

**Paper for presentation to delegates at the 26<sup>th</sup> ESREA conference at COREP in Turin,  
Italy**

**Togetherness – in times of conflict can we re-connect with our creative selves?**

This is a discourse about the power of the Arts – poetry, music, dance, film, painting, sculpture, theatre, classic novels – to transform us in times of conflict such as we are experiencing today. It deals specifically with Literature, my subject as an adult tutor. The paper describes how a recent report, published in The United Kingdom a number of arts initiatives together in order to show how they can improve people's lives. The paper describes how I position myself as an auto/biographical researcher and how, through experience in adult education, I have been able to enable a number of adults to connect with their creative selves through engagement with Literature. I begin with a summary of the report's findings and my own interest in these findings. I continue with an account of how I became a tutor in adult education and how this developed into my becoming an exponent of how an appreciation of novels and poetry can have a beneficial effect on our lives. I provide evidence for this with references to a number of books and articles, and to two case studies taken from my work as an adult education tutor. I conclude by addressing the question asked with reference to this evidence.

**The Report**

The report, *Creative Health: The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, published in July 2017 and fronted by Grayson Perry, Professor Marmot and Lord Layard amongst many others, linked together a number of initiatives that had been taking place throughout The United Kingdom, linking people's health to a creative involvement with The Arts. It consisted of Ideas such as *Art on Prescription* to help people suffering mental health problems in Cambridgeshire; *Dance to Health* for older people in Cheshire, London and Oxfordshire; *Poems on the Underground* created by Judith Chernaik to offer people a moment of quiet reflection; *Music Therapy*, an example being a collaboration between The Royal Philharmonic Orchestra and Hull Integrated Stroke Service; and *The Reader's Shared Reading Scheme* in the North West, which showed an enhanced life purpose amongst participants as they shared the classics of World Literature.

These were just a few of the many art and culture initiatives mentioned in the report that help people to live well in their communities. Informing the report from the beginning is a powerful idea from the psychologist, Csikszentmihalyi, that an acquaintance with the Arts can generate what he calls 'flow' *Flow* (2002). 'Flow,' the report says, 'implies focused concentration, a sense of being outside reality, combined with a greater inner clarity and knowledge that a creative objective can be achieved, which carries its own reward.' *Creative Health*, p29 (2017). This is nowhere better evidenced than in the case of Dawn Solomon who is quoted in the report as undertaking Art Therapy. Dawn had had three courses of chemotherapy following heart and lung surgery: 'I did a huge violent drawing in art therapy./It's how I felt./How I've been feeling lately./Maybe something is changing but I need to deal with these feelings not bury them.' One of her drawings is a drawing of herself,

printed in the report, of pushing an enormous rock up a hill, and then standing at the top as if awaiting what might happen on the other side, pp140-1.

### **Auto/ethnography**

I first encountered Csikszentmihalyi as a teacher in the 90s when I was thinking about autotelic experience. This is from the Greek auto- self and telos- end and describes an activity or creative work having an end or purpose in itself. I had just finished reading *Flow* (2002) and was writing an article about how to identify the learning potential of children. At a pause in the writing I began watching an interview with bass guitarist Jack Bruce as he talked about the free form music style used by his band, Cream in the 1960s: ‘The only things set are the beginning and the end,’ he said, ‘In between is just improvised and we never know who’s going to take the lead and what’s going to happen next, it just happens.’ And this struck me as an example of ‘flow’ where the playing of the music is its own reward. This ‘autotelic’ experience is something that we can all find in our daily lives, whether we call it ‘flow’, or an ‘epiphany’ as I tried to define in my paper at last year’s conference in Copenhagen, *Can books heal us?* (2017).

I will return to the idea of ‘flow’ later. Meanwhile, in their book *Using Biographical Methods in Social Research* (2009) Merrill and West have indicated that our life histories can be used as a tool for research. Following this idea, my experience in adult education has shown me that adult students can acquire immense benefit from a guided discussion of reading Literature. I wanted to research this and my story begins when I was teaching Literature in summer schools at Grey Friars, Adult Community College in the 1980s. The college which grew into a first class adult education centre between 1983 and 2005 enabled me to further a lifelong interest in Literature and develop it as a resource for adults to draw upon and use in their post school lives. In their book, *Grey Friars, Colchester’s Forgotten Corner* (2014) Gurney J.D. and Skinner A.V. attest to the success of this establishment in providing not only Further and Higher Education courses but also a space for those who just wanted to reconnect with books they had loved when they were young or wanted to visit or revisit now that they were older. There I taught a number of courses on subjects like *The Detective in Fiction*, *George Eliot*, and *The Short Story*.

I would say that this experience was a kind of turning point in my life. Merrill and West use the word *epiphanies* (p28) to describe these ‘interactional moments which leave marks on people’s lives’ and which can be both positive and negative. Looking back at this now I can see the work at Grey Friars as a step in the positive process that took me away from teaching children and towards an understanding of the needs of adults as learners. At the end of the third chapter Merrill and West ask if there are any particular metaphors that attract you in considering aspects of your life history and one that attracts me is the idea of our lives as pieces of a mosaic.

A piece of my life’s mosaic, to extend the metaphor, was working for a master’s degree. In 1993 I was looking at how adults learned science in order to be able to teach it themselves. I found that In Allen Tough’s work on learning *The Adults Learning Projects* (1979) he defines

three groups of adult learners, the goal orientated, the activity orientated, and the learning orientated who viewed learning as an end in itself. My conclusions were that this new learning rested to some extent on motivation and self-direction and that these students were generally goal orientated. It was, however, the third group with whom I became concerned when I left classroom teaching and joined the WEA as a tutor in 2007.

The WEA has a tradition of imparting what we might call ‘really useful knowledge’, a phrase that emerged at the end of the C19 to describe various non-practical disciplines, such as politics, philosophy and literature, which were taught to its students; that is, not knowledge to be used for career goals or as a social activity, but as an end in itself. This is Alan Tough’s third group, the learning orientated. It is the reason why the working man sought a new kind of education in the post war world of the 1920s. Lawrence Goldman in his essay on The First Students of the WEA in *A Ministry of Enthusiasm* (2003) speaks of R.H.Tawney’s classes where he read to them Walt Whitman’s ‘Where Lilacs Last in the Dooryard Bloomed’ (p49). ‘This,’ says Goldman, ‘moves a student to give us his favourite passage from the same source: “Pioneers! Oh Pioneers!” Another follows, quoting from a poem from Matthew Arnold that evidently had bitten him...and for some of us as we sat listening a new door opens.’

At this point in my argument I will compare the idea of a new door opening to the ‘epiphanies’ which I defined in my paper, *Can books heal us?* (2017) as the means by which reading Literature can improve our mental health. An epiphany can also be referred to as an ‘aha’ moment, defined in Merriam Webster as ‘a moment of sudden realisation, inspiration or insight...’ Returning to my auto/biographical theme, this can be a moment in one’s life when things change, such as the turning point when I realised that I might make a good adult education tutor. These moments can occur at any time. In a research study by the artist, Alice Tuppen-Corps in which I participated recently, she asked the participants to consider threshold points in their lives that have acted as triggers for change. This involved them in being given a number of prompts to recall significant life events. In one of the prompts the artist asked the participants to take a walk outside and recall a significant birthday. I did this and I remembered events which followed on from my fortieth. One of these was a visit to Ireland under my own steam and I kept a journal which was an account of travels and meetings there, ending with attendance at a concert by Martin Hayes: “I don’t remember being so inspired by a live performance before - his fiddle playing is extraordinary and it brought such appreciation from the audience...” The fiddle playing was the ‘aha’ moment, when all that had been contained in that Irish visit, *that life after reaching forty could be infinitely pleasurable, rather than an ending*, became clear to me.

From ‘aha’ moments we might proceed to a further definition of the ‘ahness of things’, that which in Japanese culture is termed ‘mono no aware’. This idea indicates a deep feeling or pathos of things which resides in their transience, ie. the falling of cherry blossoms, the changes of the moon, the absence of friends or lovers. For Motoori Norinaga, an Eighteenth Century Japanese scholar, mono no aware was a form of knowledge and he traced this back to *The Tale of Genji*, the classic Japanese novel of the Heian period (923-1014). In the story Genji tries to win back the lover who has renounced him because of his waning feelings for

her. His failure to achieve this is enacted against a background of the autumn season and the setting moon. This evokes a scene of exquisite pathos in her rejection of him, and Genji leaves before daylight, his sleeves along the way made wet with dew and with tears. The story is found in Ivan I Morris's *The World of the Shining Prince* (1994).

One will at once see the connection with my Literature classes here and with my promulgation of the idea of 'flow'. We are now in an age far removed from Tawney's working man, and indeed the majority of student classes in the arts in my WEA experience now tend to be women, but when the importance of reading novels and poetry is looked into carefully, it can be shown that the effect on adults, both commentators and students of literature, can be profound. I now hope to show this with reference to a number of books and articles and two case studies from my teaching.

### **Reference Material**

I think that the definitive book on the value of reading Literature in our modern age – Plato and Dante were referenced in my paper *Can books heal us?* (2017) - still needs to be written, although James Wood's *The Nearest Thing to Life* (2015) might be a good start. Wood prefaces his study with the famous quote from Georg Eliot on the subject, which I referred to in the paper, and then goes on to discourse on his theme of what makes Literature important to us. In the excellent final chapter Wood meditates on his leaving of Durham for London after university, and then his relative exile in America as a writer and lecturer. He refers to W.G. Sebald's novel, *The Emigrants* (1996) and how the author's own homesickness became the homesickness of the novel's protagonist, Dr Selwyn, for the village in Lithuania which he left at the age of 7. As I was reading Wood on this, I was reminded of my own homesickness, when I had left Liverpool, where I was born, for London University and this still resonates. When I learned, for instance, that the Liverpool poet, Roger McGough, was giving a reading in the small town where I now live I was the first in the queue for a ticket!

Articles on life-affirming experiences with Literature are now falling over themselves to be heeded to. Alice O'Keefe, writing in the Observer (7<sup>th</sup> October 2017), says that Ishiguro's recent Nobel Prize win reminds us that novels still ask the biggest questions. O'Keefe, literary critic and organiser of books events for the Brighton literary festival, says that writing and reading novels are activities that should take place 'in opposition to the frantic thoughtless rush of modern life'. Literary fiction authors, however, she says are difficult to sell unless they are talking about how to write or taking part in a discussion panel. Personally, I think that the reading of novels needs to be done in the same way as listening to a piece of music or looking at a painting, that is, *reflectively*. I followed up O'Keefe's article by turning to my copy of *Never Let Me Go* (2005) which I think is Ishiguro's finest work and I re-read the final chapter: Kathy, the book's narrator, whose two friends have been 'finished' as donors of body organs which have been harvested for other people, reflects:

'I was talking to one of my donors a few days ago who was complaining about how memories, even your most precious ones, fade surprisingly quickly. But I don't go along with

that. The memories I value most, I don't see them ever fading. I lost Ruth, then I lost Tommy, but I won't lose my memories of them.'

This is one of the biggest questions. How do we deal with the inherent sadness in our own fading memory and that of our loved ones? Ishiguro with his Japanese ancestry was very aware of the pathos inherent in ideas like the falling cherry blossoms referred to in *The Story of Genji* above.

There are more examples: 'An author with a fear of her own feelings finds a cure in books,' writes novelist, Lara Feigel, in the Observer (5<sup>th</sup> May 2017) about the writer Yiyun li. Her memoir, *Dear Friend, from My Life I Write to You in Your Life*, is about reading as a mode of survival and includes references to writers such as Elizabeth Bowen, Ivan Turgenev, William Trevor, with whom she struck up a literary friendship, and Katherine Mansfield. It is Mansfield's phrase from her journals that gives her book its title. Another example is to be found in the opening speech of the second international literature festival of Odessa reported in The Observer (2<sup>nd</sup> December 2016). In an era of fear and division, fiction plays a vital role in dramatizing difference and encouraging empathy, says Amanda Michalopolu. 'Nothing that is human is foreign to literature.' Using examples such as the refugee, Odysseus, the mad Don Quixote, and the crazed lover, Werther, she says that literature shows us that difference can be creative. Anthropology, psychoanalysis and sociology, she says, all offer theoretical descriptions for what a novel teaches by example, using ideas such as guilt, jealousy, despair violence, anxiety, irrationality, and the fear of death. 'The more education falls into decline because of a lack of imagination,' she continues, 'the more literature is called upon to serve as *another form of education*.' (My italics.)

Azar Nafisi is an author and teacher of adults, who uses Literature as a powerful tool to transform the lives of her students. Nafisi is now a Visiting Professor at John Hopkins University, Baltimore, USA, and her memoir, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (2003) is a record of her time in Iran as a teacher. In this role she was endeavouring in some way to change the lives of women who had been caught up in the repressive regime of the clerics which had followed the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. The veil, for instance, had become obligatory for women after the revolution and Nafisi describes her doomed attempts to resist the wearing of it while she taught at the University of Tehran. Without wishing to go too deeply into the political situation of women in Iran, one only has to look at Nafisi's description of the behaviour of the morality squads and how they broke up a gathering of six girls and one boy (p 72-3) with guns, and the resultant virginity tests, confessions and punishment beatings, to know that it is dire. Her book describes how as a reaction to such prejudices against women a number of female students would secretly visit her house in order to study English Literature.

There are a number of examples she gives of what they read - *Lolita*, *The Great Gatsby*, *Daisy Miller*, and I will take *Daisy Miller* (1879) by Henry James as the main example from her book of the power of literature to enhance the well-being of her students. Daisy is an attractive American socialite, visiting Europe with her mother at the end of the C19 and staying in Geneva where she meets an American, Winterbourne, who is staying with his aunt. As her contacts with the surrounding society increase, Winterbourne observes how Daisy

naively cultivates increasingly flirtatious relationships with ‘gentlemen’. This is looked upon askance by the custodians of the society in which she moves and, although she is warned about her behaviour, she continues to flout the tradition that women should behave in a demure manner. Eventually this causes her downfall. One evening in Rome Daisy is out fraternising alone with Mr Giovanelli, a good looking Italian playboy. Daisy wants to see the Colosseum by moon light, and it is known that to go there at such an hour one risks catching ‘Roman fever’, a form of malaria. She takes the risk, however, returns to her mother, falls ill and dies.

The moral of course is that women risk all if they challenge convention. Nafisi says that of all the novels the group of nine women studied with her, this is the one her students identified with most. One of the students tells her later that she has secretly named her daughter, Daisy: ‘Why Daisy?’ Nafisi asks. ‘Don’t you remember Daisy Miller?’ the student replies, ‘Haven’t you heard that **if** you give your child a name with a meaning she will become like her namesake? I want my daughter to be like I never was – like Daisy. You know, courageous.’

\*In a recent newspaper report I read that Vida Movahed was arrested for standing on a telephone box in Tehran, bareheaded and holding her veil up on a stick. (The Guardian 30<sup>th</sup> January 2018)

### **Case Studies**

Returning to my metaphor of the mosaic, I will now use two case studies from my adult education practice to support the idea that togetherness enables the creative outcome which was envisaged in the Arts report.

The first is based on an Observation Report produced by the WEA course organiser for Southern Region. It is about a course I taught called, *A Matter of Money*, which I had devised with a group of students at a centre in the East of England. The course comprised eight novels dealing with the subject of money from the C19 to the present day. The observed session covered a novel called, *The House of Mirth*, by the American novelist, Edith Wharton:

**“The session used digital images to discuss Edith Wharton and put in context her life and connections which form a basis for discussion of her writing. Students were well prepared and engaged positively with opinions and quotations. One student used expertise to give a prepared presentation on the economic position of women in the USA at the time. This ‘promoted some controversial debate’.**

**“The session included a quiz devised to test student knowledge of the plot but written to stimulate debate as questions were designed to ‘provoke reactions’. The feedback on the quiz was described as ‘well-managed’. Students were encouraged to confront and appreciate issues such as financial difficulties for women in the USA and also class differences which impacted upon the lives of people at the time. Everyone participated and the whole session was described as ‘lively, stimulating and included lots of laughter... and respect for other people’s opinions.’**

**“One student with poor hearing said that she appreciated the efforts made by the tutor and group to ensure she was involved. Another said that ‘It is the highlight of my week.’ The group described itself as a fairly academic one which ‘really thrive(s) on the educational stimulation’ provided by the course.”**

The second case study is concerned with the development of a group of students in the East Midlands. I had taken over the group from another tutor and numbers had fallen as the tutor had been popular. The brief was to teach poetry.

I began with *The Poetry of War*, a course I had taught before but which I developed to suit the group. I have some interest in how groups evolve and used ideas for this based on the work of Helen Cowie and Jean Rudduck in *Co-operative Groupwork: An Overview* (1988). The emphasis here is very much on ‘co-operative’ and, to bring myself back to the auto/biographical element of the paper, I have used the technique often in my work with the WEA: In an article about the transition from classroom teacher to adult education tutor I say that ‘Throughout our learning journey from child to adult, the importance of lived engagement with the subject cannot be overstated,’ CPD Update, issue 20. The ‘lived engagement’ with the poetry classes was the group discussion and the reading aloud of the poems we were looking at.

In the next course *An Introduction to Modern Poetry*, the creative aspect of the engagement with learning was now very much in evidence, the course involving negotiation with the students. For example, one student had expressed a strong desire to read T.S.Eliot. I had always had an appreciation of Eliot’s ‘fragmentary’ approach to poetry and so I decided to read with the class *The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock*, each group taking a part in the delivery. I then discussed with them Eliot’s *Four Quartets* (1943). The course happens to be run not far from Little Gidding which gave one of the quartets its name because Eliot had his ‘timeless moment’ there. I went to visit the place and, sitting in the small church where Eliot had sat, felt an immediate link with the ideas of ‘epiphany’ and the ‘ahness of things’ already mentioned. I was able to share this with the class in a moment of mutual satisfaction:

‘We shall not cease from exploration/And the end of all our exploring/Will be to arrive where we started/And know the place for the first time.’

The WEA has a system whereby at the end of each course the tutor produces a report based on Student Learning Records and *Tell Us About It* forms, so in order to support the argument of the paper I will refer to and quote from them. I discussed this with both my line manager and with the students and was given their agreement to refer to these records in the case study:

**On the *Tell Us About It* forms over half the class said that it had improved the health and well-being of both themselves and the class. This is a selection of comments from the SLRs:**

**‘Reading aloud and group discussion of poets’ work and biographies aided understanding to a very great degree.’**

**‘Excellent – exciting, informative – quite a lot of interaction which the class gains from...love reading aloud.’**

**‘It has given me more confidence, especially joining in the group readings. It has been great for my wellbeing in general...’**

**‘[I] thoroughly enjoyed the class. I am not very good at joining in discussion in large groups but that’s just the way I am and what I prefer. I still appreciate being part of such an inspiring course.’**

**‘It is good to share comments in the small groups organised by [the tutor] and I’m enthused to look into poets and their work more at home.’**

The comments showed that the group methods I used had also been a factor in their enjoyment.

## **Conclusion**

There is I think an amount of evidence to show that reading Literature enhances our health and wellbeing in a significant way, both in the case studies given and the books and articles gathered. Peter Clough talks about how we are always making sense of our lives through stories *Narratives and Fictions in Educational Research* (2002: P.13) and I find that telling the story of my adult education experience in this manner makes sense of mine. Similarly Kim Etherington in *Becoming a Reflexive Researcher* (2004: p19) speaks of locating our research question within ourselves. The parliamentary report on the Arts appeared to confirm the thinking I had previously done for *Can books heal us?* (2017) and I looked for ideas which supported it in in books, articles, and students’ responses referred to above. The connection with our creative selves relates to the activity of reading, discussing, rethinking and even changing our ideas as a result of our engagement with Literature. We might call this ‘flow’, ‘epiphany’, ‘mono no aware’ or an ‘aha’ moment – whatever it is, it is a moment of intense realisation, like Dawn Solomon in *The Arts for Health and Wellbeing*, after her art therapy, waiting at the top of the hill for whatever will happen next.

We have always lived in times of conflict, whether it is the macrocosm of international warfare and national disagreement, or the microcosm of sparring family members and internal struggles with the self. *The Arts for Health and Wellbeing* report indicates that creative expression of our cultural experience can help us to come to terms with the pathos inherent in our lives, and the moments of happiness, our understanding of human suffering, and even death. As I hope to have shown in this paper, there are links that can be made between the report and adult education. At last year’s conference Hazel Reid led a round table discussion and I was struck by her reference to Jean Luc Godard’s statement: ‘Sometimes reality is too complex. Stories give it form.’ This mosaic of time spent in adult education is my story.

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