps widen, until I reach the end of the path. I stand on the last board, a wide gap between me and my companion. Only darkness around and below. ‘This is the last board,’ I tell him. I realise that I have no choice now but to step off the end into the darkness. It is a dangerous action and I want to hold my companion’s hand. But I know with outstretched arms we could get hurt by hitting against something. I know what I must do. I step off the plank into the darkness. I’m falling, falling through the darkness, terrified. I realise it is not safe to fall this way and I
know to curl up wrapping my arms around my body, making myself small, protecting myself against impact. In this way I will fall safely. I am the foetus moving from the womb. This is birth and rebirth. At last I arrive, somewhere, at the place to which I was travelling, an unknown place. I land on my feet. My companion also lands safely.

I am the dreamer on the bridge. I am reborn.

~

The Quest

Where to start? At the end called Writing, or the end called The Writer? With the gerund or the noun, the activity or the one performing it? And where exactly does one start and the other begin?

Margaret Attwood, *Negotiating with the Dead*, 2003, p.3

When setting out on a quest it is always helpful to know where to start from, and the ‘where’ is usually an inward as well as an outward place: in all the best stories of quest there is a physical reality and an intention. I could say for convenience that this quest – to gain a PhD, to search for meanings of home – started in Australia where I happened to live and work at a university where part-time staff were encouraged to undertake PhD studies to increase employment prospects; and perhaps it was prompted along too by the effects of particular historical events such as the death of parents or the difficulties of relationships, the concerns of an emigrant or by memories of earlier experiences leading to a trawling of
the recesses of troubled childhoods or indeed to experiences of birth and
rebirth. I could say that the intention is not only to tell the stories I
gathered – mine and others – but to make some sense of them and, in the
process of constructing meaning, to find new beginnings and new endings,
to map an idea called home. This is probably true. But since it is also true
that time has no beginning and no end and is merely a construct to explain
our passing, it is an arbitrary thing to say a quest began anywhere or at
anytime and it is just as correct to say it began nowhere beyond time.

So I stand on the bridge in no-where, ‘at the end called Writing’, a liminal
space where potential opens up to possibility if I but jump. But the
promise is of a possibility as yet unknown, and it is difficult, perhaps even
dangerous, to go forward into the dark unknown. No, welcoming is not yet
part of the activity. The bridge is not an altogether comfortable place to
be. The safe landing is not assured. Nevertheless, the bridge will be the
inward place and the page the outer. The activity will be to make marks on
the page in response to thoughts, talks, interviews, feelings, impressions,
readings, discussions: whatever comes my way. In short, to paraphrase
writer Margaret Attwood, the activity will be, at the very least, the
defacement of blank pieces of paper. The intention, noble or pedantry,
neurotic or self-actualising, will be, in short, to find the way to some-
where. The leap will be one of faith.
The Naming

*The Tao that can be told is not the eternal Tao.*

*The naming that can be named is not the eternal name.*

Lao Tsu, *Tao Te Ching*

I am the beginning and the end. (The alpha and the omega.) I am the dreamer, the dream and the one who wakes. I am the dreaming and the waking, the writer and the writing. I write the story on paper, on my house, on my friends, on my body. Perhaps writing a PhD, no less than writing a novel, is, as Margaret Laurence and others have put it, like Jacob wrestling with his angel in the night — an act in which wounding, naming, and blessing all take place at once (cited in Attwood, 2003). A visceral act — a public act which names the parts that are wounded as well as those that are blessed — exposes the writer. Also a secret act, a layered story, not readily giving up its secrets which must be explained by the author who may or may not know all its secrets, at the beginning, or at the end. And it takes time too to know if what has befallen us, as a result of the act (or action) is a blessing or a wounding and to realise that woundings can be perhaps longer, more hazardous paths to freedom and therefore, in the end, blessings. The Danish philosopher Soren Kierkegaard (1959; 2005) suggested that ‘Life can only be understood backwards’. So, as lives have to be lived in a forward direction, this causes something of a problem. How is the naming to take place? The blessing to be uncovered from the wound? How is one to know the way out of the darkness?

The only way is to finish the story and look back; only the end result, Callanan (2004) tells us, will really put things in perspective. Callanan, a Jesuit priest and scholar, draws on St Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of
the order, who apparently devised this way – looking back rather than forward – as the best method of finding out whether events spring from good or evil. Callanan writes:

If we can gauge what effect a particular event is having on our interior being, we are halfway towards knowing whether to be perturbed or not. It can be beneficial if we have some sort of system in place that asks questions effectively of us about where good fruit or grace is occurring in our lives. As we grapple with this task it’s easy to settle on the wrong questions, or even to ask the right questions but for the wrong reasons. Human frailty tempts us to have deaf ears or an unseeing eye or an uncaring heart when ‘home truths’ loom on the horizon (2004, p. 65).

This is a reflection method which tries to raise awareness of one’s vulnerabilities, failures and successes, to find where the darkness has occurred and the nature of the woundings, Callanan continues, ‘It’s as if something deep within us is trying to relay how life experiences are affecting us. ... the ability to listen to our own wounding story can be revealing’ (p.65). And so this exercise encourages us to go over the past months of life, to look inwards and try to recognise patterns that are destructive or that might lead to self-harm and hurt. To look outwards also, at the culture which influences us, perhaps impels us towards action, that offers us experiences and situations of many kinds. We are then to reflect on these patterns, experiences and situations, on what is happening, why it is happening and noting the effects these are having on us in order to get a better perspective on questions such as who we are, what is happening in our lives and where we are or where we want to be.
I name this process because it was significant in my own perspective shift, the one which led me to the brink of relationship, to consider moving again, back to the other end of the world. But I need to explain further, for the reflection, once begun, went journeying back and back. Back to collect the pieces, the bric-a-brac of a life that in the end is all you have of the past, the collected memories that for no particular reason or every reason are the ones that stayed and stay, and try to answer the question ‘Who am I?’ This is the question raised by Jesuit priest Callanan and by post-structural feminist Butler (2001), an invitation to self-reflection I bring to my counselling clients and to the students in the university counselling programme where I worked, and the question I invite them to bring to me in a spirit of learning about self and authentic engagement: one I attempt to answer as I embark on this reflexive research project. So my story begins back in childhood and also begins with my enrolment in the PhD programme in 2004 and again in August of 2005 at a group supervision meeting where two of my fellow students shared their processes of research by thinking out loud their thoughts and thereby constructing them and co-constructing mine. The emergence of knowledge from this method becomes clear in what follows and will also be discussed later in terms of emergent methodology (Somerville, 2005; 2007). For now I recall the following:

*Hearing Lorena and Jen (Two of the other PhD students) speak about themselves or others making objects / representations to symbolise toys or identities, I am reminded that I often made dolls’ houses when I was little. I often asked for dolls for Christmas. I had Lynda with the long blond (white) tresses and long dark eyelashes, and the plastic-haired one my mother bought me with the real skirts, petticoats and lace long-legged knickers, one time she was leaving me – in hospital in Dublin. I remember a time I was in hospital, she probably wanted me to*
stay and not be distressed, she said, ‘Try not to cry.’ And I said, reasonably, I had tried. She said, ‘If at once you don’t succeed, try, try and try again.’ So I really tried. A miserable small girl in bed in an adult mixed ward watching my mother leave and heaving with silent sobs wanting to go home. Trying not to cry.

(I still have the plastic-haired doll tucked away in a box, in storage). I thought that one day I would give beautiful blonde-haired Lynda to my own daughter and, when I asked for her that Christmas I knew I was really too old for dolls but she was beautiful and I had this romantic thought about how she would be my last doll and I would one day say ‘this was my doll and I want you to have her’. But I think she was disposed of at some stage during my ‘emigration’ to Australia, and I never had a daughter.

There were other Lyndas before that. That was the manufacturer’s name on the label, I realised years later. So many Lyndas. Some looked like Barbie, all chest and wasp-waisted. I dressed them in pieces of cloth in which I cut two holes for the arms – my imagination filling in where my sewing skills or persistence left off – while my sister cut out proper clothes, hemmed, stitched, sewed in fasteners and sleeves!!!!!! Years later I still have some of our couture and marvel at the difference.

The things I made with persistence were dolls’ houses.

My father had a shop and sold everything over the years from groceries, toys and cigarettes, to tourist ornaments (my sister
and I painted Irish cottages on stones for the American tourists — we sold well). He also sold fruit and I remember when the grapes came in wooden barrels with tightly packed sawdust to protect them, and the smell of the sawdust as I carefully dug the bunches of grapes free, delighted when single grapes dropped off because I could eat these without guilt. And the oranges came each wrapped in purple tissue paper packed in long wooden crates which were divided into two sections. The lid was levered off – metal staples groaning – and the compartments emptied onto the display counter, always the freshest fruit to the bottom.

When placed upright the crate was a house, with two storeys. I placed my dolls’ furniture in there – laying out the kitchen and bathroom, the double bed with the moulded pink plastic bedspread, the sofa and red plastic-cushioned easy chairs, the standard lamp. Across the front of my house I hung an old curtain, to make the front wall. When I opened the curtain, there it was. My house. When I closed the curtain, all was safely tucked away.

Perhaps my own home was an uncertain place where my parents sometimes fought out their identities and needs unhappily. Where things could be unpredictable and uncertain. Respectable and not always respectful. Where the ground shifted and I could never be sure. But I could be sure that saying the rosary would help in the nights because I would always be asleep before I reached the end. Our lady always answered my prayers. Oh Mother of Perpetual Succour, pray for us.
With my orange box house I could be sure. Where I put the furniture it would stay. I could be sure it was in order. Because it was mine, and nobody else's.

'Who's girl are you?'

'Daddy's girl.'

'And who else's?'

'Nobody else's!'

And he would join in and laugh, 'Nobody else's.'

Bouncing me up and down.

'Can I have a penny, Daddy?'

'Of course you can!

~

In 2004 at an art class in the technical college near where I lived in Australia I made a batik depicting all my homes to that point. My birth home, my marital home, my first mortgage in Queensland and my New South Wales home. The batik provides the 'material' to tell my story, the 'materiality' of the batik illustrates the story and makes it tangible; I can take it out as backdrop and show it, the meanings and the hidden meanings, the layered story. The idea was to create a pleasing artwork that contains an overt picturing of houses in landscapes with hints of rain and sunshine to contextualise them; place them in Ireland or Australia. The tropical vegetation helps too, and the terraced Irish house contrasts with the raised Queensland cottage. The houses are placed in a Book of Kells
iconography style and there are spirals to add further hints at ethnicity. The writing script is in the Irish language and therefore obscure, while the symbology is individual and personal, speaking of parents, sisters, a cat, dogs, fish and birds, and a singularly bumptious drake which could grasp a small dog by its forelock and initiate a tug of war. These were some of the constituents of my various homes. Noticeably the pleasing colours and soft tones don’t speak of the hard times of leaving.

Figure 2 Batik: Ina’s Homes
And now in 2005 I have a new home. My own orange crate that I can make all the decisions about, my self. Where I put the furniture it stays, until I decide to move it. Perfect for my needs. I’ve had the extension rebuilt to my own specifications. I may get a window put in the northern side, just for the light. I like light. The builder asks ‘What would you like done here, Ina?’

And I decide. The shed is as big as the house. That’s to be my art studio. I can walk into town to the shops. But I never do! I can plant flowers and water them guilt free. When I drive through the automatic roller doorway and it closes behind me I sometimes feel I am escaping the world, agreeing to only small doses right now, then shutting it out. I can be in my own warm living room, which looks out on the treed hill, becoming tinged with green now at the end of Winter, or I can be under an acre of flowered bedspread electric-blanketed against the chill air of the Australian August bedroom.

All safely tucked away.

I spent five months in Ireland this year (2005). My father died in January after a week of illness. Two sisters were with him throughout the difficult daytimes. I helped to look after him with my eldest sister every night. She’s a nurse, I’m a teacher and counsellor. We tried to help: syringe
driver to control pain and distress, ‘palliative care, please; not acute care’, it took some effort in an acute hospital getting them to let him die in peace. They seemed to want to cure him! But we knew there was no cure, only care. On 27 January I wrote in my diary ‘tonight my daddy died’. It was a sad time.

~

In March, still in Ireland, I got a temporary job in Cavan town. Feeling lost, and to seek guidance from other than my self I felt spiritually parched and drained, in a deep hole without a name. Resorting to childhood prayers and meditations I searched for a way through the fearful darkness. I found a book whose very title, Watering the Desert (Callanan, 2004) seemed to offer an answer to my condition and there I found a way of thinking and reflecting that, while leaving the heart wounded, made the facts clear. Another act of blessing, wounding and naming all taking place at once. With this willingness (if not quite readiness) to embrace awareness, I was one day heading home from work, standing on the wet street, the cold un-spring like northern hemisphere wind blowing rain against my wool and waterproof-wrapped body – I felt happy. It was remarkable. Was peacefulness and contentment so foreign to me? It would seem so at that time. Or was it, as a friend suggested, a moment of special grace? Yes, I think that was it too: Because there was just no reason for it. It came out of the blue. Out the grey actually. I just felt happy that day. Like I belonged. Like it was home. Like I should live there, from that side of the world, in Ireland. Like I too knew that something needed to change.
That's how it was that day. Although sometimes I'm not so sure now. Back in Australia I find it hard, on a bright August morning, to recapture that feeling. To believe in such 'happy lightsomeness': Amazing Grace.

I haven't booked a return flight yet.

Yet I am looking at Australia now with hungry eyes. Drinking in images, storing them. Delighting in the tinge of spring green; the bloom of wattle; the flowered bedspread; the potted rocket plant on my windowsill; the renunculas in the planter from Sue who knows I love flowers; ABC Radio National; the antics of my laundry possum.

Home.

Journal entry, August 2004

The Accidental Emigrant

We are dwellers, we are namers, we are lovers, we make homes and search for our histories.


For years I watched my sister return freely and happily to America after her yearly visit to Ireland. I troubled over the fact that I was unable to have a similar attitude for my own return to Australia where I enjoyed living, working and studying for a number of years. Admittedly she had an
American husband and children in the US and certainly the journey was a bus ride compared to my own 30-hour endurance expedition. Certainly she had her faith and an acquired capacity to accept the hand that is dealt; she gave her troubles to the Lord. However none of these facts quite explained to me her seeming freedom and weightlessness on the morning of her setting out to Dublin airport, her easy goodbyes to our elderly parents, and my own burdened leave-taking, the tears, anxiety and sense of loss when my return loomed.

When I asked her about this she reflected back to me that when she had gone to America she had emigrated. Quite simply she had made a conscious choice to go there to marry an American citizen and to live there with him. That’s when I knew the difference. I had never made that choice. I had gone to Australia because my ex-husband had campaigned for the first two years of our marriage to return there and, never really believing the myth that there all would be better with us, I had eventually and somewhat reluctantly agreed. We would go ‘for a year or two’; ‘see what happens’. That was seventeen years ago. I was an accidental emigrant.

I am still dealing with the karma I created then. Having still not made the choice to be at home in this place, neither do I now still belong to the other. The words cited by Mark Wakely in his book *Dream Home*, ‘if it isn’t chosen it isn’t home’ (2003), reverberate in my mind. In real time this is the conundrum that must now be unravelled, the longing to be fulfilled so that I can find my place in the world. This is the quest I now set out on, still not quite free and happy and still with shades of tears, anxiety and loss. The trouble is I’m not sure what I will find at the end of
my journey or what I want to find. I’ve grown used to this old dry big-sky country, while still deeply attached to the thick hedgerows and historical monuments of there. So many contrasts and comparisons. Here and there. I resist just now writing ‘home’ into either place. What is home? Is it, as the old saying goes, ‘where the heart is’ or is it ‘where I hang my hat’ (as my mother used to say in her airy way)? Perhaps both, but that’s what I want to find out because I believe that once I find home I will want to spend the rest of my life there. And that will be a long-delayed, long-awaited choice. So here I am, standing on the bridge between longing and belonging (O’Donohue, 1999), wondering how I will eventually choose and how I will know if I have made the right choice. The other trouble is (and as we know from the folklore, trouble loves company), as a long-time traveller back and forth between Ireland and Australia I also know that each journey must contain goodbyes. And I was never good at goodbyes.

**Beginning**

*Finding yourself in a hole, at the bottom of a hole, in almost total solitude, and discovering that only writing can save you. To be without the slightest subject for a book, is to find yourself, once again, before a book. A vast emptiness. A possible book. Before nothing. Before something like living, naked writing, like something terrible, terrible to overcome.*


The writing started on my birthday in January 2004, past the mid 40s, my friend Teresa’s birthday card reads ‘Life is all a balancing act’ with a Gertrude Stein p.s.:

There ain’t no answer

There ain’t going to be any answer
There never has been an answer

That's the answer

Just have to keep asking the questions, I guess, adds Teresa.

She knows me.

So, I pondered, that's as far as we've got. I wondered if anyone else has gone any further in understand the big questions. I wondered would I learn from my reading and research any more wisdom than that offered by Stein. Would I be any wiser at the end of this PhD journey than when I started on that birthday. I know that it will be a journey inwards and outwards towards self and other knowledge. I begin, begging a mid-life crisis for which I can't be held responsible, drinking whiskey and living a teenage fantasy of late-night story-swapping, eating chocolates with my older sister in her golden quilted over-pillowed bed.

I began with laptop at a kitchen table in Australia and then in Ireland again in 2005 in the small bedroom of my father's house, at the hospital bedside of my dying father. I write to see what comes, to let it out, to record, to understand, to find out, to begin.

Beginnings are always written from hindsight: they are stories created later, from the perspective of what we have become, through which we constitute our sense of what we are. Not only can we never again be or fully know what we were at any beginning, we couldn't then know either if something were
beginning or what was beginning. (Game & Metcalfe, 1996, p.70).

I begin again on my return to Australia in my new old house where the windows now look out onto the greening early spring garden and the new gayness of petunias. The door gives an occasional rattle when the unexpectedly cold wind rushes through the taller trees with the sound of the ocean. The pink and blue shirts, the orange and yellow towels wave gaily from the clothesline next door. Party time! Blue-shirt trying to escape is now hanging ape-like from one sleeve. Monkeying around. Willy Wagtail is free to bob about on the green-tinged grass, poor pickings still, but the promise of spring. And I begin.

**Home**

_Do you understand the sadness of geography?_


I was recalling the depth of Peter Read's (Historian and Academic) connection to Australia (1996) and my own 'shallow' connection _not_ to say superficial) and then also my connection with my home country and town. How do I name my feeling for it? Is it real attachment? Sentimentality / nostalgia? I feel superficial, but feel deeply too. Maybe just now I don't have a name for the connections I feel or indeed the work I am writing, but maybe that does not mean there is no meaning. So for the moment I will leave it with the angels and trust in my supervisors, Margaret and Annmaree, to help me with the naming.
I am writing about home and belonging, having a sufficiency of neither. Having neither, how shall I write of them? I will find them in the writing itself. Maybe I am a bit lost just now. Maybe I have walked on the *stray sod*, the fairy grass, and gone astray in the night; wandering in the darkness even in a familiar field I am lost, I cannot find the gate. I can see the way from afar and set off in that direction, but when I reach the place where the gate was it has moved and is now in another place. I walk there and it is to be seen far off in the opposite direction. Everyone knows there is no way out until the fairies lift the spell or the morning comes. And in that morning I will know my way home. My father knew a man who stepped on the stray sod in the fields behind our house, my family home in Ireland, and often told the story. A schoolteacher. Respectable. Had he been drinking? This question was never raised.

Referring back to Read again (1996), I am thinking that the ancient monastic site, my home town, is not a ‘lost place’, but it is an ignored place (largely). Perhaps ignored by me for too long. Read asks, ‘How have humans formed attachments to their special places? After making out boundaries, clearing, working and the physical presence of being, the last part of bonding with the land is, for some, the creation of special intimate or sacred sites’ (1996, p.8). And I wonder, is this place my sacred site? Or am I ‘returning to nothing’? Why is it that on my visit to Ireland this year (2005) and last year that these monuments beckoned to me again and seemed to call me to them? These are questions I want to answer, and answers I want to know. Somehow the materiality of the stone calls to me and I want to touch it again and maybe it will offer me answers. How do I interact with stone? Learn from stone? Listen to stone? I must come to know stone, the language it speaks. I must learn this. Learn to touch stone and carry away its message. So I will tell now the story of rock-making.
and why I will return to Ireland and mould and cast panels from the high crosses.

Figure 3 The Market Cross, Kells, Co.
Meath, Ireland

I will read the stone carvings that have been there for so many lifetimes and all of mine. Read the surface message and to touch into the very stone, the materiality of ancient reminders of home. When I am there they seem to peep up at me through the higgledy-piggledy of the modern town, the crowding housing estates. They say to me 'Hi I’m here’, ‘I’m still here',
waving to me from each angle and every distance. They are funny that way, sort of delightful. Wanting to be seen and tired of just sitting about as they have done through all the centuries. Now they are jumping up, waving at me, popping their heads up and looking for attention.

I want to look at them some more. I’ve rubbed their surfaces with crayon over paper years ago, when I was a child. I’ve photographed and drawn them. Now I want to make a clay cast, press it into their skin and take the impression, recreating their story in plaster. I want to say, ‘Look at this’. Give them new life by noticing them and what they have to say. The clay will relate to the stone better than I can and will glean the story, because they are kindred substances. The clay will understand the stone and take on its form for retelling. It will re-member.

So I find myself with the artist / potter / sculptor who shows me how to know the clay and the plaster. She speaks in terms of the materials’ own knowledge and life. She is excited by my project and wants to help me learn the skills I need so she thinks at night in bed about the process: I can take a plaster-cast impression straight off the stone carvings if I protect them by painting on shellac and wax first, but the heritage folk might have something to say about the new brownish tint on the ancient stones. (And Judith Butler might think I’m doing them a violence). So the artist finds a way through taking a direct clay impression. I practice on a New England rock. I learn to cast the Irish stone by first making my own Australian rock. Because I also made a silicone mould, I can now make as many Australian rocks as I like.
It takes two days to make a rock. To mould the clay, make the plaster, by the time I was squeezing out the silicone on Saturday evening I was almost unable to stand. My back, my arm and my hand hurt. How happy I was, not a worry in the world.

On Sunday there I am again making the plaster mould-holder. I'm up to my right elbow in a bucket of wet plaster, agitating it to prevent air bubbles, watching it 'go off' – which means set – and unable to attract the teacher's attention, for she had wanted to show me what to do. I can see her talking to another student at the far side of the large workroom, oblivious to the fast-setting plaster.

I can see the choice is either to become literally adhered to this bucket in the next moment or to ladle the plaster out onto the mould as best I can on my own.

I make the right choice.

Very physical work, this rock-making. Just think how God must have felt after making the world. No wonder he had to rest.

On Monday I had a big sleep in.

As a creator I feel that's OK.
Now equipped with have another ‘language’ – I have the language of the people and the language of the stone – I am readying for my return to the place I came from. I get ready at so many different levels, and still not being ready I remain unready and waiting. To jump. Fearful of what I will find, maybe answers I won’t like, maybe solutions I don’t want to live with: maybe I will feel neither here nor there. Here recently on the news I heard that the Australian government, in its so called war on terror, wants to make it easier to strip a dual citizen of their Australian citizenship. I felt a little shocked suddenly realising again that maybe I didn’t really belong where my citizenship could be taken away. That I am one of the ones whose citizenship can be taken away. Strange how that makes me feel alienated, negatable. My Irish citizenship can’t be taken.

But I have been negated in other ways too. In Ireland in the youngest daughter role; ‘What are you doing over there?’ ‘You’re wasting your life over there’ and ‘What kind of a counsellor are you?’ Comments that blur my self, galvanise my connection to here, I suppose, dividing me from there. Remaining a daughter, a girl throughout my parents’ long lives, never a woman. When I go back this time to talk to the stones there will be no parents. I will be a woman. Mine will be a kind of voluntary uprooting this time (But I’m not selling my house – unwilling to lose this home). Unlike Margaret Johnson’s leaving of Windermere Station cited by Read (1996): she talks about the physicality of leaving even though you have come to terms mentally with the move. There is a despair. But for me, I have a shed full of my belongings, mostly books and papers, some crockery and art materials. A life of 17 years to sort through, shed, whittle down, dump, store or take with me. Goodbyes. Perhaps I am making too big a thing of it all – here, Ireland, all of it. It is my life but perhaps I am making too big a thing of it. I think at the moment I feel like:
a poor lummox going along dauntlessly in the snow at fall of day with only the road ahead of him and no promise of homecoming. (Banville, 2005, p.28)

Threshold People

*Whoever is searching for the human being must first find the lantern.*

Nietzsche (cited in Buytenijk, 1974, p. 22)

One day in March 2005 on my return to my home town of Kells, Co, Meath, Ireland, the World, the Universe, I walked into the local barn-like Catholic church and, standing in the doorway, said, to nobody in particular, 'Help me Rhonda'. Nobody in particular heard or replied, as expected. Another day, March 25, Good Friday, I spend with the faithful:

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*I am sitting at the bedside of my aunt in St. Jude's Nursing Home. I am the only visitor on this unseasonably warm day. My aunt is 97. I'm sitting here with her, making pleasant conversation. She doesn't know with whom she is making pleasant conversation and always the consummate gentlewoman, she is pleased to make it, when she is roused momentarily from her frequent slumber. 'Help me Rhonda' is playing on the*
background radio. Is anybody listening? Nobody in particular. Again. Who is it on for? Not Mrs. Carpenter, perched on the edge of the bed opposite, bobbing like an restless bird: desperate to catch my eye, to talk. Nor the other four ladies lying in bed passively watching me as I refill the water cup and offer my aunt a drink, or busy with their own thoughts. Mrs. Gardner's bedside locker is tumbling with Flake and Aero chocolate Easter eggs, a miniature floral bouquet sits on her bedside table. She tells me she made it in the 'play' room. She thinks she has been here 4 months, but I, having my memory, know different. She is not sure when she will be getting home, perhaps, she thinks, when her cold clears up. I think not.

My aunt becomes more like my mother in looks as she becomes smaller in size. She, who was tall and straight, groomed and knowledgeable, curls in the bed, her knees chinward, bedclothes clenched at the neck. She sleeps peacefully now. When she is gone I guess another part of my mother will be gone too.

The smell here is a familiar mixture of urine and institutional food, heavily blanketed in the thick warm air. The radio now blares, 'This is the closest thing to crazy I have ever been'. Feels true. The monotony of the day is broken for those well enough to walk a little as they will be taken to the Easter ceremony in the small chapel. Mrs. Gardner, in her fuchsia-pink cardigan and floral skirt, readies herself; brushes her still plentiful hair. Fiona, the care assistant, calls by and takes her away in the wheelchair. Another young assistant comes in with a spare pair of my aunt's
pyjamas. 'I'll leave them here love,' she addresses us both sympathetically, leaving the pyjamas on the end of the bed. Maybe we all look pretty sad here.

'Do you see anything nice out there Bridie?' she asks one of the elderly ladies propped up in bed and staring distractedly out of the large bay window close to her bed. A permanent strain painted on her deeply lined face.

'Only a load of cars and none of them is asking to take me home,' Bridie delivers the line as a grim observation, without humour.

'Ha, ha,' the assistant laughs halfheartedly as she leaves the room.

Bridie continues to stare grimly, alternately out the window and then about the room.

In time, Mrs. Gardner is returned from the church, she is muttering to herself about kissing the cross. She tells me the service was lovely. She tells me she is 87 and had seven children. One died at 50 years of age and another died at 2 months of age, both in March; 'March is a bad month,' she says definitively. And she shows me the photograph of her older daughter who died in March, one year. I hadn't noticed before any personal effects around, but there it was at the back of her locker. An image. A life. There is no photograph of the remembered baby.
Another lady (Mrs. Hodge), whom I had chatted to about six months ago, delighting in her strong rural accent from the place where I used to live and work, lies in bed staring silently ahead. No conversation now. She has a strong, gaunt face, reminiscent of a lifetime of hardship and hard work. She tells me she’s cold and asks if I’ve seen her daughter Áine and if there are many in the house and is the fire lit. I answer reassuringly that there’s enough fire and Áine is well, stroking her shoulder in the hope of transferring some comfort.

Meantime Mrs. Reilly from bed 4 visits Bridie in bed 6. ‘How are you?’, she queries with interest as if she hasn’t seen Bridie for some time when she has in fact inhabited the bed across for years. Bridie, in her usual grim tone, confirms the facts, ‘I’m all right. I’ve been here for years.’ Later when I visit her bedside she tells me the same. She says she’s been here for years but, ‘Sure it’s all right. Sure you’re not tied to it’ (the hospital, that is). She keeps the illusion alive. She tells me, ‘I had a stick but it was taken from me. A hospital is a terrible place for taking things from you.’ No doubt it is. Later I see Mrs. Reilly go visit again as if for the first time and Bridie asks if she is stopping here (that is, staying in St. Jude’s) and they tell each other they will see each other again. ‘I’ll be here tomorrow,’ reassures Bridie in her resigned way. And Mrs. Reilly returns to the bed opposite but one.

The Easter ceremony is being broadcast over the intercom and a nurse comes in. She switches on the television and provides us
with the celebration of Easter ceremonies in a Dublin cathedral. Now we have Easter ceremonies in stereo, radio and television, only playing two different programmes. It seems nobody is listening. An elderly nun comes around with a wooden crucifix and, as is traditional on Good Friday, all the old ladies kiss the feet of Jesus, even my aunt emerges from her slumber and knows what to do.

I kiss my aunt. I say goodbye to her. She says she hopes she will be home soon.

Everyone wants to go home.

~

In exploring my own perceptions of the aged-care setting I found I was consumed by sadness in the moment. Sadness to see Mrs. Hodge turned away from life, such a sad face, waiting to die, I was thinking, presuming. If the death of a child is 'the cruellest and most unnatural loss' (Knight, 1996, p. 125), there was Mrs. Gardner with only me to hear that she had lost not one but two children. I wanted to leave and I wanted to talk to them all. I couldn't save them. It was the end of life. I was too sad to be there. Too sad with self-pity and pity for others. I also felt a bit angry about the sympathetic tone of the young attendants, the non-consultativeness of the nurses who turned on the TV, the hospital system which, again without consultation, broadcast the Easter services across the intercom (although the patients probably like this and I am being irreligious!). Angry that the Director of Nursing didn't want these patients interviewed because of the inconvenience it might cause to the system if
they got upset: there were no staff to deal with the performance of emotion. Angry because the old ladies wanted a cup of tea at 3 o’clock and had to wait until 4.40 p.m. (due to low levels of staffing). Angry that there were no visitors – I didn’t visit enough myself. Angry at my own helplessness.

At the time I wrote in my journal:

I’m a bit concerned about my own emotional levels when I’m dealing with the research situation. I think it is a negative orientation and not doing me or the people I visit any good. It immobilises me because I feel helpless and it also casts a negative pall on the research process too I think.

I sought some advice from my friend Karla who works with people who live with dementia. My loquacious friend replied:

You asked a very brief question: what was it, within my new approach, that I did, that made the difference. The answer might not be quite as brief, but I will try not to make it too lengthy either. The foundation to do any of the stuff I do (profound inner peace, no suffering, choosing what to feel at any particular time) is the insight that we create the world with our minds. I don’t mean this in the new-agey kind of way, but in a very pragmatic sense. The world for a human being is in the first place a collection of sensory impressions (imagine how a baby would experience its surroundings after just
emerging from the womb). We are then taught and learn from individual experiences to attach meanings to all the things that our sensory organs present us with. Depending on exactly what these things are, in what order and intensity they arrive, we form our own very individual view of the world and our place within it. Cultural prescriptions might create a semblance of similarity of meanings within any cultural group, but if you have ever tried to imagine the very personal experience of the person you believe to be most similar to you, you will very quickly appreciate how vastly different that could be. Fact is, we will never know for sure how anyone else experiences their reality, regardless of what they tell us (words also have often different meanings to different people), or what we might conclude from their body language. The other day I watched a band playing music, and I noticed that the guys were having facial expressions that looked exactly like extreme pain to me. I assume they weren’t in pain, because of the context, which has taught me to interpret their expressions differently. Once you really get that, that whatever your understanding of the world is, is very much your personal interpretation only, then you can start on all the other stuff.

So, coming back to the [nursing home] encounters, I know that I really can’t know what anyone there is really experiencing. For instance, the woman you talk about, who lies there staring at the ceiling, well you can interpret this situation in lots of different ways. You’ve given me one: she might be lying there, waiting to die. It’s true, she might, but then she might just be lying there thinking nothing (as in meditation), or she might have regressed to her childhood, dreaming of her boyfriend, or she might be waiting for some specific thing to happen before she dies, like for the birth of a grandchild. Just realise that what you consider the most likely version of what’s
happening is completely a function of your own history, emotional make-up and world view. Once you become more flexible in interpreting the world, by being able to consider a multiplicity of possible meanings, and realising that you can choose the one that is most motivating, most satisfying and most energising (seeing that you will never know for sure anyway), it also becomes possible to feel more positive about your own ability to make a difference for these people. When I went there, I just acknowledged that just by me being there, their experience was already changed from what it would have been otherwise. When I additionally let them know that I love them, that I care for them, that I'm interested in what they have to tell, then there are added bits that have now changed their emotional reality as well. And if I manage to turn their focus of attention towards anything that's pleasing or funny or interesting, then the difference (for someone stuck in the same room for days/ weeks/ months at a time) can have been quite profound. Maybe. I don't know. But don't you think I come out far better equipped to deal with the next bit in my life if that's the way I look at it? I guess the real difference is that I don't look for or assume any version of 'the truth', which, if it does exist, is not accessible to me anyhow.

Regarding the focus of these people on 'home', there's also a very practical thought that might help you, and them. When people start talking to me about their home, I respond by asking them lots of questions about their home and what they like about it, and what they would be doing there now if they were there, allowing them to recreate pleasant states of reminiscing and daydreaming. Because even if these people might never go there physically ever again, and if these homes might not even exist any more, as someone else might have bought their house, they can go there mentally any time they
wish, they can spend all day there in their thoughts, if they want to. The bottom line is, we can actually enjoy things we don’t in ‘reality’ have. I don’t know whether this helps, but please do probe further where your mental or emotional objections are. It’s worthwhile to get your head around all this, I can vouch for it.

I returned to St. Jude’s in April. When I saw her ward bed empty I immediately thought her dead. ‘Mrs Hodge is in the side room,’ came the answer to my enquiry from the busy nurse. That means she’s dying. I know what the ‘side room’ is. It’s the dying room. I wonder if she knows. Not sure why she has to die there. I think it may have to do with family access, they may be coming and going more, to make it easier for the family to be with the dying person undisturbed. When I asked the nurse if Mrs. Hodge was dying she said, Yes I suppose, but (reassuringly) not today! In the side room a small birdlike figure with huge eyes and a balding head stared at me from the bedcovers pulled up to her chin. Like a frightened child she lay motionless, following my voice with her wide eyes. Hello Mrs. Hodge. How are you? I’m all right, she whispers hoarsely. I continue to talk gently while her eyes fix on me and I notice her hand start to agitate under the bedcovers and wonder if she wants to take it out from under there. I reach under and take her hand, she takes mine firmly and the hand stops moving. She appears to relax a bit. I stroke her shoulder with my other hand as I listen to her soft responses, not always able to make out what she is saying. I feel sad. I ask her about Daniel, I know her son’s name from before, using the tactic of conjuring an image that might be positive, her only possession now. Her memory can be her comfort if perhaps she is helped to re-member. Re-membering the past, putting it together again. Maybe it’s better than this present: which is no gift. She tells me her daughter is home from England to see her. Áine.
Now here again I remember my father in his last year harassed with pain and breathing difficulties, loving the music of Dean Martin. I bought him a Dean Martin CD, showed him how to use the CD player: ‘When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that’s amore’. But after a few songs the tears came, with the memories, and he asked me to turn it off. It makes me too sad, he said. So clearly I didn’t want to bring sadness to my father then nor did I now to this woman, and I couldn’t tell if I was. I didn’t think so. She continued to hold firmly onto my hand, her eyes holding onto my face, all her physical strength concentrated in this holding until the nurse came to tend to her and I must go.

Back in the ward Bridie is not in good form, she is less alert than usual and not interested in eating. Throughout my visit she uncharistically slept a lot and didn’t take much interest in looking about the ward or out the window. I go over to say hello and she squints at me asking silently, as she has often done aloud, Who are you?

~

My aunt is in good form. She is tucked up in bed, her eyes closed. My mother’s double. I feed her spoonfuls scrambled eggs followed by rice pudding, making a game of it to ensure nourishment because I know that otherwise the dishes might be left on the bedside table and then cleared away untouched. Her petrified hands can hold nothing, she needs assistance to sit upright. She won’t know the food is there. She won’t notice when it is gone. ‘Last spoonful now’, then, ‘Just three more, one two...And one more’. My sister, who is with me on this visit, alternates with sips of tea from a beaker and we laugh at my
antics and aunty Ina laughs, oblivious of the joke. The attendants call out ‘How is aunty Ina?’ and again I am reassured that this is a good place with positive people. Like the way the nurse went in to see Mrs. Hodge and gathered her in her arms with a cuddle and words of care.

I'm feeling the passing of the generations and that it is appropriate that my sister and I are here to do this for our aunt. This is family and community in action. I am thinking a lot lately of where my place in the world is, where I might belong, about family.

~

Journal entry, February 2005

I notice that my attitude towards this place has improved the longer I have observed here at a micro level. Still, I admit that when I'm walking down the corridors through the heavy air passing dull wards where people sit, or lie, soundlessly in bed, or plaintively call Nurse! Nurse! I get a heavy feeling. But this individual ward where I have spent time is now given to 'light-gleams' (Carlyle, cited in Lee, 2005) – made by the little details of the lives and the small intimate links of connection I create and experience through my interaction with these women. If, as Lee writes, paraphrasing Carlyle, biography is 'life-writing': 'the creation of intimate links between the dead and the living', the 'rescuing of lives, however obscure, from oblivion' (p.2) this work that I am doing, the work of research, and just like the work of therapy, can equally be life-giving, light-creating, life-valuing.
My aunt was the eldest of a family of seven. Only two remain alive. When the others were still at school she got a job in Dublin in the Civil Service, rising to a prestigious administrative position. A professional woman in those days was somewhat unusual but it left her in a position to help her parents' support and educate the others. Marriage would have meant having to leave her job. She said one time she never met anyone she wanted to marry, said something about not wanting to compromise, which she recognised as a big part of marriage. My mother and three aunts were able to go to England to train as nurses. My other aunt was free to enter the convent. Aunt Ina lived in Dublin, in a flat, and played tennis and took foreign holidays in the USSR. I visited her flat often and thought it exotic; one bedroom with a sofa bed and a cupboard kitchen. So neat and compact. I always liked dolls' houses. Every Christmas she bought us books. I still have many of them, ranging from large fairy tales when we were young – Red Riding Hood for me and Goldilocks for my sister, Marianne's Dreams and, to my eternal delight, the Narnia books. This continued throughout our adult lives. She was an avid reader herself and kept a close eye on world affairs.

~

Journal entry, 2005

When she became frail she came to live with my eldest sister, between whom there was a particularly fond relationship. Over the ten years of living there she developed osteoporosis, arthritis and became confined to
bed. She continued to read *The Irish Times* daily, watch the daily news and receive visitors gladly and cheerfully, inquiring from those who came irregularly from overseas about their lives and their spouses. As her physical disability increased it seemed she decided to leave this world and gradually withdrew from the present time and concerns. Eventually my eldest sister arranged for her to be admitted to the nursing hospital where she herself is a registered nurse. My aunt responds to all with the endearing ladylike politeness of yesteryear. The nurses and attendants address her as ‘Aunty Ina’.

I talk to her about the people she knows and knew, mentioning the familiar names, Dora (my mother) Carmel, Betty, Teresa, her sisters, and Luke and Gerry, her brothers. I shine the searchlight on the memories for a while. I tell her Dolores (my sister living in America) is coming home in June and Paul (my brother) may be coming from Canada. She brightens at the familiar names, responding, *Oh yes* and *That’s great*, enjoying the momentary images, her eyes still closed to here, inhabiting her own in-between. For me now the in-between of these women has become a place of possibility, what Turner (1969) terms a ‘liminal space’, the transitional space in any rite of passage between the beginning and the end where uncertainty and not knowing is an expected condition. Turner states, ‘Liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between’ (p. 95). They are the ‘threshold people’.

So is it that these people seem to me liminal entities, threshold people, and in what sense is this so? One art therapist who had worked in an aged-care setting told me, *I don’t think people bother much, like...working with them is like working with people and you’re going to lose them...like why*
bother when they’re going to be dying soon? (personal conversation). This was a sentiment that repulsed me, reflecting back to me as it did my own fear that it was true and that this was a widespread attitude, that I too therefore was powerless. But this thinking leads to sadness and hopelessness. And I have already seen a glint of hope in another way of seeing and be-ing in this space. This is the way I will follow.

Stop yer cryin’

Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold’


My visits to St. Jude’s became more positive when I let go of my now; striving to free myself from feelings and perceptions of despair that acted as a barrier to my ability to communicate with the women in the ward. If I am to hear their story, their now story, which may also be their once-upon-a-time story I must not get in the way: I must get out of the way and connect with them. How can I be useful or effective as a visitor or as a researcher, or therapeutically as a counsellor, if I get in the way? I cannot. I must put aside ‘bracket’ (Kleinman, 2004) for the moment my unhelpful emotions and thoughts and connect with the person before me, now, unafraid: I must, in a way: ‘descend to where the stories are kept’ (Attwood, 2003). Attwood writes:
All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. All must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change (p.160).

The notion of bracketing resonated completely with Karla’s method of being with the elderly people she visited in a loving way and turning their attention, for example, towards something pleasant in order to change their experience in that moment, and perhaps in other more profound ways too. This latter she could not know for sure. And neither do I, but then what is my need to know but another barrier of my making, causing immobility: if I don’t know then what’s the point doing anything? Here is just another need of mine to bracket: no point in crying over the situation of these people and at the same time creating barriers which exclude and isolate them further by preventing me from entering their situation (story) and walking the way a little with them. Here then was the place of possibility where uncertainty is expected and can become a frame of reference for connection and relationship.

‘Stop your cryin’,’ my mother would say, ‘or I’ll give you something to cry about.’ My tears and despair were of no help to anyone, including myself. Bracketing then means for me in this context, ‘holding in abeyance [my] pre-conceptions and theoretical impositions’ (Kleinman,
my depressing and negative thoughts, my anger towards the system and towards my own helplessness. And with that there could now emerge for me a new ability to be present with the women, to be-with or, indeed, ‘bear witness in true presence’ (Parse, 2005, p.298), in concert with the many writings within the fields of counselling and psychotherapy as well as nursing on the therapeutic value of being fully present to another human being with an attitude of unconditional positive regard (Spinelli, 1994; Rogers, 1965; Parse, 2005, 1998). This kind of openness Winnicott termed ‘going-on-being’ (1963, p. 86), explained as a freedom from any need to react in a defensive way to an external situation and freedom to have an open awareness to the evolving experience of the present moment (cited in Adams, 2006, p.19)

And so, ‘descending to where the stories are kept’ with these nursing home residents became a turning point for me within this project and within my work – an experience of going-on-being. This transformative experience created an opportunity to focus on the anecdotes and little details, Carlyle’s ‘light-gleams’ (cited in Lee, 2005, p.2) – to bring these people back from the threshold, back into life. Or as Lee herself says, in relation to biography writing, ‘to bring a whole life home to us’. I have used this experience throughout the period of the project to touch into the details of the participants’ lives and bring their stories forward. What I found are ‘now’ stories of lived experience, memories that live on, dreams that continue to be: a lived experience where past and future are there in the present moment. My own story continues as a thread throughout, informing the research experience and contextualising my process of writing this project. This is further developed in terms of methodological issues in the following chapter.
What do they do

The singers, tale-writers, dancers, painters, shapers, makers?

They go there with empty hands,

Into the gap between.

They come back with things in their hands.

They go silent and come back with words, with tunes.

They go into confusion and come back with patterns.

They go limping and weeping, ugly and frightened,

And come back with the wings of the redwing hawk,

The eyes of the mountain lion.

Ursula Le Guin, 1988, Always Coming Home.
CHAPTER 2 THE NEXT STEP

Methodology

I am paradoxically attracted to wandering and getting lost

as methodological stances.


I have noted in the previous chapter how my personal life and my research life fold into one another, the former an under-painting for the latter. Even my unconscious getting in on the act Jungian-style providing graphic dreaming (Jung, 1989). I have been at times intimidated and confused by the ‘unruly content of subjective experiences’ (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992, p.2): the experiences in family, in the nursing home, the dream experiences and the waking reflections. Since commencing this work I have traversed the world six times to date, I have leaped into the darkness of the void both literally and metaphorically and I have found light in unlikely places. Having a fractured story I am writing myself into a coherent existence, creating a narrative that will ‘do’; it may not do forever but for now. Perhaps it is true that ‘stories are lived before they are told’ (MacIntyre, 1984, cited in Ellis & Flaherty, 1992, p.212) and, if so, I am still doing the living as the telling has commenced: the telling emerges from the living.

An emergent quality describes the chaos of preparing for, conducting and writing this qualitative research project and it called for a methodology and a theory of representation that embraces multiple modes of expression (Somerville, 2005). There is a Taoist belief as spoken by Lao Tzu in the
Tao Te Ching, which reads, 'The Way that can be told is not the true Way'. The Tao or Way is elusive, fluid, creative. It is the not-knowing, it is the more-than, the becoming, the open-ended and uncertain. This is reflected into my belief in the elusive quality of the process of qualitative research itself as well as of the human be-ingness (subjectivity) of the researcher and participant and that such elusiveness can be accessed best through mediums of art: story, poetry, metaphor, writing and painting: that is, encoded through processes of discontinuity, reflexivity and fractal iteration. I like the image provided by Helene Cixous, post-modern feminist writer and philosopher, who suggests that women write in 'white ink': a way of writing that flows freely, producing writing that is open and changing, fluid and destabilising (1981). For her this style of writing is seen in contrast to the rigidly structured conventional (masculine) style but more than that, it offers:

the very possibility of change, the space that can serve as a springboard for subversive thought, the precursory movement of a transformation of social and cultural standards (1981, p. 249).

In this chapter I will be explicating how an epistemology of post-modern emergence (Somerville, 2005; 2007) evolved in the doing of this project through the processes of thinking, talking and writing-out-loud the multilayered experience of preparing to do qualitative research, and more specifically, preparing to have intensively personal interviews / encounters with other people / participants. This preparing, as seen from the pathway of my own life journey, through the window of my working life as a counsellor and teacher, from the deep cellar of my inhibitions, self-consciousness and fears, from the broad open doorway of my wish to
invite and enable the others who would be the helpers and participants in the research, has led to a telling of my story as well as theirs.

This telling of myself was not at first planned, and was indeed decried in my personal journal as completely self-absorbed and pathetic. The telling of my self I later recognised as part of the struggle to approach with integrity the I/Thou (Buber, 1970; Kramer, 2003) experience of interacting at a meaningful level with my participant co-researchers and the unsureness of how to access and represent the multidimensional internal (cognitive, emotional, spiritual) and external (lived body) aspects of the individual which ‘blur together in the person’s stream of experience’ (Denzin, 1989, p. 121). If we use story to organise the chaos of our existence as Game and Metcalfe tell us (1996, p.75), if story ‘is the primary scheme by means of which human existence is rendered meaningful’ (Polkinghorne, 1988, p.11), then this research, as one of my participants succinctly put it, becomes ‘my story of stories’ and may go some way to unravelling ‘the complex manner in which emotion, cognition and the lived body intertwine’ (Ellis and Flaherty, 1992, p.3). In the process I aspire to some of the qualities of Cixous’ ‘white ink’ in achieving writing and knowledge-making that ‘does not contain, but carries; that does not hold back, but makes possible’ (1981, p 259-560).

In My Father’s House

We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.
Many Irish storytellers begin their tale with the words *Fadó, fadó*, which means 'Long, long ago'. When these words are spoken slowly and with sufficient gravity, the audience turns a listening, expectant ear to the teller. And so that is how I will begin this part of my father's story: *Fadó, fadó*, when my father was a young man, the times were hard and a boy left school at 13 – with knowledge of algebra, poetry and equipped for a lifetime in the quoting of long tracts of Shakespeare, which quotes were called upon regularly in later life to encapsulate a wisdom, to indulge in the sheer beauty of the language and to prove conclusively that *they teach them nothing at school today*. So it was, he leaving school pre-maturely to do the work of a man, milking cows and making hay under the direction of the stern unyielding father. The gentle mother confined to bed, unwell with the rheumatic fever which was to take her untimely away from him, is a part of his wounding story. She died in the house, where he lived all his life, where I was born, and where he was 'taken home to' for the long days and night of waking after his death this year (2005).

He often boasted, *I've never been beyond the end of the street only to go to Mass*, conveniently setting aside the admittedly few and brief sorties to holiday destinations in Ireland with my mother long ago, but also the reputation-shattering, self-initiated, six-week holiday to the US and Canada to visit my brother and sister some years ago. Reminding him of which only elicited the brief and definitive response *Never again*, followed by a characteristic shake of the head for emphasis, in case for a moment you might harbour the illusion that he could ever again be persuaded to leave the safe confines of his home.
My father’s life was built around this house, this home, and perhaps the house was built around him in some ways too. The sheds up the back where he had toiled with cows were my play places; the long disused cow stalls where he did the milking, the dangling chains which secured them hanging loose and rusted. The dairy, outside the back door of the house, was a storehouse for his children’s bicycles, toys and junk. It was also the storehouse for his memories and the many stories associated with these places were softened by time and transformed by many tellings into colourful myths. Up to recent years I would still ask, ‘Is that true Daddy?’, after some tale of outrageous doings, to which he would respond with further laughter and an emphatic, ‘Of course’, which only served to leave me entirely unconvinced of the veracity of the story.

Then there were the family stories giving brief insights into the daily life of his youth and the relationships within the family. He told me of the time long ago when 20-year-old Michael Duffy had been sent to the fields by my grandfather with two companions to milk the cows. They were transporting the jandy of fresh milk by pony and trap back into the town when the younger of the group, my father’s youngest brother Noel, then in his late teens, becoming irritated with his two companions, for some reason now lost in the mists of time, calmly unhitched the pony and walked with it into town, abandoning the two older lads by the side of the road. When meeting my father in town, he in his twenties at the time, Noel casually told him of the situation, leaving my father with the burden of walking back with the pony
to rescue the milk and the two gombeens still standing where they were left.

Those were my grandfather's cows that were milked and he would hold the older brother responsible. My father cradled bitter memories and hurts towards his own father all his life: 'He was hardest on me. I don't know why,' he would say. And all his life my father had nightmares of milking truculent cows who kicked over buckets and of driving large herds of them for miles up the public roads to new pasture and they cantankerously darting down side roads and into open gateways at every opportunity. But now, a lifetime later (my lifetime), after every re-telling of the jandy story, my father would laugh aloud at the audacity of Noel's act, the blackguardism of his younger brother and, with perhaps a wonder at Noel's lack of fear of their father, the fun of it. He told and re-told many stories, loving nothing better than an audience, and admitting in the last year of his life, 'Sure they're sick listening to me here', the long-suffering family that is. It was true enough at times. And it was an admission he made sometimes bitterly, but mostly with resigned understanding.

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One of my roles, on my return from Australia in 2004 to provide support when he was ill, was to be a fresh listener to my father's stories. An interested audience, a role I often played well. And so my father spent much time telling me of times past and people all dead. Vaillent writes,
'One task of living out the last half of life is excavating and recovering all of those whom we loved in the first half. Thus the recovery of lost loves becomes an important way in which the past effects the present' (2002, p.103/4). Through storytelling my father rescued the lost lives of those he knew from oblivion. In biographical terms these stories were 'light gleams' for us all (Carlyle, cited in Lee, 2005) bringing times of joy and hearty laughter and relief from the chaos of pain and grief that sometimes engulfed him during his own illnesses, depression and after the death of his wife, my mother, the year before.

The process of 'recovering' lost loves paralleled the experiences and observations I had had during my time spent in the nursing home visiting my aunt and the other women there, when entering their stories, their life-world, their subjectivity. It was this subjectivity that attracted me as the stories to tell and the way to tell the stories. Not unexpectedly, this leaning, in conjunction with my professional background as teacher and counsellor, led me to embrace a qualitative methodology for undertaking research. It was, in fact, a palpable relief to me to know that ways of researching can mirror the ways we do our living and that I – the person internal and external, the counsellor, the teacher, the aspirational artist – am at-the-same-time the researcher engaged in respectful conversation with my participants who are also at once all that they are. Schwandt (2001) writes:

Qualitative enquiry deals with human lived experience. It is the life-world as it is lived, felt, undergone, made sense of, and accomplished by human beings that is the object of study’ (p. 84).
It is a perspective that recognises and honours all those that are ‘living the research not just doing it (Dadds & Hart, 2001, p. 162). This research project into the lived experience of constructing home in older age found some resonance in phenomenological and ethnographic approaches in terms of understanding subjective experience. I place my self squarely within the research as both a reflexive (Pellatt, 2003; Alvesson & Skoldberg, 2000; Mulhall, 1999) observer and as a participant as an ethical stance, recognising that my own life experience informs and affects the processes and outcomes of the research and that it, in turn, is affecting me. Pellatt writes:

In author-centered ethnographies the author is not concealed in the text, but is rather transparent about the conditions through which reports are created.

(2003, p.30)

I am aware, for example, of my own responses to my parents’ old age and deaths. I am aware of my own struggle to articulate meaning in life, having been immersed in an environment which houses the last stages of life – the nursing home – and of actively navigating the ‘slough of despond’ that reached up to draw me under in sadness and anger when I spent time in that environment, as articulated in the previous chapter. In addition, my personal experience of death has risen dramatically in the past three years from a dim memory of my grandfather’s wake as a young teenager to experiencing the deaths not only of my parents in their late eighties, but also of three close friends (now four) one of whom was my
earliest school mate and my own age. On another level, I have experienced a reluctant emigration, a surprise place-love, enduring relationships, and I struggle now in mid-life to locate and articulate a place that for me will indicate home and belonging. I note that the emic or insider’s perspective (Byrne, 2001) has informed the main areas I am investigating: old age, home and meaning, and that I do this in a reflexive way: ‘having an ongoing conversation about experience while simultaneously living the moment’ (Coffey, 1999, p.75).

Since formulating a research question requires a ‘reflexive identification of motivations underlying the research’ (Game and Metcalfe, 1996, p.38), I think it important here also to articulate my outsider’s perspective on this project. As an outside-observer, an important element in the research was an altruistic motivation arising from the recognition of the lack of dedicated psychological counselling support services available to older people and the almost complete dearth of such services within aged-care facilities, or of referral to such services from within aged-care institutions. Considering the increasing older population that is predicted (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1997; National Council on Ageing and Older People (Ireland)), Wells (2005), points out, from the Australia perspective, that the need for such services will increase in the coming years. However, Wells also reports an ageist attitude amongst professionals which leads to a low referral rate to counselling, and also a negative expectation of any positive outcome from therapy. Writing in his book *Psychotherapy with Older Adults*, Knight (1996) agrees that care professionals may harbour a pessimism about later life that stands in the way of referral to psychotherapeutic services. Pilkington (2005c), commenting on the Canadian experience, notes an over-reliance on drug therapy to deal with ‘problem behaviours’, particularly in for-profit facilities, and regrets that
counsellors in long-term care facilities would be seen as 'a non-essential service'.

During visits to various aged-care facilities, I noted that the manifestations of emotional/psychological issues such as grief, loss and loneliness were being described by staff as 'problem behaviours' and pathologised as 'emotional dependence'. This kind of attribution marked out the features of grief as symptoms. Laungani, writing about constructions of mental illness, noted that where symptoms are identified and where they appear in 'in a certain order', then that person is considered to have a 'syndrome' (2002, p.26). Asking if 'madness is being manufactured in Western society' (p. 27), Laungani questions the strong reliance of the psychiatric fraternity on drug therapy and the ethics of viewing deviant behaviour and emotions as indicators of psychopathology. In the facilities I visited, behaviours such as weeping and wanting to talk to staff, and expressions of emotions such as sadness and loneliness, were seen as being demanding of staff time — and were either given minimal attention by busy non-professional and mostly well-meaning care staff, or ignored, or treated (as symptoms) with anti-depressant medication (Nay, 1995). In one large aged-care facility the administrator told me that in ten years only one resident had been referred to an external counsellor, and this was for one session only. In all other facilities I contacted, and according to all staff I spoke to, no referrals had ever occurred. Yet Knight observes:

My impression has been that workers in the ageing network are much more reluctant to discuss therapy with the elderly than the elderly are to discuss or seek therapy. In several instances, once the senior service worker became confident enough to refer an
older person, that potential client was pleased, if not actually relieved, to have someone to talk to about his or her problems. (1996, p. 47).

It seems that psychiatric and pharmacological are the professional interventions of choice within the aged-care system with almost no referral to either public or private psychologists or counsellors, even where such a generalist service did exist (Wells, 2005). Neither was there a sufficient staff allocation within care institutions so that older people had someone to talk to about concerns and problems. Care staff were focused on schedules of showering and feeding and had little time to talk.

In New South Wales, Australia, community health services were available, even if underutilised by the elderly, and I was able to name that service as suitable for providing counselling / psychological back-up services to the Australian project participants, in keeping with the university’s ethics requirements. The Irish context was more difficult; I was told that ‘adult’ psychiatric services ceased at age 65 and from then on a person was referred to a geriatric psychiatric service via their GP for a psychiatric assessment; the GP would complete an extensive referral form with them, it would be submitted to the psychiatric service and in time an appointment for a psychiatric assessment would be scheduled. In the area where I checked through this process, the person might then be referred to the one social worker available, whose main work was in the area of benefits and entitlements. At the time of my inquiry she was on leave and no replacement was available.
The erosion of the adult status of older people is discussed later in regard to how it translates into discriminatory language usage and treatment (Chapter 5). As Parry and Doan write from a narrative therapy perspective, 'It is very easy to separate and exclude people via diagnostic systems, suggesting they do not belong in a “normal” story' (1994, p. 53; Doan, 1998; Powell and Longino, 2001). The pathologising of the normal experiences of ageing is also an important theme within this project, and the oppressive political and social implications of this perspective are explored. Advocacy for social change is an implicit and explicit theme.

As for complying with the ethical requirements, in Ireland this proved particularly difficult; I explained to the different services that during the interviews participants may access stories of grief and loss and I that wished to ensure that there was an appropriate professional to talk to should such support be required. However, I anticipated that psychiatric services was not the level of intervention which would be needed. There was no avenue of support that I could find within the Irish government health service and I eventually found a suitable community-based voluntary counselling service which employed one professional counsellor who agreed to make herself available to the research participants if needed. This experience told its own story of how the emotional needs of older people are viewed and what they account for.

Reflexivity, an important element of this project, was facilitated by keeping a reflective diary throughout the process of the project as a framework ‘to guide reflective thought and encourage critical thinking’ (Wall, Glenn Mitchinson and Poole, 2004, p.28). Through the use of the diary I discovered my own thinking by writing out my reactions and
responses to my observations and experiences. In this way I was able to
recognise my own preconceptions, consider them and decide if they were
helpful or unhelpful, acceptable or in need of challenging. If unhelpful I
could then be intentional about placing a perception to one side where it
could be acknowledged but not get in the way. This process is based on
the Husserlian concept (1931; 1965) of ‘bracketing’:

in which imaginary brackets are used to highlight and put on hold
everyday assumptions about the phenomenon of interest …
holding in abeyance pre-existing personal experiences,
preconceptions, beliefs and attitudes in order to transcend
everyday understanding of the phenomenon of interest and to
view it in a clear and unaltered manner (Priest, 2004, p. 5).

Priest goes on to say that bracketing ‘is a psychological orientation
towards oneself rather than an observable set of procedures to be adopted
by the researcher’. A clear example of where bracketing was a beneficial
process to me was the time I spent visiting my aunt and the other women
in an aged-care facility where I struggled with the experience of
witnessing day-to-day life where dementia, loss of function and
dependency were the norm. I was drowning in helplessness and loss,
feeling hopelessness and sadness at the condition of old age. I learned
through my friend Karla (Chapter 1) a way of relating to the residents that
brought a glimmer of light to the moment of conversation, a way to create
a bright moment in the present. To do this I needed to give away my own
depressing thoughts and put aside, that is bracket my ‘I’ experience long
enough to be truly present to the woman I was speaking with and to elicit,
hear and validate her moment of brightness. There was a certain letting go
for me and an embracing of a different reality. By taking myself out of first place and with the process of bracketing benefiting both myself (as visitor or researcher) and the person with whom I was speaking.

The phrase long enough above is important and emphasises that when I bracket my experience I am not adopting for convenience the scientific method, an action which Irigaray might describe as ‘the imaginary retreat into pure objectivity’ (1985, p. 195). Rather I am with self-awareness acknowledging my own experience, owning it and actively choosing my actions and responses within the given situation for the benefit of the people with whom I am interacting, and of my research.

**Bearing Witness**

*All real living is meeting.*

Martin Buber, 1970, ‘*I and Thou* in the philosophy of Martin Buber’.

When a caring professional views the client as a fellow pilgrim she can assume a stance of ‘bearing witness’ (Pilkington, 2005b) to the client’s story and, as Sally Atkins, an experienced expressive arts therapist, writes, ‘the experience of connection with each other’s stories at a soul level is profoundly healing and transformative for both client and therapist’ (2003, p. 16). In terms of research I was seeking a rigorous and holistic methodology to create a project that could be a deeply personal and meaningful experience for both myself and the participants. I wanted to engage in genuine I/Thou relating, adopting as I do in my counselling work a position of ‘not-knowing’ which acknowledges the uniqueness of
individual experience and does not presume understanding or impose expert knowledge (Neimeyer, 1999; Parry & Doan, 1994). As I also knew that I wanted to include art and imagery in the research, as process and product, I was pleased to find that the ways of qualitative methodology found echoes in the world of the artist. Artist Jeanne Carbonetti writes:

As artists we honour the mystery every time we start work not determined to say something, but with the desire to ask something, to discover rather than explain (1998, p. 12).

Fortunately, the developments in qualitative methodology indicate that this desire to create and discover is both feasible and legitimate. Braud and Anderson, writing about transpersonal research methods, offer the assurance that ‘the conventional boundaries between research, practical application and personal growth and transformation can melt away’ (1998, p. 43). Clements too sees a way forward through what she and her colleagues term ‘organic inquiry’, drawing on feminist spirituality and transpersonal psychology. This approach she says ‘seeks to present the data and analysis in such a way that the individual reader may interact with it and be personally transformed’ (2003, p. 1). Clements (2003), citing as a source of inspiration the pioneering heuristics approach developed by Clark Moustakas (1961/1990/1994), critiques the constraints of the logical positivist reductionist methods of research and supports the notion that research has an expanding nature which is best suited to subjective and intuitive methods. With the primary researcher’s personal experience (story) as ‘the instrument of the study’ she/he facilitates the reader to identify with the material at both the experiential and intellectual
levels, thus promoting the possibility of new insight and indeed even transformation, for the reader.

Describing 'reflexive action research' as a methodology particularly suited to research in the fields of counselling and psychotherapy, John Lees (2001) offers it as a way of overcoming the research–practice gap. He argues that as therapists must constantly reflect on their own clinical experience and engage in professional development and supervision, they are constantly re-evaluating and re-searching their practice: they have a 'natural facility' for doing research from a subjective position rather than as a detached observer. With my background and experience in the counselling field, this perspective certainly appealed and made sense to me. Lees cites Clarkson (1998):

Inquiry into relationship is by the same token research. And if psychotherapy is about relationship it must be about research in a sense. The fact that the work of the clinic is too frequently left unreflected and unreported in a rigorously reflected qualitative way does not mean that it cannot be done (p. 135).

Lees (2001) also goes on to link therapy, training, clinical practice and reflexive research through their shared concern with change and transformation. Transformation, he says, occurs through 'consciousness raising' (referred to by Paulo Freire as 'conscientisation', 1973) and in this respect Lees views reflexive research as a political act with the potential to enable and encourage those involved to reflect critically and therefore recognise and act against oppression. The notion of the practitioner-
A researcher who empowers both client and self is shared by Etherington (2001) when she writes: ‘It is an approach that aims to assist marginalised people to reclaim their voices and value their stories alongside the dominant discourses’ (p. 121; Parry & Doan, 1994). Citing Clark Moustakas, she goes on to describe the reflexive method as heuristic: ‘an unfolding process which could not be known about or planned in advance’ (p. 121). Heuristics derives from the Greek *heuriske* which means to find or discover, and as a research method it is deeply indebted to the work of Michael Polyani who both criticised the detachment of the scientific method and promoted the concept of intuitive or ‘tacit knowing’ (Polyani, 1958; 1966). Moustakas describes heuristic research as a process of searching and studying ‘of being open to significant dimensions of experience, and pursuing knowledge through self-inquiry, full immersion into the phenomenon, and spontaneous observation of and dialogue with persons who are experiencing the phenomenon’ (1990, p. 98). It is a method which takes the researcher through seven particular phases of inquiry:

**Engagement** – this is where the researcher discovers an intense interest or passionate concern from which a research question eventually emerges.

**Immersion** – This is about concentrated self-searching and living the question.

**Incubation** – At this stage the intense concentration is superseded and the researcher allows intuition and inner knowing to develop tacit understanding of the question.

**Illumination** – A synthesis of understandings occurs and a new conscious awareness is possible.
Explication – Now the core themes which have emerged are organised and examined.

Creative synthesis – The themes are expressed in forms such as a thesis, narrative, poetry, artwork, etc.

Validation – Validity is achieved when the synthesis of the data is seen to comprehensively and accurately present the meanings and essences of the experience. Feedback is obtained from participants and others.

(Moustakas, 1990, pp. 27–37).

Moustakas describes the heuristic process as requiring 'a passionate, disciplined commitment to remain with a question intensely and continuously until it is illuminated or answered' (1990, p.15). He developed the approach in response to a critical point in his own life when faced with a decision on whether or not to agree to a major heart operation on his young daughter. In his book Loneliness (1961) he describes how he was 'plunged' into the experience of feeling utterly alone by the 'terrible responsibility' that the situation placed on him. This experience initiated a search into his self and 'an engagement of disturbing inner contact in which he says, 'I tried to be fully aware and discover the right way to proceed' (Moustakas, 1990, p. 91). He went on to explain how this self searching (immersion) was not a process that was carefully planned or sampled but one which occurred spontaneously 'at unexpected times and places' (incubation). In noticing his own loneliness he became aware of the isolation and loneliness of others (illumination), for example other children in the hospital ward, and, looking 'into the heart of the lonely experience', he explored the meaning of loneliness and developed an understanding of loneliness as a condition of human life (explication). His
publication in 1961 of the book *Loneliness* was, of course, part of the creative synthesis of the experience.

Hiles (2001) has described the heuristic process of inquiry as one of ‘following your nose’ in response to a deeply personal concern while still ‘requiring the highest degree of rigour and thoroughness’ (p.6). He further describes it (2002) as an adaptation of phenomenological inquiry which explicitly acknowledges the lived experience of the researcher as the main focus of the research to the extent that there is a ‘transformative effect of the inquiry on the researcher’s own experience’ (p.3). Kottler agrees, saying, ‘heuristics acknowledges and embraces the intrinsic subjectivity of the process and celebrates it. The researcher is part of the study rather than a mere observer or analyser’ (2003). I have observed how these heuristic processes have unfolded in my own preparation for, doing and presenting of, the current research and the concurrent life that I am living.
More about Methodological Processes

Bricoleurs – such a suave term for scavengers

Who build with everything at their disposal

J. Schechter, 2004, ‘Bricoleurs’, ‘Nobody Is Going Home from This Refugee Camp’

Other methodologies that have informed the research process I engaged in were art-based inquiry and narrative inquiry. Hiles (2001; 2002) describes narrative inquiry which is based in narrative psychology, as an approach which recognises that we live and develop our identity through the stories/narratives that we tell and that are told about us in the different contexts in which we live. There may be dominant stories/meanings/narratives which we adopt or are foisted upon us that are unhelpful or even debilitating and there may be alternative stories that we can adopt/develop that will enhance and empower our lives. Essentially it is a constructivist approach which recognises the personal reality of authentic individual experience/truth over universal meanings. It allows for interpretations/meanings/stories to change over time and therefore endorses an active rather than a passive role for the individual (Neimeyer, 1999; 2000), whereby individuals can ‘become the protagonist in their own lives’ narratives’ (Pearce, 1996). Narrative inquiry is a participatory experience between researcher and participants through the construction of stories/meanings. The telling itself allows the expression of metaphor and tacit knowledge and thus the experience affords the possibility of being both therapeutic and transformational: talk does more than reflect meaning; it produces meaning (Hiles, 2002). On the deep and revelatory potential of story and metaphor, Pearce (1996) writes:
Metaphor deeply permeates those realms of the individual’s psyche that harbours ideas that would otherwise be repugnant and unacceptable. In the subconscious, stories find a venue where they can reside until the individual is ready to admit the story and its messages to his or her conscious being. (p. xiii)

Similarly, using art as a method of inquiry draws on the power of metaphor, story and symbol to create new and rich perspectives and understandings. Interestingly Diamond (1999), describing a method he terms symbolic constructivism, points out that arts-based research invites the search for ‘partial understandings’. This is in contrast to the search for objective truth of the scientific method, but is also a recognition of the power of art to reach past conscious knowing and to ‘speak even beyond their maker’s means’ (Lather, 1995 cited in Diamond and Mullen, 1999 p. 41). The story of Elizabeth ‘Grandma’ Layton who painted herself out of a 40 year depression is an example of art working beyond the conscious mind, for this art work was not undertaken as therapy but rather the painter, after a time, discovered that she was no longer depressed. In a similar way participants within this project drew (painted) out new knowing for themselves, which is discussed in later chapters. Neither can the arts-based researcher herself remain untouched when using these methodologies but engages in an experience of discovery of him/her self, through reflexivity, while touching in to the experience and journey of the other (Barry, 1996; Diamond & Mullen, 1999). My own art-making enhances my learning of self within the project in unanticipated ways. As Barry succinctly states, ‘art-as-inquiry does things’ (1996, p. 412).
It was my hope that by introducing art-making and including images / symbols and photographs as representations (St. Clair, 2004) into the data-gathering aspect of this research project that what it would do would be to deepen and enrich the data provided by the participants. In this belief, I am informed by a Jungian perspective, which sees the 'language of symbols' as something which 'adult man has, consciously or unconsciously, throughout the ages and in all cultures, expressed his wholeness' (cited in Kalff, 1980). I am also informed by the literature from Expressive Arts Therapies (Wadeson, 2000; Wadeson, 1980; Gladding, 1998; Weiss, 1984, 1999; Kalff, 1980) through which I hope to garner a greater appreciation of the wholeness of my participants' experience.

There is no doubt as to the beneficial therapeutic effects of the expressive arts therapies (Wadeson, 2000; Wadeson, 1980; Gladding, 1998; Weiss, 1984, 1999; Rogers, 1993) which use 'the richness of the subjective expression in art' to understand the client better (Wadeson, 1980, p.318). Wadeson wrote that she felt better able to understand intra- and interpersonal phenomenon phenomena using art rather than when using linear, scientific approaches. But here I am interested in the use of art / image-work for the purpose of generating rich research data, rather than for its therapeutic effects. I am interested in art-making and the use of images in the research process to feed into notions of rich texts / stories (narrative psychology) and to enhance the verbal expression of story because it taps into other ways of knowing and understanding, as articulated in Howard Gardner's theory of Multiple Intelligence (Gardner, 1983) and explicated in terms of arts-based research by Shaun McNiff who is confident that:
As we look in new ways, I trust that we will create new knowledge. (p. 13, 1998)

Wadeson suggested two ways to proceed using art in research (1980, p.318-323). Firstly there are observations of emerging data: this is a fairly un-structured procedure as the material is not specifically elicited or searched for, but becomes apparent only after art production / image-creation. The material emerges spontaneously rather than a system being imposed by the researcher or the situation being manipulated to produce results in a certain area. The material thus generated may suggest certain consistent themes. The second way is for the researcher to design art tasks to elicit specific data: this is a more structured approach which involves the systematic collection of results from the specific request to draw (paint / make / select) a picture of the experience or phenomenon being studied. It is based on the Wadeson and Carpenter three-year study of the subjective (phenomenological) experience of the acute schizophrenic episode (1976). The participant is asked to make particular pictures, some examples might be: a ‘free’ picture of whatever image resonates from the discussion /interview, a self-portrait, a picture of old age, a picture of ‘home’ or of the experience of living in present home setting.

I choose a loose adaptation of this latter approach in the current research as I wanted both to allow for an emergent quality in the data (from the perspective of not-knowing) as well as to elicit particular data. I provided two ways for the participant to generate / create image (metaphor) and these were using art materials with which to draw or working with a selection of photographs from which they could choose the images that ‘drew’ them. I felt that whether the participant drew or was ‘drawn’ the
impact on the data I was gathering would be the same: an enrichment and a deepening of story and meaning away from literal knowledge and conventional notions of objectivity, truth and identity (Game and Metcalfe, 1996). Many of the images are reproduced throughout this text and serve to illustrate the stories, ideas and themes generated by the participants.

Gaston Bachelard, in *The Poetics of Space*, writes, ‘Not-knowing is not a form of ignorance, but a difficult transcendence of knowledge’ (1994, p.xxxii-xxxiii), and also that ‘In poetry, non-knowing is a primal condition’ (p.xxxiii). This condition of not-knowing (or emergence) is also true in relation to the creation of art / imagery from the perspective of the artist (Carbonetti, 1998; Craighead, 1993), and I could only hope that this would equally hold for the participants and the researcher in this project. True to the heuristic process of immersion and reflexivity that I had adopted for the duration of the research, there would be a journey of self-discovery from me while touching in to the experience and journeying of the participants (Barry, 1996; Moustakas, 1990). I therefore formed the intention to engage in art / image-making myself in response to my own lived experience and search for knowing during the period of the research project.
Playing with Possibility

An artist's instinct may sometimes be worth the brains of a scientist...and that perhaps in time, as their methods become perfect, they are destined to become one vast prodigious force which now it is difficult even to imagine.


Heuristic, organic, metaphor, story and arts-based research are examples of methodologies which offer to take the researcher on a journey through an unpredictable, open-ended and perhaps even chaotic place. Contrary to the scientific method, the process is one of 'uncertainty enhancement' (Barone, 1995, p.177). It is a process replete with possibility, giving rise to 'moments of categorical disarray and intensive reflexive potential' (p. 39). St. Pierre agrees writing, 'We must learn to live in the middle of things, in the tension of conflict and confusion and possibility; and we must become adept at making do with the messiness of that condition and at finding agency within rather than assuming it in advance of the ambiguity of language and cultural practice' (1997b, p. 176). St. Pierre also writes about 'giving rise to different kinds of data that might produce different knowledge' (1997b, p. 177), further pointing me in directions which prompted using the alternative data-gathering methods, such as use of writing, photographs and art-making.

St. Pierre describes 'nomadic inquiry' which 'can never be sure of its field and thus has trouble locating it'; these are 'mental spaces, textual spaces and theoretical spaces' (1997 a, p. 412). A note in my journal from 2004 reads:
Perhaps I too can view this research (whatever it is), this journey I'm on (wherever I'm going), as a 'nomadic adventure'. Adventure as method, I like the sound of that!

St. Pierre describes:

a nomadic adventure that cannot be defined in advance because it takes advantage of flows and multiplicities and dysfunctions to make a different sense in different ways or to refuse to make sense at all. (1997a, p.413)

This kind of research is 'about mapping not tracing', says St. Pierre (1997a, p.413), citing Deleuze & Guattari (1987) and involves the risk of getting lost. The reason for this is the mirroring of human experience and human be-ing, which is itself multi-layered and complex.

This discussion highlights the multiple sources and influences that underlie, permeate and compliment the methodological orientation of this research project. There is an acknowledgement that the human experience is indeed multi-layered and complex, internal and external at the same time, embracing past, present and future in the moment. Perhaps that is what Somerville (2004) alludes to when she writes of 'the slippery subject of lived experience' (p.56/7). She proposes certain indirect analytical categories that allow purchase on the slippery body – post-structuralist textual analysis, reflections on the lived body on-site and ethnographic conversations, and she brings these methods into discursive relation with
each other, for, as she readily admits, 'each tell only one part of the story' (p.61). Somerville cites Davies (2000) about retrieving memory as words, visual images, smells, tastes, to arrive at an (elusive) truth (p.56) and of embodied knowledge which 'involves highly individual learning through the senses' (p. 60). Somerville's work finds echoes in that of the Irish philosopher and mystic John O'Donohue (1997) who has an equal respect for the visceral, 'Your body tells you if you attend to it, how your life is' (p.73) and also a healthy scepticism for the power of words to hold an enduring truth, 'Words are like the god Janus, they face outwards and inwards at once' (p.14).

St. Pierre (1997 b) writes about the problem of translating data into words so that they can be classified and interpreted. Yet, she asks: 'How can language, which regularly falls apart, secure meaning and truth?' (p. 179). She would say that there is 'transgressive' (p.180) data that escapes language and here she names emotional data, dream data, sensual data and response data; in spite of herself, putting words on it anyway. She also highlights the problem of linearity in narrative. She writes, 'I often felt that all the activities of the narrative — data collection, analysis and interpretation — happen simultaneously, that everything happened at once' (p. 180). Referring to her own research work, which appeared in textual form (thus merely simplifying the complex), she writes, 'The text appears to represent the real, but this inscription is a simulacrum, today's story, and the following attempt to unfold the methodological processes of this project is limited and partial and a bit absurd, like all attempts to capture the real' (St. Pierre, 1995, cited in 1997b, p. 180). And leaving not the last word on the matter to the mystic,
To be wholesome we must remain true to our vulnerable complexity. In order to keep our balance, we need to hold the interior and exterior, visible and invisible, known and unknown, temporal and eternal, ancient and new together. No-one else can undertake this task for you. You are the one and only threshold of an inner world. (O’Donohue, 1997, p.14).

Shape-shifting

*Soul has a fluency and energy which is not to be caged within any fixed form.*

J. O’Donohue (1997), p. 77, Anam Cara

There’s a story I know. It is a story of family, love, jealousy, betrayal, death and ultimate at-one-ment. As with many important stories, there is a king and a queen. They have four children and all live happily together close to Lough Derg in the west of Ireland. Fionnuala, the eldest child, looked after her brothers, Aeodh, Fiachra and Conn, in their childhood frolics and they returned a playful, energetic love. The long sadness in the story begins when the queen dies and King Lir, wanting a mother for his children, marries again.

*The stepmother Aoibha is beautiful and clever and soon enchants Lir so that he is blind to her jealousy of his love for his children. Being from the people of the Sí (i.e. Fairies). Aoibha was a*
Bandróidóir, an enchantress, with the power of shape-changing. One day she contrived to bring the children to the shores of Lake Derravaragh and here she changed them into four white swans. But even she could not corrupt the loveliness of their spirits and it was clear that they were the most beautiful swans in all of Ireland. And their purity was expressed through the sweetest singing voices ever heard. In her rage Aoibha placed a binding injunction (do chuir sí faoi geas iad) on them that they would live 300 years on Lough Derravaragh, 300 years on the cold fretful Sea of Moyle which is between Ireland and Scotland, and 300 years on Inis Glóra. There was some comfort in being close to their father in his final years but little after his death. The 300 years in on the Sea of Moyle was a harsh time of bitter winds and icy cold seas which froze their feathers and ripped the skin from their bodies when they tried to free themselves from the icy rocks. Three hundred years in exile; it is a long time for any one to be in pain.

On their return to Ireland the swans spent their time in peaceful solitude on Lake Derravaragh, here winning the admiration of the people for their solemn beauty and sweet singing. Many spoke softly of the legend of the Children of Lir and they brought the sad creatures food and tended to their needs, but none had the power to ease the pain of their aching and enduring loneliness.

And so it happened one day that a new sound was heard throughout the hills of Ireland, it was the tolling of the Christian
bell. All heard it and turned their faces towards the holy man who came with a new teaching of love and atonement. From the shores of the lake Fionnuala called to him and asked for his blessing to break the geas (curse) and release them from this endless life. Immediately the blessing of at-one-ment was received and the swans reverted to the human forms of very, very old people. Fionnuala comforted her brothers and assured them that at journey's end they all were soon to be reunited with their beloved father. And so it was. And heaven was gained of their souls.

_The Children of Lir, A Tale from Irish Mythology_

We live immersed in stories, with each story specific to one's sense of oneself in a certain place and time: 'They do not fit together as a linear history' (Bolitho & Hutchinson, 1998, p.xiii). Denzin (1989) agrees that we do not live life in a linear way, 'it is lived through the subject’s eye, and that eye, like a camera’s, is always reflexive, nonlinear, subjective, filled with flashbacks, after images, dream sequences, faces merging into one another, masks dropping, and new masks being put on.' So it is not my intention to contextualise the story above in a linear way or to deconstruct it here through a post-modern, post-structuralist epistemology, although it is through this broad lens that my work comes into focus. The science of chaos theory (Hawking, 1987; Lorenz, 1993) tells us that there is an underlying order in the apparent chaos of the universe, and so perhaps the story is placed there simply because it wrote itself as if by chance at this moment and was called to be told, just as participants in this research told stories, that were unpredictable and it was not immediately
clear at the time how relevant to the topic they were. In most cases there was an exchange of stories where I told mine and the participant told me theirs. As storyteller Laura Simms writes, ‘It’s really quite simple; it’s just being human together’ (1993). An at-one-ment, perhaps.

The naturalistic/qualitative methodology used in this research had that flowing quality of allowing stories (data) to emerge, demonstrating in the process ‘how chaos eliminates the fantasy of deterministic predictability, just as quantum theory eliminated the dream of a controllable, measured process’ (Skodol Wilson, 1993, p.8). This is especially true for the human sciences. Skodol Wilson goes on to write, ‘Naturalistic / Qualitative inquiry aspires to capture what other people and their lives are about, without preconceiving the categories into which information will fit’ (p.5). I think this is what it means to work within St. Pierre’s ‘messiness’ (1997b) and Somerville’s ‘slippage’ (2004). For St. Pierre it is a ‘nomadic’ way (1997a, p.412), the way that is ‘about mapping not tracing’ (p.413); it is a ‘site of passage’. For Somerville it is a dynamic emergent process of writing-as-research, embracing ‘an epistemology that is creative and constructive while continuing to undo the binaries in which we are immersed’ (2005, p. 8; 2007). In this project art, story, dreams and images emerge and interact in the space between conscious and unconscious thought to generate new insight and knowledge for the participants, for the researcher and for the reader.

Of post-structuralist / post-modern thought Sandelowski (cited in Skodol Wilson, 1993) writes, ‘Our work is located now on the faultline presumed to exist between art and science’ (p.11). Citing Nesbit (1976), Skodol Wilson tells us that the word theory derives from the same Greek roots as
the word *theatre*, with a tragedy or comedy no less an inquiry into reality, no less a distillation of perceptions and experiences than a hypothesis or theory. She goes on to write:

What we must strive for is not a science devoid of art, but rather a science with the spirit of creation and discovery left in. Both the scientist and the artist are concerned with illuminating reality, exploring the unknown and creating and peopling worlds. Often, artistic truths when compared with scientific ones provide us with visions of human nature that are more resonant with our own experience'. ...Celebrating art permits adding nonscientific sources of knowledge (literature, art, music, dance) to frame and enhance our understanding (p.12).

The theoretical implications of this methodological stance, a precondition for which is the allowing of emergence through the surrender of control, includes an appreciation of the difference between the experience-related *process of* knowing and the static construct of ‘knowledge’, which is deemed to be *held* (Game and Metcalfe, 1996). Foucault saw a strong relationship between power and knowledge and explored ‘the insidious and subjectifying nature of dominant discourses and their power to shape and mould individuals. Knowledge, he writes, produces disciplined power and institutions, which produces subjects which become objects for observation, categorisation and collation (Gillespie, 2000, p. 108; Fenwick, 2001). The subjectification nature of this process, writes Gillespie, produced what Foucault terms ‘docile bodies’, normalised individuals, controlled and regulated’ (p.110).
This image of the docile body is one which resonated with me when I both experienced and reflected on my visits to aged-care institutions. My response to that image was the choosing of a methodological orientation for working with older people that would be dynamic, and as reciprocal and mutual as is possible. In reference to the work of philosopher Helen Cixous, Game and Metcalfe write:

Her desire in knowledge is for movement towards the other, without any desire for appropriation of the other, or for an end. Any return would be a return with difference. This is a knowledge that delights in its journey, a knowledge that takes pleasure in the strange' (1996, p.173).

They write about the value in knowledge called 'wonder', citing Luce Irigaray (1993) who says we need to have wonder to move towards the other. They refer to Merleau-Ponty who, advocating wonder in the face of the world' writes that ‘a phenomenologist is a “perpetual beginner” seeing things always as if for the first time’ (cited in Game and Metcalfe, p. 174). This openness to wonder is the stance that I wish to emulate within this research project.
The Watercourse Way

Movement never lies. It is a barometer telling the state of the soul

to all who can read it.


In my ‘movement towards the other’, the participants that is, I experienced a certain ebb and flow which brought me close enough to some people to conduct a formal interview, while others became caught up in eddies of ill health or confusion which carried them to other experiences, other encounters. The first persons I interviewed were located in Ireland where I happened to be at the time due to my father’s illness. These were two women I had known since childhood and I felt that this pre-existing relationship would allow me the latitude to ‘play’ with method and therefore fine-tune my approach and technique. In addition, because we knew each other they were willing to have a go at art-making, although they articulated some reservation. I found that it is a real barrier to collecting alternative forms of data when people have not been exposed to the use of art materials or to the notion of self-expression through colour, drawing or art-making. It is not a matter of ‘being artistic’ in the conventional sense or of being proficient with art materials and techniques, but simply of having familiarity with art materials and confidence in art-making as another vehicle for communication. In spite of the reluctance, it was no surprise to me that these women proved to be rich sources of data in the form of narrative, but also of dream, drawings and imaging. Indeed, their response encouraged me to trust that data could be multi-faceted and that accessing other ways of knowing than the formal verbal interview could lead to a deepening and enriching of the data gathered.
This ‘line of flight’ prompted me to continue to ‘play in the possibilities of that space outside language’ (St. Pierre, 1997b, p. 186); to consider, for example, that if participants made an image within the context of the research interview, this might yield additional colour and texture to that contained in their verbal story, thereby enriching and deepening the story-data. Embracing the concept of Somerville’s ‘ontology of emergence which is born in the space in-between’ (2005, p. 5), I suggested to each participant that towards the end of the verbal interview they might consider making a drawing /picture about some aspect of the conversation or in relation to any image arising for them in that moment. Most looked at me sceptically the words ‘some chance’ hovering good-humouredly in the air between us, and in the end five did agree to give it a go, usually accompanied by a self-deprecating comment such as Grace’s there’s not one bit of art in me. Assurances from me that ‘you don’t have to be good at drawing’ provided little comfort, however, and I noted that it was the participants who knew me best or with whom I had made the strongest connection who went this extra mile. Of the five participants who made a drawing or two, one disposed of hers and consequently only four of the participants’ drawings are reproduced.

I introduced photographic images as an alternative to art-making for those who would prefer that method of accessing images, asking the participants to review a selection of photographs and to choose from them any that attracted them particularly or seemed to resonate for them within the context of our conversation. This option proved more popular and, in fact, found no resistance whatsoever. For this exercise I used 30 photographs from Photolanguage Australia (Cooney & Burton, 1986) believing with Kuhn that the photographic image can be used for ‘drawing the universal
into the personal' (2002, p. 40). Discussing a family photograph of her own, Kuhn writes:

Memories evoked by a photo do not simply spring out of the image itself, but are generated in a network, an intertext, of discourses that shift between past and present, spectator and image, and between all these and cultural contexts, historical moments. In this network, the image itself figures largely as a trace, a clue: necessary but not sufficient, to the activity of meaning-making; always pointing somewhere else. (p. 14)

The drawings referred to and reproduced within this text, like the stories, are, similarly, looked at as traces of lives. These additional traces remain incomplete pictures nevertheless: 'revealing not ultimate truth, but greater knowledge' (Kuhn, p. 6). The nature of the knowledge or knowings or traces that I refer to comes not from a Jungian interpretation of the art work (product) for which I do not have the expertise in any case, but rather from what comes up (emerges) in the conversation process that accompanies the drawing. This is an approach which I believe acknowledges with the art therapist Gregg Furth that, 'It seems that when physical energy is expended, psychic energy makes itself more easily apparent’ (1989, p.2). There is certainly a sense for me that the art-making process did bring further awareness to the fore for the participants and further depth to the stories told and this is discussed in later chapters. As already accepted, with regard to findings of qualitative research, the ‘whole picture’ is never a possible or even a desired outcome: ‘light gleams’ are a wish-fulfilment.
With my supervisors it was decided that I should interview about 18–20 individuals in all, with the idea that some of these might be interviewed a second time for purposes of clarification or deepening of the story of their experience. I choose purposive sampling (Polkinghorne, 2005; Patton, 1990) to select participants. The individuals selected were over 80 years of age (age range 80–97 years); living in a diverse range of settings (own home, living with family, and different levels of aged care); having a diversity of life career/vocation and experience (homemakers, academics and tradespeople) and family circumstances (five men and five women were widowed while two men were never married, five women were part of a religious community, and one woman was married). I interviewed seven men and five women in Australia and these were persons whom I met through my professional and personal contacts who had spoken to them about the project and asked them if they would like to participate. A further five women were from a dwindling religious community in my home town in Ireland, and one lay woman from there comprised the remainder of the sample. The story of the religious communal home and ageing (Chapter 6), as well as their individual experience, would also inform the biographical (auto-ethnographic) aspect of the study, that is the deepening of my understanding of the concepts of home, place and belonging.

Having been introduced to each of the individuals through face-to-face meetings and telephone contact, I spoke with them about the research project and my aims and objectives. Prior to conducting the interview I forwarded an Information Sheet (Appendix A) and Consent Form (Appendix B) which outlined sample questions, further details on the project and safeguards such as the assurance of confidentiality, assurance that participants' names would be withheld in the writing-up of results and that participants would be free to withdraw from the interviewing process
at any time. An interview time was then arranged at a time and place of the participants' choosing. All but one was interviewed in their own place of residence. One was interviewed at my home.

Before commencing the interview I felt it important to highlight a number of particulars: having checked if they had any questions, I reminded the participants that if the interview became uncomfortable or if anything arose that they didn't want on tape the interview could be halted or terminated; I previewed with them that towards the end of the interview I would be inviting them to 'make' a drawing or alternatively to select from a range of photographs as a way to identify and/or express points of resonance from the interview. Here I provided A3 drawing paper, and oil pastels which have qualities of providing strong or light colour and can also be used as a drawing tool. The Photolanguage Australia images I used (Cooney & Burton, 1986) and were evocative of natural and human subjects and activities. I selected about 30 of these and arrayed them either on a table, a bed or on the ground, depending on the space available. I asked the participants to choose any that attracted or resonated with them after our conversation. Usually about 5–6 were chosen. We talked about each one briefly and then I queried:

If you were to choose one photograph from this group, which one would you choose?

Each participant made a clear choice and we talked about this photograph in further detail. Many of these choices are reproduced in Chapter 3.
In addition, and in line with ethics requirements, before commencing the interview I pointed out the details of follow-up counselling services available to participants should such support be required subsequent to the interview. All of this was done prior to requesting them to sign the consent form. The interviews were informal and conversational. I had a number of prepared open questions on the broad themes of home, concerns and meaning-making. For example:

Tell me where you come from.

I would like to hear about your home.

Tell me what home means to you.

What objects are important to you?

What worries / concerns do you have?

When you think of home, what images come to mind?

I also asked if there was anything in particular they would like other people to know about when relating to older people. My purpose here was to gain specific information that might be useful to families or services that are supporting an older person. Another specific question was:

How was it for you talking to me about all this today?
The purpose of this question was again quite specific, as I wanted to get a clear response about the effect of the conversation on the participant in light of the fact that I had been refused permission to talk to residents for this project in one particular aged-care institution as the Director of Nursing thought it would ‘open a can of worms’ and ‘might just leave them upset’. Such a reaction is not untypical and, in *Psychotherapy with Older Adults*, Bob Knight (1996) observes that even amongst some therapists:

> There may be a tendency to avoid probing for emotional expression that is specific to older clients. Making older people cry may be difficult for everyone, perhaps especially for those who like older adults enough to specialise in working with them (p.127).

In addition he observed that family and friends will discourage older people from expressing their feelings if they are uncomfortable with the kinds of emotions expressed. He writes:

> The negative feelings and expectations that many people have about ageing may also inhibit them from encouraging older people to express their feelings or to talk about future options out of the mistaken idea that the old do not have anything to look forward to (p. 119).
I sent a thank you card to each participant soon after the interview. I completed the transcriptions as soon after the interview as possible and this allowed me to recapture the whole tone and experience of the encounter for myself and to note again tone and pace of voice, silences and moments of emphasis. Conversations, found to be delightful in the original, delighted all over again. After the transcription process was completed, I then sent a copy of the transcript to participants with a letter inviting them to comment, add or make changes and explaining that I would phone them to invite such comment. At this time I again checked with each participant if there had been any ill effect or upset resulting from the interview and again was assured to the contrary. To my question, ‘How was it for you to talk to me about these things?’ All the responses are reflected in those reproduced below:

I was quite happy about the talking. (Hal)

Oh, it was wonderful. (James)

I was quite happy to do it. (Gerald)

Doesn’t worry me…I’d tell anybody anything. (Michael)

It’s been quite easy. (Margaret)

I found it very enjoying (sic). (Greg)

Oh good, happy, yes. (Lorna)

I enjoyed every bit of it. (Stephen)

There’s certainly nothing that you’ve asked me that I didn’t want to answer. (Joan)
A number of participants invited me back to talk anytime and I did see some of them again either informally, on attending the aged-care facility where they lived to visit a friend, or formally for a second interview. Second interviews were held with two participants, one was to check some facts of the story and the other was to allow the participant the opportunity to make a drawing as time had run out on the first occasion.

I mentioned above that a concern was expressed that the interview process might be upsetting for residents of an aged-care facility. Being aware that issues of grief and loss would inevitably be touched upon, I believe such fears are not totally unfounded. However, I knew, from my prior contact with older people both in the community and in aged care, that in principle most of them enjoy contact and conversation and have the resilience and resources to converse about potentially difficult subjects. I also hold that the emotional performance of self is healthy and normal, and something to be supported rather than feared or avoided. In addition, the participants in this project suffered neither dementia nor mental illness and were well informed about the topic and range of interview questions prior to taking part. I was also confident in my own skills to relate in a manner that invited trust and confidence and that, as an experienced counsellor, I possessed many of the skills required by a qualitative researcher (Polkinghorne, 1991). I willingly shared parts of my own story within the conversation, where appropriate, and this helped the participants to relax and enjoy a mutual exchange. There were many opportunities for enjoyment and laughter. McLeod writes:

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The main investigative tool in qualitative research is the person of the investigator, and his or her ability to form relationships with informants that encourage the disclosure and expression of relevant data (1994, p. 95).

Indeed, to ensure mutuality and reciprocity within the conversation as much as is possible, I included as a last question:

Is there anything you would like to ask me?

Here I was wanting the participants to also ask the question of me that I had essentially asked of them namely, 'Who are you?' (Butler, 2001). Butler writes:

Consider that the struggle for recognition in the Hegelian sense requires each partner in the exchange recognise not only that the other needs and deserves recognition, but also that each, in a different way, is compelled by the same need, the same requirement. This means that we are not separate identities in the struggle for recognition, but are already involved in a reciprocal exchange, an exchange that dislocates us from our positions, our subject-positions, and allows us to see that community itself requires the recognition that we are all, in different ways, striving for recognition' (p.44).
The participants asked me a number of questions ranging from what I intended to do with the data from this project, to when had I arrived in Australia. Since my own story of home and meaning is an important and overt element of this project and is reflexively pondered throughout, it was important that my subjectivity was also shared with the participants to some extent. I felt it was also important that I was prepared to share the experience of being vulnerable to questions. The following chapter details the stories that the individual participants shared with me.
When the great Rabbi Israel Baal Shem-Tov saw misfortune threatening the Jews it was his custom to go into a certain part of the forest to meditate. There he would light a fire, say a special prayer, and the miracle would be accomplished and the misfortune averted.

Later when his disciple, the celebrated Magid of Mezritch, had occasion, for the same reason, to intercede with heaven, he would go to the same place in the forest and say: 'Master of the Universe, listen! I do not know how to light the fire, but I am still able to say the prayer.' And again, the miracle would be accomplished.

Still later, Rabbi Moshe-Leib of Sasov, in order to save his people once more, would go into the forest and say: 'I do not know how to light the fire, I do not know the prayer, but I know the place and this must be sufficient.'

Then it fell to Rabbi Israel of Rizhyn to overcome misfortune. Sitting in his armchair, his head in his hands, he spoke to God: 'I am unable to light the fire and I do not know the prayer; I cannot even find the place in the forest. All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.'

And it was sufficient.

Elie Wiesel, 2006, The Gates of the Forest
CHAPTER 3 STORIES

Once Upon a Time

Sacred stories move us; they get us thinking about what is important.


In this chapter I have initially given shape to each individual participant’s story, using the organisational framework of the story map, adapted from Heather Richmond (2002). In using this framework I had wanted to locate the voice of the storyteller in a particular time and place (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990; Clandinin & Connelly, 1994) mapping the major transitions and changes that the participants have experienced and are experiencing in their lives, as well as those that are anticipated. The temporal dimension – the past, present and future – brings the reader into the ‘once upon a time’ of the story, a familiar invitational space which provides it shape and pattern and a way for the reader to ‘meet’ the characters of the stories, the participants of the research and get a sense of their life-story.

Another structure I use in the story map is a reflection of the inter-personal and intra-personal aspects of the life, something of the internal and the outward worlds (drawing from Clandinin & Connelly, 1994), in each case highlighting ideas about where home is or was externally located and the attendant feelings. I highlighted these in bold typeface. The writer Margaret Attwood tells us, ‘Every life lived is also an inner life, a life created.’ It soon became clear to me that the once upon a time has two
places to exist: the inward story and the outward-acting-embodied be-ing in the world story, each integral to the other. The metaphor of the ‘fold’ (Deleuze, 1993; St. Pierre, 1997a) can be evoked to explicate the notion that the two stories are not separate-binaries-opposites: the ‘places’ where they are are creating and operating on each other. The image of the Mobius strip illustrates how this is so:

![Mobius Strip](image)

This closed system supports a kind of ‘uncontrollable drift of the inside into the outside and the outside into the inside’, such that ‘one side becomes another’ (Grosz, 1994, p. xii; Deleuze & Guattari, 1980), ultimately – in terms of the individual – making one (complex) identity: who (any)one is. It is an anti-Cartesian viewpoint that accounts for both the relational and the subjective nature of the self (Witherell, 1991) and is reflexive of the kind of complex subjectivity that I have espoused throughout this project in my methodology and in my orientation towards participants. The story map is a way to try to represent a sense of the layering of identity.

The inner and the outer stories do sometimes tell a different tale or hint at another chapter of a life, left untold. These hints and traces of tales are not given prominence here, but some are picked up in Chapter 5 of this text and there I have coined the term the under-story to describe some of the non-dominant personal experience stories that exist in the fold. To quote an old Irish saying, *Bíonn dhá insint ar gach scéal, agus dhá ghabháil*
‘there are two ways of telling every story, and twelve ways of singing a song’. The lives I tell are multi-faceted and not all of these faces are easily visible.

After I have mapped the story here, I tell it to you, the reader, under a title from the person’s own words which guides the narrative. I cannot recreate the experience of that moment when I sat down with each individual participant and stepped into their worlds for a short time and pressed ‘play’ on my tape recorder, but I can tell you, in the best storyteller tradition (after Thomas King, 2004) there’s a story I know...

Yet, already begins the problem of reporting on and analysing experience – my experience as researcher and the participants’ experience of home, of being older, of life, of me. At this stage it is again the words of the writer, rather than that of the qualitative researcher, that hearten me in my endeavour to write the stories:

All writers must go from now to once upon a time; all must go from here to there; all must descend to where the stories are kept; all must take care not to be captured and held immobile by the past. All must commit acts of larceny, or else of reclamation, depending how you look at it. The dead may guard the treasure, but it’s useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more – which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change. (Attwood, 2003, p. 160)
I have become the storyteller – my story of their stories: I have mapped the brief story outline and then (now) attempt to enter the realm of the audience (reader) by my own narration of the person (character, participant) and events, themes and circumstances of the stories. Here a bridge is built between the participant and the reader through me. And here is where the major act of trust between the participants and myself comes into relief as I reconstruct their story (narrative) for a third party, the reader. I come to this task of storytelling informed by the feminist post-structural knowing that in the first place the stories belong to the participants and wanting to be respectful and careful not to ‘efface’ through my representation (Butler, 2004). I ask myself, after Koro-Ljungberg (2001, p.368), ‘Who [am] I to interpret their realities and still call it theirs?’ Like Lather, I am looking for a way:

for telling stories that situate researchers not so much as experts ‘saying what things mean’ in terms of ‘data’ [but which] situates the researcher as witness, giving testimony to the lives of others (1997, p. 298).

As one way to this end I use extensively the participants’ own words in retelling the stories (presented in italics) in order to retain as much as possible their own voice and idiom. As Carlo Ginzburg wrote, ‘To narrate means to speak here and now with an authority that derives from having been (literally and metaphorically) there and then.’ The stories I tell now as I interact with the reader have travelled the distance between the there and then of the research process to the here and now of when I type this manuscript and to the now of when you, the reader, come back from the future to read it. These are sacred stories and I place them in the ‘Once
upon a time' where they can enjoy a safe and honoured space, where they are not so much reduced and analysed as re-presented and allowed to be for now: All I can do is to tell the story, and this must be sufficient.

~
Michael’s story (84) I like to do me own thing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Migrant identity</td>
<td>Migration to Australia, work,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poverty background, crowded home</td>
<td>Building houses, mates great fun,</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanted to see the world</td>
<td>Unhappy marriage, wife mentally ill, divorce, Death of ex-wife</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Home: Hornsby with the children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*That would be the only home I ever ... enjoyed*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nostalgic about country of origin, Likes living alone, loves the freedom, loves the weather of Australia</td>
<td>Reads, drinks whiskey, TV, sings ethnic songs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Batmobile</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Tells stories, a joker</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Living alone near daughter, own home</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Home is here now</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Future Intention</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I like being on my own – Freedom</td>
<td>Travel around on the Batmobile.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Listen to my music, Watch TV</td>
<td>Do me own thing</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I'd like to marry a rich widow. Pig's arse I would.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>drinking</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Just keep breathing.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>It's a bit sus this afterlife business</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Michael isn’t one to allow questions of mere fact to disturb a good story, even if that truth is to be recorded for posterity in a PhD. There are more important things than academic studies and serious students, and some of these are the yarns spun around truth and indeed the truth itself, although it might be hard to tell them apart when delivered in deadpan fashion or high glee from Michael. So when he told me about the Avon lady in sales mode calling to the house on the very day that his and the neighbours’ kids found a large quantity of cosmetics discarded on the local tip, the punch line was simply inevitable: according to Michael the children retrieved the cosmetics and sold them to all the neighbourhood housewives, their mothers. The appearance of the Avon lady on the scene selling cosmetics may have been a fiction to carry the line ‘We don’t need any, we get ours at the tip’. Followed by peals of laughter and a twinkle in the eye.

He left Ireland in his early thirties, finding his way to Australia first by plane to London and then by a circuitous shipping route which took him to Suez where he was warned by the Captain, Don’t talk to anyone here. They’re not our type. He found them a fine lot: We talked to some great people altogether. In the pub getting pissed every day. They docked at the famed Bay of Naples: It was a bloody slum. There followed the spot of commercial endeavor in Naples when his mate decided to sell cigarettes from the ship to the locals, hearing that there was a shortage of cigarettes in Italy. He smuggled them off the ship under a huge woollen greatcoat in the sweltering Italian summer and came back triumphant with thousands of lire, only to discover they were of little value. The actions of entrepreneurial Paddies placed in the arse end of the ship after paying the full price of passage while the 10 pound Pommies swanned on the upper decks. In India he purchased tea and naively trusted to the seller the
money to forward it to his mother in Ireland. Needless to say, she never saw that tea. The poverty in India surpassed his Irish experience and here he and his mate the cigarette seller were big time riding around in a rickshaw, a fella with no clothes on him...a G-string and he's dragging us up the road.

It wasn't easy to find Michael's 'home'. He had moved around a lot. First from Ireland, but that wasn't home and still isn't (Sure Jaysus Christ I was over there a few years ago and they wouldn't even talk to me). His memory of there is of, Three beds in the bloody room, an old house, damp as hell. He left with a firm resolve, I'm getting the shit out of here, and there are no regrets. Australia brought a number of houses after his marriage and since the divorce, when he began an itinerant work schedule between New South Wales and Queensland. There were many flats and places to live: I couldn't give a shit where I live. I'd live in a tent. The period of marriage was initially glossed over because it became an unhappy time due to his wife's mental illness and the ensuing financial and emotional instability, however it was in this time-space that home was eventually located.

In the house in Hornsby where he had brought up his young family for a period of only twelve years: That would be the only home I ever...I enjoyed! ... And the kids say that too. The kids will tell you that. 'That was the biggest mistake you made Dad, to sell that place.' He explains that his wife sold that house and from there on there were transactions on houses that ended in losing all the houses and the money and he living in rented accommodation and divorced without notice: everything went astray. In recent times Michael moved from a rented flat in the capital to be nearer
his middle daughter, and has been granted a housing commission house in a provincial city. He has difficulty walking and rides a motorised scooter, which he calls the Batmobile. It gets him to the shops and the pub and to his friend Jack's house where he enjoys a beer. Michael is the Joker riding the Batmobile.

Figure 5 Michael's Home for 12 Years
### Joan's story (85) My lucky life

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Quiet life, shy</td>
<td>Age 6 F died penniless only child</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life was easy</td>
<td>University and WAAF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>I enjoyed myself</strong></td>
<td><strong>I was lucky</strong></td>
<td>Happy marriage, in-laws and 5 children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>The farm – Home</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>Death of husband</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Heart attack</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Present Experiences</td>
<td>I wish I hadn't had to choose</td>
<td>Living in aged care – Here, not home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I don’t want to make a fuss</td>
<td>You look around and you find a lot of things that work on your side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feeling lucky/ happy/ lonely</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Intention</td>
<td>A total blank in the head</td>
<td>Stopping here</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
If Joan’s story were a song it must surely be Kylie Minogue’s ‘I Should be so Lucky’. Joan has been confined to a wheelchair for about 13 years due to bone degeneration (*I have a useless skeleton*), and has undergone five hip replacements as well as knee, shoulder and neck operations. She was in hospital when her husband of 60 odd years died nine years ago after *a bad time with arthritis*. He died in March and by the end of that year she had moved into the aged-care facility where she now lives, when a bed became available in the high-dependency unit. The high-dependency unit affords Joan a large room which accommodates her wheelchair and a hoist to help her in and out of bed. The corridors and doorways are wide, allowing easy access to the bright, natural-light-filled dining room. Although her hands no longer allow her to hold a pen and write, she is able to propel the wheelchair independently to the dining room and here she dines with a group of residents who are passive with illness and dementia.

After her husband died it didn’t seem an option for Joan to stay in her own home: *I had to have somebody full time...without him I suppose I was a bit of guesswork*. She had had a carer for a time but after being hospitalised for a heart attack she was placed for respite care in the aged-care facility. While there the manager informed her the heart attack *has taken you to the top of the list now and if you want to stay now you can. If you don’t well you’ll just slip down the list again where you were at*. It was decision time for Joan and she said ‘yes’. Her children *packed up everything. I just came*. *They decided which picture came with me. ...They did the whole works...I really wasn’t in very good condition to make the decisions...and I sort of manage with what they choose*. For Joan the move to living in aged-care came suddenly and she was not involved in a planning process. *I wasn’t thinking very straight at the time...if I was sitting here with my things, if I’d been at home and looking at them, I might have thought, ‘I’ll...*
take that with me’. In the beginning it was a relief to just come in here and my meals are put in front of me, to have assistance to get into bed... that covered any disappointments, dislikes... After about a month I got around to thinking... how am I going to live like this? How long am I going to have to put up with living like this?

Joan admits she spends a lot of time on her own, and her constant companion is a book, any book, many books, but always a book. She will pop the latest book down the side of her wheelchair if anyone chances by for a chat and resume reading when alone again. She is often to be found sitting in the small sunlit courtyard alone and reading and responds with delight to a visitor. The move to aged-care was considered necessary by Joan’s family due to her care needs and after a period of looking for a suitable location she made her choice based on convenience to family. It was a matter of weighing up the pros and cons: It’s a gamble any way...And I am lucky that I have come to a place like this...you look around and you find a lot of things that work on your side.

Joan has had plenty of practice of looking on the bright side: As a penniless shy child wearing hand-on uniforms who lost her father at 6 years of age, she quickly discovered enjoyment at school and the friendship of others: I was lucky enough to do fairly well at the school lessons and to run fairly fast in the sporting line. So life was easy. Joan reflected an ability very early in life that is currently standing her in good stead: I could get enough enjoyment out of what I was doing. And I really did love being with a lot of people. This happy experience of being with people, discovered first at school, was also evident when she joined the WAAF and later when she joined her husband in his large immediate and
extended family and had her own large family. In her own reflection on the interview with me, Joan stated that these experiences probably helped her to adjust to living with a group of people in aged care.

Joan would prefer not to be there (I wish I hadn't had to choose) and this place is not home to her although she concedes, When I first came here it was just a relief to have somebody else thinking for me. Home is the farm where she lived with her husband and family, and where one of her sons now lives with his family. Home was where my husband was, it didn't matter where. This from that point of view is not home...It suits me for what I've got to have. But she realises, you don't quite run your own life. When she moved ‘here’ she was too ill to choose which possessions to take and her family did the choosing for her. Sometimes she misses something she had, a piece of clothing for example and asks one of her family to find it for her. But this is not a major concern because she doesn't remember many of the things: The heart attack that put me in here, I think that sort of dusted over my memory...And I'm not much good at remembering things, not at all. And that's perhaps made it a bit easier.

When Joan speaks of my lucky life she does so with complete awareness of the difficulties in her current situation, the loneliness: I can have a day of 'Oh dear oh dears'. She is no Pollyanna, but while she wonders: How long am I going to have to put up with living with this? She holds the conviction learned from her mother: I should make an effort to confront whatever came up, not just sit back and let it bother me.
For Joan, remaining positive is a decision. When she looks at the Photolanguage photographs she remembers further details of her early life particularly the loss of her father when she was only six years old and most of the photographs she chose reflect this; *I seem to remember wondering quite a lot what it would be like to have a dad...I guess sort of something stopped.* On the photograph shown she comments, *I'd say it probably reminds me of my own childhood and leading on from what I missed in my childhood. I enjoyed having children.*

*Figure 6 Photolanguage No. 15*
**Pearl’s story (90) Life is hard, isn’t it?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents, happy childhood</td>
<td>Home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>Mother</td>
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<td>migrant identity</td>
<td>Worker</td>
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<td>Lover</td>
<td>Melbourne unit – panic attacks</td>
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<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Isolated from family</td>
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<td>Fear</td>
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<td><strong>Present</strong></td>
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<td>Experiences</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frustration</td>
<td>Living in Aged-care Hostel – Home</td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling part of society</td>
<td><em>The manager says it is our home</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>Anger, depression</td>
<td>Gardening, domestic chores</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fortunate</td>
<td>music</td>
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<tr>
<td>Sensitive, easily hurt</td>
<td>Buys food</td>
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<tr>
<td>Protecting</td>
<td>Has company</td>
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<tr>
<td>Spiritual search for meaning</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ideal home image</td>
<td>Living near family</td>
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<td></td>
<td>High blood pressure</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Intention</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s a lesson you have to learn</td>
<td>We are spirit</td>
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</table>
Pearl lives in a communal dining room. With deeply furrowed brow Pearl tells me how difficult it is for her to live with people with dementia, but also with people who live differently or with whom she has nothing in common. She sums it up with the statement: I don’t like old people. Pearl likes to watch TV in the common lounge room which most of the residents do not use. But from 6.30 p.m. to 7.30 p.m. one other resident Fran wants to watch the local news programmes in which Pearl, preferring the international news station, has little interest. This imposition irritates Pearl as does the fact that this lady shuffles around with a grim expression and closes all the windows and doors while Pearl likes them open for fresh air. I suggest maybe she could watch TV in her own room for that hour and give herself a break from the irritation, since at 7.30 p.m. Fran will go to bed. But she refuses, saying, No, I will not give up my pattern.

Pearl does not want to give up her pattern and questions me: ‘What can I do? You are a counsellor’. I am challenged because counselling is often about helping people to change themselves or their environment. How can things be different for her? In what ways does the cultural system within which she lives create and respond to problems? What support can she call upon? She lives in a group setting with many people who she finds upsetting and uncomfortable to be around. The continuous nature of the process of adaptation and adjustment strikes me: it is never over, new problems and challenges may arise at any time. Pearl is finding this difficult, I wish I could go with the flow but I never will. When I go with the flow you can carry me out. A mixture of fatalism and defiance? I am concerned because Pearl suffers from hypertension brought on by anger and frustration. But I also admire her strength of will and even defiance in the face of unsurmountable problems, and I feel sad too. Her eyes well
and tears overflow as she tells me the story of her upset with Fran and with the people with dementia with whom she must share her life.

Pearl is reflective about her life and wonders why she allows others to have such power over her so as to upset her. She feels sensitive and vulnerable. She says she definitively was not born with a happy outlook and cites other residents born with this happy outlook. She asks me if I was born with it. This sets me to thinking about how I react and respond to events. If such a characteristic as a happy outlook is predetermined, I hope I have it! Sometimes I too say 'I'm lucky'. Not all the time, of course, and often preceded by a great struggle. I note how the participants in my study, particularly those who are happy, regularly say they are lucky and count their blessings. But, like Pearl, they are not necessarily passive.

In spite of her struggles with Fran and other residents, Pearl appreciates the benefits of living in the aged-care facility: It is the idea that there are people around at mealtimes, and at night if one is sick. When she lived in a block of units for older people in the city, Pearl developed anxiety and panic attacks: Well there were 60 units, for elderly people. They were very nice. But there were occasions that one of the residents died in the unit and they were discovered a week later. Because you live by yourself...nobody...We all knew one another but we were not looking to see if you see your neighbour or don't see your neighbour. And that made me really anxious. By contrast living at the aged-care facility provides security (Here you just have to push a button and a staff member comes and she will contact the doctor or whatever), comfort and company: You don't feel so isolated in getting old as I did when I was living in the unit...you feel a part of society.
One of the few residents without dementia, Pearl sometimes feels that she should not be living there. Since coming to live there the profile of aged-care residents has changed to people with higher needs, while those with fewer care needs are now more likely to be provided with support in their own home. Pearl has lived there ten years now and in that time has seen her friends die and be replaced by others, mostly people who suffer from dementia, Alzheimer’s disease and other illnesses. It is not a Hostel anymore. It is a nursing home. [It's] not very nice because there’s not many people you can have a conversation with. She traded the freedom and peace of living independently for the benefits of the facility but adds, that doesn’t mean I can’t complain. She complains about the quality of the food and about the manner of some staff members. Never one to follow the path of least resistance, Pearl refuses to accept the role of the three monkeys I see a lot of things, which I shouldn’t. You should be there not seeing anything, not hearing anything, and definitely not saying anything. But I do. And that makes me difficult.

Drawing on her religious beliefs Pearl suggests that she has been placed in this situation because there is a lesson she needs to learn on her spiritual path; you have to have a lot of patience and a lot of understanding, and love I think. She suggests this interrogatively, wondering perhaps if this could be the purpose to it, but it’s not easy, sometimes you don’t have all those qualities anymore. She struggles to bring meaning to her present situation. Things are not as she would have liked them to be. This is reflected in her drawing of home which turns out to be an imagined ideal home which includes a little house of her own. In the picture she is relaxing in her home while her child plays outside and her husband arrives by boat. The title of the picture is ‘Arrival’.
Figure 7 Arrivals
### James’s story (80) A fortunate life

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<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Making the most of opportunities</td>
<td>Family migration from England</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
<td>Opportunities</td>
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<tr>
<td>Good memories</td>
<td>University professor</td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Father</td>
<td>Marital home</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Death of spouse</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I’m immensely happy here</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>gardening</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual conviction</td>
<td></td>
<td>reading</td>
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<td>Political discussion</td>
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<td>U3A</td>
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<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td></td>
<td>A large number of friends</td>
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<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td></td>
<td>Living in own home, designed by self</td>
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<tr>
<td>Extremely fortunate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hope</td>
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<th>Future Intention</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tr>
<td>Positive attitude</td>
<td>As above</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hopeful and optimistic</td>
<td>Physical decay</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy</td>
<td>Ultimate co-operation, oneness</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Unpleasant things may come</td>
<td>with the whole of creation</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Some sort of wider awareness</td>
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James lives in a home he has had designed and built to suit his needs: *It suits me down to the ground. I told them that I hope to live here until they carry me out.* He moved there after the death of his wife and he explains that they had both already identified that the family home was too big for them. His wife became ill and died before the move. A graciously spoken ‘elderly gentleman’, James declares himself to be extremely contented and fortunate and, yes, lucky. He is another who declares: *Life is what you make it* and in the face of old age and the knowledge that *being pain-free is something one shouldn’t take for granted in one’s eighties*, he faces the future with the hope that *I would adopt an attitude that would make me feel I am aware of my blessings and happy even if unpleasant things happen*. He tells me he thinks that *by the time people reach eighty that their attitude to life very much determines whether they find this last part happy or not*. He continues: *Some people grow as it were shut in and closed, and other people, like me ...it all gets more and more exciting.* He expounds on this position with a ready laughter that does more to convince me of a clearly constructed personal meaning to it all (*Life, the universe and everything*) than the comprehensive explanation of Dawkin’s theory of the ‘selfish gene’ and the comprehensive explanation of the findings of contemporary science, physics, chemistry and cosmology. With James I am surprised by joy.

James is well aware of the physical decay assailing his body and explains the symptoms as *kindly reminders that the human body is not meant to function forever*. In retirement he continues to pursue his life’s passion and vocation – the study of philosophy. He finds it *enormously exciting* to be a part of the search for a future synthesis of knowledge that he expects never to see, *but it’s lovely to sort of try and spend my time groping towards trying to formulate bits of it*. He embraces The University of the Third Age* as *one of the great joys of my life* and maintains a deep
spiritual conviction that is really...the mainstay of my life. I feel lucky now. I get to ask a philosopher the meaning of life – after all that’s why I’m doing this, isn’t it? I’m certainly looking for answers of some description and I hold the hand of Laurel Richardson (1994) still for she has told me that in the writing the knowing will out. How am I doing, Laurel?

* The University of the Third Age (U3A) is an international organisation, embodying the principles of life-long education and the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake, in an atmosphere of mutual learning and teaching. Each U3A is a learning community, organised by and for people who can best be described as being active in retirement – the so-called Third Age of their lives.

James offers a most beautiful evocative phrase: And underneath the everlasting arms. It is a quotation from the Old Testament evoking the parental arms comforting the child, holding, amid and beneath all the tribulations, challenges and difficulties of life. He uses the phrase to talk about home, the notion of being ultimately at home in the universe. Home, a familiar place, the place where you’re ultimately safe. I recalled the longing for parents who would provide this ultimate safety and security, the longing for arms to provide it, the loss of those other arms where in recent years I thought to find it. I recalled the letter from a friend a month before who reminded me that, given the scale of the universe, I was not, despite my recent return to Australia, far away: ‘We belong to the earth and whether you are in Australia or Ireland you are still at home.’ The letter was comforting. I could be at home in the universe, on the planet, no matter the place – there’s only one place.
James’s reflection on this photograph reveals that, in spite of his present level of contentment, he has not been untouched by pain and that he sometimes struggles with the process of life. This reflection sounds a different note to the main verbal interview and indicates a deeply felt response to some of life’s experiences.

*I mean life is a pretty ruthless sort of a process. There are all sorts of failures and that’s certainly something that has to be reconciled with what might sound like the sunny ‘underneath the everlasting arms’. I mean they can be a bloody long way underneath in some periods, some times.*
Greg’s story (82) *The longer I live the more I love living*

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<th>Inward</th>
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<td><strong>Past Experiences</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Excitement</td>
<td>Hobbies</td>
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<td>Fun</td>
<td>Engineer</td>
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<td>Responsibility</td>
<td>Husband</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family ties</td>
<td>Father</td>
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<td>Emigrant to Australia</td>
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<td><strong>Present Experiences</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Meditation</td>
<td>Retirement</td>
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<tr>
<td>Contemplation</td>
<td>Secretary of Buddhist group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hobbies</td>
<td>Living in own home with daughter and granddaughter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>I have heaps of fun</em></td>
<td>Sets priorities for the future</td>
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<tr>
<td>Home is where I am</td>
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<tr>
<td>I accept myself fully</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future Intention</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Secretary of Buddhist: <em>I will do this next year, as long as I live</em></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Knowing what for I am living</em></td>
<td>Active</td>
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Greg tells me that home is not a place: *Home is where I am......I could live in many places*. He adds for emphasis, *Even if it would be in a den I would make it my home*, followed by a youthful carefree laughter that belies his 82 years. Greg emigrated from Australia in his early seventies having spent a year there visiting his daughter who had lived in Australia for 28 years. During that time he lived in a caravan on the corner of the property near her
Greg is a man of wide interests, including woodwork, metalwork, physics, astronomy, photography, shell-collecting and solar technology. Since his retirement at age 67 he has re-embraced the hobbies of his youth and developed more: *I have heaps of fun*. Seven years ago a chance event changed and broadened Greg's life: he read the *Tibetan Book of Living and Dying* and followed this by attending a Buddhist retreat. Having already left the devotional demands of formal religion and German nationalism long behind him Greg was not one to adopt another ideology. He found Buddhism the antithesis of ideology: a theory of the mind, a way of viewing the world. He also developed an interest away from science and towards people: *I found out that people are even more interesting than astronomy and other stuff...to be in contact, to share things...therefore it was like a new life*. He is actively involved as secretary of a Buddhist group, providing cohesion and support to a scattered and remote community.

Having myself read the Dalai Lama's book *The Art of Happiness* (being on my own search) I asked Greg if he is happy. His reply, followed by laughter: *I absolutely agree to the life I have and that I enjoy this life more than ever at another time in my life. And I could say 'I freely agree to my*
life', that's the thing. You could call it happiness. That's a possibility. It is certainly a possibility that I would call it happiness.

I am provided with another clue to happiness, not gleaned from the world of science: Greg sees that some people make themselves unhappy for very stupid reasons and warns, With our mind we create the world. He is a small, wiry man with abundant energy, but he concedes that his body strength is receding and that both physically and in his thinking he has slowed down: I realise there are a lot of things connected to getting older which are not so nice. But this is not something to worry about: So this is one thing I have to accept (laughs) it would be no sense at all to worry about this. This is normal. In fact Greg has faced his mortality and embraced it from all angles: the longer I live the more I love living. On the other hand there is no fear of dying. In the meantime he has much to do: I need more time, and the way ahead is to set priorities. Greg considers himself extremely lucky to be active and knowing what for you are living. That's the best thing to expect. I wouldn't know any better.

When I asked Greg to choose a Photolanguage Australia image that resonated with him, he was attracted to one of a large tree where a small boy played. Then, instead of commenting on this he invited me to another room where he had hung a framed photograph of a very old tree. The tree provided a metaphor for his life.

[It] has grown a long time and in the evening sun there is a long shadow and a lot [of] things broken down. I loved this picture... There was a little bit like an identification [of myself with it]. In spite of the many parts which
have broken down, there are still enough leaves which are exposed to the sun and the moon and so on so it still is able to live. I have a lot of life behind me...I feel the strength of a rock in spite of being a plant...There will be a day with a big storm...then 'crack'...
Margaret’s story (88) Some mornings I wake up feeling very homesick

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<tr>
<th>Inward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Past Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Wife</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Dreams</td>
<td><strong>Mother</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>Home feels like there’s a lot of love in it</em></td>
<td><strong>Homemaker, cooking</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Present Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Loved gardening</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Saying goodbye / letting go</td>
<td><strong>Marital home</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Boredom</td>
<td><strong>Living in aged care — here</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Homesick</td>
<td><strong>Company</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Feeling useless at times</td>
<td><strong>Still owns family home</strong></td>
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<td>Security</td>
<td><strong>Doesn’t plan ahead</strong></td>
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<td><em>I live from day to day</em></td>
<td><strong>I live from day to day</strong></td>
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<td>walks</td>
<td><strong>I live from day to day</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future Intention</strong></td>
<td><strong>Aged care?</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><em>I haven’t thought that far ahead</em></td>
<td><strong>I haven’t thought that far ahead</strong></td>
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Margaret became a widow about two years ago after a happy marriage lasting 63 years. She moved into the aged-care facility where she lives on a rental basis for three months, with the option of another three month extension. She is in this transition period at the time of our meeting and currently entering her second three-month cycle. Margaret retains ownership of the family home: ....*It was very hard* [to leave that home] *And I still have it. I haven’t done anything. It’s just as I left it. Because if I can’t settle down here I can go home.... Well I just feel like, sort of, on an even keel, because I know it’s there.* For Margaret the idea that the move
from home is reversible gives her comfort, however the house is locked up and a security system has been installed to which she does not know the access codes. She remembers the day she left the home with her son and his family, *I never looked back...If I'd looked back I think I would have started to cry.* Now that she has made the break from home, her constant dreaming of her late husband has decreased and she is sleeping better. The graphic reminders of her loss are no longer so frequent. A small rotund woman moving slowly with intent, between replies to my questions Margaret holds her lips tightly together, her hands often held together on her lap. Her responses are quiet and measured. She is working things through.

Margaret draws the distinction between *'here'*(the aged-care facility) and *'home'*. She has brought little from home except the family photographs and three pictures for a bare wall. She notes that curtains would make the place *more homely* and is still debating whether to bring some or not: *I didn’t want to bring anything from home until I knew I was going to stay... Some mornings I wake up feeling very homesick.* Everything else is provided by the facility: furniture, paintings and even bedclothes. I note there are no cooking facilities in the unit apart from a microwave oven. She tells me she loved cooking and *feels useless at times* here. Margaret feels that having grown up in the country has helped her to develop the resources to cope on her own now. But when she looks ahead she doesn’t yet know what she is going to do: *I haven’t thought that far ahead because I don’t...you know, I just feel I can’t plan that far ahead.* In the meantime she has seen the family growing up and doing well and concludes, *I’ve got so much to be thankful for.*
Margaret has a heart condition which restricts her energy levels and movements. The physical tasks of living at her marital home, heating the house with an open fireplace, keeping the garden, had become too demanding. She had come to rely on her son to bring in the wood: *I felt I was depending on him, not that he minded, he didn’t. But I didn’t want him to feel that he was tied to looking after Mum.* She recognised that her health was deteriorating and, having seen it happen that older aunts of her own became dependent, she felt a need to weigh up her situation now while she could still cognitively make choices: *I didn’t want to get to the point where they had to think for me and maybe, you know, decide what was best for Mum. I wanted to do it myself...I just wanted to make that transition myself.* At the pace where I felt I wanted to. Yes, yes, think it through.

Her unit is situated directly across from the communal dining room and recreation area of the facility and this short walk is convenient for mealtimes and accessing social interaction. She is coming to appreciate the benefits of living here, the meals, no responsibility and especially the companionship of other people to talk to: *When I was at home, well I might be days and I wouldn’t see anyone, only the ones that brought my meals to me.* Initially she told me that she didn’t know about the bus trips organised by the facility because her son took her anyplace she wanted to go, but now she tells me she has been on a number of outings and enjoyed them. She also lightheartedly enjoys ‘playing ladies’ on Sunday afternoons: *There’s a ladies’ afternoon and the ladies go over to the lounge room over there and watch a movie or you can have afternoon tea.*

Margaret had a large garden at her home and enjoyed the profusion of flowers and plants which she tended. Here she has planted nasturtiums in the small patch of grass under the front window, for the colour. But they are not doing well. We puzzle over them: while two plants seem to flourish, the remainder look yellowed and sparse. In such a small space
can individual conditions be so different that one will flourish and another wither and die?

When I laid out the photographs for Margaret and asked her to choose any that attracted her in relation to what we talked about, she first went to the bedroom and retrieved a photograph of her and her husband on her eightieth birthday. ‘Maybe this is the image most strong for you?’ I queried. To which she replied, *Well, our life together is more or less, you know, what I’m living.* Of the Photolanguage images she had chosen, the one which resonated most with her is pictured below (122). Margaret says, *My imagination takes over with that one...I just think when I look at that there’s a centre point in your life and yet it goes in all different directions.* She confirmed the centre point of her life as *my home, my family.*
**Doris’ story** *When the heart is at home you feel ahhhh....*

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<tr>
<td><strong>Past Experiences</strong></td>
<td>Extrovert</td>
<td>Lived in town – company,</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>neighbours, friends</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Feeling part of the human race</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Belonging</strong></td>
<td>Mother</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Present Experiences</strong></td>
<td>Feeling isolated and lonely</td>
<td>Living in marital home in the country</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Longing</td>
<td>Family</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>Home is where the heart is</em></td>
<td>Poets’ group, friends</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future Intention</strong></td>
<td>Hope to move to town</td>
<td>Increased age and frailty will</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>necessitate move into town</td>
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Doris moved into her current home, situated 20 minutes drive outside town, 30 years ago. She moved there for others: her husband, *His heart went into the building of it...it was the house he’d always wanted to build*; her youngest son, *I thought I’d get him away to the country where he might ride horses and have a more healthy lifestyle*. But she quickly realised that for herself the move was a mistake and suggested to her husband that they return to town. As a self-declared extrovert she had thrived on town life and amongst company and in this home she was in a sometimes beautiful, sometimes drought-stricken, depressing place. When her own job ended she found herself alone in an empty house for a number of years until her husband retired. She confides, *I found the longing to be*
in town didn't leave me...I suppress it a lot. She describes this feeling as **longing to be with people, amongst people in the community. I just want to be part of a community, physically. Just to feel I'm part of the human race.** Her husband loves the place and doesn't want to move and, although she believes that at some stage the day will come to leave the property as he becomes less able to cope with the physical tasks required there, she says, *I don't get too excited about that.*

To compensate for her feelings of loneliness and isolation, Doris maintains a strong friendship group with whom she communicates regularly: *The telephone's a comfort,* and she goes to town every day where she often has coffee with friends. She used often to stay for lunch but now that her husband is retired she usually returns home by lunchtime *I'm a homing pigeon...because [her husband] is here and he gets lonely...I'm pulled back.* Doris concedes that she allowed this pattern to become established from the beginning, *I think I should have put my foot down and said 'No, I've got things to do. You'll be ok'...And let him get used to the idea that I have a life of my own. But I felt for him and I do tend to submit to his needs in that way.* She describes her husband as her home, the other part of myself really...and I would be incomplete if he died. She explains the pull home thus, *It's a bit like going home to Mum...It's sort of a bosom thing. And it's love. It's belonging. It's where you belong. And that is where the heart is.** Opposed to this is the longing bit, the feelings get at you: wanting, wanting something [to be in town]. In order to cope, she says, *I adjust simply by denying...trying to deny it...or submitting to his [my husband's] needs...I just yield.*
Doris identified her home as ‘where the heart is’. It’s more than the house and the garden: It’s the sort of person you are, and what you long for and where you feel at home most. She finds her heart is invested in many places: her husband, but also in the poets’ group she belongs to, her children and individual friends and in town where she finds a sense of community and belonging. With friends, when the dialogue is flowing and connecting...the heart is at home. When the heart is at home you feel ahhhh (sighs). She concludes, There are lots of homes I suppose. I suggest that perhaps ‘home’ is transportable since you can bring your heart to different situations. She readily agrees.

When I asked Doris if there were any images that came to mind regarding what we had talked about she named and drew something that symbolised a huge personal problem for her. She stated, I've given form to my problem and you can stand back from it and look at it as, well either a work of art or whatever. She later tore up the picture.
Ted’s story (82) I’m so pleased I’ve got what I’ve got

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shy</td>
<td>The bush</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Close family relationships</td>
<td>Close family, boarded – homesickness</td>
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<td></td>
<td><em>I fell in love with the teachers’ college</em></td>
<td>Teacher</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Sharing</td>
<td>Teacher educator</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Togetherness</td>
<td>Community involvement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Happiness balance</td>
<td>Shared homes</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Present Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Father grandfather figure</td>
<td>Own home</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Enjoys freedom and privacy</td>
<td>Retired</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Affection</td>
<td>Tuition</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Pleased</td>
<td>community involvement</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Safe &amp; productive, peaceful</td>
<td>Gardening book group</td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Exercise meditation</td>
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<tr>
<th>Future Intention</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Schools concert</td>
<td>Maintaining fitness</td>
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Ted’s house became home for a lot of people including himself. There is a separate apartment where a younger friend lives and school students have come for a long time to access his computer and to receive tuition. The many photographs of smiling faces displayed on his china cabinet tell of his long association with the Aboriginal community and the stream of students to whom he had provided support. A retired teacher and teacher educator, he enjoys listing their scholastic successes and is pleased to have benefited their lives: *I think that they began to enjoy learning*, just as his life has been benefited from knowing them: *It was rather wonderful*
because it kept me up with the times, alive, on all levels. Although there appears to be a constant stream of traffic through his house, Ted confides, *I still like privacy...I enjoy this place most when there's no one in it except me.*

Ted has felt ‘at home’ in a number of places; his family home in the Australian bush where his father *sang little Irish songs* while Ted sat on his knee and where his mother, the disciplinarian, proved herself a supportive presence and a formidable woman: *She was very competent,* and Ted illustrates this by telling of the manner in which she went to see his new school principal to ensure that he understood her expectations in regard to her son’s education: *She ordered a hat from Grace Brothers in Sydney. It was brilliant red...So she plonked it on her head and she walked into the principal’s office and she said, ‘This is my boy. His name is Ted and he’s a very good boy and I will expect you to treat him as a good boy and to teach him properly’. Needless to say, the principal complied. Ted’s school days were a success. After the death of his mother when he was just 15, the family – his father and two sisters – moved in with an aunt for a number of years. The tutors’ residence at the Teacher’s College was another important home for many years of his life. *I fell in love with the Teachers’ College. It was absolutely amazing.* But the present house, purchased at the eleventh hour before he retired, now 21 years ago, is the only one *which is completely mine.*

If home ownership hasn’t been of a high priority for Ted, the characteristics of his present home, where he can feel *still and safe and productive,* is common across his experiences of home. This ownership gave him a sense of freedom and privacy that was new and which he
continues to enjoy thoroughly, I was free for the first time to do what I wanted. Ted is conscious of his age and, wishing to retain his independence for as long as possible, takes active steps to maintain his health and fitness. He doesn’t take any of his good health and fortune for granted, I’m so pleased I’ve got what I’ve got and recognises that having spent much of his life helping others, the hardest thing for him is to accept help for himself.

On reflection Ted recognises the sharing and togetherness of his early days at Teachers’ College to be the happiest time of his life. His nostalgia for old connections and places stirs my own. He asks me about my home in Ireland and I perhaps betray a certain longing. He empathises, You always miss the things you had when you were young.

Something Ted had in great measure when he was young was access to the outdoors and this affinity is reflected in his choice of images. He sees nature in all its beauty and, suddenly noting its destructiveness, he exclaims uncharacteristically, When I see something like this I say to myself, ‘Where the hell is God?’. This led us into a new line of conversation on his spiritual beliefs system and the satisfaction he gets from the balance he sees in nature where the whole thing harmonises. A balance which he does not always see in human affairs and which causes him some perturbation. The picture (Photolanguage 42 reproduced on p. 78) provides a metaphor for his own life, Well, I think it indicates that there have been no major insurmountable traumas. There’s a sort of definite pattern of peace...in a way it’s got a smooth and beautiful look...And so I think it’s sort of a picture of my life. It’s been a small but
pretty unpainful [life]. There have been troubles and all the rest, but the balance has been there.

Gerald’s story (83) I suppose, getting old, that’s a bit of a drag

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<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I enjoyed having small children around</td>
<td>Family home, big house</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Trauma</td>
<td>3 children, The smell of burnt milk</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Wife &amp; son died 20 years ago</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Maths teacher</td>
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<td>Retired</td>
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<td>Present Experiences</td>
<td>Back to life as a student</td>
<td>Own home</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Worry</td>
<td>No family photographs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Engagement with maths</td>
<td>Stair-mate</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Driving, books, friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>I’ve never taken religion very seriously</td>
<td>Working on mathematical problems</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Getting old, that’s a bit of a drag</td>
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<tr>
<td>Future Intention</td>
<td>As above</td>
<td>Read fiction</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Death: A candle going out</td>
<td>Sooner or later [a nursing home] or the like</td>
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Gerald is a tall man who, if he could raise to his full height, would reach 6 feet 6 inches. He tells me his sons equalled his stature and were successful amateur basketball players. Gerald was slow to answer my door knock and as I waited outside I reflected on the steepness of the driveway leading up to his house, a two-storey red-brick apartment building. At last a gracious slow-moving stooped man admitted me and invited me to precede him upstairs to the living room. The stairs were steep and high and I waited in the room above while he seated himself in the mechanical stair-mate which ground its slow ascent. I was conscious of being a strange presence, reaching his living room prematurely almost, and waited in quiet silence as he arrived. It is a sparse, comfortable room with few ornaments. I notice there are no photographs.

Gerald moved to this house 20 years ago after his wife died. Back then, he told me, he hadn’t anticipated the problem of negotiating a steep stairs. In this house Gerald, an intellectual and retired academic, is surrounded by his books on subjects ranging from Russian and German language literature to mathematics and the occasional novel. He devotes his time to solving a mathematical problem and hopes to have time one day to read the many works of fiction he has put aside for years but, then a new worry turns up in my calculations, so I’m kept occupied. He continues, I’ve gone back now quite a lot to my life as a student. When I ask him about any other worries he may have, it’s clear that he has given this little consideration. He considers that the state of the world is bad but reasons, there the old man has the trump card. It’s not going to be bad for long for me. I’m going to get out of it quite soon. Having conquered the stairs for the moment, Gerald hasn’t thought far ahead. He anticipates he will have to move into aged-care sooner or later...unless [he] has a heart attack, but hasn’t done any research into where he might go, If you suddenly realise that it’s time to go there may not be much choice; there’s a
vacancy there there's no vacancy somewhere else. He admits, *I suppose getting old, that's a bit of a drag*, but other than the fact that there's no longer a large family around him he sees that in regards to his own activities nothing much has changed and *life's the same as [it] used to be*.

Gerald assesses that he has had a *protected life*: there may have been choices he could have made differently, but, recognising that he did the best he could at the time, he doesn't worry or regret. He advocates decency and respect for others, but has never taken religion very seriously. For him life is given to us without our choosing, death is *like a candle going out*. He seems attached neither to life nor things. Regarding treasured possessions, Gerald muses that things are useful to make life pleasant and he sometimes misses incidental things that were given away when he moved from the family home to this smaller dwelling, a particular green jug, for instance. He laughs, if there's some item he would miss *It's going to be at the level of green jugs that I'd like [to be]*. I enjoy this remark as I have recently moved house and am engaged in culling the possessions gathered over 18 years. I am hoping I can adopt the 'green jug' attitude.

When Gerald reviewed the Photlanguage photographs, he was drawn back into the materiality of his early years, subjects he had not already spoken about. He recalled his early married life when he and his wife were having children, *I enjoyed having small children around. I remember being rather sorry...when we no longer had a baby in the house because, you know, there was always the smell of milk and...lots of work to do*.

A tall man himself, his children soon followed suit, *they grew out of being able to be thrown around quite early because their legs grew so long*. But their babyhood still held special memories, *The first one got all that*.
special attention showered on him because he was new. Number 2 gave us hell when he was young...He was born in Brisbane. He was a very plump baby and he just lay in a pool of sweat and felt unhappy about it and shared his unhappiness with us.

Figure 11 Photolanguage No. 107

Gerald recalled also his own boyhood days, emphasising I was young once. Of the photograph above (Fig. 11) he commented, I suppose the old man [himself] is rather envious. I couldn't sit on that sort of place anymore. But I used to be able to...especially if there was a parent telling me it was dangerous!
**Lorna's story (86) Life is what you make it**

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<th>Inward</th>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Past Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>Chatty</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Lonely</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Present Experiences</strong></td>
<td><strong>I don't mind my own company</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td><strong>Faith</strong></td>
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<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Future Intention</strong></td>
<td><strong>I've done all I wanted to do</strong></td>
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Lorna moved into aged care 14 months before our interview after having had a heart attack and realising she needed extra care and security. She had known a nurse from the aged-care facility as a girl and had been friendly with her parents and this made the move somewhat easier.
However, she says of her private unit where she had lived with her husband for nine years, *I loved being down there, it was really nice.* Lorna had had a successful bypass operation years previously, but after the recent heart attack she became quite debilitated, unable to hang out washing without getting dizzy and finding the task of preparing meals so arduous that *by the time you want to eat it you can’t be bothered.* Having no family of her own Lorna depended on a nephew who lived quite a distance away and on neighbours. Being less active than previously, she had reduced contact with other people, *I had good neighbours but you can’t be in their place all the time.* This situation led to loneliness and depression, *all I wanted to do was cry.* In the Hostel she says, *I’ve got plenty of people around me to talk to...I’d never wish to leave it actually, until I have to. They’ll carry me out in a box when I do.*

She brought with her a few possessions from her own house, small pieces of furniture and a hand-stitched wall hanging depicting a bagpipe-player made by her carpenter husband, a migrant from Scotland. Her most prized possession is their wedding photograph. Her husband died 16 years ago, they were 43 years married. Lorna can only walk small distances within the care facility, due to her heart condition, and cannot even venture to the bench on the street outside where she might have the benefit of chats with passers-by. She has access to a communal sitting room where she can watch TV, and mostly she has this space to herself. Lorna likes this lounge area because it makes for a feeling of home not to be confined to one room, but she must sometimes share this space with others and this causes some difficulties. These difficulties are further discussed in Chapter 7.
A soft-spoken genial woman, Lorna enjoys the activities offered by the facility, excursions, bingo, entertainment and happy hour on a Friday, *I don't drink. I have a soft drink because I take too many tablets to mix with that.* Even the ‘oldies’ join in. The ‘oldies’ referred to are the residents with dementia brought in from the high-care block to join in the activities. I asked Lorna how she manages interacting and living with a large number of people with dementia, *Oh good! I don't mind. I go and have a yack to them...you can't have a conversation with them, but you can have a little bit of a talk.* And she goes on to tell me a funny story about one resident becoming confused and getting into another’s bed. She takes it all in good spirits.

Lorna sees herself as the kind of person who likes her own company, but usually gets along easily with others too. She has always been chatty, *I've got the gift of the gab,* and she attributes this to learning to mix with people from an early age due to living in the town and not having television. She sees those around her who don’t talk and have a tendency to worry and complain and she recognises that this makes them unhappy, *It's no good at all.*

By contrast, she herself says, *I'm not a worrying person. When I was having my heart operation ...I just put my trust in the Lord and my faith in the surgeon.* Lorna quips, *Money is the only thing I worry about and I haven't got any, so I don't have to worry about it.* She concludes, *I've been lucky,* but recognises that how one lives one’s life is not simply a passive matter. She states, *Life is what you make it...I've always gone along and lived my life the way I wanted to.* When I ask her how she dealt with the difficulties in her life she immediately responds *I didn't have any*
and to my surprised response she reflects, *Oh well I suppose I might have done, I've forgotten.* Lorna is not one to hang on to the past.

![Image](image)

**Figure 12 Photolanguage No. 130**

Her choices from amongst the photographs (Fig. 12) reflect her present world and her empathy for others. She chooses images depicting older people and sees herself in these images:

*You need a lot of [help] when you're old and giddy (unsteady on the feet), can't walk. He's looking down to make sure that she's putting her feet in the right place. I don't know whether he gave her the flowers or she got them from somewhere she'd been...Poor old soul. I know how it feels to be, you know, vulnerable like that and that's what she puts me in mind of.*
Hal’s story (82) I’ve come to conclude that the whole thing is just for fun

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<tr>
<th>Inward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Past Experiences</td>
<td>Family home</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brick, mortar, furniture, kitchen</td>
<td>Brother (19) killed when Hal aged 16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philosophy on life and death formed</td>
<td>Mother’s unresolved grief</td>
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<tr>
<td>Loner</td>
<td>Making things in workshop</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Travel</td>
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<tr>
<td>Present Experiences</td>
<td>Retirement village, place of living</td>
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<tr>
<td>Introvert / loner</td>
<td>Friend</td>
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<tr>
<td>Content</td>
<td>Reading</td>
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<tr>
<td>Friendship</td>
<td>Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Future Intention</td>
<td>Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Only the body dies; the soul lives on</td>
<td>As above</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The body dies</td>
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When I asked Hal about home he immediately began speaking of his family of origin. I queried this and he responded, What other homes are there? On reflection he noted that he has lived in a number places and he is now in his fourth place of living, an independent unit in a retirement home. When he speaks of his various homes it is about the activities he carried out there that he enthuses, I was always interested in making things. In his parents house he built a glider, a sail plane and then a boat which he sailed it to America and back. Moving then to a unit on the coast he spoke only of the large entertainment space beneath the block of units which he cleaned out and built another plane underneath there. Moving
away from the coast for health reasons he purchased a small house onto which he had built a huge shed. Here, now in his seventies, he built another glider and, getting his pilot's license at 72 years of age, flew it around the top end of Australia.

At age 78 Hal developed problems with his eyesight and could no longer fly. For Hal this was a bend in the road requiring adjustment from him. He sold the glider and undertook to build two model steam locomotives. Characteristically, Hal worked alone, My social activity was entirely with what I was making. I could entertain myself. I didn't need to talk to anybody.

I first met Hal, a fitter and turner in his early days, when he lived in the small house with the big shed (‘the shed with the house on it’ as it has been described). The darkened house was plainly furnished and betrayed no sign of colour or decoration. Four tubular steel chairs with bright orange plastic padded seats sat into the Formica-topped kitchen table. The drab blinds that covered the three picture windows were drawn and a large television set sat on a table in the middle of the room. This was in fact a closed-circuit TV that Hal used to help him to read. Hal explained that he had developed macular degeneration which caused difficulty when using tools and restricted his capacity to drive. Another a bend in the road led to his taking up reading and he demonstrated for me the capacity of the closed-circuit TV to enlarge print. I noticed a copy of the Upanishads and other Buddhist and spiritual texts on the table. He led me down four wooden steps, through the narrow laundry and into the shed which had been his workshop. Filled with light from the three large windows along two sides and the 6 sheets of alconite in the tin roof, the shed was of a size
that could easily hold four parked cars. It was almost completely empty except for a lathing machine and a lawnmower, the plane and trains gone now. All of the tools and equipment sold, this creative space seemed to be waiting. That way of life had ended for Hal, *I'll go into a retirement village because I can't make anything anymore.*

Hal described himself as *very much a loner...an introvert,* yet when he moved into the retirement village he made a decision: *I decided that I was going to learn to be sociable...so that's a new avenue for me.* Hal doesn't believe in accidents or coincidences, *Everything is sort of planned...or worked out by some big computer that you might call God.* Four or five days after he arrived in the retirement village, a lady from a nearby unit knocked on his door and introduced herself, explaining that he bore the same first name and surname as her deceased husband, *and ever since we've been talking to each other and she has introduced me to a lot of her friends.* Daphne, an outgoing, feminine, bubbly woman who loves to cook and chat and drive, has swept the confirmed bachelor along with her. Now, he says of his move to the retirement village, *I make it enjoyable by making friends.* Reflecting upon his life and philosophy Hal states, *You're only here in the world for a certain time [and] I've come to conclude that the whole thing is just for fun.*

Hal sees his unit in the village as a place that you can relax and get away from all things outside. He describes himself as very fortunate and reasonably happy. For him happiness is a choice. *If you want to be happy, be happy. If you want to be sad, be sad.* His advice: *If you find that you don't like [something], well then change it yourself, or even go somewhere else...or change yourself:*
When it came to images Hal generated his own and these were held in stories which articulated his understanding of the world, the mind and the spirit. This is one he told me:

_They have a story about a man who fell down the well you see. And, a passer-by heard his cry and threw a rope down to him and tied the other end of the rope to a tree. He said, ‘Get a hold of that rope and you can pull yourself out’. And the man in the well said, ‘I want to know who dug this well and I want to know how wide it is and I want to know why it was dug’. And he said, ‘All those questions will be given to you when you pull yourself out of the well’. And we are all in this well. And we’re wanting to know all about it and everything. But there’s only one way we can know and that is to get hold of that rope and pull ourselves out. And the rope is your mind. And the other end is tied to God. So follow your mind. Not what anyone else thinks or believes. But follow what you believe and it will lead you to the truth...along a different path to what I would._
Stephen's story (97) I'm still out there but I'm in here

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<tr>
<th>Past Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Choir, farmer</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fortunate</td>
<td>Married</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Marital home, the farm</td>
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<tr>
<td>Walk to the pub</td>
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<tr>
<th>Present Experiences</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>Aged care – here</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lonely I'm still out there but I'm in here...my mind's out there</td>
<td>I've only got a couple of years</td>
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<tr>
<td>Happy</td>
<td>Sitting in the sunshine</td>
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<td>I'll stop here. I'll stay here 'til I go</td>
<td>Spends a lot of time in his room</td>
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<td>Daughter's friend takes him out</td>
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<tr>
<th>Future Intention</th>
<th>Inward</th>
<th>Outward</th>
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<tr>
<td>I'll be home with God...that's where I'm heading for</td>
<td>I've only got a couple of years</td>
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<tr>
<td>That's my home</td>
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Stephen, a tall thin man with broad shoulders, still wears the Akubra and chequered shirt of an Australian farmer when sitting on his tiny veranda catching the last rays of the evening sun. I spoke with him there, at the aged-care facility where he has lived for the past four years. He had
Stephen had been married for 70 years. He met his wife through church activities, he a tenor (I can’t sing fiver now!) and she an alto in neighbouring choirs. They lived in the same neighbourhood all their lives and brought up their children on his family farm, where his son and family now live: well that’s the old way; no place like home. We loved home. This was an old slab home now reported to be in disrepair and he has been told it is going to be pulled down altogether. Stephen reasons, I’ve got nothing to do with it now...I’m right out of it altogether. Stephen’s son and family have taken over the home farm and Stephen appears reconciled to the fact that he will live out his time in the aged-care hostel.

He appreciates the benefits, There’s a nurse here to look after you when you’re sick. The food could improve, The cooking, I’m not at all in love with but he gets around the problem by having a supply of biscuits, chips
and pies put by. If anybody brings me a couple of pies I put them in the fridge; they've got a fridge out there. It's really nearly like home away from home. Not one to make a fuss, he is used to taking care of his own needs: If there's something that I don't like at the kitchen I don't tell them. But then I'll come down and I'll warm my pie up or get apples out home at the orchard. I'll bake a couple of apples in the microwave. It only takes eight minutes and I've got two apples baked. Not accustomed to town water, Stephen has a large supply of tank water, which his son brings him from the farm, stored in bottles in his room. Stephen reports he makes the place feel like home by having his wireless and his tank water: You couldn't wish for any better [place] really.

Stephen describes himself as happy but lonely. It's a pretty rocky road after 70 years with one woman. We were one. And for her to be taken and I have to take the road myself. It's a bit rough. He continues, As far as I'm concerned now I'm on my own.

Until recently Stephen walked down the hill to the pub but now this has become too difficult ...going down is good, it's comin' back ahh...too far. His son comes to visit every Sunday and Stephen loves to keep up with the news of the farm. He doesn't want to be a nuisance to anybody and knows returning to the farm is not an option. Well, when you've got to be away from home you accept it. I've accepted it because I've got to stop here...I'm still out there but I'm in here...my mind's out there. He concedes, I'm not as happy here as I would be at home. But is reconciled to his situation, I'll stop here. I'm here and I'll stay here 'til I go. I feel the sadness in Stephen as he waits, he cannot go back to the farm, and going
to be with the Lord is not in his hands but he knows, That's my home. That's where I'm heading for. [My wife]'s gone home.

The images that Stephen most responded to were ones that reminded him of old times (e.g. Photolanguage No. 42 on p.78) and those that reflected his belief in God, the mainstay of his life. He proudly showed me a framed prayer that hung in his house his entire married life. You can't get them anymore, he confides. He is leaving it to his nephew in his will.

Figure 13 Stephen's Prayer
Madeline's story (85) You can't... give in. It's too easy to die. It's harder to live

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<td>Past Experiences</td>
<td>Travel overseas</td>
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<td>Present Experiences</td>
<td>You can't give in</td>
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<td>It's fun</td>
<td>Living in own home</td>
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<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Plays bridge and golf</td>
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<td>Acceptance</td>
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<td>Prayer chapel</td>
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<td>Helping</td>
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<td>Future Intention</td>
<td>Prayer is great</td>
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<td>Active retirement</td>
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About four or five years ago Madeline had been experiencing some aches and pains and decided to go for a check-up to her GP. First he diagnosed flu and suggested she go home to bed querying if she had someone to look after her. A widow without children: Of course this frightened the life out of me – that I was on my own and I had to go to bed ...I got kind of panicky. When the flu didn't develop the GP diagnosed a kidney infection
but the prescribed tablets effected no change. She reports that on her third presentation at his office he got fed up with me and he said, 'I can't do anything more for you'. So he brought me next door [to his female colleague] and put my file on the table and got rid of me that way. This other doctor sent Madeline to a specialist and she spent five weeks under psychiatric supervision in a general hospital. She says with emphasis I was depressed at that stage, but not clinically depressed according to the specialist and she was discharged. Still not feeling 100 per cent all the time, she returned to her GP and this time was admitted to a major psychiatric hospital where she was given anti-depressant medication and offered electro-convulsive treatment. The offer of medication was a comfort as from it she deduced that, whatever was wrong with me can be looked after. After some weeks she declined the electro-convulsive therapy and came home.

A sports lover all her life, Madeline believes the cause of her trouble was a loss of function and physical agility, and that she had suddenly become aware of slowing down: I was getting older you see...I realised my trouble, that I can't expect to be as good as I was at 70, or even in my mid seventies. I was very good, playing golf two or three times a week. She realises that this is an ongoing process: I'm not as good now as I was last year, but suggests, I don't mind. I know it's normal. What can I do about it? That's the way I feel. However it was something she hadn't been expecting: I thought it would never happen. She reasons that the GP (He wasn't the best man to understand old people, in my opinion) had been trying to give her a medical diagnosis, or in her own words, something to say I have. But she reasons that as far she is concerned, although it did develop into depression, the problem was age creeping up: I was upset that I was different. I couldn't accept it I suppose.
Madeline takes a planned approach to her situation now. While she takes a low dose of anti-depressant medication, she currently takes an active role in creating a happy and fulfilling life story. She finds the mornings the worst time, *when you wake up you want to go back to sleep again*. So she gets up earlier than she ever did: *You could easily say 'I don't want any more of it'... what's the point ...I won't let myself say it. ...You can't, you can't. It's too easy to die. It's harder to live.* A former boutique clothes shop owner, Madeline retains an eye for colour and coordination in her clothing and presentation. A pale lemon is one of her favourite colours. She recommends taking charge of one's thinking, *If you can get it into your head 'it's fun'...Get that way of thinking*. And it is not a purely cognitive approach, *It's very important to have things that are going to be fun*. She organises fun around golf or a TV programme or contact with people. She also enjoys walking to the small prayer chapel in the town and is an enthusiastic member of the Active Retirement Club. Another way she finds for feeling better is by being useful to others, *Helping people is a great help to yourself...if I can pick somebody up and give them a lift or that kind of thing, it always makes me feel better...Once you lose that I'd say you lose everything*. Madeline continues to walk this path putting in the effort.

At the end of her interview Madeline produced two strong images from her imagination. One is a drawing which reflects her current state of mind (Fig. 17), and the other a dream which reflects her state of mind at the time she was experiencing depression. These are discussed in Chapter 7.
Grace’s story (85) But sure we have to leave eventually. Haven’t we to go and die?

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<td><strong>Past Experiences</strong></td>
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<td>Freedom at home</td>
<td>Teaching 38 years</td>
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<td>Prayer</td>
<td>Retired</td>
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<td>Grief</td>
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<td><strong>Present Experiences</strong></td>
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<td>Happy</td>
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<td>Freer</td>
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<td>&quot;Little deaths'</td>
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<td><strong>Future Intention</strong></td>
<td><strong>Move to the new house</strong></td>
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<td>Peace</td>
<td>Death</td>
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<td><em>sure we have to leave eventually</em></td>
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Grace is another participant who places great store by being helpful: It’s great to be of use...it’s great to be able to do something. She has had many opportunities to put this attitude into practice since her retirement from teaching 22 years ago. Since then she has given piano and French language tuition to school students, had a role in stock-taking and ordering domestic supplies for the convent and engaged in pastoral activities within the community, I go to visit in the hospitals as well and go to funerals and bereavements, that kind of thing. She entered the convent aged 19 in 1936 and, apart for a few years spent as community leader in a convent in a neighbouring town, she has spent her entire life since leaving home in this place, You came in here and you did what you were told and that was it
you see...You didn't know would you ever get home again. At 85 Grace has a the same gentle tone and smile I knew when she taught me French at school. She looks directly into my eyes when she speaks with sincere modesty that she hopes she isn’t wasting my time.

This place, her convent, is a large rambling building near the centre of a rapidly modernising and expanding town. Real estate is at a premium here and this building, originally housing 50, now houses 11 ageing nuns. The building is to be sold and perhaps demolished. The sisters are to move into a house to be build behind the existing building in the large convent garden. The once beautifully tended garden, which yielded abundant flowers, cabbages, potatoes and other vegetables for the large convent and attached boarding school, is now gone to seed and rank with weeds. The place where generations of girls and nuns walked in procession in prayer and song behind the raised statue of Mary the Queen of the May is deserted. The boarding school has been closed for 20 years.

In the early days Grace lived a very regulated life in the convent: The bell went and you got up. Prayer began at such a time...then you had reading and then mass at half seven and breakfast in silence...We’d knit...crochet, embroider. We were always supposed to be doing something. After Vatican II in the 1960s things began to change and religious life became less structured and for her, It's a much better life, spiritually...you're a freer person. You're more responsible. Older age also brought more freedom to pray a little bit more...or do little things that you like to do. A trend to de-instutionalise convents saw a number of the younger sisters move out to community housing in the mid 1990s, a group of us opted for the bigger house and we're still here. When I ask her how she feels about
the inevitable day when they will leave this house, she responds from a different angle. She recalls the memory of leaving her parents’ home at the age of 19 and tells me about the death of her father, then her mother and later the deaths of her sisters and a brother. She reasons, I always think that all the little partings all along the way are like little deaths...and when we leave this house it will be a little death too. Grace doesn’t use a feeling word. For Grace all the little partings prepare us for death: but sure we have to leave eventually. Haven’t we to go and die?

Grace’s idea home of home is of a welcoming place, but she is conscious of the uncertain times where, for security reasons, doors must be kept locked, I’d love to have the door open, but you can’t. It’s terrible isn’t it? Grace agrees to make a drawing of her home and I suggest she can make it whatever way she would like it to be in the drawing. This leads to a certain resolve. I see it as an open door. How will I open it? How do you…? I give a few ideas from my limited knowledge of perspective and the image she creates reflects how she would like things to be: how home looks in her mind, I would see it as an open door for people. Then she draws in large windows with a strong statement of self, I love the light. I rarely pull a curtain. That’s me. I love the light. In fact while throughout her interview Grace mainly spoke in the impersonal second person (you) and third person plural (we), during the drawing activity she gave clear voice to her I.

Grace’s drawing with further commentary is reproduced in Chapter 6 (figure 15, p.169).
I have presented the stories in this chapter in a way that they tell themselves, without analysis, since that is their great strength. Analysis follows in subsequent chapters, but for now I take my lead from the storytellers. There are stories that take seven days to tell, says the Cherokee storyteller Dianne Galancy,* and there are stories that take you all your life. These individual stories told here have taken whole lifetimes to tell. They remind us of our relationships to each other. They remind us of our humanity. They remind us how to live. I will make no further comment on them here, but to borrow once again from the master storyteller Thomas King, now that they are told:


* Take one. It's yours. Do with it what you will. Put it on a T-shirt.

* Turn it into a play. Tell it to your children.

* Or... forget it.

* But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently, if only you had heard this story...

* You've heard it now.
I want the scissors to be sharp
and the table to be perfectly level
when you cut me out of my life
and paste me in that book you always carry.

B. Collins, 2002 'Vade Mecum',

Sailing Alone Around the Room.
CHAPTER 4 THEMES

What’s the story about?

*Truth is like ordinary light, present everywhere but invisible, and we must break it to behold it.*

R. Scholes, 1994 *The Elements of Fiction*

In the previous chapter I deliberately evoke the tradition of the storyteller in bringing the narratives (throughout this project I use the terms ‘narrative’ ‘data’ and ‘story’ interchangeably) of the research participants to this text. There are three purposes in doing this: to bring to the fore the tradition and genre of the story form as a conveyor and constructor of knowledge-wisdom-truth (data) that informs and instructs; to examine the role of the interviewer-researcher-narrator in obtaining, constructing and reporting story-data; and to explore the relevance of that data-story for the audience-listener-reader in relation to the construction of knowledge, both in the context of the interview conversation and also in the wider social context.

The stories presented in these chapters are not disengaged narratives, but deliberately combine the active voice of the researcher and of the research participants, functioning as ‘a connected medium of knowing – an embodiment of an intimate relation between the knower and the known’ (Plath Helle, 1991, p.50). The epistemic stance here speaks to a relational focus which evokes / represents in a dynamic narrative way not only the events of the stories, but the face and embodiment of the narrator-participants so that the reader might ‘know’ them too, rather than simply gain knowledge ‘about’ them: the humanity of the research participants is
central to the purpose. Notions of connection and care permeate this text both ontologically and thematically and create the cornerstone of the ethical stance taken here (Belenky et al., 1986; Gilligan, 1982; Witherell, 1991; Koch, 1998).

The story form is a cultural universal, but not merely as casual entertainment. As Kieran Egan writes in *Teaching as Storytelling*, the story ‘reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience’ (1988, p.2). Egan goes on to suggest that the story form may reflect a fundamental structure of our minds. Certainly the ‘*Once upon a time*...’ phrase sets up a certain expectation even in an adult audience: our conceptual abilities are immediately attuned to creating the world that the teller offers, and, if it is a good story, we may be deeply moved, we may learn something new. We will be impatient of interruption and reluctant to finish. This process that the story ignites has transformative potential, stimulating new awareness, knowledge and understanding about ourselves, our fellow human beings and the human condition (Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1993). In this way story is first and foremost presented here as a way of knowing, beyond the logical-empirical paradigm (Bruner, 1985; Witherell & Noddings, 1991).

The role of the storyteller, then, is not dissimilar from that of many researchers engaged in finding out about and reporting on human experience. In fact, some qualitative researchers have suggested (with some reservations) that good stories of themselves carry tacit knowledge as well as vivid accounts of phenomenon; ‘To analyse stories takes away ownership of the primary narrators and masks the qualities of a narrative with the abstract interpretations of the theorist’ (Goodley, Lawthom.
Clough & Moore, 2004, p. 149). At the end of the last chapter I offered the stories-data to the reader to do with what you will. The intention is not to treat the life stories of the participants in some offhand or casual manner, but to recognise that the story will be understood by the reader in her/his own way according to her/his own abilities and interests. It will be comprehended and acted upon in ways that I cannot control, monitor or influence: I cannot even, like the oral storyteller, use tone or emphasis or speak to the audience-reader directly to watch their reactions and guide their responses. As the writer Ursula Le Guin points out:

A reader reading makes the book, brings it into meaning, by translating arbitrary symbols, printed letters, into an inward private reality. Reading is an act, a creative one....an active transaction between the text and the reader (2004, p.169).

And so, from my perspective, the story eventually stands alone. From that position it can become the vehicle for presenting qualitative data-knowledge that transgresses the dichotomy of truth or fiction, that embraces the objective within a dynamic inter-subjectivity of the researcher, the participant and the reader, and ultimately makes a claim to re-present humanness.
Truth and slippage in research analysis

We need wisdom schools, which would honour the revelatory nature of the body, of art and of storytelling.


I have long pondered the importance of maintaining the integrity and 'truth' of the individual stories shared with me by the participants, an integrity that is juxtaposed with the imperative as a researcher to take the story 'one step further'. This further step is the process of analysis, which needs to be considered in relation to the theoretical significances to be gleaned and meanings construed from such a process and what this adds to the pool of knowledge. One might say (as my supervisor did when I was agonising over this dilemma) that the process had already commenced when I presented selections, snippets (highlights?) of the stories in the previous chapter, but not the actual transcripts. I was more than a little perturbed to realise this. I have a sense of the vulnerability of the stories, of the research participants: a heightened sense of responsibility that has arisen from the 'relational sense of [my]self and [the] connected way of knowing' that I have embraced (Plath Helle, 1991, p.63). Already the participants' stories have slipped out of their hands and have become my story of their stories. So, it is certainly true that the receiver of the stories will take from them what she/he wills: I already have.

Having already transgressed (in the Catholic sense!) unknowingly, the law (unwritten) that the narrative is sacrosanct and owned by the participant, do I now take the metaphorical stance of Macbeth who was 'in blood stepped so far that, should he wade no more, returning would be as tedious as go o'er'? That is, do I go ahead and just analyse 'em, the 'harm' already having been started? Still, having 'given' the stories to the reader
somehow I am reluctant to take them for myself. I find I need another way towards representation of stories through the filter of analysis, a way that allows me to give and take in an ethical way. I need another metaphorical stance – one not so dramatic and violent.

I have asked myself if I am not being overdramatic and even precious about the handling of these stories. After all research is research and I have been given ethical clearance from the university and my participants have signed on the dotted line. But it is the image of violence that holds me just now and a recollection from a paper by Judith Butler where she described how the other can be violated and effaced (2001). I thought she was being too dramatic then, but it was a perspective that mulled away in the back of my mind and demanded further consideration in terms of the forces of politics, power and discourse that impact the individual, on society and even on research. For example, in her response to the current US politics of domination which favour violent retaliation while concurrently designating which lives are grief-worthy and which are not, Butler (2004) calls for a disruption of dominant forms of representation in the public domain. Dominant forms of representation in this context are those that censor or otherwise erase from public view the names, images and stories of those whose lives and deaths it is not politically expedient to recognise. She cites, for example, prisoners in ‘indefinite detention’ who, through the suspension of their legal and political status and through the operation of the dominant powers and discourses, do not count as human (italics mine). She writes:

Some lives are grievable and others are not; the differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved, and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is

Butler describes the ease with which human life can be annulled and the processes of power and discourse that can work to achieve this, putting forward a conception of ethics, developed by Emmanuel Levinas, that 'rests upon an apprehension of the precariousness of life' (p. xvii), that admits the face, the human, the injurable, the Other, into public representation.

In Butler’s writings we are faced with an ethical challenge and a demand to name, to image, to represent the other in their humanness and vulnerability, in their precariousness and grievability. We are confronted, challenged and provoked to do this not only for the sake of ‘truth’ but for a wider purpose of social and political renewal, cultural criticism and social advocacy and change. Thus Butler’s writings inform this research project on a number of levels: she raises the question of the other, the subject (participant), and how that person is perceived, treated and represented; evoking Foucault, she challenges notions of power, ‘subjectification’ and discourses which manipulate and dominate; and, after Levinas, she explicates the inherent difficulty of representation:

For Levinas, the human cannot be captured through the representation, and we can see that some loss of the human takes place when it is ‘captured’ by the image. (2004, p.145).
It does not take a great leap of imagination to realise that if the original story no longer belongs to the original teller, neither do I, as the (re)writer of the story, 'own' it. Foucault agrees:

Somebody who writes has not got the right to demand to be understood as he had wished to be when he was writing; that is to say from the moment he writes he is no longer the owner of what he says (cited in Carette, 1978, p.111).

Davies explains it thus, 'The author is not the final arbiter of meanings', nor can she/he necessarily control meanings. Davies introduces the notion of 'creative possibilities' that may be opened up by writers, but concedes, 'it is the readers of their work who will bring it to life' (Davies, 2004, p.6). While this 'life' may be based in 'ambivalent understandings and emotions' (p.7), perhaps this is the only way that human experience can be understood: in its incompleteness. These are all issues that concern those of us undertaking qualitative research in the Humanities and are issues that are raised in the so-called 'crisis of representation' facing qualitative research (Lather, 1993; Neumann, 1996; Richardson, 2001; Tierney, 2002; Davies, 2004). We are concerned about these issues as both ethical and practical considerations, but also (and perhaps this is only a personal opinion born of Catholic notions of transgression), to borrow a cautionary note from Butler, not to do so would consummate our own inhumanity (p.151).

Harkening back to my need for a metaphorical stance from which to operate ethically, I clearly need one that eschews notions of 'ownership'
and violence and which can tolerate some ambivalence and incompleteness. I have found a helpful image in the simple notion of putting the stories 'in motion' (Game and Metcalfe, 1996): they can be an offering, a gift from the teller to myself, from me to the reader and from the reader to where you will. My task then, having gathered stories of human experience, is to (re)present them in ways that will honour the voices of the tellers and will also engage and impact the reader to reflect what the stories-data mean for them and for our society. Calling on the exercise of their imagination, questions I would like to ask the reader might include: what does that story mean for you and your relationships? How might you act differently having heard that story? What might you change in your life/work now as a result of reading of this person's experience?

Perhaps, after Tierney and Butler, one can optimistically hope that the impact of writing about human experience in an ethical way – apprehending the precariousness of life – will ultimately be towards the possibilities of provoking engagement and shifting paradigms, towards personal and policy change (transformation), social critique and civic-political renewal (Tierney, 2002, p.397; Butler, 2004; Osborne et al, 1998; Koch, 1998).

There's a story I know…….

Paddy – Patricia Hamilton – is 82 years of age. Her father was brought up in an Irish 'big house' in Co. Dublin and she's keen to tell me all about it when she hears my Irish accent. We
immediately have a connection. Paddy is short and broad, in a compact way. She’s a self-proclaimed ‘horsey’ person, trained and rode horses all her life – ‘very outdoorsy’, she says. Loves animals. She was a bit shy about the fact, casually tossed off by her friend Hilda, that she was the first lady jockey at Newcastle, but recalled with easy laughter that she’s still got the scars from when she was thrown by a ‘tricky Shetland’ at the age of 10. Paddy went on to train fine horses throughout her life, many of which are displayed within photograph frames on the fridge and wall in her unit and were ridden by her younger self, drawing carriages in trotting competitions. She owned a team of four Dutch Frisians, jet black with feathered fetlocks, and she owned Tommy the son of Magic Dancer who ‘pulled like a train’ and ran second to Phar Lap in the Melbourne Cup.

Paddy has an obvious limp and says she’s had her right hip replaced twice, that when carriage riding in 1984 with a team of horses she got thrown out at a water hazard and the carriage wheel ran over her coxic bone. There was mention of a ‘smashed hip’ and mild criticism of the man who designed the course and who should have known that the bank was too steep and needed to be filled in with sand, followed by laughter and hip operation details, so that I was confused in the end as to when the hip had actually been replaced in chronological time, whether the hip or coxic had been smashed in the carriage accident or both, but remained convinced that Paddy was indeed a person readily capable of being pitched from a carriage at high speed on a water hazard.
Filled with ready laughter, Paddy said ‘Life is what you make it dear’.

I asked curiously, penetratingly, ‘What do you make of it?’ (unable to make much of it myself at times, seeking insights). She responded gaily, ‘I don’t know, dear.’ Then added brightly, ‘It’s like when you open your eyes in the morning and say, “Aha, I’m alive”.’

‘Right,’ I pondered, perhaps not fully appreciating in that moment that being alive is of course the fundamental prerequisite of making anything of it at all.

Paddy takes me to her home, a single unit within an aged-care facility, to show me photographs of her father’s Irish house. She pauses at the doorway of the unit, ‘Now when you come in there might be something you’ll see that’s not allowed, so we won’t say anything about that. You never saw anything.’ ‘Of course,’ I conspiratorily agree, spotting the rebel within and unquestioningly on-side. ‘We’re allowed a fish or a bird but nothing else,’ she adds, giving me a clue. She calls to ‘her lovely little girl,’ who strayed in some years previously, reassuring her that everything is all right and there are no strangers to worry about. I notice that the unit is darkened with drawn blinds and the sofa and armchair have additional protective coverings. Later when I’m peering short-sightedly, middle-agedly at the photograph album picturing her family home, Paddy volunteers to open the blinds to give me more light and reveals they are shut so that nobody (I read staff) sees ‘you know who’. ‘You know who’, affectionately known as Put Put, meantime luxuriates on a
vast red pillow at the foot of Paddy's bed, a large contented ginger fluff, who knows where home is, protected, fed and loved.

Later, as I leave, Paddy says,

'I really don't think I'd still be here if it wasn't for her.'

Paddy's story is one of the many gathered in this text. Play with it (Game and Metcalfe, 1997; Gadamar, 1996). Apply the three questions above to it and notice what comes for you: What do you make of it? That is the question of analysis that the researcher asks: what do I make of it – the story-data? This is the question of the moment. What do I make, for example, of the precarious joyful vulnerability of Paddy's humanness? What do I make of the secret she keeps that keeps her here? What does it mean in the context of this research on older age and the making of home? What can we read here about life and love, about power and precariousness in relation to Paddy living within this aged-care setting? In order to tackle these questions, I must harken back to the research issue raised in the first place, my topic of interest: the lived experience of constructing home in older age. For me, Paddy's story, like the stories of each participant, is the direct path into examining the abstract notions of 'home' and 'older age' embedded in the materiality of the life and relationships being lived. Earlier in this text I quoted Nietzsche: Whoever is searching for the human being must first find the lantern. I realise now, as the writing emerges, that the invitational space of the story-form is my lantern.
The interviews I conducted (the story-forms which emerged) covered the broad themes of 'home' and 'older age', evoking a multitude of memories: childhood homes, hobbies and parents; marriages and spouses, children raised and grandchildren born; death of family members; memories of emigration and other forms of displacement and transition. They traversed perceptions of life in older age, home, aged care; and constructions of meaning that embrace and transcend ageing. In this way the individual interviews facilitated the telling of 'thick narratives' (Brockelman, 1985) 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of life that address the particularities and materialities of older age and home and, referring back to Butler (2001) and Callanan (2004), provide some answers to the question of 'Who am I?' or 'Who (any)one is'. Having already presented the stories in a way that as closely as possible privileges the voice of the original narrator, in this chapter I explore (play with) some of the themes which arise across the stories collected and see them cluster into three broad meta-narratives: narratives of Appreciation, narratives of Loving and Grieving and narratives of Engagement. There is considerable overlap between these meta-narratives, for loving and grieving is predicated upon engagement and, indeed, appreciation presupposes engagement whether with that which is presently loved or with that which is previously lost. As one of the participants was told by her pastor on her wedding day 60 years ago, foreshadowing the griefs to come, 'love presupposes loss'. 
Narratives of Appreciation

*Old age is full of enjoyment if you know how to use it*

Plato, 4 BC– AD, *Republic 1*

As has already been acknowledged, 'Certain faces must be admitted into public view, must be seen and heard for some keener sense of the value of life, all life, to take hold' (Butler, 2004, p.xviii). The faces I bring into view in this particular text are old faces; wrinkled, lined, sometimes pink and cheery, sometimes weary, pained and sad, often joyful and serene and beautiful: like Paddy's face. The people I bring into view are real people; they are the threshold people, people who appreciate the simple act of opening up their eyes in the morning and who truly understand the meaning of living in the in-between (Turner, 1967). Like Gerald, who, living with a 'mountain' both outside and inside his home, employs a mechanical stair-mate to climb his Everest and pronounces, *In terms of stairs then...I think I've conquered that, at least for the time being* Gerald has learned 'the wisdom of insecurity' (Watts, 1951).

The wisdom of insecurity is not a way of evasion, but of carrying on wherever we happen to be stationed – carrying on, however, without imagining that the burden of the world, or even of the next moment, is ours. It is a philosophy not of nihilism but of the reality of the present – always remembering that to be of the present is to be, and candidly know ourselves to be, on the crest of a breaking wave. (Philip Wheelwright, 1951, Arts and Letters (review of Watts))
Stories of older age are about loss and sometimes sickness, and perhaps death does hover closer than when we are younger – although none of us knows the day nor the hour – none of us knows how close we are to the crest of that wave. Older age is also about adjustment and meaning-making and, most of all, it is about living. Greg explains how it is for him. *The longer I live the more I love living. On the other hand there is no fear of dying.*

Joan, a softly spoken woman in her mid-eighties, spoke of being *favoured by fortune* in her later years and recounted having found a *very satisfactory* place in aged care and considered herself lucky on many counts, including that her family is near enough to visit, to a stroke having *dusted over [her] memory* so that there were things she couldn’t recall or miss: she re-framed the heart attack in that way as perhaps it made adjustment to aged care a bit easier. She was nevertheless realistic about her situation and recognised the move into aged care as a gamble, the outcomes of which are strongly influenced by one's own attitude and choice of action:

*And I am lucky ...if you come to a place like this and you look around, you can find a lot of things that work on your side...I came in here and I did.*

There is a clear message from her of retaining her own sense of agency and internal locus of control. Despite the down sides, and she recognises that there are down sides, she looked for opportunities to make the situation work for her. A number of participants considered themselves
‘lucky’ or fortunate in their lives in the present-oriented now and appreciation of luck or blessings was certainly a theme that kept coming through, with statements such as:

*I’m very fortunate, I have a place to live, clothes to wear, money to buy food.* (Hal)

*To see the family all growing up and doing well and everything like that. I’ve got so much to be thankful for.* (Margaret)

*I was very fortunate that I was able to specify whatever I wanted to go into it (the home)...I’m immensely happy here.* (James)

*I would hope that I would adopt an attitude that would make me feel I am aware of my blessings and happy even if unpleasant things happen.* (Hal)

*Every block has got separate rooms...its own lounge and kitchen...I can do my own washing and ironing and we have got a fridge in the kitchen...we are very fortunate.* (Pearl)

*I’ve got a lot to be grateful for (re having good friends and relationships).* (Margaret)
It's wonderful to be able to still swim twice a week and walk on the days I don't swim and more or less keep the garden free of weeds, look after myself, do my own cooking and all those sorts of things that are physical. (James)

At the moment you know [I have] nothing much beyond a little nagging arthritis in one thumb (laughter) enough to make one realise that being pain-free is something one shouldn't take for granted in one's eighties. (James)

It depends if you're lucky too. Now I love reading. I've always loved reading...I've got a useless skeleton but I've got, for the moment, pretty good eyes and I can read all day without any concern. (Joan)

I'm really really fortunate there. I really am. But that doesn't mean that I cannot have complaints. (Pearl)

The final comment above, spoken by Pearl aged 90 who is living in an aged-care facility, reflects back a clarity of perception that tells us, 'No it's not all great': 'I can make the best of this, but it doesn't mean that I can't see how things are'. There is no lapse into a passivity or into a detached
spirituality here, no graceful withdrawal from the world: here is no Pollyanna:

*I don’t go with the flow, I never have* (Pearl)

I get a sense from all the participants of people very much in touch with the precariousness of life, but not fearful: aware of their vulnerability, but wanting to make the best of things. And some still reserve the right to complain! This sentiment was summed up by many interviewees with the statement: *Life is what you make it.* As Joan stated (above), adopting a positive attitude is important. Greg agrees:

*It seems to me that by the time people reach 80 their attitude to life very much determines whether they find this last part happy or not.*

Hal is even more direct:

*If you want to be happy, be happy. If you want to be sad, be sad.*

Hal knew he was lucky. A consummate loner and the confirmed bachelor – *I had no desire to get married. My father wanted me to carry on the name. I don’t know why they want to carry a name on* – met the nurturing,
sociable Daphne when he moved into a retirement village. Hal assures me, 
*There’s no coincidences and there’s no accidents. Everything is sort of 
planned...or worked out by some big computer that you might call God.* 
And now he and Daphne share a life of reading, of meals and travel. She 
has introduced him to her friends and they all meet to read and discuss 
books, religion and philosophy. A snippet of their life is storied later in 
this chapter.

**Narratives of Loving and Grieving**

*Only people who are capable of loving strongly can also suffer great 
sorrow.*

_Tolstoy, 1886, Childhood, Boyhood, Youth, p.109_

My own recent life experience presented me in quick succession with the 
decline and death of my mother and my father’s obvious frailty and 
subsequent death, the deep dementia of one aunt and the gentle confusion 
starting in the mind of another. Beginning a study in this area of older age 
had certainly seemed odd even to me. I couldn’t explain it really: I had 
been a teacher and school counsellor, roles which I had loved, working 
with children. So it was odd to embrace this subject and I felt a need to 
explain. Fischer suggests, ‘Doing qualitative research is the ultimate test 
of our sensitivity to our own ageing’ (1994, p.13). I heard myself trying to 
explain, inadequately, trying to understand for myself. I found myself in 
homes, houses, convents and nursing homes, called to the side of this aunt, 
that elderly lady, this teacher of mine from long ago still walking up the 
hill from the convent at 90 years of age. Was older age calling me to itself 
(I wondered how I had time for a mid-life crisis and a PhD) or is it just 
possible that I was calling up old age in order to meet my own mortality 
and befriend her? She – old age, death? – was closer than I knew and she 
has worn the faces of three of my friends in recent years as well as that of 
my mother. Now my father. Now, at the time of writing May 2006,
another aunt, a sister of my mother’s, and my close friend of 26 years, Mary, not yet 50 years of age.

Still I am drawn to this writing (or to writing this) and in the meanwhile seeing my friends and family passing away from me forever. They are disappearing and I don’t know where they are going. It’s as if the sky opens up and they are pulled out and then it closes over and there is no sign of the fissure and the clouds drift indifferently over the sense of someone missing. After a recent funeral a religious sister from my hometown equated death to the end of the journey after one has climbed the mountain. ‘And then you fall off?’ I suggested. No, she countered smilingly, shaking her head, safe in her faith that the next step is Heavenwards. I want to see what is true. True for me? I want to know from others how it is when old age and death sometimes comes creeping up the way Madeline experienced it. And how, at other times, old age offers her signs of decay gently, softly like a mother, kindly reminders that the human body is not meant to function forever, as James told me told me. But sometimes I know death is very cruel:

~

When she is cruel she comes when you are 45 and out shopping for thread for sewing your daughter’s First Communion dress and you are full of life and joy and the hope of the summer to come in Spain where you will spend two weeks with your husband and two daughters and of how you will come back and wear the black and gold dress you bought, in the boutique on Grafton Street, to your older daughter’s high-school graduation. It’s hanging in the wardrobe upstairs and you take me to admire
it after we’ve shared dinner, your family and my sister and I, and you tell me enthusiastically, because I’m on a shopping spree myself, that I should look in the same shop for they have lovely dresses on sale.

And she marks you out with no warning at all there in the shopping centre, was there even a sudden headache? But you manage to squeeze your husband’s hand in the hospital before they take your organs which you have generously given and you are buried in that black and gold dress while I am in Australia. And I never see you again.

~

Journal entry, 2005

Some day you’re going to lose the lot, James tells me, speaking with certainty about mortality’s ceaseless march. He laughs boyishly, shyly, having already let go of many things he has deeply cherished. Acknowledging mortality’s authority, he is at peace with the inevitable. Being almost twice my age and sensing a sadness in me, I think, he tells me heartily that I have a lot to do (a lot of living?) before I have to worry about any of this.

I respond with a cautious, ‘You never know.’

~
I am not ready to be comforted. My friend was buried in a black and gold dress. We went to school together. We sold shamrocks on St. Patrick's Day. When we were young we laughed and caught minnows in jam jars and planned feasts. She read encyclopaedias and knew the names of plants and flowers and stars.

~

James echoes in agreement, You never know. Easily dissuaded after all, from paternal notions of reassurance and mistakingly thinking, perhaps because I am here, perhaps because I am the one asking the questions, that I am prepared for complete honesty, for the incomplete truth. But I am not prepared really: I am actually, by being here, by initiating this conversation (however I cannot initiate my self), entering a 'realm of pure possibility' (Turner, 1969). This conversation, and each conversation with my participants, has created for me a potential space where I am learning, being challenged, if not confronted by existential issues of life and death and living. This liminal space comes between separation (from childhood? immaturity? naivety?) and transformation (maturity? adulthood?) in a kind of rite of passage that might be called research, or middle age reflectiveness (no, not crisis, not that) or personal growth, and all of these. To borrow from Bronwyn Davies, 'in writing of these other lives [I] opened the possibilities of discovering my own (2004, p.). Turner writes:

The liminal period is that time and space betwixt and between one context of meaning and action and another. It is when the
The initiate is neither what he has been nor what he will be. (1982, p. 113).

In the conversation above I am the initiate and the old man, James, gently unknowingly leads me into the space of learning, the place of my discomfort, what I might call, a 'zone of proximal development', (Vygotsky, 1962). We face mortality together in this moment and we have each other, and Hope, he for the things I will achieve in the years to come and I for the peace he has already achieved after the years gone by. A self-confessed intellectual to my back teeth, James has grappled with the issues I am concerned with, in fact he enjoys it:

'It's lovely to sort of try and spend my time groping towards trying to formulate bits of it.

'It' being the no-small matter of God, spirituality, the meaning of life. I ask him, opportunistically, the meaning of the latter, well after all he is an aged philosopher and I ... would love to know.

James is the youngest participant at 80 years of age. He lives alone in a townhouse which he designed and moved into after the death of his wife some nine years before. Of the marital home, he says, after her death it was no longer home. The fact that his wife died there left painful memories and after the children had left and as he and his wife were both getting older, the house had in a way outgrown them. Moving was an
option even then, but she had got ill before arrangements could be made. He is pragmatic and can let go in order to live, to move on:

*let go of the things that you have deeply cherished from your past, let go of those aspects of your life which are dying, because one day you’re going to lose the lot.*

James goes on:

*Actually I think probably the Buddhists have the best terminology for talking about this, whether they talk about the fundamental spiritual thing being non-attachment to … which doesn’t mean of course that you don’t like things or whatnot or that you don’t enjoy them… but that you – the things that you really like and treasure – you try to see from the perspective of remembering that everything will one day cease and change, including you.*

‘Not me!’ I reply, with deep uncertainty and unconvincing laughter.

Vaillant (1993), in his work on ageing, finds that emotional and psychological factors may well have more to do with successful ageing than lifestyle factors, stress and genes. Here Deveson’s (2003) writing on resilience might inform; citing the long-term work of Michael Rutter she writes that ‘each person’s reaction to adverse experiences is highly individual and influenced by whatever else is happening in their lives’ (p. 49). Protective influences, such as the sense of emotional connectedness
and belonging that comes from strong family and social relationships, help to boost resilience and reduce risk factors that can lead to loneliness and depression. Conversely, social isolation will increase the person’s vulnerability to such outcomes (Browning, Wells & Joyce, 2005).

Vaillant further writes that when we are old our lives become the sum of all whom we have loved; therefore it is important not to waste anyone (p. 103). He goes on to discuss a task of old age, previously cited, that of excavating and recovering all those whom we have loved and cautions against psychotherapists (counsellors) emphasising present grief at the expense of helping people to remember past loves: ‘Counsellors sometimes forget that the psychodynamic work of mourning is often more to remember lost loves than to say goodbye’ (p.104). Similarly, Knight reminds us that ‘moving on’ or ‘letting go’, terms often used in relation to grief therapy, is not about forgetting the deceased person, rather he writes:

The goal is to achieve enough emotional healing to be able to handle the remainder of life (1996, p.123).

While it is true that older people will generally have a greater experience of death than younger people, it would be erroneous to predict that the experience is therefore easier for them than for other populations. Writing from the perspective of clinical experience with older people, Knight tells us that, not only can the emotional impact be harder because of the longevity of the relationship, but in addition:
Death, especially the death of others, is virtually always a surprise emotionally, even if it follows a prolonged illness with a known prognosis (1996, p. 118).

Margaret has lost a love. Her husband of 63 years died not quite 2 years ago. It was quite unexpected and stemmed from a fall which caused a broken hip: We never thought that that could happen...he would never walk again. I always thought I was the one would go first, because I have a heart problem, which he never had. Her family believed that moving out of the marital home into an aged-care facility may have helped her to say goodbye to him because she doesn’t dream of him so much since being here: I’d wake up very distressed because I knew he was gone: It was only a dream.

Margaret states, It’s a long time to be together...you don’t sort of get over it, but you learn to live with it. Margaret tries to live within the aged-care facility where each unit is identical, including fittings and furnishings. She sleeps better but there are other losses:

I just feel I’m being waited on instead of looking after myself...I feel so useless at times...I loved cooking, but here the meals are provided.

I loved gardening...but the garden at home was getting away from me...the bushes were growing out of control.
Another participant, Stephen, is also processing a breavement, his wife of 71 years died about 18 months ago in the aged-care facility where they both lived. He keeps this grief mainly to himself and feels it keenly. One of the widowed residents sympathised, having gone through bereavement too, but he contains his great sadness:

*I don't say anything because I know they went through it, but not for 71 years. I won't bring it up.*

He feels lonely and isolated:

*You don't talk to the staff here at all because they don't have time to talk to you; I can go all day here and won't speak to anybody.*

Stephen is a committed Christian and loves to talk about the Lord, but sees that many of the residents have different interests and beliefs they speak a different language to me. Ultimately Stephen sees I'm here on my own really. Oftentimes he prefers to be on his own in his room, but he is quite adamant that he's not silly lonely, that is, he doesn't get melancholy and into a phase of not talking at all. He will happily chat with any visitors and is delighted when his daughter's friend Maggie takes him out for the day. She runs the local pub which is nearby and he used to walk that far. But this is now out of his reach, *I think I could do it but I won't try. It's OK*
going down the hill, he thinks, but it's coming back up, *Too hard! Oh Dear.* Instead he spends time sitting in the sunshine on his small veranda or goes for a short walk within the facility. And when Maggie drops by and he has only just made a mug of tea, she whisks him off in the car to town, and he will happily go mug in hand, thoroughly amused at the whole idea.

Loss of loved ones was a significant theme for the participants of this project: Only one out of the eleven participants who had been married had a spouse who was still living. At this older age, loss of children was also a factor. Gerald, who experienced both loss of his wife and of his son twenty years previously, tells me:

*That was completely sudden and...Yes I suppose traumatic is the word...more than my wife really because I had long, long warning of her death. She had cancer... Everything was going well with the treatment. Then I was warned that it wasn't going so well. So I did know about that. And she, after all she...was a young person to die in modern times, she was in her sixties...whereas John had just turned 30.*

Another theme emerging from the interviews was bodily loss of function and the relationship between sense of self and bodily functioning:

*I realise there are a lot of things connected to getting older that are not so nice, for instance my body strength.* (Greg)
Greg recalls that in his sixties he was well able to mow lawns and chop wood with a long axe, but now everything takes longer, even thinking, and there are ointments to be applied to various parts of the body in the morning before he can commence his chosen activities for the day. He exclaims, *I need more time!* However the slowing down is something Greg accepts and is prepared for, *there would be no sense at all to worry about this, this is normal...so I have to set priorities.*

Other participants tell of similar experiences of loss of function and indeed of accepting this loss as an inevitable outcome of successful longevity:

*I still have a driving licence, and a car. I don't know that I'm going to keep that for very long because I'm not...not enjoying driving the way I used to once. I never was an enthusiastic driver. But I find it, I find it worries me a little bit driving around even this little town. And when I have to give up my car I...don't think I'll be very distressed by it, although, it's walking or taxis after that....Which is a nuisance.* (Gerald)

*I could see that as time goes on too, now I get to planting all the plants in the garden and I find I've got a [indicated leg] knee...*(laughs) *Dicky knee...Yes. Otherwise I get an aching back.* (Ted)
I thought there was something wrong with me and I went to the doctor and he sent me for a checkup. Yes I was feeling pains in my knees and all sorts of things. And he could find nothing the matter with me. Yes. But I still felt there was something wrong. And, actually, there was because I was getting older, you see. (Madeline)

...my central nervous system, if you like, is no doubt doing the standard sorts of things, decaying of neurons, which means I forget things much more easily, my short-term memory is pretty poor; I have to write myself notes to make sure I remember to do things and so on. and physically an hours' work in this patch of garden is quite enough for me for a day, and so forth, all these are the sort of, inevitable signs of decay. (James)

I was walking across to the pub and walking down the street [previously] but that got a bit too far. I think I could do it but I won't try. (Stephen)

Like a number of the participants, Greg also thinks that being useful is important in his life and states, I have the feeling that what elderlies need, what they miss may often be the fact that they are no longer useful. He has solved this problem in his own life by having many hobbies, being active in his children's lives, helping his son develop a business plan for example, and in the community, being honorary secretary for a small Buddhist group. He suggests that if the oldies don't have this from their own self it should be the main point to help them find meaning in life. He
advocates having hobbies and socialising and emphasises, *You see, I think this feeling to be useful for others...I think this is the most important thing oldies need and don't have.* Greg doesn't identify himself with this particular group of 'oldies' in the same way as Lorna doesn't identify with the 'oldies' who have dementia. Retaining a feeling of being useful in the face of their losses was something the participants held on to:

*The kids come because... Two girls, they are now in second year in high school and they have no computer so they come together from time to time when they want to type out assignments or when they want to research assignments. And so they get the stuff out of the computer and often I've got to interpret it for them.* (Ted)

*Sure you're always helping somebody, aren't you? Driving somebody somewhere, right? Or bringing someone to hospital or...going with them on a holiday... It's great to be of use... it's great to be still able to do something.* (Grace)

*Helping people is a great help to yourself... if I could pick somebody up and give them a lift or that kind of thing it always makes me feel better ...If I could be of help to...somebody else. Once you lose that I'd say you... lose everything... Like that you're still useful. That you're not just having to be looked after yourself. That you can look after somebody or do something for somebody.* (Madeline)
Madeline highlights a concern she senses ahead but has not yet reached a time when she will no longer be able to drive and to help. Others have looked ahead too and some view the new stage of dependency differently:

*I guess I'm saying that I don't like being dependent on other people. And yet I have tried desperately to accept help (laughs) ... when it's offered. And I say you know, 'You like to help people because you're the top dog, when you're helping other people. Why don't you give them a chance?' In other words helping is easier than ... being helped. (Ted)*

*So I think that certain things happen... and I don't think it would matter what... happens, if you've got a philosophy that that's the way it's to be well, you just accept it. So what would make me unhappy? I don't know. I don't really know... It doesn't matter. I'd be just as happy, I'd be just as content with whatever the situation happens to be. (Hal)*

Living in an aged-care facility, Margaret highlights another loss, *Some mornings I wake up feeling very homesick.* A number of participants living in an aged-care facility mentioned the loss of their own home and some spoke in terms of being *here* in body (in the aged-care facility) and that this was certainly not home:
I don’t quite know that I would look upon this [as] home. Home onto me, I had a very happy marriage...home was where my husband was. It didn’t matter where...We were in the same place for 60 odd years...This, from that point of view, is not home. (Joan)

Well, when you’ve got to be away from home you accept it. I’ve accepted it because I’ve got to stop here...I’m still out there but I’m in here. (Stephen)

Although greeted with acceptance and fortitude for the most part, for the six participants who had relocated to aged care, loss of home and health were important features in their decision to go there. In this sense, as Nay’s research also points to, ‘there are no real voluntary relocations’ (1995, p. 324), and each brought its own emotional cost. Neither was it evident that services were made available to the participants to validate these losses or to support their transition to a new place of living and way of life.

James left the family home voluntarily after the death of his spouse as the house had become too big for them, after the children left, and the garden too hard to manage:

After her death, when that was no longer home, I sold it ...she actually died there, which left painful memories.
Like Margaret, James felt a need to relocate in order to deal with the memories. That was when he commissioned the building of the townhouse where he now lives, *I don’t think I could contemplate happily living anywhere else*, he adds, *unless I absolutely had to*. James knows the frailty of life well enough and acknowledges the uncertainties that may lie ahead.

Michael lost his home in different circumstances:

> All that’s gone, that’s gone...even where the kids were growing up in Hornsby...It wasn’t me that sold it. It was the old girl that sold it...She sold the bloody thing, kept the money.

He nurses other kinds of losses too and, with a bitterness that was somewhat tongue in cheek, tells:

> I reared six kids. And they all pissed off...Half of them won’t even talk to me.

A number of participants mentioned how their families were now grown up and dispersed, had children of their own and responsibilities of families and jobs which prevented them visiting often. In commenting on the changes brought by older age, Gerald mentions another experience common to a number of the participants, loss of family:
In fact what has changed is primarily there's no longer a large family around me.

The boys are a long way away. One's in Perth. One's in Melbourne and the other one died. So...I can think of them but I...and I can visit them, talk by telephone but I don't see much of them really.

In contrast to some, Margaret still retains ownership of her family home and hangs on to the thought that, *If I can't settle down here I can go home.* Here in the aged-care setting she can sleep better because she is not reminded of her deceased husband at every turn. Margaret could be drawing together the three meta-themes highlighted in this chapter when she reflects:

*Well our life together is more or less what I'm living on now...That's how my life was and I know I had it. But I can never have it again...so I've got to be grateful.*
Narratives of Engagement

An aged man is but a paltry thing

A tattered coat upon a stick, unless

Soul clap its hands and sing...

William Butler Yeats, 1969, 'Sailing to Byzantium'.

John lives in an independent unit in a large aged-care complex that includes many units, hostel accommodation and a nursing home. He came here because he has a heart complaint and he feels that he will be looked after if he gets sick later on. (I came here to conduct an interview with another resident, Hal, who lives in a nearby unit). John is keen to show me his 'antique' silver-plated cutlery set, an old gold scales, I'll bet you've never seen one of these before, he enthuses, and then his real delight, his spoon collection in separate bundles wrapped in newspaper, still to be placed in a fitting display cabinet. I unwrap each bundle, despite his self-deprecating introjections of, you don't want to see all these. I call out the place-name on each individual spoon, the place visited by him, or his sister, or the neighbour or the pub owner. A number of people are linked into this collection. He plans to make a cedar display cabinet.

~

Hal arrived at 12.30 p.m. and announced that Daphne had lunch on the table and my collector friend and I are both invited. We walked down to Daphne's unit where, young at 78 years, she was busy in the kitchen placing the remnants of cooked chicken in a
serving dish. Ripe red tomatoes lay in a bowl on the table beside a plate of freshly made cucumber and lettuce sandwiches. Daphne urges us to sit and to begin our lunch. I notice she has an eye on the clock, and on the food situation. She surveys us from over the kitchen bench and she quickly butters more bread and places the slices on the sandwich plate. Then back to the kitchen. She extracts more chicken meat from the already denuded carcass. She has two men sitting down to lunch and a young lady. That's me! I see she's concerned if she has enough food in the house. I know that feeling. I ask, 'Can I help you Daphne?' ‘No, Dear’. Hal suggests she come and eat as we have all begun, but she is still eyeing the table, gauging the appetites and still producing bits of chicken. Eventually she sits down. And yet Daphne completes her meal with the rest of us, picking up plates as she goes back to the kitchen. She begins the washing up and concurrently puts a fruit-salad dessert together, slicing fruit into individual bowls.

The men sit. The kitchen is not their business. We talk about Buddhism, Christianity – the bible, the Upanishads. The books are all on the table here. We discuss whether there is such a thing as coincidence, I tell them about Deepak Chopra's new book on the subject. They ask about my study. Daphne moves around the kitchen, commenting freely on the conversation but with an eye to her work. I pick up the remainder of the plates, the dishes and condiments, wanting to be helpful to her. The men sit. Daphne places bowls of fruit in syrup in front of them, and me. And a jug of cream. We help ourselves. ‘Is there ginger in this Daphne?’ I ask. She says, ‘Yes Dear, do you mind?’. I assure her it's great and she tells me she bought the ginger syrup in
Budhrim when she and Hal recently travelled to Queensland together. Daphne has a unit on Magnetic Island and loves to drive. Hal had hoped to meet someone with whom he could travel when he committed to be in the retirement village. He has the same first name as her late husband, and shares his surname too. And so they met. Lucky. (Actually neither Daphne nor Hal believe in coincidence).

The men continue to eat. Daphne, still with an eye on the clock begins to clear up. At 2.30 p.m. Hal is due to present his slide show. It's 2' clock. Daphne has computed how long lunch, dessert and chat takes and then the walk or drive to the hall where the slide show is to take place. Hal's slide show. My collector friend won't be going. He has seen it before. Daphne will be going. She has seen it before.

The men leave, one to his garden where he grows marigolds and petunias, and there's not a weed in sight. He hopes to commandeer a plot of land at the back of the units to grow vegetables. Hal goes to set up for his slide show in the recreation hall. I later discover that Daphne has already transported the slides, projector and equipment in her car. Hal, with severe macular degeneration, can no longer drive. I say, 'I'll come with you, Daphne, if that's all right.' I can see I've taken sides, joined with the women. In the kitchen she produces a basket trimmed with red gingham and I see her cut up, butter and glad wrap slices of fig cake on a plate. We drive together up the road to the building where the slide show is to take place and put out chairs.
for the folk who come from various units, older and frailer than us. The show begins. Daphne betrays she know this show in her comments, buffering Hal against possible criticism when the slides are damaged, asking 'pertinent' questions throughout that will encourage the audience to remain engaged. Hal proceeds according to his pre-taped commentary on the slides, both of which he made in 1964. The tape tells of his trip in 1962 from Sydney to Los Angeles in his own-made 39-ft steel-hulled sailing yacht. He spent two years on the trip there and back, spending about 8 months working in America, and stopping off on Hawaii, Tonga, Samoa and New Zealand and many other islands on the way there and back.

Before the final slide fades Daphne is up switching on the kettle in the small kitchenette attached to the hall. Of course, I realise, there's going to be tea and cake. Hal tidies his slides and sits down, discussing whichever aspect of the slides or journey with whomever is interested. There are lots of questions. Daphne busies herself back and forth from the kitchen distributing cake and tea from the first boiling of the kettle. Meanwhile, unbeknownst to himself, Hal had switched off the power to the kitchenette when he switched off the projector. Soon there's a bottleneck of octogenarian in the small kitchen, mug in hand and teabag in mug watching the kettle. I'm there too. We ask variously, 'Has it boiled?', 'Is it boiling?' Now firmly focussed on the cup of tea, Daphne knew we had to have. Knowing a watched kettle never... Finally somebody discovers the power switch problem. And we're in business.
The older people I talked to, both in their own home or living within aged-care facilities, overwhelmingly attributed positive personal meanings to being older and living through this stage of life. This is an attitude that contrasts with the negative connotations typically associated with the current Western cultural story of older age. For example, some participants like Hal spoke of how they could value the benefits provided by the aged-care facility such as security, health care, having meals provided, having company and friendship. In doing so they created alternative cultural stories of older age, of aged-care residency, stories that provide sympathetic and empowered accounts of older people utilising aged-care facilities to have their own current needs fulfilled while they actively live their lives. For example:

To have the company around. When I lived in my unit in [the city] ... you felt all the time alone, especially when you go to bed at night time. And it is very nice to know that there are always staff around at night time and [if] you get sick. And you, you have the meals and the afternoon tea and the morning tea with people around. (Pearl)

Anything that goes wrong, even the electric light globe. Just ring them up and they'll put a new one in. You don't have to do that. You don't have to mow the grass. And I find it very relaxing. And I like to do the reading I do, and go out occasionally. I go out on their bus trips. I find that interesting. (Hal)
Participants were engaged in hobbies as diverse as solving complex mathematical equations and playing golf, to knitting squares which would be made into blankets for the poor. Whether living in aged care or not, a dominant theme in the life stories I heard was one of engagement with life through a multitude of interests, hobbies and relationships, as evidenced in the following extracts:

_I have a deep spiritual conviction that is really, if you like, the mainstay of my life._ (James)

_The hospitals as well and go to funerals and bereavements, that kind of thing._ (Grace)

_By the time people reach 80 their attitude to life very much determines whether they find this last part happy or not_[ for] people like me it all gets more and more exciting (Greg)

_My current focus is a sort of rethinking of the relation between spirituality and evolution [it is] enormously exciting...it’s lovely to sort of try to spend my time groping towards trying to formulate bits of it._ (James)
[I have] A longing to be with people, amongst people in the community. I just want to be part of a community, physically...Just to feel I'm part of the human race. (Doris)

Ted, an ex-teacher, enjoys providing tuition to young people:

It was rather wonderful because it kept me up with the times, alive, on all levels

Engaged in his multiple interests, including astronomy, Buddhism and photography, Greg states:

In fact the longer I live the more I love living. On the other hand there is no fear of dying.

There's agreement from Hal:

People make themselves unhappy for very stupid reasons...they have at some point a restricted understanding of life...I have no time to worry.
Engagement in life took many forms for the participants according to their interests, abilities and inclinations. However, it does not follow that this engagement is an easy thing. As Madeline discovered, effort may be involved:

*It's much easier staying in bed when you're young ... and jumping out then and getting ready quickly and coming down quickly. Whereas when you're old you know you have to take it slowly and you have to get dressed and you have to say your prayers and get your breakfast and ... routine. And it becomes maybe monotonous, you know. But if you can get it into your head 'It's fun' or 'It's well worth doing' and 'Look at the fun I'm going to have after dinner looking at such a thing...'

Each participant has confirmed that the physical frailties they experience in older age do make engagement in life more difficult or at least slower and more painful at times, and each has confirmed their commitment to life and love nevertheless. While some are ready for death and would even welcome it, others are disturbed to hear a knocking on the door in the night. One says, *life is just for fun*, a while another says, *it is an evolutionary process towards oneness with the universe* and yet a third sees life as *a pathway to God*. Since commencing writing this chapter, four of the participants have died, Stephen in love with God, a happy marriage behind him ready to die to rejoin his wife with God. Hal, finally at the end of life enjoying an intimate relationship, dies in the arms of the woman he loves. While on holidays swimming, a sudden heart attack took him. Daphne was left. I am left. He had it completely figured. He would
call death merely a bend in the road of life. That was his lived experience. He told me a story to explain:

A chap and his wife had three sons. And while he was away at work the three sons were killed and the wife said to the husband, before he got home, ‘If God gave you something, then he took it away would you be upset?’ ‘Well no, that’s his right to do so’. And she told him the three sons were dead.

The Interpretative Zone

If I point to the moon, do not look at my finger.

Zen saying

In this chapter I have endeavoured to draw together themes which arise across the range of the participant stories, in order to highlight some of the lived experiences of older age. These broad narratives of Appreciation, Loving and Grieving and Engagement, together with the individual stories from Chapter 3, bring to articulation something of the experience of older age and home. They respond to the address ‘Who are you?’ and in these accounts tell of humanness and vulnerability, strength and injurability, joy and woe. In the ethical sense discussed by Butler, there is no demand inherent in the question for the saying of a completely coherent self-identity, no expectation for a definitive story. Butler writes:
By not pursuing satisfaction and by letting the question remain open, even enduring, we let the other live, since life might be understood as precisely that which exceeds any account we may try to give it. If letting the other live is part of an ethical definition of recognition, then this version of recognition will be based less on knowledge than on an apprehension of epistemic limits (2005, p. 43).

If, then, there is no answer that will fully satisfy the question ‘Who are you?’ the knowledge with which I move forward now includes the apprehension that the Other can never be fully known to me. (And here I also consider that this is so even when that Other to whom I pose the question is myself). And so the question is asked within this project in the context of an ongoing hermeneutic conversation (Gadamer, 1975; Koch, 1998) that refuses to shape or position the experience of older age and deliver a final answer. Rather, working from this perspective is to choose to stimulate awareness and understanding and to connect meanings in ways that give a layered sense of self / identity, the kind of space where Stephen can definitively own opposing feelings, I’m very happy. The only thing is I’m very lonely, and, like Margaret or Joan, his mind and his body can be in two different places at the same time; and in the way that Pearl knows she is unhappy but utters the constant refrain I don’t know, as though some part of her is hidden to herself.

In the current consideration of narratives presented in this chapter, there is then plenty of room for slippage, room to ask questions of the experience of ageing and the ageing identity, to create a dialogical space. Wasser and Bressler (1996) refer to an ‘interpretative zone’: a space of ‘unsettled
locations, areas of overlap, joint custody or contestation' (p.13, cited in Gerstl-Pepin and Gunzenhauser, 2002). This is the kind of space I want to open up, a place of uncertainty where the narratives belong to no one in their incompleteness and invite the reader not to draw conclusions, but to create synthesis within and across the stories heard and with their own stories. I want to invite the reader to remember that the transformative potential of stories is in stimulating new awareness, knowledge and understanding about ourselves, our fellow human beings and the human condition (Simpkinson & Simpkinson, 1993). What we make of these stories is what will engage us, researcher-reader-listener, towards better understanding and appropriate action in the wider social context (Tierney, 2002) including in the care industry (Koch, 1998).

Retaining a paradigm of unknowing within this project I, as a researcher, continue to seek to keep open a reciprocal address with the person to whom I speak without presuming to uncover a reductive truth which says, 'I know who you are' (Butler, 2005). From this paradigm too I embrace an ontology of becoming rather than being, as articulated by Somerville following Grosz (1999), 'that emphasises the irrational, messy, embodied and unfolding of the becoming self' (Somerville, 2007, p. 237). In the following chapter I will integrate further into this conversation notions of self – neither fixed nor fully knowable – and from there consider other socio-political implications arising from contemporary debate on the self / identity in later life.

There’s a story I know:

* A man born blind comes to me and asks ‘What is it, the colour green?’
So I say, 'The colour green is something like soft music.'

'Oh,' he says, 'like soft music.'

'Yes', I say, 'soothing and soft music.'

So a second blind man comes to me and asks, 'What is it, this colour green?'

I tell him it's something soft, like satin, very soft and soothing to the touch.

So the next day I notice that the two blind men are bashing each other over the head with bottles. One is saying, 'It's soft like music'; the other is saying, 'It's soft like satin'.

And on it goes. Neither of them knows what they are talking about, because if they did they'd shut up.

It's even worse than that, because one day when one of the blind men is granted sight and he's sitting in the garden and he's looking all around him and you say,'Well, now you know what the colour green is.'

And he answers,

'That's true. I heard some of it this morning!'*

* Adapted from, Awareness, by Anthony De Mello, pp. 10
You must give birth to your images.

They are the future waiting to be born.

Fear not the strangeness you feel.

The future must enter you

long before it happens.

Just wait for the birth,

For the hour of new clarity.

Ranier Maria Rilke, Letters to a Young Poet, 1874–1926