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Published version

CRAIG, Claire and KILLICK, J (2011). Why creativity and dementia go together. *Journal of Dementia Care*, 19 (6), 20-22.

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WHY CREATIVITY AND DEMENTIA GO TOGETHER

by

CLAIRE CRAIG & JOHN KILLICK

Our argument begins with childhood. We have all been through the experience of being a child. Many of us know what it is/was like to have young children. Think back to how you/they perceive(d) the world. There is a freshness, a sense of discovery and experiment about every day and every part of every day. Now compare this with how you see things now. You know an awful lot more about everything, about the environment your senses inhabit. You can put a lot of this information into words or writing. Much of it is so familiar to you that you wouldn't even bother to do so --- you take it for granted. Inevitably, to a greater or lesser extent, custom stales everything. That is one aspect of becoming an adult.

Another is how we are taught to value experience. We have embraced a culture which places facts above feelings, which rewards logic rather than imagination, which compartmentalises rather than taking holistic perspectives. And we have developed an education system which enshrines these values. Creativity, if it is to play any part in our lives, is relegated to the category of a pastime rather than being embodied in the mainstream.

Now look at the way dementia affects the person. Granted, it takes many forms, and everyone with the condition displays different characteristics. But we can identify certain aspects which are common to all, one of which is the impairment of intellectual capacity. Because of the mind's adaptability, this can lead to the exploration of new growth pathways. We wish to propose that this can provide the individual with fresh opportunities to re-connect with pre-mature ways of apprehending reality. (Frena Gray Davidson puts this succinctly as follows: 'In many ways the deepest revelation of the Alzheimer journey is that it is a kind of passage from the mind into the heart.')

What we are suggesting here is no less than that dementia can disrupt the accepted patterns of stimulus and response, forcing a re-evaluation of the way a person sees the

world. This has profound consequences for their value system: thought is no longer in the ascendant, and creativity has a chance to re-assert itself.

The child responds to his/her environment with an instinctive sense of wonder, unfiltered by rational analysis, and through exploration of language in its various forms (words, paint, sounds etc.) interprets these experiences spontaneously. Sir Ken Robinson, the educationalist, tells a story of a small girl who is drawing. Her teacher asks her what is the subject. "It's a picture of God" is the answer. "But nobody knows what God looks like" says the teacher. "They will when I've finished" the little girl replies.

The works produced by children are to be valued for their immediacy rather than for their finished qualities. Later on this vision fades and 'the light of common day' as Wordsworth puts it, takes over. Or as another poet, e e cummings, says 'As I grew up, down I forgot'. It may well be that persons with dementia, though they have a life-time's experience behind them, have 'forgot' much of their life-experiences but their energies are channelled into 'the moment' and all it has to offer in unadulterated intensity.

When a person with dementia takes part in a creative activity, they are not to be judged by the criteria of an adult aesthetic, whether amateur or professional, but that of inventive immediacy. A completed poem can be an amalgam of actual and made-up language, to produce a compelling word-picture, as in this example written down by John as it was spoken:

AN EYESHOT IN SUMMER

A little eyesight in the middle,
some of it retained for a purpose.

I can see a sleeve of purple.
And then there is yellow in the sky.

The trees are good and dry,
young and barking.

It's a wonderful setting,
this whole melting scene.

Is it opening or seizing?
The view --- it's got the ring of expand.

If our theory has some validity, its proof would be in the practice. We have little doubt, from our separate experience, that the peculiar circumstances of dementia have released special qualities in certain individuals, and that the arts as an outlet may have more general application for those with the condition. There are not many areas of human activity in which we can be so positive towards people that we can afford to ignore this opportunity. How would we go about bringing this provision to fruition?

Ironically the steps are often surprisingly simple. People with dementia frequently have an innate sense of creativity, seeking out forms of self-expression that are not dependent on words.

Much then is about recognising when this occurs, attending and responding in the moment, recognising that creativity is a language that operates on many different levels. This requires improvisation and imagination. You will need to enter into the creative spirit where a sheet of paper can be a sewing pattern, a fan or a flag or as easily as an art pad or a place to record words. Attitude is key, since creativity flourishes in a climate of mutual respect and freedom of self-expression. Trust is important here. So is the ability to lose self-consciousness and go with the flow. Don't be frightened of not being in control: think of your interaction as a dance where the person with dementia leads and you follow.

Space and time are both important pre-requisites. This space can take many forms. For instance; in the offering of art materials, in listening to a piece of music, the reading of a poem, in mirroring and simple movement, recording what someone says. Do not believe that arts activities only take place in hour blocks, small pockets of time are just as important here.

You will also need to think carefully about the materials you use as they will variously act as meeting places and scaffolds, the

medium for expression. The quality of the materials will communicate messages about the value of the activity to the person and to others. You will need to offer choice, but not so much choice that it becomes overwhelming. We have both witnessed instances where people with dementia have been paralysed because they have moved from a position of having no choice to one where they are presented with infinite possibilities.

To realize a broader vision and embed creativity within the culture of the environment where the person lives it will be necessary to engage in more systematic planning.

This may require additional resources, for instance

We make these suggestions not in a spirit of paternalism but in one of speculative enquiry. With dementia we have far more questions than answers, and believe that what we have identified here is an area well worth exploring. On this journey we are accompanying people with dementia themselves. Their voices are increasingly making themselves heard, and one of their demands is for exploring the creative side of the self. In an article in this journal in which she characterises dementia as 'a licence to be free' Agnes Houston described herself as waiting for aspects of creativity to develop:

'It will happen. And it's exciting, it's a bit like waiting on Christmas. You know it's coming, but as a child you don't know exactly when. It's a nice feeling.'

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