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We’re not nice little old ladies
Barbara Kamler

Dramatis personae: Four women between the ages of 70 and 85
Scene: Melbourne, Australia
[Two women are sitting center-stage with a teapot, two cups, and a cake plate on the table before them. One woman is standing stage-left placing flowers into a vase. Another woman is sitting at a desk stage-right with a photo album and a pack of cards.]
Table woman: Home now is my garden and my bed. It’s the place where I properly belong and where I find rest, refuge, and satisfaction. When I’ve been out all day and am fair done-in, I can’t wait to get home, go inside, lock the door, ignore the winks of the telephone machine, pour myself a drink, and flop into a chair from which I survey my back garden.
Desk woman: We started to think about moving to a unit or village, but I loved my little home. We built it straight after World War II—in a paddock—with no road, electricity, gas, or sewerage. How could I leave this home? Every corner had history, every shrub and tree planted and nurtured. How could I leave all this?
Table woman: I just think I will live a little longer here...and enjoy tomorrow’s walk up the hill as the sun sets, and the wonderful golden light with the clouds in the still cold evenings—and the deep blue of the mountains. Yes, I will stay a little longer.
Desk woman: I’m having pangs about moving away. I know it’s something I need to do, and part of me looks forward to the new challenge. But another part of me cries out—this is not the same as any other of many previous departures.
Flower woman: Although some of us have trouble adjusting to old age on our own after our partner has died, many women find—maybe unexpectedly—that this is a truly liberating time. No longer does one have to tidy away things that might offend the partner, or have meals at regular specified times, or sleep at night, or shut all the windows—or open them. One can feel free to just sit if one feels so inclined. One can choose for one’s self.
This scene from the multimedia performance of We’re Not Nice Little Old Ladies was performed in a modern community theatre space provided by the Glen Eira City Council. The audience was spell-bound. Grandchildren, sons and daughters, friends, university professors, and community members watched with amazement and pride as these older women took center-stage, literally, to dramatically read their stories and perform in the spotlight. No one in the audience was worried about what the women looked like or the fact that they were old. We were too busy listening to what they had to say—their quiet insistence that we think past the stereotypes of ageing and imagine what it might mean to make a home at the end of our lives.

Stories of ageing
The performance was the culmination of a 3-year research project called Stories of Ageing where I worked with my coresearchers Susan Feldman and Terry Threadgold to explore what ageing means from the point of view of the older woman. For 3 years we worked together with women aged 60 to 85 in writing and video workshops to produce stories that captured the diversity and difference of growing older. The women wrote about relationships with family and friends, experiences of migration and homebuilding, how they
negotiated the challenges of daily life, and the emotional and physical changes that accompany the ageing process.

The performance script We're Not Nice Little Old Ladies used only some of the many stories the women wrote over the 3 years, but for us it was evidence of the power of language to transform understandings of ageing. We were particularly excited that the idea for the performance came from the women themselves. As researchers we had been presenting their stories at a wide variety of conferences and workshops over the years. But as they came to believe in the importance of their collective project and the power of their stories to teach others, the women wanted more direct involvement in moving their stories from our workshop community into the community at large.

As 1999 was the United Nations International Year of Older Persons, we approached a local council in Melbourne that agreed to adopt our project to commemorate that year. The Glen Eira City Council donated a theatre space and the services of a professional director to convert the women's research stories into a public performance. A professional writer worked with the director, us, and the older women to produce a script. Women from both the writing and video workshops joined together to work in a 7-stage, 12-month project plan, which included script development and theatre skills and culminated in two performances and the publication of a script. The director used a team of young theatre artists to conduct workshops and involve the women in all stages of the decision making. These included ideas for staging, use of props, movement, vocal work, sound effects, and visual images; publication format, artwork, marketing, and publicity; and aspects of backstage, stage, and front-of-the-house management.

**Aging as change**

It is now 2 years since the performance of We're Not Nice Little Old Ladies, and I'd like to reflect on two key aspects of our approach to literacy and generation. The first was our belief that ageing involves both change and growth. This was a fairly revolutionary idea in 1996 when we applied for funding, and we built this into our study by designing a longitudinal project, from 1997 to 1999. Our emphasis on change rather than decline or deterioration was unusual, for while it is common to research change in the lives of young people, this is not the case with our elders.

Francis Kazemek has written often in this column about his writing workshops with elders in Minnesota, USA, who have been writing together for 6 years. In the Stories of Ageing project, we worked with 40 women over 3 years, although of course there was some coming and going due to periods of ill health and the death of one member. Unlike the Minnesota workshops, however, our focus was very much on documenting change. The older women were collaborative partners in this investigation, rather than research subjects. They brought a mix of histories, personal and professional, and came from a range of Eastern European, Anglo Celtic, Philipina, and Vietnamese backgrounds. We took them seriously as learners and offered them the opportunity to learn new skills—in writing and video production and later in theatre performance. They, in turn, offered their stories so that we, the younger researchers, could gain understandings of ageing from their writing and filming.

The other distinctive aspect of our workshops was our belief in the power of language to shape and reshape the women's lives. Stories and language were central to our work together, but we were not narrowly focused on skills. We were interested in how stories provide the beliefs and frameworks through which we act and understand ourselves. We asked the women to critically examine cultural stories about ageing and to then physically make other stories in writing and film. In the process of making these texts, the women began to create other positions outside stereotypes of ageing. They began to rewrite themselves as well as their texts. Making texts became a powerful way not only to reflect on the past but also to create new understandings. I can illustrate some of these ideas through our work in the writing workshops.

**Writing together**

Typically, we met weekly for 2 hours with groups of 10 to 12 women over 8 weeks in each year of the project. Each week the women would write at home on a topic we designated. They would bring their texts to the workshop to read aloud to one another for comment and critique. These texts always promoted much discussion and sometimes raucous laughter and hilarity. At the end of each workshop we set a topic for the following week, usually one emerging from our discussion.

While some of the women had previously attended creative writing workshops, our approach was different in its critical orientation. We shared a political agenda with the women—to rewrite negative and diminishing narratives of ageing. Together we were committed to develop richer and more complex perspectives about what it meant to grow older. We encouraged the women to attend to the detail of what appeared to them at first to be boring. We gave them tools to ask critical questions about the writing and treat it as clay. They wrote and rewrote; they looked at what they had not said as well as what they
had. They developed other endings, other ways of thinking about their experience as older women in ordinary spaces.

The community we created over 3 years became a powerful space for all of us—filled with a kind of lightness, energy, and wisdom. What was crucial for the women in our community of writers was to be taken seriously. This was a space where they could talk and write about issues they did not necessarily raise with their families. We expected their stories to offer real alternatives to the limiting ways our culture defines ageing. So, while the women wrote for themselves and one another, there was always a larger cultural purpose that extended beyond them.

The work was demanding; it was not busy work. We did not assume that creative faculties decline with age, and we were not afraid to set tasks that were intellectually challenging. Consider, for example, Nancy’s (pseudonym) response to addressing the seemingly ordinary topic of home.

Moving home is a way of life for me—I’ve done it 35 times (15 times by 19 years)—and my immediate reaction to this topic is to feel that I can’t bear to look at it. It brings a whole heap of undealt with feelings which no doubt need to be faced, but which quickly lead me to the “poor me” syndrome. Without question this constant moving was one of the most important influences in my life, and tackling it I feel lost, as if I’ll sink without trace. I feel so lonely. And so I dodge it. But those changes happened one at a time, not en masse, and I didn’t sink without trace. The prospect of moving fills me with sorrow and dismay, but at least I know I’ll get through it. I always have because I carry home with me.

Making home

Nancy’s resolution, “because I carry home with me,” had a powerful effect on her, on the group, and particularly on Sarah (pseudonym), the woman in the performance who spoke Nancy’s words. At the end of the project Sarah reflected,

I’m struggling at the moment because I’m going to sell my home, and I felt it was a very, very big thing, almost insurmountable for me just lately because again my health has really been playing up. But the line was that “I would take my home with me,” and it was only just two lines, but I couldn’t believe the significance of it because suddenly there it was. It was really saying what’s true for me. I’ve done it all my life.

Home turned out to be a topic that produced some of the richest writing in the workshops. Home is typically thought to be one of the boundaries that constrain an older woman’s life and keep her isolated and lonely. Home is also the space where women work to look after others and nurture them. Rarely, however, do we think about the complexities of what it means to make a home at the end of a woman’s life. We have plenty to say about other life transitions—from childhood to adolescence, from high school to college, from being single to being married—but not much that’s useful for those in their 70s, 80s, and 90s.

The women in our workshops told different stories—of being contented and alone or alone and part of a community. Some wrote about finding new freedom and independence, others reminisced about the continuity of home across the lifespan. For some, home did not mean stability or any of the usual home-sweet-home images associated with “nice little old ladies.” The excerpts included from the performance script suggest that moving home in the later years may be filled with growth, sometimes pain and grieving, and sometimes joy and resignation. The women taught us that making home is not a static thing, but a lifelong process of remaking and rebuilding, after divorce or the death of a child or a spouse, after war, or marriage, or migration to Australia. Their stories have much to teach us all.

Lessons for lifelong learning

There are too many lessons from the Stories of Ageing project to recount here. So let me end with a few observations. First, if we really believed older people learned until the end of their lives, we would need to make big changes to our current educational practices. We would, for example, need to rethink the power of writing to reshape lives and teach younger generations. We would connect the teaching of writing to life purposes that serve the individual as well as some larger cultural purpose outside oneself. We would build writing communities where it is possible to examine how our personal stories are shaped by storylines of the culture (Barbara Kamler, Relocating the Personal: A Critical Writing Pedagogy, 2001, SUNY Press). These would be places of acceptance, not just celebration, where we could do text work together, across generations, and try to tell those stories differently.

Second, if we really believed ageing was a process of change, we would treat older people as both learners and teachers. We would provide opportunities for intellectual and emotional engagement rather than busy work. We would provide opportunities for mentoring and recycling what they have learned back into their communities—much as the older women did in our study. They took their stories out to the public spaces of the community where they could be seen and heard. They worked with younger people who taught them how to produce their performance, and the younger generation became their audience—their students—challenged by what these older women could do and say.
Our work was small-scale—40 women over 3 years—but those 40 women became teachers in their own communities and families, touching the lives of others. However, they needed a space where they could also be learners and be taken seriously. Using language and making text became the object of their learning for 3 years, and their writing, videotaping, and performing work changed them. It changed the way they saw themselves, both the journey already travelled and the journey ahead. It made a difference, more than we thought possible. If we could all imagine this kind of learning happening on a larger scale, perhaps we'd look forward to growing older ourselves.

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