

Teachers & Writers

Magazine / Volume 12, No. 1



Artists and Elders Issue

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Introduction: A Mansion With Many Rooms

1. Visions of China

NEARLY TEN YEARS AGO, Lucille Wolfe began "A Kind of Odyssey" when—like the Ulysses of Tennyson's great dramatic monologue—she left the terra firma of Work and set sail into retirement. Her wanderings took her to various strange isles in the Social Work Seas, where she sought her old work once again; it was not to be found. Even where she was permitted to land, she was made to feel not like a veteran of fifty years of experience, but like a creature belonging to a race apart, one of the old ones. Her old social role was no longer available to her. She set sail for China, with a number of other Grey Panthers, "to witness firsthand a nation trying to mold a new kind of social human being."

There, she saw that the old were not displaced persons; they were not segregated, ignored. Older workers took on the dignity and the power, along with the responsibility, of being "elders": "as arbiters, in their communes and neighborhoods, [they] were called upon to settle disputes between neighbors, between couples, or between parents and children. They were particularly effective in this role because of the respect and sense of fairness attributed to Elders." They were valued as custodians of the past: "They were called in to share what we would call 'living history.' They called it educating the young about the 'Bitter Past.'" Elders transmitted traditional information about herbal medicines to doctors; they led sanitation campaigns, agricultural projects. The special gift and task of aging—remembering the past—became a source of strength, a way of making a social contribution.

2. Bad Housing

There's a poem by Tu Fu which almost all Chinese have known by heart (I am told) for the past 1300 years, and anything remembered by a people so long becomes a kind of sacred text, a bearer of something essential to the culture. "The Roof Whirled Away By Winds" tells of a long night

by Marc Kaminsky

of wind and rain when the adversity suffered by the "old and feeble" Tu Fu grows wide and general and becomes the condition of China wracked by "all these disasters of war." The wind exposes him to the elements, and a gang of eighth-century toughs completes the work the wind has begun: they mug him—"rob me even in my face." He returns home to his crumbling house, with the rain raining in: "like strings of wax the rain fell." He can't keep himself or the "darling son" of his old age dry. In his helplessness, he asks:

When will this long night of drizzle
come to an end?

Now I dream of an immense
mansion, tens of thousands of
rooms,

Where all cold creatures can take
shelter, their faces alight;

Not moved by the wind or the rain,
a mansion as solid as a
mountain—

Alas, when shall I see such a
majestic house?

If I could see this, even though my
poor house were torn down,
Even though I were frozen death,
I would be content.

3. The Will to Bear Witness

If a just society is a mansion with tens of thousands of rooms, I would like to imagine that sixteen of those rooms house the Artists & Elders Project; and in each room, poets, social workers, and old people meet together as peers, each to enlist the particular gift of the others so that they may work together on the great task which writers and old people both urgently undertake. It is the task of bearing witness to what they have seen and been and known; it is a task

MARC KAMINSKY directs the Artists and Elders Project. His previously published books include *What's Inside You It Shines Out of You* and *A New House* (poems). In 1981 Sun Press will publish a collection of his narrative poems, *Endings*, and the University of Illinois Press will bring out *Daily Bread*, a book of poems and photographs on aging.

undertaken in the face of the long night and the storm they cannot shut out: joblessness and neglect, lack of "regular work" and the status it gives, and a particularly keen ear to hear the beating of the wings of the Angel of Death even as it rushes through the corridors of the multinational corporation and as it sneaks into the subway car in the midst of the rush hour, or as it hovers over anyone's left shoulder in the midst of a crowded schedule and gives things (in their eyes) a finer, more immediate edge, or gives them up to the despair they cannot always escape. These are secret knowledges they share, and make light of, in a corner of the mansion of many rooms.

4. The Recovery of the Public World

Lucille Wolfe makes all these connections: she connects visions of China, and what she suffered in her late-life *wanderjahrn*, and her half-century practice of mediating between suffering persons and the world they are sick with, and what she herself went through when she joined one of the Artists & Elders workshops. Starting out in the role of "therapist" to a group of "clinic clients," she underwent a crisis—brought on by her forced retirement at 73—which transformed her vision of herself and of the writing workshop: "Somewhere along the way I've come to believe that this is what they—and I—want and need: to tell our stories, to give some order and affirmation to our lives. Helping each other overcome all that hinders us, helping each other describe how we cope with our aging, and offering each other some of our own solutions—this is what we are all about, this is the therapy we have to offer each other, even if some of us are 'clients of a mental health agency.' We each have our own unique odyssey to tell, and we each have a need to find our own 'singing voice' again—or perhaps for the first time. But I have to remember this is not China—so it takes repeated acts of faith, and perceptive eyes and ears to tune in on our glimmerings, and a joining of youth

and age to overcome our fears and draw out our tales.”

In an age-segregated society, it takes projects like Artists & Elders to make a space in which youth and age can sit down together and exchange knowledge and skills that are vital to both. Lucille Wolfe experienced the workshop which she was part of as a “version” of what she found in China; there, she went to a Home of Respect which childless, aged miners maintained for themselves and where their self-governance was combined with a continual receiving of guests, for whom their stories were a broad road—the Chinese love that metaphor—into the public world of the past.

Dale Worsley’s description of “Snug Harbor” opens up a landing-place where a kindred kind of activity goes on. Dale worked with retired seamen, great storytellers who were passionately interested in creating an oral history of the making of the National Maritime Union. The room with portholes where they met, in the union’s shipshaped headquarters, is another room in the imagination, beyond the reach of this society.

5. The Actual Poetry

And Janet Bloom takes us to another two of the Artists & Elders’ sixteen rooms. “A window was opened to me,” says a woman in a room in Astoria: access to poetry, to her own imagination, and most of all to a world of direct communication with others have helped renovate the enclosed space in which she, and the women for whom she speaks, live. “A Window Was Opened To Me,” the title of Bloom’s group interview, dwells on the delight in opening out which these women felt, and which they feel came to them as a result of truth-telling conversation.

The poem, too, is a kind of truth-telling conversation which enhances our own and to which we can turn when the good and bad talk around us has come to an end, and we need to carry on the figures of thought and feeling that go on in the head. Rexroth, for one, makes explicit the connection between talk and poem writing and the value of friendship which animates all that these women say. And what they say gives the seal of unimpeachable witness to the old poet’s words: “The speech of poetry

is from me to you, transfigured by the overcoming of all thinginess—reification—in the relationship. So speech approaches in poetry not only the directness and the impact but the unlimited potential of act. A love poem is a communication of love, like a kiss. A poem of contempt and satire is like a punch in the nose.” Rexroth seeks “the actual poetry, the living speech of person to person,” the speech of a person “in total communication”; and a great poet—he is talking here about Tu Fu—“presents himself as a person in total communication.” Homer he values because Homer’s *Odyssey* tells us that “the thing that endures in life is comradeship, loyalty, bravery, magnanimity, love, and the relations of [people] in direct communication with each other. From this comes the beauty of life, its tragedy and meaning, and from where no where else.” This is what Homer believes, and Rexroth, and the women in the room in Astoria.

6. Metaphors of Self

Janet Bloom also takes us into a bare room in Spanish Harlem where an old Puerto Rican woman sets her doll down in the middle of the table. Out of this one act, what sagas of meaning begin to flow. The doll with the cracking face—emblem or effigy or metaphor of self for an old woman about to go into the hospital for eye surgery—becomes one of the great occasions in a workshop when life dictates the content for which the poet provides the form. Here experience spontaneously transforms itself into symbols which the altering eye of the poet knows how to handle. Tactfully, “staying inside the symbol,” Janet Bloom allows the old woman to convey her plight to the group and to receive consolation from it. The shielding, the screen provided by metaphor, is never stripped away. There are disguises, masks, that must not be damaged; they are too nearly one with the skin of the face. Quite an opposite truth from the truth that’s directly expressed in truth-telling conversation and the truth-telling poem! Here we have to listen to Whitman, who may have seemed to have “blabb’d” all, but who confessed mockingly, tauntingly, provocatively, that his poems also moved by indirection. And by indirection we must sometimes move among others.

I give you fair warning before you attempt further,
I am not what you supposed but far different...
For these leaves and you will not understand,
They will elude you at first and still more afterward, I will certainly elude you,
Even while you should think you had unquestionably caught me, behold!
Already you see I have escaped from you.

* * *

Here I shade and hide my thoughts,
I myself do not expose them,
And yet they expose me more than all my other poems.

* * *

Then with the knowledge of death as walking one side of me,
And the thought of death close-walking the other side of me,
And I in the middle as with companions...

Paradoxes are tackled head-on in this room, where Janet Bloom speaks the foreign tongue and must get through to the Spanish-speaking members of the workshop by way of an interpreter. Though she cries out “against interpretation,” she must speak her piece about living with death through an interpreter, and what she has to get through is that there are times when the elusive meanings must be plainly spoken. She takes it as an essential part of the poet’s task to pin down the wings of the shadow of death by an act of interpretation.

7. Another Wing

In another wing of the mansion, colleagues work among colleagues. There Susan Miller trains artists to work with the elderly, tells them what they must know about aging in order to see old people as they are—as people who are as various as other adults are, who have as little in common, and as much, as, say, poets (another much-stereotyped group). Susan Miller sits in a room with all those intending to teach creative arts workshops, and she talks without jargon, without mystification, of what happens to the mind and body as the years accumulate; the teaching principles she educes from the “Realities of Aging” are a marvel of profound knowledge and common sense.

Across the hall, Rebecca Raas is beginning her workshop. Would you like to go in and listen? ●

Realities of Aging: Starting Point for Imaginative Work with the Elderly

by Susan Miller

RECENTLY, PROGRAMS TO fulfill older people's expressive needs have sprung up in the form of creative arts workshops. A personal and painful experience made me interested in training the artists who teach these workshops. First, the experience.

In 1976, Theatre for Older People was formed as a project of the Joseph Jefferson Theatre Company, a professional off-off Broadway theatre housed at the Little Church Around the Corner. Because I was eager to start the project, I decided not to work with older nonprofessionals who would need training. Since the Joseph Jefferson Theatre wished to provide a community service, they made available their professional actors and staff, as well as their facilities.

The idea behind my forming this theatre was to present original plays on issues of aging to audiences of older people. After each performance, there was a group discussion: the play served as a springboard for the older people in the audience to express their own thoughts and feelings. These discussions were led by professionals in the fields of gerontology, psychology, social work, and education. I saw the project as having recreational, educational, and therapeutic goals.

For the opening production, we put together a revue based on the writings of older people in the psychology

SUSAN MILLER teaches gerontology at Touro College. She has taught older adults in a variety of programs, including New York City Community College *Institute for Older Adults* and the Brookdale Center on Aging *Living History Seminar*. She also founded Theatre for Older People at the Joseph Jefferson Theatre Company.

classes and human relations workshops I had been teaching. The writings dealt with the memories, experiences, and concerns of those who were growing old. We called the revue "Prime Time: A Celebration of Aging" because we focused mainly on material that portrayed positive aspects of aging.

In addition to our five older actors, two men and three women whose ages ranged from about sixty to eighty, we engaged a young woman to direct the play. She had come highly recommended, was experienced, and seemed sensitive to the material and to the goals of the project.

The first few rehearsals made us optimistic. The director had a good rapport with the actors, and she seemed to have an interesting theatrical concept for the text, which was a loosely structured series of writings. Breathing a sigh of relief, I went about doing all the other things necessary to get a new production and a new project off to a good start. I did not attend rehearsals, but from time to time talked to the actors who were very pleased with their progress and with the work of the director. A week before the opening, I attended a rehearsal and was stunned by what I saw. "Prime Time" was no longer a theatre piece, but resembled a radio show in which a group of old people sat on wooden boxes and stood up when they had a line to say. From time to time, the men would move around the stage a bit, but these movements were rare. As I watched the rehearsal, it looked like a group of people were sitting *shiva*. (In the Jewish mourning ritual, those who are grieving sit on small hard boxes or benches.)

I tried not to let the actors see my dismay, as they were obviously enthusiastic about their work. When I spoke to the director after the rehearsal,

sal, I told her that the play was static, without theatrical life, that it reminded me of a radio show. She did not seem too surprised by my comments. She told me that given the ages of the actors one could not expect much more. To illustrate her point, she said that one of the actors—a woman in her seventies—could barely walk across the stage without hobbling. I suggested that this particular actor would have no problem if she took off her three-inch high-heel shoes. Unconvinced, the director went on to enumerate the actors' difficulties, and she would not move from her position: no extensive changes could be made; the actors would be unable to learn new lines, cues, and stage directions because of their age and our time limits.

Five days before opening, there was no imminent solution and the pressure was mounting. I seriously considered cancelling the show. However, in the usual illogical way of most theatre projects, the situation resolved itself. The executive director of the Joseph Jefferson had a dream about her deceased father; she felt the dream told her that if the show went on in its present state it would irreparably harm the project. When the director still refused to make any changes, it was mutually agreed that another director would have to take over.

The actors were furious! When we announced the change of director, two of the actors quit on the spot. One of them threatened to report us to the Episcopal Diocese for immoral conduct. After their dramatic exits, there was a moment of silence until an eighty-year-old actor spoke for the remaining cast. She said: "I'm outraged by what you've done. We were all pleased with the director and with our work. How can you expect us to do a show with a new director with only five days to opening?" She paused—the tension was unbearable. "But since I've worked with you before and always found you to be more than fair to actors, I will give you and the new director a chance. If I feel the new direction of the show is better, I'll stay. If not, I too will quit after tonight's rehearsal." The other two actors agreed with her position. Holding our breaths, we started the rehearsal with the new director.

Since the new director had been

called in a few hours before the rehearsal, he had little time to prepare and had to improvise during the rehearsal, making the situation even more tense. At the end of the rehearsal, we were pleased and excited with the changes. The radio show was transformed into a revue which had music, movement, and simple dance routines. The actors conferred, and the eighty-year-old spokesperson said that although they were probably crazy, they all agreed to stay. The show would go on! But we soon discovered it would have to go on with only four characters and with one character played by a man in his forties, since we could not find professional older actors on such short notice.

The changes meant five days of continuous, hard work: the unlearning and relearning of lines, cues, stage business, and the learning of the added movement and dance. By opening night—a benefit performance to raise money for the project—the actors had mastered the new material. The audience was carried away by the life, energy, and professionalism of the older actors. When the curtain came down, they cheered. Perhaps even more than the play itself, the older actors projected the message to the audience—largely composed of younger people—that aging was not synonymous with illness and decay, but could be a time of growth and change.

Often I have thought of this experience and regretted that I had not thought to discuss the aging process with the first director. So much difficulty and unhappiness would have been avoided.

My interest in training people who work with the elderly in the arts dates from this time. Subsequently, I have taught the training seminar of the New School's Creative Arts Center for Older Adults. In the training seminar, I have had the opportunity to explore some of the issues of concern to those who teach arts workshops to older adults. Following are some of the points I have found to be of importance.

1. Attitudes

A 1975 Harris Poll for the National Council on the Aging, replicating twenty years of studies about attitudes toward aging and the elderly, found that both young and old in our

society view most people over 65 as not very bright or alert, not very good at getting things done, not very physically or sexually active. In our youth-oriented and age-segregated society, it is not unlikely that many artists and teachers have negative attitudes toward the elderly. In a workshop situation, the teacher's attitudes and expectations have a direct bearing on the student's creativity, both on the process and the outcome. Thus, the examination of attitudes toward aging and older people seems to me to be the starting point for anyone working in the creative arts with the elderly.

Unrealistic attitudes—whether positive or negative—can be problematic to the teacher. In my early teaching experiences with older adults, I had a "rose-colored" view of the elderly which got me into trouble. Initially, I accepted a job teaching older adults solely because I needed the work. Having had a stormy relationship with a difficult and hypochondriachal grandmother, I had little love for the elderly. In fact, I viewed all old people as cranky, depressed, and depressing. My first group of older people in Bedford-Stuyvesant was a delight, and I experienced a total reversal of feelings toward the elderly. With a new convert's zeal, I thought older people could do no wrong. Given my low expectations of their abilities, whatever they did seemed wonderful to me. Feeling that my mission was to help the elderly, I found myself involved in inappropriate relationships and situations in which I was often exploited. It took a hostile ninety-three-year-old man in a human relations workshop to shock me into reality. Rude and abusive, Mr. G. really knew what "put-downs" were most effective. Finally, I ran out of excuses for the negative behavior he constantly directed at me. I realized that it was not possible to like all older people: they were individuals with good and bad characteristics. Extending this thinking, I began to see that their accomplishments and talents varied, and I was wrong to deem anything they did as wonderful because they were old. When I began to see older people realistically, it became clear that they did not have to be the recipients of my "bounty." After a period of adjustment to this

new way of thinking, I began to enjoy my work more and felt more effective as a teacher.

Identifying and understanding one's attitudes toward the elderly are important first steps for the teacher. Of equal importance, and perhaps more difficult, is the confrontation that people working with the elderly must make in relation to their own aging and death, and that of their loved ones. I realized the importance of consciously being in touch with these anxiety-producing realities when I spoke about aging to a group of CETA artists who were conducting workshops with older people. Many of the artists said they were unable to function effectively as teachers because of the anxiety and depression they were experiencing as a result of their work with the elderly, many of whom were frail, institutionalized, and cognitively impaired. (Incidentally, these feelings are not uncommon when working with the healthy elderly in the community.) In listening to the CETA artists, it was apparent to me that they would find it difficult to be effective or to enjoy the teaching experience until they consciously acknowledged and, on some level, dealt with the realities of personal aging and death. By consciously dealing with painful feelings, teachers will find it easier to experience the older person's creative process in a more open and full way. With less energy spent on defending against anxiety and depression, teachers will have more energy for relating to older people and for stimulating their creativity. For both teachers and students, the workshop will be more rewarding and pleasurable.

Teachers must also be aware that the elderly themselves have largely negative attitudes toward aging and old people. The 1975 Harris Poll discovered that the young had slightly more positive attitudes toward aging than the elderly. Those older people who do not conform to the negative stereotypes of aging consider themselves exceptions; they do not generalize their positive attributes to their peers. Many older people are quick to make negative judgments about themselves and other elderly; "mistakes" seem to confirm their expectations. Teachers who realize that the elderly view themselves and aging negatively will better understand why

older students do not take risks, why they fear doing something that might result in embarrassment or ridicule from their peers.

Paradoxically, teachers find themselves in a position where they have to demythologize older people's stereotypical thinking about the elderly and the aging process. By breaking down the stereotypes, teachers can help the elderly to take chances, to stretch creatively, and to interact more harmoniously with peers in the workshop.

Understanding and dealing with personal and societal attitudes about aging seem to me to be the necessary baseline from which to proceed into the creative experience of the arts workshop.

2. Sensory Losses and Psychomotor Functioning

It is difficult to know whether the negative attitudes toward the elderly come from a lack of knowledge, or whether negative attitudes about aging produce negative attitudes. In any case, there is no doubt that there exists many myths and stereotypes about aging and the old. In order to have realistic expectations and to work effectively with the elderly, the artist must have basic information about the aging process.

When we are dealing with the arts, we are dealing with the senses. The teacher must be aware that as people age they suffer increasing sensory deficits. For example, aging brings visual losses. Most people become nearsighted as they grow old; their field of vision shrinks and they have a slower adaptation to changes in lighting. Other age-related changes are decreases in color sensitivity and losses in visual sharpness, peripheral vision, and depth perception.

Hearing losses are quite common in the later years. In general, the elderly have less auditory sensitivity, especially for high frequencies. Further, when there is a lot of background noise, older people have difficulty in clearly hearing the person speaking to them. Some older people have nerve disorders, resulting in a condition in which certain words of a sentence fade out. Often, they will reply only to the part they have heard, causing the listener to suspect they are becoming senile. For many, hearing aids are not effective. Hearing loss can be

more of a problem than visual loss because it makes the old person uncomfortable in social situations, from which they then withdraw. For some, it is too frustrating and too embarrassing to keep saying, "What did you say?"

In addition to vision and hearing, taste, smell, and touch are thought to decrease in sensitivity as one ages. Also, there are changes in the way we sense our body, particularly its position and its motion. Balance is affected and vestibular sense (i.e., inner ear) change makes dizziness more common in old age.

Sensory change is a reality of aging. However, these changes occur and are experienced gradually, so most old people are able to make the necessary adjustments. For example, I recently gave a lecture to a group of older people at a senior center. After the lecture, an eighty-nine-year-old woman who had been sitting very close to me and seemed to be straining to hear told me that she was able to hear only a part of what I said, but that she enjoyed the part she heard.

Along with sensory loss, as people age they experience a decrease in psychomotor functioning. For example, older people have less muscular strength and physical stamina. They also take longer to react to many forms of stimuli and to respond in motion. Again, such changes are usually perceived as occurring gradually and most old people can adjust.

By being aware of the common sensory and psychomotor changes of aging, teachers will have appropriate expectations of the older student, and will be able to deal with some of the psychological and interpersonal problems associated with the changes. In addition, being aware of aging-related deficits will alert teachers to the possibility of offsetting them through environmental manipulation. Some ways for teachers to compensate for deficits are: using microphones, seating people so they can see and hear one another, making sure that the workroom is not in a noisy and distracting area, keeping out street noises, making sure that the lighting in the room is adequate, and seeing that people are not bothered by the glare of light or sunlight. In many cases, teachers will have to find more complicated solutions than the ones just described. In each workshop situ-

ation, different problems arise, growing out of the losses and changes that come with aging, and teachers have to be creative in their solutions. Often environmental manipulation will be the easiest and most practical solution; sometimes it will be the only one.

3. Cognitive Functioning

Learning. "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." This is part of our folk "wisdom." I've often wondered whether this statement is true about old dogs; it certainly isn't true of old people.

Old people *can* learn. However, they learn more slowly than young people, and they learn best when they are not given time limits. Because of their slower learning process and their anxiety about learning, older people will find self-pacing a more effective way of learning. Also, older students will have more success in a learning situation that draws on life experience and is more concrete than abstract. Interestingly, some studies on how older people learn show that although they learn more slowly, they learn more deeply. They have different strategies of learning than the young; for example, they are less likely to be distracted by nonessential details and are quicker at getting to the basic concept.

Often older people need to be reminded that both the young and the old experience anxiety and difficulty when learning something new, and that given the time they will master the material being taught. Older students need to be reassured that, indeed, they too can learn "new tricks."

Memory. Learning is dependent on memory, and most older people feel insecure about their ability to remember recent events or recent learning. Everyone knows older people who complain that they remember events from fifty years ago, but forget what they ate for dinner the night before. This complaint illustrates the principle that immediate memory falls off more rapidly than the ability to remember items or events from the distant past. And for most people it is true: there is more decline in short-term than long-term memory.

There are a number of possible reasons to explain the decrement in short-term memory. To begin with,

changes in the central nervous system prevent older people from processing and absorbing information as well as they did when they were young, which affects more recent memory. Situational factors may have an affect on memory. For example, older people who are ill, depressed, withdrawn, or socially isolated will not be maximally aware of what is going on in the environment and therefore may process and store less information. Motivation may also explain what happens to memory. Some older people may remember the past in detail because it was a happier time, a time in which they were fully involved in life. For these elderly, it may be more pleasant to dwell on the past and to block out the present time, which they do not find as satisfying. Another important point is that it may be easier for many old people to remember the remote past rather than the recent past because they have been "rehearsing" these memories throughout the years. Thus, the memories that have prevailed throughout the years tend to remain, while the memories of the recent past are sometimes forgotten for the reasons cited above. In addition to absorption, processing, and storage problems, and the situational and motivational aspects of memory, the elderly have more difficulty in retrieving material from short-term memory. As people grow older, they retrieve material more slowly: memories are not lost, they are just slower in coming.

Teachers who explain the slowdown in short-term memory will help to make students feel less anxious when they experience memory difficulties. Also, they can help an older person who cannot remember something from the recent past by giving cues: "Mrs. Jones is the woman who sat next to you, wearing the blue sweater." Sometimes it helps to tell an older person that if they relax, the memory will surface. It usually does. When all else fails, I confess to having burned four pots in two months because I forgot that I had them on the stove. Since I am neither old nor senile, this bit of sharing usually helps my older students to feel better.

It is important for the elderly to know that memory slowdown is a natural part of aging and in most cases is not a sign of pathology. Of equal

importance, a teacher may point out, is that while memory decline happens to more and more people as they grow older, it does not happen to everyone. There is a great deal of variability among the elderly, and some older people, regardless of age, never show any measurable memory impairment.

Intelligence. Many people equate old age with a decrease in intelligence; they think that old people are stupid. Faltering intelligence is another myth of aging. As a matter of fact, research on aging and intelligence shows that in healthy older adults there is no appreciable decrease in intelligence. For some, crystallized intelligence—that knowledge that we gain from the culture—actually increases; this is the case with verbal comprehension. The older person who continues to read, who interacts with other people socially, and who lives in a stimulating environment will continue to function well on an intellectual level.

4. The Myth of Senility

One of the widespread myths about aging is that we all become senile. But senility is not a natural outcome of aging. Nor is it a medical diagnosis. Senility is a catchall term used by laymen and doctors to describe such symptoms as memory loss, confusion, disorientation about time and place, and inability to learn or solve problems. These symptoms can be manifestations of chronic brain syndrome, a term used to denote various forms of diseases causing organic and mental deterioration. Chronic brain syndrome includes such diseases as Alzheimer's and senile dementia. In such diseases brain cells are destroyed and do not regenerate, or the connection between these cells becomes tangled. In any event, the outcome is a progressive decline for which no real treatment or cure is yet known. Another disease that produces "senile" behavior is arteriosclerosis or hardening of the arteries. In this vascular disease, hardened arteries cause a blockage of the blood flow, and oxygen is not carried in sufficient concentration to the brain, resulting in such symptoms as confusion, memory loss, and hallucinations. Thus far, chronic brain syndrome cannot be reversed. However, since only 5 to 6 percent of the over-sixty-five population is institutionalized, and this

percentage includes institutionalization for a variety of reasons, it becomes obvious that chronic brain syndrome occurs in a small percentage of the elderly.

There are also acute conditions which produce the symptoms of senility, such as malnutrition, depression, metabolic disorders, infections, and reactions to drugs. An acute brain syndrome can be reversed when the cause is diagnosed and treated properly. In such cases, older patients can make a full recovery, with the total disappearance of senile symptoms.

Fear of senility is common among the elderly, who share the general population's misconception that it is a natural part of aging. A teacher who knows the facts can help to allay the anxiety many elderly unnecessarily experience when they notice any changes or slowing down in cognitive functioning.

5. Personality and the Elderly

There is no "personality of the elderly." Personality is more continuous than discontinuous, and older people will continue to be more like they've always been than like other people. While the basic core of personality remains intact in the healthy older person, there are some personality changes common to many older people. Some of these are:

Introversion: Most older people turn inward as they age and become more preoccupied with the self. They become more focused on their bodies, their thoughts, and their emotional states rather than on what is happening externally. To illustrate introversion or "interiority," a friend told me about his mother who was in her late seventies. Previously very active, she told her son that she noticed that she was less interested in activities and socializing. As time went on, she found herself experiencing more pleasure from reading, thinking, reminiscing, and letting her mind wander over space and time. She was more focused on herself, and not at all unhappy with the change. Keeping in mind this personality change which happens to many elderly, teachers can encourage older people to express their increased inner exploration in artistic terms. Possibly, too, the artistic and interpersonal experience of the workshop might motivate the older person to look outward and find new interests and enthusiasm in the external world.

Behavioral rigidity and conservatism: Older people are faced with significant life changes and make adjustments all the time. However, they seem to manifest a trend toward more rigid and conservative behavior. Elderly people have less physical and psychic energy and find new situations can make them uncomfortable. Thus, it becomes easier to hold on to old thoughts and behaviors. In a workshop situation, a teacher should move people away from habitual and conservative thoughts and behaviors. However, it must be done carefully, in a way that does not point out that old ways are superannuated. Optimally, the old and new can be connected in a way that leads to a new transformation.

Intolerance of ambiguity: To stave off anxiety, many older people will seek to impose a familiar structure on an ambiguous situation. Often it doesn't matter whether or not the structure is appropriate. A case in point of intolerance for ambiguity occurred at an arts conference I attended last year. A unique and interesting poet was demonstrating how she teaches poetry workshops. An older woman kept interrupting her and asking for rules on how to structure a poetry class. When the poet asked her to participate in the experience and learn from it, she was unable to do so. She made it quite clear to everyone at the conference that she felt the workshop had been a waste of time. Initially, a teacher can deal with the older student's anxiety about ambiguity by making sure that the workshop and each task undertaken in it has an observable structure.

Restraint in making judgments and taking risks: It is difficult to face disappointment, uncertainty, or failure at any age. However, risk taking is even more difficult for the older person who is experiencing changes and losses due to aging. Not feeling one's best makes it harder for the older person to be confident about making judgments and decisions. By understanding that for many the self-concept is not strong and that there is less of a feeling of mastery over the environment, the teacher will be able to react to the older student with more sensitivity and will experience less frustration, too.

Lessening of social restraints: While there is more restraint in mak-

ing judgments and taking risks, many older people seem to have less social restraints than they did in the past. A dignified and gracious woman in her early seventies once confided to me that when she reached seventy, she saw no reason to please everyone else. Much to the surprise and dismay of her friends and family, she became quite outspoken even when her feelings and thoughts were negative. In a class situation, older people are often hard to teach because they are noisy, rude, tactless, and harshly critical of one another. There are no bromides for this situation. But as the teacher becomes more familiar with the individuals and with the dynamics of the group, the lack of social restraint gets easier to deal with. In my experience, acting-out behavior is an individual's expression of a problem such as anxiety, the need for attention, boredom, jealousy, or competition. Eventually, the teacher will understand the root of the problem and with patience and tact can succeed in making the person feel more comfortable.

Interests and values remain fairly constant throughout life: Rarely will an older person with no past or present interest in the arts become a devoted workshop participant. For an older person to become deeply involved in an arts experience, there usually has to be some long-standing or latent interest. For example, although Grandma Moses had never painted until she was seventy-nine and had never studied painting in her life, she had a long history of being interested in the decorative arts, of doing needlepoint and yarn paintings. On occasion, however, a person who has had a suppressed or unconscious yearning to express themselves creatively shows up at a workshop; when asked what brought her, she will say "to keep a friend company." A teacher who senses this person's latent interest, desire, and fear, and who responds to it with sensitivity, may be successful in making a "convert."

Gerontological research points out that personality changes in old age might be brought about by a basic change in the organism: the primarily arousal-seeking state of youth and middle age is avoided because of decreased sensory processes and the slower speed of integration of infor-

mation. Also, the older person finds that energy can be conserved by avoiding arousal. Thus, older people begin to seek simplicity rather than complexity. For this reason, they might tend to avoid new situations, hold on to old patterns, and impose a structure on ambiguous stimuli or situations. Remotivating the older person can be difficult unless the benefits of the new experience quickly become obvious.

The teacher has to "hook" the older person into the workshop experience faster and stronger than would be necessary with a younger student. Giving structure, attention, reinforcement, appropriate praise, and genuine caring are effective ways of approaching the older student.

Artists who share and facilitate creativity with the elderly are working in a new and uncharted field, where training thus far has been minimal. The problems are great, but so are the rewards of sharing people's lives and experiences. Most rewarding of all is helping people to discover a hidden and creative part of themselves in old age. ●

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About Beginnings

How to use the techniques of interviewing to get an elders workshop going.

SUNDAY AFTERNOON, A writing workshop in the adult education program at Hofstra University. I greeted a group of twenty people, many of whom were older adults; many were women. They were eager but a little apprehensive. After all, most of them had not been in a classroom for many years.

Wishing to shorten the distance between us, I introduced myself and discussed my own writing difficulties. They were amazed. They thought a writer was someone who sat at his typewriter and produced an instant masterpiece.

While expressing a wish to get to know them and find out what expectations they had of the workshop, I

by Rebecca Rass

conceived the idea of having each of them introduce one another instead of presenting himself.

"How can we do this, we don't know each other?" someone asked anxiously.

I suggested that they start by asking their immediate neighbors as many

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"important questions" about their lives as they could in ten minutes.

Embarrassed giggles followed, but they paired off, turned to each other, and began to talk.

In a matter of minutes the classroom became animated with the sounds of people—complete strangers—talking earnestly to one another. They were so engrossed in the initial interview that they had to be reminded to let the other person do the asking, too.

After the exchange of interviews, which lasted twenty minutes altogether, they took another ten minutes to write down and shape the material.

When they were ready, I addressed Ann, an elderly woman sitting closest

to me, to read her introduction of her neighbor.

Bea has been a librarian for many years. Now she is retired but still works in the library two days a week as a volunteer. In her youth Bea used to write poetry and short stories, but for many years now has not written anything. She wishes she could start writing again and has come here to find a way to do it. She would really like to know why the rest of the people have come.

Now it was Bea's turn to read her introduction of Ann.

Ann, my neighbor, was a teacher. She is retired now. She has many stories to tell, many accumulated experiences wishing to pour forth. But not a word comes out from her pen. It's the flow, the flow of words that she so misses. And I must admit this is the way I feel myself. We were both excited to find out how much we have in common. I found her so interesting I wish I could spend the whole afternoon talking with her.

Somehow, without any guidance, maybe because the time to do it was so short, Ann's and Bea's interviews, as well as those that followed, were very compactly written and often disclosed dramatic stories that involved the entire group and touched off a lively discourse.

It became obvious that many in the group shared a similar frustration: they said they had so much to express and they wished to write it down but were unable to get started.

"At least," someone remarked, "we are expressing our inability to write in writing."

Next Charles read his interview.

Diane went through an extraordinary experience last summer, and this experience has been a burden on her ever since. She longs to find a way to express it in writing.

Our curiosity was immediately aroused. Would Diane please tell us what the unusual experience was?

She did. She related how suddenly last summer without taking any drugs or medication, she started to experience something close to what she had heard an LSD trip was. It was a frightful and awesome experience lasting five terrible days. She wrote feverishly during this time but once it was over was unable to write another

word. She was so overwhelmed by what her mind had presented to her that she took the writing workshop because she felt compelled to express in writing what she had gone through.

The next pair consisted of two women who could not have been more unlike. Edith, a youngish, attractive, and simply dressed woman, appeared very assertive and "very together." Francis, a coquettish, overly made-up and overly dressed woman in her late fifties, appeared nervous and insecure. Her childish high-pitched voice contrasted with Edith's calm and assured voice. Edith read her interview.

My neighbor, Francis, a handsome, elegantly dressed woman, is a widow of two years. She is a mother of two grown children and a very great lady, indeed. She talked to me at length about her pain and her struggle to adjust to being a widow and a single woman again.

After a short pause she added:

I feel very grateful that she was able to share with me the difficulties of losing her husband, coping with the children, her loneliness and pain.

She looked around and said apologetically, "I must admit that I found Francis so interesting to talk to, and I was so intrigued by her story, identified with her pain, that I was carried away and didn't give her the opportunity to interview me."

Francis was genuinely astonished that anyone could find her that interesting.

Later on Edith and Francis continued to talk at length, and only when Francis finally read her interview in the following session did we learn why Edith identified with Francis's pain. Francis was the daughter of guilt-ridden survivors of the Holocaust who had made her the scapegoat of their pain. Recently she had gone through a nervous breakdown and now was trying to rebuild her life.

Francis and Edith supported each other throughout the course.

At that point, Bea, the librarian, asked Francis, "When you speak about pain, do you mean mental or physical pain?"

"Mental pain," Francis answered.

"Well," said Bea, addressing all of us, "I would like to learn how to cope with physical pain." For years she

had suffered from debilitating back pain.

Ginny, a rather expensively dressed, well-coiffed older woman said, "Let me read to you my interview with Joan. I think it relates directly to this issue," and she pointed at her neighbor, a mature, heavy-set black woman.

Joan is a domestic, the mother of two adopted girls. She has been through five major operations and two heart attacks. When she was only thirty-four, she was hospitalized for a cyst operation, but on waking up from the anesthesia was told she needed a hysterectomy to save her life. Although she had never had any children, she had no choice but to go through with it. In two days they operated on her again. She has undergone surgery four times since. She is in pain twenty-four hours a day every day, but has learned to enjoy people and life more fully. What other people take for granted she does not as she may die tomorrow. Oh, yes, she is in pain, it hurts, but she has taught herself to live with it. She has reached the point where she does not feel sorry for herself and is actually grateful for whatever life she is able to enjoy.

From then on the class was propelled by its own energy. Everyone was eager to share his life experiences. Ann, the retired teacher, was particularly agitated. "Let me tell you my story," she said. "A few years ago, while going through the agony of a traumatic divorce, I was told that I was going to lose my sight. For two years I lay in bed alone. Then, one day I was reading a book that changed my life, Viktor Frankl's *Man's Search for Meaning*. It recounts the author's search for the meaning of life in the midst of the horrors of Nazi death camps. Frankl reaches the conclusion that even in such terrible conditions of physical and mental stress a man has a choice of action; that everything can be taken from a man but one thing: the last of human freedoms—to choose one's attitude in any circumstance, to choose one's own way. And Frankl concludes that this spiritual freedom makes life meaningful and purposeful.

"This was a profound revelation for me, and I decided to take my fate into my own hands. I went to an ex-

cellent eye-surgeon who operated successfully, and now I am happily married."

"But was it *your* choice of action or *fate* that brought about these changes?" asked Bea, who had originally raised the issue of how to deal with physical pain.

"Absolutely me!" said Ann. "I willed it. It was *my* choice, *my* decision."

After they had all read their interviews aloud, I asked them to write down one sentence that expressed what these interviews had made them aware of. Some of these sentences were particularly interesting:

"A group of strangers turned into friends in no time," wrote Ken.

"How alike each of us is in his drive to express his own individuality; behind the different shapes, sizes, colors and backgrounds, we seem to need to express the essence of ourselves," wrote Ann.

"The air in this room is heavy with the combined longings of so many people, utterly strangers an hour ago, growing so close now," wrote Charles.

"I am amazed that the desires of the people in the group are so like my own," wrote Edith.

"It's an overwhelming and revealing experience to hear my own life story, well-organized and condensed, read aloud by a person I have never met before," wrote Francis.

"I am very aware of my inner self now and eager to put it to the test of writing it down myself," wrote Joan.

A workshop of this kind can explore many possibilities of interviewing. The participants can interview the same person again in depth for a longer period of time, search for meaning and order in the other person's life. The participants can change partners, then compare the various interviews done with the same person, discussing the differences in style, approach, and point of view. They can write an imaginary interview with the same person five or ten years hence. They can write a short story or a play based on the interview. And they can also write their own interviews, searching for order and meaning in their own lives.

Interviewing is especially valuable in the first or second meeting of a writing workshop. Under the aegis of carrying on an interview, people feel

more free to ask the questions they would never dare to ask in other circumstances. Because of the fear of invading someone else's privacy, people are prevented from becoming close to one another. Interviewing not only helps pull down defensive walls quickly and pleasantly, it enhances a feeling of support. The tearing down of walls and the newly experienced ability to ask questions and talk freely about one's life generate a feeling of liberation, making it easier for people to relate to one another. The warm support of virtual strangers can be invaluable to people insecure about themselves and their ability to write and express themselves, people who



want to write but who have not done so.

In a relatively short time, interviewing shifts the focus of attention from the teacher to the participants, resulting in the active participation of everyone. Consequently, the workshop rolls along on its own energy.

There is a major difference between two people interviewing each other and a person writing his own autobiography. People see themselves, view their lives, reassert their identity differently through another person. People need to see themselves from a point outside themselves to affirm and confirm their existence, "to yes" their being.

Moreover, people have a need to be

heard and tell their stories. Sometimes memories are the only valuable thing left for them. Talking about themselves to people who listen and, moreover, take notes, helps them tap their memories, and thereby assert their existence, and validate their past experiences. Memories and experiences gain new life through written words, and written words are a magic formula which gives permanence to fleeting moments, presence to experiences long gone. The written word has the power to arrest time. The act of writing can make people perceive patterns and meanings to their lives where none seemed to exist before.

Written interviews by themselves carry an immeasurable value both for interviewer and interviewee. The interviewer, who tries to verbalize and define, put order and literary structure in another person's life story, becomes aware of pattern and meaning in his own life. The interviewee, on the other hand, has the opportunity to observe his life from a distance. In addition, as an interviewee, he may well have his first chance to view his life as a whole, seeing events that once seemed unrelated and disconnected take on form and order, creating the unique life story which is his own.

Listening to one's own life story read aloud by another person, a stranger, as well as listening to other people's life stories, makes people aware that they belong to a wider circle, to a larger family. People often feel trapped in a set of given circumstances. Interviewing enables them to get out of their own circle and look further beyond and even take an active part—as an interviewer—in other people's lives. People discover that many of their life stories mirror one another and that each of their lives comprehends common experiences of pain and joy, love and happiness, struggle to cope, and the search for meaning. People derive strength from the realization that they were not singled out to struggle. Each one's way of coping with difficulties, with failure and triumph, creates his own individual pattern. The feeling of sharing parallel experiences, on the one hand, and the heightened experience of uniqueness and individuality, on the other, often evoked a sense of exhilaration in this workshop. ●

A Window Was Opened to Me

*Members of an elders workshop reveal what the workshop has meant to them.**

by Janet Bloom

JULIA SCHUBERT: I FIRST HEARD ABOUT THE writing workshop from Ellen Chuse, the woman who runs the JASA Astoria Senior Center. Ellen approached us downstairs in the lunchroom, and she said that a writer would be coming to conduct a workshop, and who would volunteer? Now I was reluctant at first, but to please Ellen, whom I like very much—she's a lively lady—I agreed, and I think most of us agreed for the same reason. And then we first met Marc Kaminsky, and Marc started us off with an assignment about awareness which we all completed that very same day, and he seemed pleased with our efforts, and from there on he would give us a different assignment each week, which we would bring back and read and discuss and also criticize. And I, I was reluctant because I never wrote. In my line of business everything was conducted via telephone, but to me it was a challenge. I figured: let me see, let me see if I can write. And to my surprise I do very well.

Irene Salamon: Ellen asked us if we would join the writing group, and I came from Europe and have no English education at all. I figured: what can I lose? I really didn't know what I'm going into, but I saw I liked the group and Marc got out of me in that year a complete new personality.

Frances Arluck: I've always written more or less, but I took it because I hoped I would improve my style of writing.

Lillian Steinberg: I joined out of curiosity, really. I have a few writers in the family and I wanted to know if they got it from me.

Margaret Friedman: I always wanted to write, as a matter of fact I wanted to go to school for that, but got waylaid on the way. And when I heard they were having a writing class, that was really the reason I joined this senior citizens center. And I've enjoyed it very much, it's helped me in many ways, helped me to talk a little more freely than I would have at other times, and Marc sort of draws everything out of you, which is important for most of us.

Aurelia Goldin: I was asked to come up, and I didn't want to; I do love English, but I was upset about the word *poetry*. I can't rhyme, and I didn't want to start something that I already had a feeling I wouldn't like. However, I became very interested, was also a little argumentative, I'd forgotten that poetry doesn't always have to rhyme. I was

*Excerpted from the transcript by Marc Kaminsky

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completely bewildered by the first poem he brought in. I couldn't get anything out of it, and it was English, it was simple, short, and then we took Marc's attitude and so many things came out of every word! He's very analytical, but it's like an injection that you get; they give it to you directly in your blood because it's the fastest way to get to you. It just has to go into your blood, a little goes here, a little goes there, and you hear, see, and then you look at the poem and you understand it; but at the beginning it's nothing, and that is the way other things are. Once he gave us an assignment about color, and I thought: Now what can I write about color? Now I don't say that every time I wrote something it was what I would have liked to have done, or as well, but I saw something that I didn't see before. And as it came to me, the words, a little window was opened to me. It's hard for me to describe it in words. I see a little clearer, I hear a little clearer perhaps, and not only as far as poetry is concerned. As I say, he injected the words, I don't mean it's painful, he opens up a little window, and it's better than no window. Once at three o'clock in the morning, I wrote a poem, a poet I may never be, but I am a little window. It all came to me.

I look at poetry differently now—it's clearer, it's closer to me. I don't know if I can enjoy reading heavy poetry much better than before, but I read it, I feel it differently. It's satisfying. I feel I've learned. It's late in life, but I seem to be able to learn, I think, from every little contact that I have.

I'm sorry if I couldn't be more brief. I wanted so much to give the feeling that I feel across that I keep groping for more words, and that defeats my purpose.

Janet Bloom: I have a very vivid impression from your images of the injection and the open window, and it is letting yourself go—you have to be free enough to give yourself time to find those images. It doesn't so much impress me as verboseness as giving yourself enough of a lead to arrive at something.

In a way you've all touched on all of the questions I want to ask you in your answers to the first one, but maybe hitting head-on some of the next ones you can elaborate on something you've already said. After the group got going, what was your chief interest, what kept you coming back? What would you say the group means to you?

Margaret: Well, I think it's not only that we write, but we have a chance to discuss. We go into a lot of phases of our lives. Since most of us are senior citizens, we're able to talk about things that happened in our lives and things which we would have liked to do which didn't materialize for many reasons. I think it's given us a very good chance to discuss and find out about each other. It's drawn most of us out, I think. I mean many times there were topics that we would ordinarily not talk about, but here somehow there is a feeling of real friendship, despite the fact that we are only together about a year. We don't seem to feel that

we have to hold back; we can be really honest with one another. And I think this is a very, very important thing because I have a daughter who seems to feel that people of our generation are not as open with one another as the younger people are today. And with this particular group I find that we do have that open line of communication.

Janet: What were some of the subjects that you felt were under wraps before you came here?

Margaret: Certain things about the family, things that happen in the family that ordinarily most of us were quite reticent about even thinking about, much less talking it out with other people.

Frances: In a sense it's sort of a catharsis. I know in my particular case I joined the class never thinking to write about anything that happened in the past. I wanted to start something fresh and new, but somehow everything you do relates to the past, so you sort of rehash what you really didn't want to. But it's alright, I suppose.

Janet: Does that change things?

Frances: What?

Janet: Rehashing the past?

Frances: No—

Julia: It helps to get it out—

Frances: It does not.

Julia: Doesn't it, a little?

Irene: For me personally, it opened a whole new world. I could never talk about the past. I opened to it more than I ever thought would be possible, and it feels easy. I can talk in a way I couldn't do even with my own family many times, so for me it's a therapy.

Janet: Does that make it easier with your family?

Irene: Certainly for me. I don't know if it's easier to talk with the family. About certain things, yes, I can talk about them now, and I couldn't do it before. But here I talk over things I would never have believed it possible to talk about.

When I joined the group, I felt I'm the only concentration camp survivor. I felt a patronizing feeling—sorry for me in the group, and I really hated that, but I must say it was all in my mind. Maybe the first few times they wanted to be friendly with me and I didn't accept it, but right now I must say it's the greatest friendship I ever had, and I never had close friends before that I have now. I call them my friends.

Julia: I'm very reserved. At the first meeting I explained to Marc that I am a very private person, I don't like to speak about personal things. Little by little I gradually softened, and I did start to speak about personal things.

Janet: What difference did that make to you, to start speaking about personal things?

Julia: It's kind of loosening up my inhibitions. Because I do keep things to myself. Even now there are lots of things I would never discuss, even with this group, but there are things that I do, and I like to write poetry, and writing poetry you have to give something of yourself.

Janet: What's the advantage of loosening up your inhibitions?

Julia: Well, I get rid of some of my frustrations by speaking and writing about them. I think we are all frustrated in one way or another.

Janet: So the kind of understanding you get in talking here and writing here is a relief of frustrations?

Julia: It's very helpful, and the ladies here I consider them all family. I have no family of my own, and I always

say this is my family, adopted. And that has helped me.

Phene Dreher: I'm not quite as involved as the others. I'm the newcomer here. Not that I don't get affected, please don't misunderstand that, but I haven't written enough, I haven't participated enough to be able to comment any more. I enjoy it. I've never had the feel of being able to read poetry and enjoy it before this.

Aurelia: I had a problem with what subject matter will I write about. I recall saying so in the very first session. Julia touched on that. You cannot hide, you know, you cannot hide yourself—and you don't want to, writing must be interesting. Your experiences that you write about must be interesting, favorable or not so. I felt there is a vacuum I won't be able to touch on. Some of the assignments were difficult because I had to grope, and I can't lie and I can't fill in. Once or twice I wrote something that I was pleased with; other times it was rather brief. Once it was disastrous, but as was pointed out, we feel close, and although we are not great eggheads, I developed a confidence that no matter what I would say, it would be understood the way I feel it here. (She points to her heart.)

Janet: I get the impression you are feeling what used to feel like a void for you, you are finding something where it seemed like you were empty. You didn't know what you would write about, and you're discovering that there is a lot there.

Aurelia: No. I still don't feel I have enough material to write about. I don't have enough material to write about. Take that story we read by Isak Dinesen. She saw those buffalos, she saw those giraffes. I couldn't say what that woman said, but I saw what she saw as I listened this morning. The talent was there, but she was there to see it. If she hadn't been there, she might not have had the opportunity to give us what she gave us. I am extremely pleased with one poem which I was embarrassed to read. Everyone said it was very good, it came out, I don't know if I can do another. I was embarrassed about it at first, but then it gave me a great deal of satisfaction.

Janet: Would you like to say something, Lillian, about your main interest in the group?

Lillian: I like some of the assignments we get, and the way we get them. Like one cold day Marc came in, and it was very windy out, and we got an assignment that day to write about the wind, and everybody came in with a different conception of it. And if I get into a book, it's going to be an inheritance for my children. (Much laughter.)

Janet: If you get into a book...

Lillian: I mean if my work gets into it.

Janet: Oh, the workshop will be bringing out an anthology?

Lillian: Yes.

Janet: Anyone want to say anything else about major interests?

Frances: It's the warmth which comes out of each individual that is expressed by their writing.

Janet: Could you say that these meetings resemble any other kind of meeting that you are familiar with or that you've heard of?

Frances: Not I. Personally, no.

Aurelia: I've joined a number of discussion groups wherever I happened to be a member, and it was helpful, but the continuity wasn't there, it was just for the moment, for the half hour or so, there were too many disruptions.

Not everyone sits there and discusses things they want to discuss. It's there for that purpose. See, this is a cohesive group. And although I don't like to be tied down at this time in my life to strict routines, yet if you want to do something well, there must be a little continuity. And my productive time isn't so much now, and when I do spend time, I like to feel I get something out of it. I sleep better that night.

Irene: I was very hesitant in the beginning. School to me was like a military school, discipline and listening. And when he started with grammar I really wanted to run away. I was really afraid. I cannot write rhymes, and grammar to learn at this age was for me horrifying. But I must say I learned a lot, and it was not the school type that I thought it would be. It's a very relaxed group, and when I do one bad work the next one is a little better, and I don't feel I'm a failure. In the beginning I was very much afraid I could not go with a group in English. I was afraid of my mistakes, and it all worked out so beautifully that no one cares if I make mistakes. I write what I feel like. I have learned quite a lot.

Janet: There's a lot to unlearn too, that militaristic sense about education. Does it recall any kinds of meetings to anybody else?

Frances: I was born in Philadelphia, and I can remember in grade school, strict discipline was the mode of the day. If you didn't know something, you got a clap with a ruler on your fingers. I didn't enjoy school until I got into high school. I went to Tilden High School when it first opened up. Things were a little different; it was a little more relaxed. I don't remember the name of a poem I read, I had never been in love, but it was a love poem, and you could have heard a pin drop, because it was like the feeling—whatever the poet was saying—came out in the poem, and in the class.

I was never an excellent student. I worked hard at whatever I got, but I wasn't on the top. But this is different. It's a more relaxed atmosphere, and I think that's very important, especially in your senior years—you don't want anything rigid anymore. In that sense it's very helpful because whatever you do, you're doing voluntarily. It's not like in school where you have this, this, and this to do, and it's required. Here, if you want to do it, you do it, and if you don't do it today or tomorrow, maybe five weeks later you do it, and I think that's what's happened.

Janet: That's interesting, not wanting to do anything rigid anymore. I'd like to hear you elaborate on this.

Margaret: First of all, as you're growing up, you have to go to school. Then when you get married, you have a family, then you have certain responsibilities. Then when you go to work, you have your family, and your work, and your responsibilities, and sometimes it gets to the point where it feels like it's choking you. And so, when you stop working, and your family is grown, and you don't have to worry about them anymore, then you feel: "Well, gee, now this is time for me." Which is something that you couldn't do before because if you have an infant it has to be washed and fed and dressed; as the kids get older you have to take them to school and bring them back and forth. And so this is the time of your life when you can say: "The hell with everything and everybody, now I can take care of me, and I can do as I please and the way I please."

I never liked routine. I always fought against it, even as a

kid. They said, "You have to eat at twelve o'clock." If I'm not hungry at twelve, I didn't want to eat, and this caused problems. But this class, I made it my business to miss as little as possible, because I really enjoy it very, very much and got a lot out of it. So this is what happens with most of us—you become sort of a free spirit that you don't have to worry for everything, and it's primarily yourself you're taking care of, body and soul.

Frances: My son kids me: "Did you do your homework?" And I say, "No, I haven't done it yet."

Janet: What do you think the major themes were for you? The major theme for the group may be different than the major theme for yourself.

Julia: I think as we started with Marc he emphasized awareness, awareness of yourself, awareness of others, awareness of the world, and I think the assignments all had something to do with awareness. That's how I interpret it. In order to write you have to be aware of what goes on, to put it down into words.

Janet: So the connections between literature and talking very intimately about yourself sort of fell into place from the beginning.

Aurelia: I felt it immediately.

Frances: You suddenly begin to see things that you saw before, but it registers more now. And you listen, so your eyes and ears are sort of waking up.

Margaret: And also, maybe because you have more time.

Frances: Because you're making the time.

Margaret: But we *have* the time.

Frances: I don't have that much time, with three grown sons still living at home.

Julia: You make it your business to have time.

Irene: I like the remembrance of family, and things that happened, and it comes back to you. I love that very much. Memories, and generations gaps, and family, and past and present and future we wrote about, and I love that.

Margaret: And the theme of getting older. Because there's such a—how shall I say?—a misconception, and there's such a terribly youth-oriented society that so many people are so afraid, even saying the words *senior citizens* frightens them, as if they don't want to get older, and sometimes I don't think they really know what it's all about because you can get older if you accept the fact that fortunately when you get older you can look back on things in the past and some of them relate to the present, which is very important and which most of us would not have thought about as much if we hadn't been here. But here we are made aware of the fact that you *can* get older and you *can* do things and you *can live* a life and be productive and be interesting and be with people.

It's not only that. You can be with people many times and you still don't get to know them. But here, because of what we wrote and what we developed, we really got to know each other because we didn't hold back. In many instances, you go so far and then you pull back. But here, we pour out our hearts and souls and we say what we mean.

Irene: There are seven people—seven students—here, and seven different lives, and in one year how it has affected us, each one's life, and we opened really a lot in that one year. It's so different, we're all in the same age group, but everyone has such a different story, and it came out and that helped.

Minerva's Doll

by Janet Bloom

TO GIVE AN IMPRESSION OF my writing workshop at Casita Maria Senior Center in Spanish Harlem, I have taken excerpts about one of our most deeply moving sequences from my weekly journal and inserted clarifications as needed. I noted then that I felt this part of the journal was being "written in the flickering of the flames."

This was the beginning of our second round of workshops. The first round had begun in April and concluded in August with El Grupo Literario giving a glowing and warmly received reading of their work for the other members of the center. After a brief end-of-summer hiatus, everyone was glad and eager to be together again. We climbed up to our usual room on the second floor, in one of those standard, red brick, cruciform project buildings, the halls of which often feel to me like a rainy day inside a submarine. So I am always glad to get to our light-filled corner room and see the long wooden table at the far end of which we sit. Except for the people, it is the only thing in the center of real substance, real grain, depth, color and polish. It appears to have been well oiled, to bring out all the striations of reddish browns to yellows, then burnished like a dress shoe. It is our ground. We put our papers and elbows on it, and talk across it.

Casita Maria Journal
10/16 and 10/23/79

This gathering seemed rather quiet, as we were working with a new interpreter. Except that Minerva Rios was bubbling with suggestions for our new start, which tickled me pink, and which I encouraged, as she has always treated me with the embarrassing respect she thinks proper to a teacher. To her especially, but also to the others—who never went beyond sixth grade in Puerto Rico, if they went to school at all—I am "La Maestra," the feminine for master, not in the



sense of master craftsman, which I would like, but calling to mind a hickory-stick teacher with the right answer, the correct way. It is constant watchdog work to take any chance to step down from the position of authority they keep putting me (and how many others in their life?) into, and give them a leg up toward assuming the authority over themselves necessary to authorship.

I wanted us to be a little more orderly and studious than we had been and hoped now that we knew each other better, we might find a way of tailoring our work to common interests. My initial efforts to arrive at some agreement on a thematic organization for our work had drawn blanks from them, appeared to be utterly unreal to them, so I gave in to the flow and did whatever seemed appropriate moment by moment. Now I wanted to try asserting more direction again. When I asked them to write down a list of what is most commonly *on their minds*, the complexity and abstraction of the things they listed were beyond the reach of any common focus that I could see, so I gave them an assignment, their first. I'm loath to give assignments in these circumstances as I think the benefit, the point of writing for people in groups like these, will come from their getting around to wanting to do it and cannot come from being told what to do. But now I felt selecting a focus might be freeing, so I asked them to choose a very familiar and important object in their home and describe it. I emphasized once again that good writing comes out of familiarity.

The pick up on this assignment was astounding. Everyone delivered the following week. This had never happened before, when I'd made only suggestions as to what they write about. Minerva and Bernard Burgos, the two oldest members of the group, both in their seventies, delivered very moving pieces. Bernard had never written a word in all the previous twenty weeks and also had never having said much, except once something about gambling.

When we discussed Juanita Rivera's and Alejandrina Diaz's pieces on their TV sets and what the different member liked on TV and why, Minerva said, "Because I am all alone. With TV I have company." She is a childless widow who used to

work in a laundry and in restaurants. She graduated from elementary school in Puerto Rico and came over to this country in 1929, about the same time as Bernard. Most of the people in this center are living on less than \$5,000 per year.

Juan Torres hadn't done the assignment, but had written instead about a recent visit to a Seattle winery on a trip to see his son. I was very pleased because, while not following my immediate directions, he was following an ongoing and deeper set of instructions. He was going on his own authority and writing about what was *on his mind*, which is all one can write about well since it is what one *cares* about at the moment.

Then came the *pièce de resistance*: Minerva's doll story. Someone called it "a living relic." As I do with much of both their prose and conversations, I have typed it out in lines as if it were poetry. Mechanically this makes the back and forth between the Spanish and the English translation much easier going. More fundamentally, it transforms what feels like an easy-to-lose scrap of life in prose into a framed, full-bodied, resonant, and somehow complete poetic moment. I want them to see the poetry in their lives. In a way I do not care if they ever write poems. Personal—otherwise known as creative—writing is a process which won't come easily or naturally to many. There is too much solitude and work in it for most people's taste, and then there's the problem of what you do with it after you've written it. But I do care that they *think* poems: people can use writing, or drawing, or talking as ways of learning how to see poetically, as ways of framing their experience in their minds so that they can turn it around and milk it for all it's worth, as a poet might. For me the following story, the written statement, was only the beginning of the poem we made when talking about the writing and living through something with Minerva.

El objeto mas querido que poseo

Escrita por Minerva Rios

De todos los objetos que poseo, en mi casa y que mas quiero, es una vieja muñeca Española para adornar la cama. Este muñeca me la trajeron de España hace mas de treinta años.

Esta muñeca tiene el cuerpo de trapo;
la cabeza es de un material como yeso
y los brazos como de plástico.
Ella era muy bonita. Digo "era" porque ya su cabeza se está deteriorando.
Su cara está arreglada como una mujer.
Sus ejas, mejillas, uñas, y labios están pintados.
Tiene zapatos de taco alto.
Su cuerpo todavia está como nuevo.
¡Como recuerdo, a mi muñeca, vestida como una Española con su traje de satén encajes negros
y su velo puesto por la cabeza hasta la cintura
y su elegante peineta, adornando el centro de mi cama.
Ahora solo busco como podré reponerle la cabeza o si se le podía rensovar la misma que tiene.

Minerva's own translation follows, with my more literal version of some passages in parentheses.

The object that I own and I love (The most loved object that I possess)

Of all the objects I own, in my house, and (that) I love (most), is an old Spanish doll that adorns my bed.
This doll was brought to me from Spain more than thirty years ago.
This doll body is made of rags; (this doll has a body of rags) but the head is made of clay; (is of a material like clay) and the arms are like plastic.
She was very beautiful. I said "was" because now the head is coming apart.
Her face is fixed like a real woman.
Her cheeks, eyebrows, nails and lips are painted.
She has high heels.
Her body is still like new.
Oh! how I remember my doll, dressed like a Spanish lady sitting in the middle of my bed with her elegant hair combed and black lace veil down to her waist
and her satin and black lace dress.
She looked so beautiful adorning my bed.
Now I only look for a way by which I can find a new head (look for how I could replace the head)

or fix the one she already has. (the same she has.)

More literally the next to the last sentence reads:

(with her dress of black satin lace and her veil placed from the head to the waist and her elegant comb, adorning the center of my bed.)

I asked everyone to say what the story meant. No one, except Juan under his breath (he sits next to me because of his poor hearing) treated the story as directly symbolical of Minerva herself, now facing a cataract operation, and no doubt having faced for many years the very deep wrinkles of her face. Several said her story was about "conservation." One said it was about using the doll as a substitute daughter.

Minerva was in no way consciously connecting herself with the crumbling face of her doll.

I was fascinated and felt I had to be careful in guarding the secret and not being too direct about the meaning of the story. After learning everyone's reactions, I asked Minerva if she felt she could or wanted to expand on her story. She wanted to know if I thought she should. I said I thought it was very beautiful the way it was, but I also thought she knew more about the doll and could tell more if she wanted to. It was up to her; I didn't want to pressure her. I think she liked the idea of trying to see if there was more. She wanted me to tell her what. I said I couldn't do that, but she'd heard what the story meant to others, and maybe she could answer those things a little.

Then we went on to Bernard's partly written, partly told story of young love thwarted by parents who interfered with it on race and class grounds. The important object in his house, a photograph of a tambourine player which he has hung surrounded with musical instruments, reminded him of a dance where this twist in his fate began.

**Casita Maria Journal,
10/30 and 11/6/79.**

Breathless. Hair-raising.

Once you have a choice of saying something or not, what an edge you're on! And if it's about love! Or death!

In the shower this morning, getting ready to go to Casita Maria, I came to a new understanding of understanding. Quite suddenly I caught on to something new in what a friend had said to me months before. It seemed as if I had only caught and been tossing around the outside, the surface meaning of the ball he had tossed me before. Now I'd caught the inside of the ball, the inside meaning. And my future seemed to depend on how I fielded that new catch. Then it occurred to me that Minerva's life also depends on how I field the inside of her story while others were fielding only the outside of it.

Ever since we'd read the story, I'd kept trying to figure out what I might say to her or ask her about the relation between her operation and her doll. As we settled down around the table, Alejandrina said Minerva had brought her doll. In a few minutes sure enough! Minerva buzzes in with a doll that seems bigger than she. It was quite different from my expectation. She was a lived-in doll, and I had had a stage doll or a store doll in mind. The doll was really only a medium-sized doll, a foot and a half to two feet tall, but she seemed very large when Minerva sat her down in the middle of the table and spread out full circle all the layers of her black-lace-trimmed, red taffeta, ruffled skirt. There had been no mention of red taffeta with the black satin and lace in the story. I have no recollection of her torso. She had naked arms, very shapely, Capezio feet, and a very poignant face. The others focused on the peeled and cracking paint on the face. But more powerful to me was the effect of the shadow over the eyes, in the manner of the current dark fashion in eyeshadowing. She was like a pubescent doll painted by Goya. There was sorrow and dignity in her face that has never gotten within miles of any American doll I've ever seen. Her rosebud lips evoked in me a whole pantomime of the containment of manners: prissy is too strong a word for this; everything seemed shaped and patted together (perhaps because of Minerva's pats in displaying her) so as not to run wild or leak. And what Bernard noticed, and put so well—I don't have his exact words: a faraway look, a look as if she were thinking of someone now there. We worked on describing that

expression at the very end of the session.

Minerva, in her brisk way, plunked the doll down, then showed us her feet, spread out her skirts, pointed to the arms and pinched them, and kept knocking on the arm nearest her and on the head. Her concern, her insistent concern throughout, was the "material" of the body. She kept wondering why the arms were all right while the face was cracking. Minerva is a very active person, more wiry than bouncy, not sedentary or contemplative, but executive; she's the president of the women's club at the Center, and a showwoman. She loves to recite poetry at parties, which is not uncommon at Puerto Rican festivities. Finished with all the gesturing involved in her guided tour of her doll, she lay the doll down. I could hardly hear it, the doll lying out there, feet to us, just a little of the profile we were talking about visible at the far end of the table. I asked Minerva to sit her up, prop her up against her purse. Minerva was slow in understanding what I wanted; it seemed so obvious. When she finally tried to sit her up, the doll wanted to slip forward feet first, and Bernard helped push her back.

He told us his wife has a doll like this, but she is black. He quietly proclaimed this with a twinkly look over to me. He's very light. Never having thought of him as black until the subject came up with his story of young love, I now sensed it was a very deep concern and wondered if his wife is black. I haven't found a way yet to get more deeply into this. I know only that it seems in Puerto Rico these people can be proud of some aspects of their mixed racial heritage, but here they are confounded with a prejudice so deep I was unable to make the group enrollment mixed. Mysteriously the interested blacks in this largely Puerto Rican center never came.

I soon got the idea of asking everyone to write about the face of the doll and the meaning of what was happening to it, and passed out paper. Meanwhile the question of the material the doll is made of was disputed at length. Her arm did feel like plastic, but that seemed impossible for a thirty-year-old Spanish doll. Bernard, formerly a housepainter, gave a word in Spanish which turned out to mean

plaster. Maybe. Definitely not china. I suggested to Minerva that whatever the material was, it seemed as if the skin color were "baked" into it, but the features of the face were painted over that. She kept saying in many ways that she wanted to get it fixed. Did I know how? I said I'd seen a doll hospital near Bloomingdale's that I had long wanted to take my doll to. Much later I finally dared to say that I thought it would be very expensive. She told Damaris, the interpreter, she'd pay \$50. My view of the material satisfied Minerva to the extent that she knocked on the head and said, "It's good inside." Did I support that idea enough? Before I left the center I meant to go through the yellow pages with her looking for doll hospitals. I'll call her in a little while, and we'll do it over the phone.

When the writing about the face started, Minerva wanted some prompting from me. I said I didn't want to steer; I wanted them to find their way. But it occurred to me that one word from the others, giving a clue to their point of view, might jiggle something loose for her. So I asked them to each give us one word for the face. Juan obliged immediately with *aging*. Alejandrina inevitably started going on. I insisted she stop. So did Damaris. Finally Alejandrina got it down to *painting*. Bernard didn't get it down to one word either. Minerva's word was *material*. Her request for some prompting set me off on an important speech.

In the last few weeks of teaching in public school I've been concerned with teaching stream of consciousness and how to enter the imagination to my fifth grade class. I said: Minerva's question seems to say that I know what she should write. I don't. I told them about the way a painter friend of mine taught painting: by having the whole class write down descriptions, verbal sketches really, of the paintings up before us for discussion. I suggested they start out just describing the face, and in the description they would find the clues that would lead them into the solution of the mystery of what they were going to write about the meaning of the face. I really love this formulation for helping people get over the terrible blank about what to write. Why do we expect ourselves to know so much, to know the answer before we've even



found the question, when, if we devoted our whole lives to it, we'd still know so little? Minerva smiled, happy with what I'd said. Bernard and Juan were also happy with it, nodding in assent several times. These smiles meant a lot to me. They seemed to be the smiles of getting into the excitement. Each one had the happiness of a child let into a ring of hands.

Here's what they wrote, in the order in which we read it aloud for discussion. Minerva took hers with her. (I've asked for it repeatedly, and she promises to look for it, but can't until she gets her new glasses and can really see again.)

La muñeca parece que un tiempo era una preciosa y hermosa doncella.

Hoy después de los años que le han pasado en el rostro las huellas han dejado.

The doll appears as if once she was a very precious and beautiful lady.

Today after the years she has gone through the marks are left on her face.

by Juan Torres

Esta muñeca de Minerva es una flape;
es una muñeca muy vieja de tanto años.
Pero para tener tanto años se ve bien.
Tiene un poco la cara escrachada pero ella puede pintarla con una pintura que se llama vasnil y queda perfecta.
Yo me siento muy contenta por ver una muñeca de tantos años.

Minerva's doll is a flapper;
it is a very old doll of many years.
But having so many years she looks good.

Her face is a little scratched
but she can paint it with paint called varnish and it will be perfect.

I feel very happy to see
a doll of so many years.

by Alejandrina Diaz

La cara de esta muñeca a mi entender fue pintada. Y con las años le esta pasando como nos pasa a nosotros las personas humana, que la cara cambia.

Yo me refiero a la cara es que le pasa igual que la cara de una persona cuando es joven, y cuando llega a la edad madura la cara cambia, las arrugas y algo mas.

The face of this doll to my understanding was painted. And with the years it's happening as it happens to us human beings, that the face changes.

I am referring to the face: what happened to it is the same as what happens to the face of a person when young, and when he reaches the age of maturity the face changes, the wrinkles and something more.

by Bernard Burgos

I am sorry that Juanita's reactions were not recorded. Never having been to school, she does not write; but she is our natural poet. All her life she has composed poems and songs and loves to slip a song into our sessions in her bell-clear voice. The interpreters or I have taken some of her work down, but this time we missed.

At some point in the rush of reac-

tions, I went around trying to help them distinguish and elaborate on their separate points of view. Bernard's remains clear. He seemed to feel that one has a whole new face. Minerva's view was that the material underneath is as good as new. I teased Juan a good deal, on the basis of a misunderstanding from both handwriting and translation, that he wasn't telling what his point of view was; that, as far as I could make out, it was perfectly ambiguous: he could mean either that age left many marks, or that, given the age, there were few marks. He stubbornly wanted to leave it at the "objective" statement: age leaves marks. Then he seemed to come out in favor of the second view, which led me into Alejandrina's having said the face was "a little scratched." I am sorry I did not pick up on the acceptance in her last sentence, but I was eager to tell a story, especially as she was insisting on the varnish.

I had already said this doll's face was painted by someone as skillful as a portrait painter. Now I told them that I had been in love with a painter whose words I respected very much. And, when I came home from Paris with a bronze candlestick which was heavily tarnished deep brown, I told him I was going to polish it. I could not have been more shocked by the lecture he gave me. He really read me out, saying I should take it as it came, with the patina of its life history. I told them that I can still be as ashamed as I was then, whenever I find myself wanting to polish the life off of something, when I see myself wanting to clean something up that is better accepted with respect for its age and history. I added that this is a very profound question which keeps coming up over and over again in life. There was a lot of nodding. The story went down.

More and more things came out about Minerva's doll. She said her living room is not very fixed up, but her bedroom gets a lot of attention. I'd missed this, but it had made an impression on Damaris, who is studying home economics. Later it occurred to me what a wonderful story could be made about the woman who fixes up her bedroom, "her interior," as Damaris put it, not her front room.

Minerva told us how she didn't

have this doll on her bed all the time. She has lots of dolls, including the ones she has made. (Doll making is popular among Puerto Rican women. This center has classes in it, and the bazaars held to raise money for center expenses are always filled with them. Minerva made me one for Christmas, and she gave it to me with a card attached to the bonnet tie saying: "To my dear teacher...; Para mi querida maestra..." These dolls are all bright, pretty, elegant lady dolls.) When she gave me my doll she said I could make her a new dress when this one, white with blue flowers, gets dirty. She said she likes this Spanish doll out of its box only on two holidays when she is having visitors. One is New Years; I'm not quite sure of the other. She puts a comb in her hair and a black veil over her. I'm not sure if the veil is to cover her lack of hair—Minerva also wants to get her a wig—or for tradition, or both. This skirt was made, I guess not by Minerva, to replace the original which got old, dirty, worn out. It was in telling us about the special occasions on which she brought out this doll that she said, "There's a superstition that it's unlucky to have a doll on your bed." To this Bernard immediately added the one about it being unlucky to have a hat on your bed.

My first thought was of the resemblance between a doll and a corpse. Then I thought of the sainted Mother Cabrini laid out in her habit up near the Cloisters, and those medieval couples with their dog, faithful as a stone rose, lying in European churches. I felt I understood immediately that the superstition about having a doll on your bed arose from the resemblance between a doll and a dead person. And I understood the hat one similarly, as having to do with a missing person. I asked them what they thought the superstitions were about. No one was saying. They really had no tracks to run on. I left the question hanging as long as I could, angling it differently, but nothing was forthcoming, so I landed my thought on them. Juan tugged at me and offered to get me lunch. I could have wrung his neck. I put him by. It was time for lunch, but now, after seven months of working together, we had for the first time raised the subject of death.

It had come up once when Juan had told us of the time when he put a

gun to his head after a youthful failure in love, but the coldness of the gun stopped him from pulling the trigger. That day several others told stories of suicide and love, but not personal stories like Juan's, and all those stories were of long ago and far away. Today, for the first time, we all knew that one of the group members was going to the hospital for an operation. The moment went very swiftly. I'd said it. Should I have?

Up to this point, Minerva had kept insisting that the material the doll's head is made of is good and that the trouble was only the paint. I had supported her in that and was really tickled with her pluck. Now she began telling us about her sister who won't go into an elevator, but she, herself, goes into an elevator figuring, if it breaks, they fix it! She said her sister's worry made bad things happen, and I agreed, saying it sounded as if her sister drew the trouble out. Then it occurred to me to say to Minerva that her attitude made things go as well as possible. She dismissed this suggestion. The way she had put it initially made it seem as if she saw herself going around not knowing what's happening so that anything bad just hits her on the head. I wanted her to know that my very firm feeling about her is that she knows what is happening; she just doesn't worry about it, and she makes the best of it by thinking that if anything goes wrong they will fix it.

Afterward, Damaris surprised me, when I asked her about it, by saying that she thought I shouldn't have mentioned a doll's resemblance to a corpse. She was sure that was why Juan offered me lunch. I said, "But didn't Minerva then give herself a big pep talk? And, if that's so, then didn't mentioning death help Minerva make herself feel stronger?" Thinking about that, Damaris decided what I had done wasn't all bad. But she maintained that Minerva's pride was in for a downfall, that everybody was used to her being strong, and that it left her very vulnerable with nobody, including herself, recognizing her fear. Damaris thought Minerva would suffer worse if things came out badly. I said, "But it's the same act that's going to help her pull the pieces together then. I am putting my faith in the act." But, at the same time, by asking the others to give her

their views, I was also trying to provide her with a sense that there were ways other than her own of accommodating the situation, ways she could reach out for so that she would not be at a total loss if her way, her faith in fixing, was not borne out. I wanted to begin opening all of them to the availability of other viewpoints on a subject which had been totally locked up—viewpoints which they might use to ease their minds of some of the terrible pressures they are all under about the repairability and decay of their bodies.

I loved Minerva's pep talk. However Damaris made me wonder if my feeling that Minerva is in good shape and good spirits for her operation is just a case of opposites attract. Perhaps I, who usually think they might not fix it, may simply be enjoying the relief of the opposite viewpoint, though it seems clear to me that Minerva is no dope and knows as well as anyone what the hazards and world possibilities are.

By misfortune or good fortune all this had gone on while I was thinking that Minerva's operation was still a few weeks off. Very near the end of this class I was told she was going into the hospital next Sunday. When we broke up for lunch, I thanked her for bringing in the doll, and she said, very emphatically, she wanted *me* to see it before she went into the hospital. The way she said it, I felt as if she were giving me her soul, as if she had said, "I'm going, you keep me." Whatever it was, I *had* to have it, a legacy pressed hard into my hand.

Such momentous things happen without one's knowing. Afterward I saw that she, the one in danger, had thrown her lifeline to me on shore. At that moment she was letting me know. Suddenly, across that table, we had a life-and-death bond, as deep as bonds between close relatives, so deep that both people wear blinders, or speak without mentioning the true subject, in order to see their way through the moment. A minute before that we didn't have it. I see it now as a reverse umbilical cord, being attached at the end, rather than cut off at the beginning of life.

Again I was astonished. But now I felt in no way prepared for the burden, or the joy of the burden of this trust. Later I recalled the women in Marc Kaminsky's Astoria group

whom I'd interviewed for the history of the Artists & Elders Project. They felt the other people in their group were friends even more than the people they had called friends throughout their lives. What had happened with Minerva seemed something like that, an incredible leap of trust in a stranger, a bridging, which suddenly enables a person to give to the outside world something it has made her keep terribly private all those years; a burden so heavy and so explosive a person can't dare to reveal it to those she is closely bound to; a terrible giving, terrible only because it comes so late, but wonderful and softening too. I hear Irene's voice speaking of this in Marc's group. It was so relaxing for her to testify about this unimaginable friendship that had come to her. I cried then; I'm crying now. I see Minerva's very deeply weathered face, usually taut, active, pert, let down a little after she pressed that giving into me. She was relaxed, a little drained, and softened by some deep recognition and acceptance of a legacy delivered. Perhaps all of us want to leave a legacy with someone in the world outside the family. A childless widow has no one else to turn to. It was as if she had asked me to see her, recognize her in one of the most feared moments. And that glimpse I gave her was somehow a relief.

When Minerva and Bernard delivered up their stories I sensed they felt something newborn in themselves. It seemed to me they were more deeply happy and excited about this feeling because they are closer to death and have little time to live with it—the giving and the taking away, an exhilarating somersault at any age, but increasingly exquisite.

As Minerva told us she had lots of dolls, I said then I bet you have lots of stories. When I found her to say goodbye as I was leaving the center for the day, she and Bernard, who is president of the men's club, were working over the bingo accounts. All I could think to say, as a way of going with her in spirit to the hospital, was to put it in her head to think about what she would write while there. She said with a girlish secrecy, "Did you know people used to talk with fans? You know, when boys and girls couldn't talk to each other because their parents were watching, they could do this with the fan," and she

touched her fingers to her lips, indicating a kiss in fan talk. Her sensuality seemed to be flaring in her imagination before possible blindness, before death.

When the group went to visit her in the hospital the following week, she was sitting up in the middle of her bed with her legs crossed, almost as pert as ever. None of the usual color of makeup was on her face; the always neat hair was a little mussed; she had a big white eye patch and a bright pink quilted bedjacket. She didn't even want me to roll the back of her bed up. I thought: isn't that just like her. Finally, though, she let me. And when she had relaxed into the backrest a little, she said how much she loved the way we talked of *recuerdos del ayer*, memories of yesterday, and she mentioned Juan's story of the coldness of the gun.

A woman came into the room dressed in nurse's white, and Minerva introduced her as the sister with whom she'd be staying after the hospital. Several weeks later I found out quite accidentally that this sister had in fact not taken her in and she'd had to go from friend to friend until she could take care of herself alone. She had friends, this time. But I am under the impression that many of these people have difficulty making friends precisely because they are so much at the mercy of failing health and failing means to help themselves or others. For some, their memories of yesterday are their only friends, the only things they have to see them through. Minerva's thankfulness for our talk and her experience on getting out of the hospital make me see the work of these groups is to provide sustenance and light for people who live in the very dark perspective of the likely eclipse of friendship and help.

In presenting this story from my journal, I separated out the foregoing narrative from the following observations and explanations.

Could I have done more for Minerva if I'd known the exact date of her operation? I would have done something else no doubt. Could it have fallen out so well? In a way the whole story is a story of getting *more* meaning out of *not* knowing as we usually expect ourselves to know.

Did more get said through the indirectness I harbored by not insisting on identifying the X in the symbolism

equation as Minerva facing aging? I think so. There is something terrible—perhaps owing to widespread therapy—about the way we label and box and point at things, as if we could pin them down or dismiss them, as if they have no mystery. By not discussing the doll as symbolizing Minerva's concerns about her operation, blindness, and death, which would have restricted the conversation to things about which we are all more or less helpless, the discussion was open to everything from attitudes toward elevator repair to fan kisses. Staying with the symbol seemed like opening a window in an airless room, or like staying in the garden of life, instead of going over to the chalk on the blackboard and nailing down meaning with squeaking chalk the way we nail corpses into coffins, as if meaning would not get out alive. We all know better; for instance, we get the meaning of incredibly complex and fluid facial movements all the time. Perhaps the terror of discussing death is simply a terror of having nothing to say about it. It hasn't happened yet. We haven't met any returning travelers. Once beyond the impossibility of feeling obliged to say something about something one can know nothing about, there's plenty to say. It might be said that by withholding the interpretation of Minerva's doll story, which could have been death to our conversation, I enabled us to circumnavigate the void, feel out ways of approaching it. Because we were only dimly cognizant of what the doll was meaning, it acquired full meaning, true meaning; it swam in the sea of our thought.

Even Alejandrina became engrossed in something outside herself.

I want to convey something of this very odd sense of responsibility I have just come into. Responsibility for the mystery? I'm not sure exactly. If somebody can say something so moving to you that you cannot move, something the dawning of which is so important, so profound, that you could not let yourself know in words what it meant when it was said to you, but had to wait an hour or more until, in a protected solitary moment in a dark stairwell, it dawned on you; if the meaning of something important can take months or years to come through to you, then, in what tense do you deal with meaning as a teach-



er? Do you aim for meaning now, or meaning later?

Maybe I am only going over a personal ridge. Someone asked me many years ago: "Do you have to be so pointy?" That's been going off in me like the grains of a time capsule ever since. He meant did I always have to point out the meaning of everything? I began to see that pointing can make a subject squirm, pin it down in a damaging way, jab the life out of it, make it go away. A softer response seems better sometimes, more attractive, more welcoming. By now I feel that neither approach alone is the answer to how best to listen to people. At one moment the softer approach may draw more into view. At another moment in the same situation, a thrust may open more up. It's a matter of trusting your intuition, your touch, at any given moment. This trust is developed, I guess, through the practice one gets in friendships, trying out harder and softer approaches and seeing which is most effective when, and with whom. You develop an ear for those moments when a person can live and live more within a symbol—when thoughts will flourish by remaining inside the cave of the symbol, protected from interpretation, during sleep—and an ear

for the other sort of moments when thoughts will flourish from the direction given to them by interpretation. It's a choice between dwelling in the garden of the imagination or following the geometric roadways of the intellect; between receiving, accepting, or analyzing critically. These are two very opposing impulses which can be contained in different moments of the same situation, as with Minerva's doll.

Now that I can point if I want or have to, I was fearless enough in the workshop to float in the black pulse of the mystery and let it push me to mention corpses. The fearlessness may simply be a highly practiced and therefore calloused fearfulness. In any case, I sense myself to be peculiarly unafraid of the subject of death and therefore quite sensitive to other people's fears of discussing it.

I am all questions and amazement tonight. Having spent years as a writer devoted to self-scrutiny and to the scrutiny of life, what can I aim to get across to people for whom life mostly just happens. When you think about it, how much do we learn in school, at home, at church, about the thought processes of being human? It isn't learned from books. I think most of us know most of what we know about being human by accident, by what falls between the cracks, by getting burned. Someone very accidentally says something that means something to you, and you remember it the rest of your life; it comes back to you repeatedly like lightning. I remember that candlestick story I told them today with hot flashes; I remember it by shame. We go around thinking we're supposed to remember the neutral or neutralized information they try to teach us in school; but actually we remember by shame, and happiness, and sorrow. The by-heart part. The language has it right, even when we can't hear it any longer. We remember by heart, by what gets branded on our hearts. I am teaching branding irons. Today I am in awe of teaching branding irons. When these workshops begin to work for all they are worth, what people begin to reveal is the brands they've had to cover up all their lives, literal brands in the case of concentration camp refugees, name brands in racist and other categorizing, imprisoning situations. And giving others a little glimpse of the terror is somehow an immense relief.

Teaching branding irons: it is like telling Minerva, after she has taken pains to tell us that she brings the doll out only on special occasions, that the superstition about a doll on your bed being unlucky is based on a doll's resemblance to a corpse. It's like laying a black egg.

The truth helps me, which makes me feel peculiar when I see it means trouble to others. There was a man who used to tell me the truth; he was in a way the first who did. I loved him for it. It made me feel more secure, anchored even, no matter how rough or shocking or breathtaking it was on impact. But he loved me. And since he died, I have taken the truth well from others because I can remember the love surrounding his harsh knowledge. So who am I to go into a senior center, which is sort of like a country club where people's pretenses are important, and tell the truth? As my mother would say, "It makes my gizzard wobble." The whole truth and nothing but the truth. Where did we ever get the idea of mouthing such a statement? As T.S. Eliot put it, "Humankind can't bear very much reality."

What is it they don't want to know? That they are going to die? Who doesn't know that? Is it possible that there is wisdom in their not wanting to know? In not wanting to go around thinking "they won't fix it this time." Is the wisdom of it simply that it's more fun not pinning things down or more fun pinning the tail on the donkey in all the wrong places because it goes there too?

Something is going off in me about meaning. As if nobody ever told me about meaning, never even hinted at what it was *all* about. I started our group today talking about what meaning was *all* about, and how, if you paid the utmost attention, you couldn't begin to catch up with it, so we could not get very close with a lot of distractions. How can it be that our education has tried to make it all stand still and be simple? How can that be? I simply do not understand. The continents have always been surrounded by oceans; we have always breathed air; they all flow. I don't understand. A word is a name, is a label pinned on like a paper tail. Meanwhile nothing stands still. And a word, like snow, is always becoming something else. And we can't talk

about death, because we spell it, say it with a capital D, and make it stare us in the face as if it stood still. In my experience a dead lover never stands still; thoughts of him run through my mind in new combinations and contexts almost as if he were alive. He's not fixed. My perspective on him changes. O.K., I am devoted to changing my mind. I had to be. But even so, I never met a mind like a tombstone.

Right after he died people would say something to me about my grief. I always wanted to say: What is it? They seemed to know, to have some identifiable, isolatable phenomena in mind. I never asked, perhaps knowing they wouldn't like the question, as well as knowing I'd find out for myself, make my own grief. Almost ten years later I met a very white-haired composer at an artist's colony. She was in her sixties or seventies I suppose, and recently widowed. She was very reserved, and I don't know what it was about me that broke that reserve enough for her to tell me that all her friends kept telling her she'd get over it. "Get over it?" I said, horrified. "You don't get over it. You live with it." She was so relieved. She thought there was something terribly wrong with her that her grief for her husband, to whom she'd been married for over thirty years, didn't go away the way people said it would. She seemed to have been told to sweep a lifetime of memories under the carpet, and somehow my remarks gave them back to her. We dismiss an awful lot. When we think we are dismissing pain, we are in fact dismissing essential nourishment.

Whatever this composer saw in me must be akin to what Minerva saw, enabling her to give me what I call her soul, her emotional legacy. What is it? Is it simply that they both somehow felt if they gave me a glimpse of the death they were grappling with, I could take it, receive it? Not rebuff it or them? I think I am coming close to the truth here. Compared to many if not most people I meet, who seem to have death hanging from a very lengthy tongue, or have death invisibly biting their tail, I am not squeamish about it mentally. I've lived very close to it for many years, as many people have, more than we know. I am mentally familiar, you might even say comfortable, with death. The reading

and writing of poetry, which so often dwells on transiencies, has put me at ease with and given me a grip on the many guises of death. This does not mean that I don't get scared in subways or on street corners when a big truck or evil-looking man is coming at me. But whatever fright I experience is mostly contained; I recognize it, what it's about. Sometimes I take it as the lightning striking the darkness under the hood which sparks my propulsion system. And sometimes I think my fear is funny; I mean it is comic the way it comes barreling at me almost out of nowhere.

Through the experience of Minerva's doll, I am sensing that what I can do as a poet, for older people particularly, is give them their death, something society persists in trying to take away from people, by treating death as if the only thing to do with it is get over it, jump it, or get it over with as fast as possible. That, of course, makes it difficult to think or talk about death or the approach to death and impossible to learn that we all know how to live with death, our own and others! We live—all of us, all our lives—in more or less conscious fear of or desire for death, with people and things we are fond of coming and going, being given and taken away. We all have a lot of experience with and therefore accumulated strengths for handling transiencies, disappearances, hostilities, and humiliations of all sorts. We nearly die of laughter, shame, embarrassment, joy. But then most people leave any elaborations about these conjunctions to the poets, playwrights, and novelists, and go about thinking of death as black, of death as if it were only the obituary or the tombstone. In fact it is with us like water, like air; it is part of the daily flow and traffic of life. By ignoring it, treating it as unmentionable, we let it seep uncontrollably into our lives in forms as diverse as war and pollution.

If we could come to see death not as a big new subject, totally unknown, unknowable and terrifying, but as a daily experience which makes more or less frontal appearances in small disappointments as well as in funerals, then we need only tap strengths we already know we have to face physical death, whether or not we believe it's final. ●

Snug Harbor: Workshops at the National Maritime Union



Jose Valverde, Dale Worsley, Phil Valdez

by Dale Worsley

Finding the Goal

WHEN I WAS HIRED BY CETA to work as a fiction writer in the community, I asked to be placed in a job with the elderly because they would be likely to tell interesting stories. Eventually I was assigned to

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work with retired seamen at the National Maritime Union (through the Artists and Elders Project led by Marc Kaminsky, at Teachers and Writers Collaborative). My stars were very good. Who could possibly tell more stories than seamen? I pictured myself sitting around a wharf with a group of tattooed skin, sailor's caps and pipes (upon which they perhaps tooted). Palm trees swayed in the breeze and the gulls cried as they followed ships out in the harbor.

Later, in April 1979, I was walking through the grimmer reality of 17th Street in Manhattan toward the union building, to start the project. As I ap-

proached, I realized the only really substantial thing I knew about seamen was what I recalled from literature—very little more than the fantasy I'd painted originally. What I knew about maritime unions had filtered down to me when I lived landlocked in the south, where unions are suspect and maritime unions in particular are feared for their reputed violence. At the entrance to the building, where men and women without tattoos or caps were going in, I panicked a little.

Inside I passed a security guard and well-equipped gymnasium, took the elevator up to Dan Molloy's office (in Personal Services) and met Dan, Marc Kaminsky and Steve Schrader, of Teachers and Writers. We discussed the upcoming workshops, then went into the cafeteria to talk more and meet some of the pensioners who'd shown interest. In the food line I was introduced to a bright, very well-dressed man in his sixties named Bill Gavin. In desperation I said, "I don't know anything about the merchant marine, or life at sea."

"That's all right," he said. "What do you want to know?"

His answer relieved my intense apprehension, but I didn't know yet what I wanted to know. I asked him what he'd done as a sailor and he explained he had been an oiler. I didn't know what an oiler was and was too embarrassed to ask. I asked him instead when he first sailed, and if that was still the proper word, *sail*.

"I first sailed out of Fort Williams, Ontario, back in the thirties," he said. "I'd been bumming around with a friend of mine..."

By the time we paid the cashier at the end of the food line, I realized I could talk with Bill Gavin. For one thing, I'd bummed around a few years back myself, and we were able to compare notes about that. For another, Bill was very patient by nature. He was interested in taking the time to explain the particulars of seamanship to me. My mind was a blank slate. There would be no danger of telling me anything I already knew, and I had none of the prejudices a more informed man might have had. We had lunch with the others and talked more, and I began to look on Bill as a sort of treasure, a man incredibly rich with stories and the intelligence to put

them in historical perspective. The way the workshops were to shape up, I was to meet with any interested men two hours every Wednesday afternoon for at least ten sessions. I practically begged Bill to come to them. He said he would come back next week, a bit amused at my naiveté.

Bill indeed came back the following week, and for all the sessions after that. He more or less guided me into the unknown world of seamen. A total of fifteen other men tried the workshops in the TV lounge of the union building. Most came in for one or two sessions and drifted on, but five became regulars. We got to know each other well, over what turned out to be sixteen workshops. A kind of front porch atmosphere evolved, with plenty of kidding around and, occasionally, serious personal talk.

The five regulars were a diverse bunch: a Black from Miami, a Hispanic from Panama, a Pole from Boston, a Hispanic from Brooklyn (who wasn't actually retired) and Bill, a WASP from Canada. I felt privileged to be with this crew of men, not only because they opened up to an outsider like me, but because I was party to such a successfully integrated group of people. This successful blending of diverse backgrounds was not a coincidence, I discovered. A watchword in the formation of the NMU back in 1937 had been "Black and White Together," and therein lay the original strength of the union that was now manifest in our group.

Before I met them, I'd conceived of my job with these men in terms of a creative writing workshop. I'd thought we would extend into modern times the rich history of the literature of the sea from the point of view of the ordinary "jack." When I got to know them, it became clear the best tack for this would be to record their stories. Whereas they were quite comfortable speaking, most would have balked at a proposal to write. Some, in fact, claimed they couldn't write. Consequently, the workshops became a kind of oral history project.

As the sessions progressed, I became more educated about the concerns of seamen. I discovered what an "oiler" was, and what that meant in relation to the other jobs on a ship. I satisfied my curiosity about the differences between sailing ships and modern shipping. I soon knew

enough to direct the conversations and stories to make sure we probed comprehensively all the aspects of their lives at sea. I did this by introducing topics at the beginning of each session, making sure each man had a chance to speak on them, and interjecting whenever anyone seemed in danger of sailing too far off course. The group thus evolved a goal, which was to create a "book" and make it as thorough as possible. Throughout the sessions, the fact of my being a tabula rasa provided a fruitful dynamic. They supplied the material and trusted my ability to see it was organized to its best advantage.

Though a book became our final goal, many by-products were discovered along the way. It was an amazing thing to blow the fog away from certain memories, for one. It was also important to air beliefs as men and as seamen. Many other purposes were served, mostly ones that will always attend the efforts of a team working toward a goal. In the end, the book itself emerged. We were successful. As far as extending the literature of the sea into modern times, I don't know if that is what we accomplished. It doesn't matter. I wish a proverb were handy, one about setting out to do one thing and, once finished, finding out you've done another more to the point.

Problems

Naturally, during the course of the workshops, certain problems had to be resolved. The first one came up before I was involved. When Dan Molloy tried to get a program for pensioners off the ground a year before, the union officials were reluctant to allow space for them to meet. Their hesitations stemmed from an incident in Puerto Rico where pensioners had been allowed to meet and had organized a firebrand rebellion against some of the current policies of the union. The officials in New York didn't want any such dissension here. Eventually they softened their position and provided space for the workshops, and fortunately, for me as well as them, though perhaps for different reasons, the men didn't become activists.

The second problem that arose was to find the best method to use in conducting the workshops. The evolution of the oral history idea has been mentioned. The way it came about was

largely the result of the first official meeting with the pensioners. There were eight in all. Half were willing to write, but no one was enthusiastic about putting pen to paper. I had a tape recorder there for that eventuality. I turned it on and tried to induce one man at a time to speak on a specific topic. The topic, which I pulled out of a hat, was "emergencies aboard ship." A couple of the men spoke stiffly about this. This route was too uncomfortable to be viable, so I turned the tape recorder off and broke out in a cold sweat about what to do next. The men were looking to me for guidance, and I had none. To aggravate the situation, a very strange and blindly egotistical man was beginning to filibuster the session with a recitation of transcendental poetry that no one wanted to hear and a lecture on reincarnation that struck us as complete balderdash. I didn't know what to do to make the situation work, but I knew that if this man kept talking, the workshops were doomed. I spoke firmly to him and managed to damp his fires momentarily. At that point a couple of the men started discussing the difference between passenger ships and cargo ships. The discussion got very lively. I furtively turned on the tape recorder. Later I played back part of the tape for them, and we all realized it was possible simply to converse and be recorded. Our basic procedure was thus achieved, but it was nip and tuck in there for a while.

The third major problem that came up relates to the one of the egotist, whose obsessions threatened to destroy the workshops. It is a demon with many heads. It involves the wholeness of the group itself versus the needs of individuals. The transcendental poet was clearly an anomaly for whom we could do no good and who could only sabotage the group's delicate machinery. Though he came back a couple more times, I always let him know he was getting out of hand firmly enough so that he finally stopped coming. Other cases aren't so clear. Notably, one of the five regulars took medication that made him a speed rapper. If he had too much rope, he'd turn you into a psychiatrist with his paranoid, depressed monologues. Through the willingness of the other men to extend him sympathy, however, and the deft

orchestration of time allotted to each man to speak his mind, we were successful in both doing him some therapeutic good and evoking comments from him that were apropos of the book. At various times the quirks of other personalities also threatened our progress, but never so much that a comment from me or a change of subject and perspective by one of the other men couldn't prevent a disaster.

The last hurdle of any consequence faced by the workshop was one that recalls the first. Seamen tend to be outspoken men. If they weren't, they'd have no union and they'd still be working under a lash of one kind or another. These particular seamen struggled forty-three years ago against practically insuperable odds to form a union that served them decently. They are the founders of the NMU. They have kept their fingers firmly pressed to its pulse throughout its existence, and they have things to say about it now that seem extremely controversial. Besides their opinion of certain union matters, they have led lives that exposed them to many of the seamier phenomena of the world, and they don't hesitate to describe them in picturesque detail. These two areas of controversy presented problems. If we had been producing the book independently of the union, we'd have been free to say anything we wanted. Because it was a book sponsored by the union, however, too much emphasis on decadence and too harsh a criticism of the union were intolerable. To pick our way through this thicket, I devised a procedure. After the material had been recorded, transcribed, edited, corrected by the men, and approved by them (which in itself eliminated some of the controversial statements), I took it to Dan Molloy and asked him to redline anything that he had doubts about. He generously performed this unpleasant task and returned the stories to me. I then showed the men the areas he indicated and they ruled whether to include them despite Dan's doubts. Almost always they went along with Dan and felt the material was not important enough to fight over. They generally had the opinion it was exaggerated and would taint the rest of the book anyway. A very real conflict was thus averted and the book's life was assured without any loss of in-

tegrity.

Seamen

Having walked into the NMU building completely ignorant of both conducting workshops with the elderly and of the merchant marine, then having held sixteen sessions with articulate retired seamen, I came out with a more informed view of both matters. It's difficult to talk about them separately, however. At every juncture I saw that as individuals, as elders, and as a group, the men were seamen and spoke as seamen. Though most of them will never sail again, and though they live days completely filled with the activities of stationary men, they have the identities of seamen. Often in our meetings the men would try and cajole me into becoming a seaman. They wanted me to understand what it was like. They went to great lengths to illustrate, using their lives as examples. As a group, they understood each other clearly because they had common experiences and spoke a common jargon. I had the feeling the workshops were only a small extension of the rag chewing that might occur in the forecastle.

One of the first things that defined this group as a crew of seamen was the integration I described above. These men united in the thirties in a terrible struggle against powerful enemies to gain decent wages, living conditions fit for a human, and a new status in the world—one raised above the criminal, second class status accorded seamen earlier.

"In order to become a merchant marine fifty years ago, you had to be rough. There was no such thing as a sissy seaman. This union was built by criminals. By hoodlums. Let's face it. This union was built by men. You had to have guts to build this union in those times. Not only the union, but to go on ships." —Jose Valverde

"There was a whole new education of the crew that went along with this unionism. There were a lot of books and literature brought on the ships. . . . I didn't want anything to do with tattoos. . . . We were going to be a new generation." —Bill Gavin

Hardly had these young men beat poverty, formed a union and begun their education as a new breed of laborer, when the sea-lanes became America's "first front line" in the Second World War. Eisenhower

dubbed the merchant marine the "fourth arm," and these seamen indeed had to fight like soldiers. They suffered submarine, battleship and air attacks in seas around the world, carrying 80 percent of the supplies for the Allied effort and a great majority of America's seven million troops. Phil Valdez was torpedoed twice the same Easter Sunday morning in the Caribbean. He and Tony Zajkowski made the dangerous Murmansk runs through the Arctic Ocean. They are all proud of their record, but feel they didn't reap the benefits they deserved when the fighting stopped. Though the merchant marine lost more men, proportionately, than any branch of the service, they are not recognized as veterans.

"I was in one of the first convoys to Murmansk, in February, right after we declared war. Thirty-eight ships we lost. Eight returned. Absolutely no protection from the Luftwaffe, the wolfpack submarines, the German navy. We lost the British battle cruiser Trinidad on the way over, the Edinborough on the way back. We carried 5,000 tons to TNT. We were on the outside, so in case we were hit we wouldn't blow the whole convoy. . . ." —Tony Zajkowski

"There were no labels on the torpedoes saying, 'we're for so-and-so.' They hit the vessel and everybody went. Some survived and some didn't. . . . We had military orders, military escorts. We passed ammunition. We fired guns. We got a lot of praise. . . ." —Phil Valdez

"I was in the Pacific, where the Japanese were attacking with kamikaze pilots, in a tanker ship. You've got no chance on there. Yet they don't recognize you as a veteran." —Joe Valverde

There are still appeals being made to Congress to rectify this situation, and it's still possible these men will be awarded benefits thirty-five years later. Either way, there's no disputing the value of their harsh and idealistic experience, which fomented hundreds of stories, only a fraction of which we had time to share.

The status of seamen has always risen and fallen with the tides of economic, political, and military history. Following the Second World War, it hit low tide on every count. The shipping industry declined when practically every other industry

boomed. The unions were compelled to clear up their uneasy ties with communist organizations to survive the postwar red-baiting that flared up in this country. As a result, internal union operations were chaotic and uncertain. The Liberty ships that had provided work for so many sailors were now being torched for scrap. In addition to this, the new ships that were eventually produced were more mechanized. Crew complements declined, jobs became more boring, and the traditional skills of seamen began to vanish—just as living conditions on board were reaching practically luxurious levels. Issues of all sorts were no longer cut and dried. To survive, seamen had to adapt. It was another test of their resilience and intelligence that molded their identities.

"The place I remember most is Cuba." —Jose Valverde

"Havana, of course, was the greatest port of them all." —Bill Gavin

"Everything went." —Jose Sanabia

"With ten dollars, you could have a beautiful time in Havana. It was like a paradise." —Jose Valverde

"It was a paradise." —Jose Sanabia

"There was a bar there called Sloppy Joe's. A Coca-Cola cost more than a whole bottle of rum. It was a meeting place. It looked like an ordinary bar, but it had more young women there than we had men." —Phil Valdez

"The police were all racketeers in Havana." —Bill Gavin

"I won't forget Barranquilla, Colombia, with the girls out in the moonlight. Young girls... you're dancing and you're drinking... the atmosphere." —Tony Zajkowski

"The average seaman tries to make up in port for what he missed doing from the last port he was in. I used to be an alcoholic. I used to say, 'If I die, I die with it in me, not in the bottle.'" —Phil Valdez

"If I kept going to sea, I'd be dead within a year... I was in Hudson & Jay Hospital. The doctor says, 'You've got alcoholic neuritis in your ankles. If you don't stop drinking and start eating, you're going to die of total paralysis. This is going to creep up your body...' I still have a little limp. I never told my wife. I told her my other wife used to have a chain on my leg." —Tony Zajkowski

"The thing about drinking or not drinking is there comes a time in your

life... it doesn't matter where you are... when you've got to think to yourself, 'Am I going to grow up? Or am I going to keep on the same road that I'm going?' I can't tell you what to do. You have to say this to yourself." —Bill Gavin

"I always tried to improve what I was doing, to make it easier for tomorrow. That was my plan. Probably something will come up in the future and you will change and do something else, but you still try to make improvements. You still try to improve M-E." —Phil Valdez

"They're running these big ships with what, five men on a crew? When I was sailing we had a complement of thirty-seven. They were the old up-and-down jobs. With these turboelectric synchronizers you're just a bookkeeper." —Tony Zajkowski

"I was on a ship called the Marine Dow Chem. We used to come out of Freeport, Texas, with thirty-two different kinds of chemicals in one load... After the war, as years went on, they were getting more complicated all the time... It was very difficult for the company and the workers to keep up to what danger and what threat really went on... Until something happened, you wouldn't know how safe it was." —Bill Gavin

"I'm a sailor. I've been on deck all my life. The way it is today, you get aboard ship and you have a man and he calls himself an AB but he can't splice or steer. He can't go aloft. We had one kid who was an AB. They sent him up on the mast to secure the jumbo boom, to put the pin in the thing and put the collar around it. He froze up there. He actually froze. We had to go up and get the bastard." —Jose Sanabia

When a man chooses to become a seaman, he accepts certain realities that few other men have to contend with. His job is lonely, transitory, devoid of lasting friendships. Sustaining a family or a successful romance is extremely difficult. Older seamen assumed when they went to sea that they would have no control over the forces that directed and often oppressed their lives. Tradition reinforced alcoholism, and vices were at their fingertips (or fully in their hands) at every port. Survival in the teeth of these conditions is practically a miracle. It is a tribute to the power

of their will that these men not only survived but braced their strengths and shaped their lives to appreciate and participate creatively in the times now at hand.

These men are survivors. Their mettle has been tested. They are equipped to deal with the world. Now they must deal with retirement. Some are handling it well, fitting in comfortably to the niches our culture offers the elderly. Others have encountered even more loneliness than at sea and are finding this their greatest test. Our workshops relieved that loneliness for a brief spell, and, for most who participated, accomplished much more. The conversations grew into stories and the stories began to uncover long hidden memories. With the ordering of these memories a history began to take shape, a history full of fact, fiction, myth, parable and joke, a history that conveyed a meaning. And the meaning, the peculiar and valuable meaning of life as a seaman, once communicated, became a huge affirmation.

"Tell about your chicken farm."

"I never had no chicken farm."

"Who was I talking to?"

"A lot of people had chicken farms."

"You figure you get two chickens and one rooster and the next thing you know is, you got a thousand chickens."

"We used to have a saying, 'red beans and rice.' Retire down to Cuba and eat red beans and rice."

"New Orleans is the red beans and rice place."

"Who was it used to talk about his brooders and all that?"

"There were a lot of people had chicken farms. Seamen are always dreaming and talking about what they're going to do when they retire. When I was sailing into Houston, the night engineers used to come on board and come down into the engine room and be talking about the place they either had or were going to get up in Arkansas. It was always in Arkansas. And they were either going to grow chickens or pigs or strawberries. I don't know why. It was always one of those three. They talked about the nice spring water, the good land in the country that wouldn't cost you too much. This was their dream."

"They called it Snug Harbor." —Bill Gavin and Tony Zajkowski ●

A Kind of Odyssey



This was not the first time I faced retirement. I had been “mandatorily retired” at sixty-five from the Community Service Society, a large private agency which used to offer individual and family counselling services directly to people in Manhattan, the Bronx, and Queens. In 1971, because of the recession and depleted funding from the private sector, the agency scrapped its entire family casework division. I was working in the Bronx Center and experienced that exodus with the rest of the staff. That made it easier to leave. During the ending phase, we raged and mourned our job

by Lucille Wolfe

loss together, feeding each other little goodies daily until June. But because

LUCILLE WOLFE began her social work career in 1930 when she joined the staff of the Jewish Social Service Agency. She spent her early career working with refugees both at JSSA and at the National Refugee Service. She obtained her masters degree from the Pennsylvania School of Social Work. Since then she has worked primarily in the family casework field.

I was three months short of retirement age, I was permitted to shift to the Queens office where they planned temporarily to carry a student unit and needed experienced staff to help assemble a pool of potential clients for them. But then in September, retirement was mandatory. I resented it bitterly.

I’m an old social worker. Now at age seventy-four, I’ve spent the past fifty years working in my profession. Just a year ago, in May 1979, I became a participant-observer in Marc Kaminsky’s Guiding Light Group, continuing in that role until

Marc left in February. Since then, my colleague Caroline Kablot and I have been co-leaders of the group. This essay is about how I came to join that group and what I experienced and learned there. It describes a kind of odyssey—my nine years of quasi-retirement, of struggling to remain afloat and find an appropriate place for myself within my profession.

I don't write easily; and with a lifetime of hiding myself behind others, it is hard to talk about myself directly, to retrace my steps and reflect on my meanderings. But I feel it's imperative to set my record down for myself and others to learn from. So I'm writing, and at the same time I'm still wrestling with myself to continue because the struggle isn't ended. I will shuttle back and forth between this past year and the previous ones because it's easier to talk of the earlier years even though the struggles of the present have stimulated this effort. It has been a year of crises for me and a year of keener self-awareness.

During the past year, I've been both a volunteer participant-observer in the Guiding Light Group which meets at SPOP* and a part-time intake worker on the paid professional staff of that same agency. Actually the pleasure and support I felt in being a participant-observer sustained me through the threatening experience of a gradually dwindling role in SPOP. The agency as well as my job was changing. I was depressed and ambivalent about remaining.

How retire? One does not incorporate a professional self for some forty years only to cast it off suddenly as a worn outer garment. It was my flesh and blood, giving meaning and purpose to my life. Yes, I felt a need to slacken my pace. I wanted longer vacations and shorter hours, but I still wanted my work, and I wanted to be paid for it because I needed the money. So I went job hunting. After almost a year of searching for a social work agency that would accept a person over sixty-five on its staff, I heard of an opportunity to work in a new community outreach program for the "mentally frail elderly" in mid-Manhattan. It was a part-time and temporary position. And my role in this new set-up was rather nebulous. I was

hired by St. Luke's Community Psychiatric Division as both their liaison worker and their "loaned worker" to SPOP. Still, I grabbed the opportunity. It was exciting, too, because my age was considered an asset! I could understand and identify with the stresses older persons were undergoing. It was an adventure for all of us because it was a new agency needing to find itself. Everybody was interested in the job and felt part of a team that was testing out various ways of helping the elderly. The job lasted a year. Although my role was foggy and my loyalties were often divided between St. Luke's and SPOP, it was overall a rewarding experience. After that, every year until 1976 I was offered temporary and part-time work at SPOP.

But over the years, SPOP was changing. Initially it offered an outreach program to the mentally frail elderly. Social workers made home visits and helped the elderly find appropriate housing, medical care, and housekeeping services; they helped them secure their legal entitlements, and they gave lots of warmth and comfort, sensitivity and understanding to their aging clientele along the way. But it was not too different from other agencies. Gradually it was finding its focus, more sharply defining its role in the community as a mental health clinic for the elderly. It hired a psychiatrist as medical director, and got itself accepted as a clinic by the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene. With increased professional prestige, the agency began to shift from an outreach program for the "mentally frail elderly" to a consultation service for fee-paying, office-visiting older clients. Social workers with their recently earned M.S.W.'s were asking for a more sophisticated, more intact client group to work with. They wanted to offer insight therapy rather than supportive counselling. Those clients who needed home visits and more protective and directive services were assigned to students and to paraprofessionals. By 1977, when I was promoted to permanent status, there had already been a large turnover of staff. Staff morale was low, and intake had fallen off. Case workers spoke of feeling "burnt out" and of wanting clients to "shape up," especially the more oppressively dependent ones

and those who required home visits. The kind of enthusiasm I remembered had almost disappeared, and staff was slow in picking up on assignments.

A profound source of pressure was uncertainty about the agency's continued funding. Self Help, the parent agency, was threatening to withdraw its financial support by June. Generally, clients on fixed incomes were not eager to pay a fee for services. But the State was paying for Medicaid clients, who generally were poorer and less intact. The staff, including myself at times, felt caught between wanting fee-paying clients and needing those on Medicaid. Unfortunately, because of administrative pressure, staff became less interested in meeting our clients' needs than in getting their services paid for. But for our clients, the pervasive need was to be relieved of their depressed and hopeless feeling that they were no longer of use to anyone, even to themselves.

By the spring of 1978, staff was less and less eager to accept assignments, and I, as the intake worker, felt frustrated and hopeless in making assignments. The time was ripe for me to be wondering and questioning if there were not better ways of working with the elderly. It was then that, quite by accident, I discovered a little notice, tucked away in the monthly publication of the U.S.-China Friendship Association, about an opportunity to join a national tour group which would visit China that summer "to study the role of the elderly." It was, I felt, a chance of a lifetime. I went through an exciting, cliff hanging time to convince the California chapter of The Friends that I was one of the New Yorkers they really wanted. Imagine my joy and surprise at being selected as one of the twenty-four activists who were chosen from among "persons working with the elderly" throughout the country. Our group included gerontologists, lawyers, social workers, housing experts, and a number of Grey Panther workers, including Maggie Kuhn herself, who was our leader. My agency was interested enough to consider adding an extra two weeks to my paid vacation.

China had always interested me. I saw this as an opportunity to witness firsthand a nation attempting to mold a new kind of social human being.

*Service Program for Older People, a mental health clinic for the elderly.

But I particularly wanted to know how they dealt with lonely, depressed, older people. Well, I found out what should have been clear to me from the start: older people had a continuing role, and an important one, in the life of their country. There were no lonely, depressed elderly around. We looked in vain for separate hospitals and community nursing homes for the aged. There were none, except for a few homes for the childless aged. We visited one of these, a Miner's Home, appropriately called "Home of Respect" where the retired miners were involved "with pride" in the organization and maintenance of the place, especially the gardens, and in telling visitors about their past. In the country, generally, retired workers really never retired but simply were shifted to other work, often more interesting than the jobs they had previously carried. They were, for example, often elected to positions as arbiters in their communes and neighborhoods and were called upon to settle disputes between neighbors, between couples, or between parents and older children. They were particularly effective in this role because of the respect and sense of fairness attributed to elders. They were called in to share what we would call "living history." They called it educating the young about the "Bitter Past." Both the doctors in training and the so-called "barefoot doctors" turned to elders for the secrets of herbal medicine so that these could be passed on. They were leaders in "sanitation campaigns" and in undertaking difficult agricultural projects because of their enthusiasm and know-how.

The elders we met were not lonely because they did not live alone, but always as a part of a group, a family, or a commune, and always as equals. This is even written into their constitution. Even the mentally ill in China are not treated as a group apart from the world they live in, even those in mental hospitals. I remembered when we visited a mental hospital in Shanghai, we were entertained by "the inmates" who had their own orchestra and played and sang "Oh My Darling Clementine." The relationship of the doctors to their patients is a democratic, friendly one.

China was an exciting and moving experience. Returning to SPOP was a

letdown, and it was growing more chaotic than before. The administration no longer seemed interested in calling a staff meeting to hear about my trip, though it was finally called. Funding by Self-Help had been cut off in June. By September, no one on staff had been paid for weeks. Since we were so dependent on Medicaid payments, paperwork had increased to meet state requirements. But the staff had been sabotaging all work, especially the paperwork. A new board was scurrying to find new monies and to introduce sharper controls. We were being inundated with efficiency studies geared to produce greater "productivity levels" while intake had fallen off, and those who had been waiting on a waiting list were no longer interested. Full of my experience of the active Chinese elderly, I felt even more depressed and negative about the difference here.

Staff was being asked for success stories. I could think of none. Staff members were also short of cases and were pressing to carry their own intake. I felt left out of planning, and my function was often bypassed. I also sensed I was being scapegoated. I resented this younger staff that seemed to be meeting behind closed doors at sessions I wasn't invited to. I resented the bursts of laughter I overheard, which at earlier times I knew had been generated by stories that poked fun at the more disagreeable oldsters. Since I was growing disagreeable, I wondered if they weren't also poking fun at me. And sometimes I felt as they did—"burnt out" and annoyed with my clients. Much of this was my anger and resentment at my diminished role; it was my own form of self-hate for being a member of that unwanted and pitied group which had—as it was said in fun—"no future."

In December Ken Berc, our psychiatrist, resigned. It was he who had asked me to come on staff on a permanent basis, he who had worked closely with me on intake screening. I felt the loss of his presence keenly; and although a new psychiatrist came in March, for me it was not the same. He was not Ken, especially since, like the new members of the board, he needed to question whether I was turning down potential clients. Far from it. But in the stress of the times we were being given mixed messages. We

were told to take on the severely damaged elderly who needed home visits, and not to take them on; to raise and not to raise the issue of a fee at the time of intake.

Of course, I bungled the screening of some of the clients, but I was too threatened to admit it. I felt undermined, resentful, and put upon; I was easily angered; and to others I no doubt seemed quite paranoid in my reactions. It was during this period that the files on closed cases were moved from a central spot into a young caseworker's office. I thought that they should have been placed in my office since I, more than anyone else, had need of them for clearance. But someone else had already been put in charge of them, unbeknownst to me. So when the files were moved, I created a scene of which I am still very ashamed. I wanted desperately to resign, but I also desperately wanted to remain. I'm sure that all of staff was feeling very low, but each reacted differently. No one knew who might leave or be retired next. Although all of us were facing stress, we did not meet together as a staff to discuss our common problems. We were, in effect, in this together, but not together. Each one was looking out for himself, and looking for how he or she might benefit from the other's stress.

It was at that time, in the spring, that Marc Kaminsky came to a staff meeting to talk to us about forming some writing or oral reminiscing groups. Previous groups he had led had come from senior centers. Even though our clients might be less intact, he was hopeful they would be interested.

His coming was like a presage of spring. As he talked of these groups and their poetry, I was moved by his joyous appreciation of the old people he worked with. Their poetry was about their lives, their losses, their hopes and dreams. They reminded me of poems written by persons in a senior group I belonged to, the Washington Heights Institute of Retired Professionals, but there were some marked differences. The poems from Marc's group had added dimension and value because many were group poems woven together from their members' shared thoughts and dreams, which Marc was helping them to find and fashion together.

The poems from the Heights Group were highly individual pieces written outside the group experience, though shared with the group. The poems from Marc's group were also more spontaneous, and thus seemed more natural.

I was struck by the fact that, as in my Heights Group, where we were all peers, this group seemed to have a peer relationship to its leader. The caseworker-client or therapist-patient relationship seemed missing. This was like the way it was in China between doctors and their patients. For Marc, group members were all persons, not "cases"; nor did he carry "professional distance." He spoke easily of his feelings for them.

As Marc was asking staff about possible referrals of some of our clients, I wanted to suggest some of the persons I had seen at intake, but I was told only clients already under care could be considered. It was then I realized that I had a great desire to see for myself how this kind of workshop worked. So I screwed up my courage and asked if I might sit in on one of the sessions. To my delight, Marc agreed. But after the first session, he asked me to commit myself to continuing as a "participant observer" and to keep a log of our sessions. I consented.

Here in this group, to my problem-oriented eyes, were five clients. On one level I included myself, but I was likewise on another level carrying that professional distance I have noted in others, mentally maintaining it by diagnosing each of them. There was Marcia, with her beautiful face and angry eyes, too obese and tense, picking at her fingernails, obviously afraid of her own anger, afraid that it could destroy others, particularly men. And there were the men: Bob, tall, handsome, sportily dressed, but seemingly uncaring, spouting poetic cliches as though he gave birth to them; Harry, the kind of person who could be overlooked, even in a small group; and Adrian, a low-keyed, light-skinned black man, who seemed bright and sensitive, but on guard, to avoid revealing himself. I knew him from intake as someone who felt fated to be victimized, especially by the women he needed.

I was also observing their responses to our leader. All seemed moved, as I was, by Marc's introduction. He sug-

gested we were going on a shared journey and a journey in sharing. At that point he shared something about himself. He said that he had known and had loved all four of his grandparents, that he had learned something special from each of them; that he had led a number of groups of older people, and that he had discovered in working with them that he generally learned and received more than he gave. This was the magic. Probably for the first time, most of us in that group were being told we *were still important*, and as older persons we still had something to teach, even to our "teacher." I began right then and there to take a second look at these clients, these elders from whom I could learn. And even in that first session, each one began to share something about himself. First came generalities. Then Bob spoke of his marriage—how alone you can feel with another person if that other isn't "with you!" His insight was warmly accredited, stirring from Adrian a comment about the good feeling you have in finding that others have the same problem as you do. Later, Marcia mentioned that Mother's Day was coming up, and Marc suggested that for next time we write an imaginary letter to our mothers, adding playfully, "whether she's in heaven or hell or somewhere in-between."

This stirred my own great need to reminisce about my mother and in turn about my sons. But I wasn't quite ready to write that letter, certainly not for group consumption. Clearly I was "engaged," more as a participant than as observer, but I still was not clear whether I could reveal myself to myself. I looked forward to the safety of taking minutes of the sessions.

Curiously, no one was ready to write about Mother; but, yes, we had embarked on a "journey" in sharing and in learning. During the second and subsequent meetings, I began to experience and understand the meaning of Marc's comments about learning from older people. In this group of elders, there was much wisdom gleaned from life experiences. All were eager to share with one another in a generous and gentle way. In the second session, Adrian vented his distress and bitterness about a friend's abuse after he had loaned him money to help pay the cost of his

wife's funeral. The group was comforting and supportive, especially Bob, who noted the ambivalent nature of friendships. He said that Adrian's friend both liked and disliked him; but under the stress of his grief and the funeral, he had vented the negative side of his feeling. Others pointed to the projection, saying that the friend was really angry at the "angel of death," but felt close enough to Adrian to let him "have it." Comforted, and with a new perception of his friend's behavior, Adrian could reach out to him again. On talking about this the next time, he observed how helpful Bob and others had been and said that he wished he could have experienced such "guiding light" earlier in life. It was then that the group was christened the "Guiding Light Group."

It was this "Guiding Light" quality that Marc had "turned on" that led each of us to share ourselves in support of one another. This didn't always happen, of course. The light was often dimmed, and the negative, angry side came through. But wisdom and insight were there in each one. My feeling about the five members went through many changes, as these lights went on and off. More and more it became clear that Adrian, though he may have felt himself to be a victim, also had remarkable sensitivity, a gift for generous accreditation of others, and a fine ability to express himself well. It became clear that Bob, despite his cliches and his slick, often uncaring facade, had much insight and a poet's vision: he had a real gift for transmuting his knowledge of the "sportin' life" and the Mafia and the argot of numbers runners into vivid folk tales. And Marcia and Ruth were veritable storehouses of practical information on how to untie the knots we make of our lives. In fact, there was a potential social worker in both of them. More and more I noted that when these other parts of the self—strong, creative, imaginative, practical, and realistic—came through, there was a burst of light in the group. Each was prepared to see, and I myself was beginning to learn, the strengths of the others. The challenge for each of us was to discover and bring out and sustain these strengths; this process supported and secured the frail egos of the members of the group. By

turns, and at moments, each one became a healer. Inevitably, my own perceptions changed. These were my peers, learning and attempting, as I was, to live with less fear.

A word here about writing. The central theme for the group was writing, in the sense of self-expression, creative self-expression, of finding one's own voice.

As my image of the group changed, so did my gestalt of individual members. My image of Harry and Ruth underwent the greatest change. I saw Harry pretty much as Bob and Adrian did—the “good guy” or Boy Scout whom others inevitably took advantage of. He lacked aggression and was terribly critical of himself as well as of others. Locked into his own feelings of inadequacy, he dared not even express them. So he was bland, a “daydreamer.” Easily victimized, he offered little resistance to the painters who, he lamented, had been making a shambles of his place. He threatened no one, and the ladies in the group all “loved him.” Although always clean, he dressed shabbily. Initially he spoke up little in the group; when he did, he seemed to have a potato in his mouth.

Every conceivable technique was used to reach him. I felt critical of his being “the Boy Scout,” but Marc supported this decent helpfulness in him. Role playing was introduced. Bob became Harry standing up strong against the painters, the landlord, the abusive square dance leader. When Harry was robbed and blamed himself for it, Ruth and Marcia offered all manner of realistic suggestions for future self-protection. I played the role of his “good angel” against his bad one—his savage super-ego. Harry was urged to criticize all of us, and everyone accepted his criticism. Then, very tentatively, he began to speak up for himself. We learned of his love for the music of Gilbert and Sullivan, and when we urged him to sing, we discovered he could sing with warmth and cadence. Finding that Harry had “a singing voice” was the starting point of a shift in my perception of him as well as of the others. When we first discovered this and urged him to sing, Bob, who also has a good voice, took over; but this has gradually changed. More recently, in a quiet way, Harry has stopped Bob from taking over. He has also come into his

own as a square dance enthusiast. He has become desirable as a needed partner, driving with a square dance teacher to groups all over the state. And he has taken on the role of a “good angel” among us, particularly in relation to Ruth, possibly the most damaged person in our group.

I want particularly to write about Ruth. She entered the group in the third session, and it was from her that I learned the most. Ruth's voice had a perpetual whining wail to it; her English seemed poor; her thoughts were fragmented and trailed off. I had heard talk about her in the past. She was one of those unfortunates the staff usually fled from and described as a “pain in the neck.” She told us she had been offered a group as a “last chance.” We knew she was a widow who had served as a medic during World War II. She could not be drawn out about her past, though she hinted that members of her family died in the Holocaust. She was full of forebodings about the future. Her references, when she did talk, were always oblique. One never could quite understand where her stories were going because, as if following a road full of unexpected twists and bogs and stopping places, she became hopelessly enmeshed in richly confusing details. She defended herself by leading us away from the real story, the one she prevented herself from telling, and by telling stories about people other than herself, important people whom she had known and who had been good to her. This was her way of affirming her worth. A childless widow with a bad heart and other handicaps, terribly fearful of sudden death, she drew our compassion, but resented it. She was most fearful of becoming helpless. But she could be strong and warm in offering realistic and helpful suggestions to others in the group. On one occasion, Ruth confided that she did not like her name, and she had several others, such as Rene and Bubbles. Adrian suggested that in her writing she might present herself under the name she liked most. The following week she brought in a beautifully written piece about herself as a greenhorn that sent all of us into gales of laughter. Even her voice suited this role of the sad clown, which we learned later had been the only “successful” defense she had ever known for her

heartaches. At times she blossoms in her old role as “the entertainer.” We have yet to find if there can be a better one for her. Ruth has said that the group is more important to her than seeing her doctor because it gives her a place where she can make others—and herself—laugh.

What I'm attempting to indicate is this: each member of the group has become a guiding light for the others and, if you please, for me. We have grown together. But more than that, I've found myself becoming a peer as well as a social worker. I'm really fond of every member of the group; I had certainly not been originally.

What I wish most—and least—to describe is how the group helped me indirectly through my own ending as a worker at SPOP. I was retrenched last October because the agency was short of funds and could no longer afford a separate, and especially a part-time, intake worker. Though this made sense, I was terribly hurt, experiencing this “rejection” as a measure of my worth. I felt this was not only a matter of economy in a bad time but also a scapegoating of an old and experienced staff member who was considered too slow, too unproductive, too “involved” with her clients, and who was disliked by most of the young, newly trained staff. Yet it was not entirely unexpected. Looking back to the spring, I felt that dropping me had been planned long before the coming of a new director in the Fall. There had been much talk of not needing a separate intake worker. Flashes of negative attitudes toward me came to mind. I remembered, for example, a talk with our publicity worker. Sometime during the summer, he had mentioned in passing that in putting out a brochure about the agency they had thought of using a photo of me with a client, but vetoed it because they felt it was confusing. I looked too much like a client myself. People wanted to see that our staff was composed of younger persons.

I did not share this view. But later in our group, when Adrian commented on the value to him of having youth—he meant Carolyn and Marc—appreciate him, I felt this was true not only for him, but for me. It also gave me pause to consider that my clients, whom I felt preferred me because I was older, might indeed have

preferred a younger person, especially if the younger person was appreciating them.

I picked up "an attitude" on the part of our psychiatrist. Though I found him sensitive, thoughtful, steady, and skillful, I always had the feeling that I made him uneasy. He mostly managed to have short, half-hour conferences with me, although with younger staff he usually observed "the fifty minute hour." He couldn't understand why I needed over an hour, and sometimes two, for intake and screening interviews. His were usually only twenty minutes. The phrase, "I've got to go now," which he used both with me and with clients, was deliberate. Comments from clients implied that they felt that he just didn't seem to have the time "to get to know them," though they liked him anyway, as I did. Nowhere did I get the impression from him, as I had from our previous psychiatrist, that he valued my expertise, my long experience and know-how. But neither did the rest of staff. My participation was not solicited during the preparations for the news dispensation. Quite the contrary. I was left out of planning the new format of records, even of intake; and most denigrating of all, I had no part in planning for the staff seminars in the fall. I will not easily forget the first full staff meeting with students where our psychiatrist gave a talk on the medical and psychological aspects of aging, highlighting some of the problems and the discomfort of youth in working with older persons. Not once did he call on me for my comments or expertise; not once did he make use of my authority as an aging person. It was as if I were not in the room. Was it that he didn't think I had anything to offer? Or was this a planned avoidance because I was leaving?

During that late summer period, I had no Guiding Light Group to sustain and buoy my spirit because we were recessed from mid-August to early October. But we were in session at the time I was told of my retrenchment. In that awful period, I found the group (indirectly) and Marc and Carolyn (directly) helpful to me. Dear, dear Marc, I will never forget his immediate feeling connection when I told him of my "retrenchment." He said he felt a lump in his stomach, and he was ready to make

himself available to me, so that I might talk it over with him and lay my burden down.

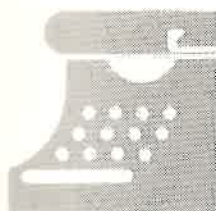
He also immediately offered me a position on the staff of Writers and Elders on a one-day-a-week basis and wrote me into his funding request. He and Carolyn and I would meet after the group meetings for quite a time; they both gave fully to comforting me and drawing out my anger and pain, supporting me and giving me perspective. When I mentioned becoming so forgetful that I let my pots boil over and burn, Marc's comment was, "You sure are burnt up."

I could not speak in the group itself of my pain and feelings of rejection in what I experienced. I would have felt too humiliated and ashamed and would have considered it "unprofessional." But the group was most therapeutic for me just the same. When Harry spoke of being robbed and of feeling "like a bag of sawdust opened up," I strongly identified and could express my indignation, and in the role of the "good angel," I could dramatize that it was not his fault. I could accept writing assignments which Marc gave the group, assignments such as "the hard task ahead" or "when I lay my burden down"—sounds like a black spiritual—and write these for myself at home, or share them later with Marc and Carolyn. Doing this writing also gave me insight as to how hard, how painful it is to expose one's pain in a group. The hard task for me was staying "in control" at SPOP through December—carrying new intake, ending with my clients, completing the recording of assignments and closed cases, while running what I experienced as the gauntlet of the staff's rejection of me.

My Washington Heights Group was also a source of comfort to me in this period. Its first post-summer meetings coincided with the beginning of my crisis period, and I was the more conscious of its value for me. This democratic group of elders has as its basic purpose the writing and discussion of papers on various subjects in order to "widen our horizons and to help us continue to grow intellectually and spiritually." No one is passive; every member is expected to research and write at least one paper during the year. Like the Guiding Light Group, the Washington

Heights Group has in its own way offered its members, myself included, courage and excitement. When Hilda R., who is over eighty and almost deaf, wrote a story about an antique rocking chair and a sofa talking to each other in an attic, her rueful humor about old age and its condition touched all of us. When the almost blind and deaf Bea R. wrote a paper about American and Russian relations, rote memory, and sheer guts to deliver it—the spirit overcoming the fear—that certainly helped to keep me struggling. In them I see "the view in winter," and it doesn't look too bad.

Well, it's now the end of May, and much has happened since last December. Carolyn and I have continued as co-leaders of the Guiding Light Group and have added two new members. We will be terminating at SPOP as a place to meet in the middle of July, and we will meet again in the Fall with the same group at a local church or library. It's fluid. It will be good to end at SPOP. I'm now on the staff of the Artists and Elders Project. With the decision to end at SPOP and with the kind of emphasis that comes from the atmosphere and attitude of the rest of the project's staff (they are mostly writers), our own emphasis in the group has been changing. There is a marked shift in expectation toward helping members of the group express themselves in writing whenever possible, and toward taping and transcribing what cannot be written. Somewhere along the way I've come to believe that this is what they—and I—want and need: to tell our stories, to give some order and affirmation to our lives. Helping each other overcome all that hinders us, helping each other describe how we cope with our aging, and offering each other some of our own solutions—this is what we are all about, this is the therapy we have to offer each other, even if some of us are "clients of a mental health agency." We each have our own unique odyssey to tell, and we each have a need to find our own "singing voice" again—or perhaps for the first time. But I have to remember that this is not China—so it takes repeated acts of faith and perceptive eyes and ears to tune in on our glimmerings and a joining of youth and age to overcome our fears and draw out our tales. ●



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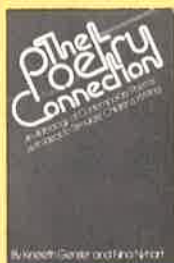
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