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“Aging and Verbal Creativity - Creative Writing for Elderly in the Library”

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The topic of this presentation is “Aging and Verbal Creativity – Creative Writing for Elderly in the Library”. Over the last few years I have been leader of a project that has arranged creative writing courses for elderly people in Bergen and Hordaland County, initiated by the Hordaland County Library. Several of these courses have taken place in various public libraries, to enhance the library as an attractive meeting place for elderly. We have held seven such courses for “ordinary” pensioners living at home, while two have been given at nursing homes and one at a clinic for elderly suffering dementia. This lecture will focus on the seven courses that took place in public libraries.

When we started this project in the Autumn of 1998, our basic pedagogical idea was that old people possess much experience, valuable knowledge and creative abilities that are allowed to emerge in a far too small degree in our society. Our task as educationists is precisely to see and discover the potentials in all human beings. We were inspired by, among others, the work of American poet and Professor of literature, Kenneth Koch. In New York in the ‘70s, Koch initiated courses in poetic writing in a nursing home for older people. These were people with no previous experience in writing poetry. Would-be authorities were sceptical, especially staff at the institution. But the results from his work were astounding. Koch showed that there are no dull and uninteresting people. Everyone is a universe of experience and capability, and many harbour

undiscovered qualities. They are books never leaved through. One of “our” participants wrote about this:

*You live in our neighborhood
You wander in our streets
but nobody sees you.
You go about so quietly
doing your own thing.
Your coat is grey
not the latest model.
You are a “grey mouse”.*

*Well, are you really?
Perhaps you have colourful memories
and sparkling expectations inside.
Perhaps you are a picture book
in a worn grey cover
that no-one bothered to open.*

Just why creativity?

In a city like Bergen there is much on offer for older people: Meetings, lectures, parties, outings and trips. And nursing homes have activity rooms. All this is valuable, very valuable indeed. But what about old people and their creative abilities – when *they* are the *producers* and not the recipients, consumers of what others have thought for them? Do we give due respect to their spiritual welfare, their mental capacity and their creativity?

We are convinced that in toiling with words strange and wonderful things happen. The words live on, establishing contact despite age, generation or culture. Even at the first meetings we can see how words bring us closer together. Taking our starting point in memory, we write texts based on experiences from childhood, and immediately texts appear, producing both smile, laughter and tears in the listeners. At our first meeting in Bergen they seemed both very sceptical and a bit nervous. So we asked them to close their eyes, think back and write a few sentences about what they saw. And suddenly we were presented with pictures of “snowclad hills one sunny Sunday on an island some 85 years ago.” An older woman began her text like this: “My mother died when I was five.” And within five minutes we already have established a strong contact. Reading the texts for the first time, we normally read them out loud, anonymously, and comment on their positive traits (details, a good picture, a metaphor etc.). We often experience their enthusiasm, and they often say afterwards: “That was my text!” And even though many of them are sceptical at the beginning, we experience that those who do show up to the first meeting, stay.

What, then, has this got to do with creativity? Are not these examples simply exercises of memory already gathered and catalogued enough in Norway? No, I will say, creativity is central to bring forth those memories, and for these memories to take hold of us. Why was I never taken the same way by the stories my grandmother told as I am by the stories from the writing courses? A good narrator can make a common story good, while even the best story can be told badly. This has to

do with creativity, and it has to do with poetic language: For the second course in Bergen, one of the participants, Jenny, wrote a short story for the task “That Day”. She started off telling about herself and her two sons of three and five years of age sitting in front of the radio one morning listening to a children’s programme, and how they unfolded the world map afterwards and let the small toyboats follow dad’s travel route at sea. Towards the end of the text it says:

The wind had calmed down, the fjord lay dark and quiet, it was peaceful – spring was here. We had no running water, so I headed for the well to fetch a bucket of water. Then I heard slow, hesitant steps on the path, I saw the shadow of a man appearing. I was scared stiff, I put the bucket down, and wondered who was there. I was not moving, the man came closer. “Do not be afraid, I am the priest,” he said calmly. He had arrived on the passenger boat across the fjord, it was late, but he had waited to make sure the children had fallen asleep. I was paralysed, could not move. The priest held my arm and led me inside. We sat down, and in a calm voice he told me that Kaare, my husband, had died early that morning - an accident on board.

It was difficult to understand that this had anything to do with me and my small children. We had lost our dad.

That day – my life was changed.

Through the text we are presented with a touching glimpse of a strong lifestory. I do not think it would have appeared in the same way if we had simply asked Jenny to tell us of her life. But Jenny was given a concrete task called “That Day”, and she sat down and wrote of the day she lost her husband. In focussing on this particular day it appears before us. We are *with* Jenny as she receives the message of her husband’s death in the words “Don’t be afraid, it’s the priest.” Through poetic language we get to know Jenny’s emotions in just that moment. We experience the idyllic opening, becoming an enormous contrast to what will come. And we experience small textual pointers, such as the double meaning of the description of nature.

This goes to show how poetic language communicates differently from rational language. Language and thinking are intimately interweaved. Utilizing everyday language in order to tell things of importance can often appear intimidating, whereas poetic language opens up other possibilities of mediating. The American educationalist Elliot Eisner claims that we have become alienated through rational language: «...as the use of language becomes more abstract, the power of language to alienate people from their feelings increases». And Louis Arnaud Reid writes of poetic language opening up for deeper insight: «In poetry the ability to use words, the greatest of all single human powers, can open up new perspectives of imagination and conception, new understanding of love, youth, age, mortality.». Through the creative texts and through the poetic language, the stories become something more than just tales.

Indeed, typical of all the writing groups is that very personal memories are touched upon by poetic language. The participants produce texts, expressions they otherwise would not have, if were they just sitting about reminiscing. Everyday language would quickly make that too personal or intimidating. An instance of this is given by the writing course we started last Autumn in Bergen. The participants seemed sceptical about presenting their stories. But as early as the next meeting

texts were produced yielding strong glimpses of events that had been important for the participants. Through tasks like “That Day” and “To Come Back” we achieved concentrated texts mediating the writer’s emotional life through poetic language. And we experienced how the texts lead to a qualitatively special unity in the groups, both participant to participant as well as between teacher and participant. The following text was in reply to the task “That Day” at one of the Bergen writing courses:

*Wednesday October the fourth
Nineteen forty four
My father went to work at seven
I left home at half past eight
My mother and my sister Turid were alone.*

*The planes came five past nine
Fifteen minutes later
Everything was calm*

*One hundred and fifty bombers,
Allied heroes had spread
One thousand four hundred and thirty two
Evil seeds over Laksevaag,
The fruit being death and chaos.
They were laid in the same grave
The carpenter had made the coffin
Broad, because my mother was pregnant
And Turid was seven years and five
Months*

It is difficult to live death

In his article ‘Creative Challenges and the Construction of Meaningful Life Narratives’, Mark Luborsky demonstrates that elderly people have a need to re-arrange their lives through meaningful narrative categories. It is important for them to arrange their own experiences and lives in a story, a narrative acceptable for, and meaningful to, themselves. And this implies creativity. The writing courses seem to strengthen this constructing when we experience the participants’ need to share their stories, stories often previously untold.

One participant in Bergen had been a nurse during the war. At one of the meetings they were supposed to tell a story about an object. So this pensioned nurse presented us with an old ampule of penicill, and started to tell about Terese – fourteen years of age – who was ill with pneumonia, and that they had no penicillin. How she was the sunbeam of the hospital. At last they succeeded to get penicillin from the sky – airborne from an English drop, but it proved too late, she died shortly after. The doctor had then given this nurse the small ampoule and said to her: “You shall keep this until you grow old, and then tell of Terese.” And so almost 60 years later we sat there feeling this ampoule that had arrived too late. And this nurse had more stories to tell from the war. Towards the end of the war she sat by the death-bed of an English pilot. A few days before he

died, he gave her a poem he had just written, 'A Nurse's Hands'. And so this modest woman pulls out an old, faded note, in clear handwriting, dated September 4th 1945. She had never shown it to anyone outside her close family. Here's a short excerpt:

*Your hands will tell the story plain and true
of all you are and know and feel and do;
Your hands, the servants of the mind, are used
In countless tasks and cannot be excused –
A nurse's hands, tho' unadorned by rings
are hands of beauty, trained for noble things.*

This poem is a good example of how poetic language works. We would not have been fascinated or moved by it in the same way if he had written a note simply thanking her for her care. But the poem elevates the content, and it becomes a text we can read again and again, and it will always have something new to tell us.

Creativity as present time and therapy

But the writing courses are not only creative use of memory, even though memories are important. The idea that old people primarily should tell of the old days, does something to the perspective; to quote one of the participants: "I know several who write reminiscences, but to me that's drab stuff. That's nothing but what (already) *has* happened!" Creativity, on the other hand, is a centripetal force taking its starting point in a creative "now", but in the process pulling past and future closer. Hope, dreams and strong emotions do not vanish by the fact that one has reached a certain age.

In the course of the writing courses we notice that the participants proceed to writing texts from an everyday starting point, and what they are concerned about here and now, not just the past. Asbjørn, another of the participants in Bergen, became seriously ill and had to be hospitalised. But rather than lying awake at night worrying over his condition, he wrote a text about the sounds in the hospital at nighttime. And he was granted leave by the doctor to show up at the writing course when he told him how important this was for him. And in the middle of serious illness we experience humour breaking through as Asbjørn arrived, hospital wristband and all, to read his text out loud. According to Asbjørn the writing course has helped him enormously through heavy times, something he wrote about in several poems.

Initially, there is no therapeutic aim to the courses, but we can see how the strong stories tales break through, without our request. We have several examples of how much the writing courses mean to the participants. An older lady in the writing course at Askøy said that because of the writing course, she noticed none of her usual winter depression. And a course participant at the Red Cross Nursing Home said that the writing course had kept her from the grave. In the courses, tears flow and laughter is plenty. Life is play and life is dream, and life is harsh reality.

Research on aging and creativity

In the US, research on aging and creativity has gradually grown into a large field. In her article 'Aging, Writing, and Creativity' Carolyn Adams-Price seeks to investigate the characteristics of

creative writing among regular old people. These fit with our own results. First, in that old people are more direct than younger ones; the texts demonstrate a wish to communicate directly, which we have seen both in the texts presented here and the other texts from the courses. Another observed characteristic also supported by the courses, is that elderly people's texts often stress positive aspects of life – harmony, synthesis, wisdom. While younger people's creativity is often characterised by originality, we find less of that in older writers. But the texts of older people contain more of what Adams-Price terms empathic resonance. It produces empathy and sympathy in regular people, but is not as popular among literary critics. In the light of these qualities, originality is hardly a reasonable criterion of creative quality as normally established.

About the linguistic expressive side, the same article says that older people have a rather simple language, a direct, straightforward style with short sentences. But the vocabulary may well be rich. There are often powerful words one cannot find in younger writers, graphic words from nature, and old words about to grow extinct.

The method

And the pedagogical method? Simple, yet efficient. For pedagogic truths, the same holds as for other things in life: What is great and essential is – essentially – simple. We go for the positive side of things. We start from what people actually manage and do not focus on that which is not as good. “Do not kill a song-bird,” sums up our philosophy. Still, we do give advice, for this is about learning. The atmosphere and group climate are very important for the participants' daring to step forth and lay themselves open through their texts.

Though we are mutually inspired by each other's texts, we stress the value of everyone's keeping their unique voices. One of the participants always writes very short texts where each word carries great significance, while one paints texts in broad strokes of the brush, the way she does when painting a picture. Another writes marvellous portrayals in dialect, yet others bubble over with joyful play. We strive to play and experiment. Norwegian philosopher Arne Næss once said: “Much more play when over 70!”; we agree unequivocally. The power and willingness to create, to challenge yourself on areas where you never before have been, is a central element in these courses. As Swedish poet Gösta Ågren has put it: “If you do not change, you become another” (my transl.)

Often we find that the texts of the elderly carry wisdom, wisdom encountering daily life and experiences with nature. One lady writes:

*Grey is not my colour
but I am fond of stone
grey roadside guard stones
innumerable shades of colours grey*

Another one talks about the yellow dot in the pansy: “Have you seen the yellow dot?” A participant at Askøy writes: “I do not climb the highest point, I rather seek the deepest water.” Expressions offering food for thought – maybe carriers of wisdom. Do I take time out to see all the nuances of grey in the rock? It makes life a little easier, is the small dot in the pansy a

reminder? For what do we use our short lives? To climb high or seek the deep wells? We experience that the texts often are about seeing the great in the small.

Creativity and the future

In addition to writing texts of past and present, the participants produce both texts looking forward and which are joyful of the future, as well as texts filled with wonder, philosophising over a future they will no longer be a part of:

*The day will come
when I no longer exist
Who will then think my thoughts
suffer my pain
or rejoice my happiness?*

*Who will then look with my eyes
the clouds drifting cross the sky
the fountains diamond drops in the sun?*

*Who will then hear with my ears
the wind whispering in the leaves
the robin singing in the forest
or the child's exciting tale?*

Who will then put my footprints in the newly fallen snow?

And Mette from the first course in Bergen said on a humorous note: "I intend to postpone my funeral, after all I cannot miss the writing course!" And listen to this short poem from the same lady, inspired by the great Japanese haiku-tradition: "The autumn leaves / Shivering in despair / Afraid to lose the thread of life".

This was just a brief insight in the experiences we have gathered from the writing courses held in libraries in Hordaland County. As you have seen in these texts, we have experienced clearly increased abilities in the participants when it comes to writing and expressing their thoughts and feelings, together with a lot of other positive aspects. From the libraries' point of view, we have seen an increasing interest in libraries and their services. A lot of the participants had never before written literary texts, and most of them did not read much. But after the courses we have seen a lot of the participants returning to the libraries to find literature and authors that we have used as models or as inspiration during the courses, and several say that they now have found a new interest in reading, not just for readings sake, but to look at the language, how professional authors use their language. And many have started reading modern poetry, a genre they never before would have dreamed of having an interest in.

Finally, I would like to quote a text that surfaced in the course at Osterøy. It is written by an older man who had never written anything other than case documents for local authorities. His text shows much of what I have touched upon here: Empathic resonance, harmony, visions of the

future. Hearing him read it was a strong experience. He was obviously quite moved, and towards the end he had to stop for a while in order to be able to finish:

You and me are walking parts of the same road, ahead of us the roads separate, there I bend off. You move on. In my thoughts you are walking on grass wet from the dew, barefoot, singing and sensing how life is breaking through in you, and with oceans of time ahead of you. I am entering an autumn landscape, crackling yellow leaves under my feet, but my steps are slower than yours. My goal is not so far ahead. I don't need much speed to get there in time. But it feels good to walk on autumn leaves. Oh, this blessed autumn sun, it is not so high in the sky anymore, but it still sparkles on me. And the road? It is still unknown - and exciting.

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