

'Give Them Us!' - The Arts in Dementia Care

John Killick

John Killick was for 30 years a teacher in schools, further and adult education. He became a freelance writer in 1989. After residencies in a prison and a hospice, he settled to work with older people in 1992, when he was appointed writer-in-residence for Westminster Health Care, a part-time post he still holds. In 1993 he began to work with people with dementia, and has concentrated on that area ever since. In 1998 he was also appointed Research Fellow in Communication Through the Arts at the Dementia Services Development Centre, University of Stirling, Scotland.

Amongst his non-dementia publications are Between the Lines, Between the Bars: National Anthology of Prison Writing (Other Voices, 1994), Windhorse: Poems (Rockingham, 1996), and Writing for Self-Discovery (co-author Myra Schneider, republished Chrysalis, 2002).

In the dementia field he has given many presentations and had numerous publications in professional journals. Two books of poems have been published by The Journal of Dementia Care: You are Words and Openings (the second a collaboration with the French photographer Carl Cordonnier). He is editing a series of books, packs and videos on the Arts and Dementia Care which are appearing from the University of Stirling. He is co-author with Kate Allan of the book, Communication and the Care of People with Dementia, published by Open University Press in 2001.



Oliver Sacks has spoken of 'the undiminished possibility of reintegration by art, communion and touching the human spirit'. (Sacks, 1985, pp37-38). This was in the context of the many 'damaged'

people with whom he has worked, including those with dementia. The fact is that the majority of people with the condition are nearing the end of their lives, and perhaps experience the need to try to put their many and varied experiences in order. This may be what a woman in a nursing home was alluding to when she said to me, "The arts is all that's left. Give them us!"

So the artistic expression may be especially valuable for people with dementia because they are 'in extremis'. It may also be needed as an alternative channel of communication. Many art forms do not require verbal ability for their successful practice, and this can be a positive advantage for individuals who are experiencing losses in that area.

A further characteristic of the arts, which suggests their appropriateness for offering to people with dementia, is their reliance on the sensual and emotional aspects of experience. Many people with the condition experience a degree of disinhibition which allows the feelings free range. Faith Gibson makes this point eloquently thus:-

Dementia strips people down to the essence of their being and frees them to be in more direct touch with their emotions. They communicate with greater authenticity than our customary reliance on controlled emotional expression.

(Gibson, 1990, p. 6)

Fourthly, I have noticed a quality of imaginative longing on the part of some individuals, and this needs to find an outlet. One man articulated this as follows:-

GLIMPSES

To see what is beautiful
To hear what is beautiful
They don't know what is beautiful
All these young people
Good men, nice boys, fine chaps -
They are too busy to see
It'll be a good bit longer
Before you see
What you want to see
But they don't want to see
What in some queer way
They are anxious to see
We see it very rarely
But the difference is
We are trying to see!

(Killick and Cordonnier, 2000)

At their most basic level, the arts offer opportunity for meaningful activity. So many people with dementia simply have nothing to do. It seems as if all the things they used to do, even straight forward tasks and those including personal care, have been taken away from them, because they are no longer able to carry them out effectively or safely, or because those around them have deemed that would be the case if they were allowed to attempt them. The arts give the possibility for achievements, and empowerment through successful realisation of an ideal. One man put it to me as follows:-

THE BLUE FAR YONDER

In the skies up high
With the clouds below you -
That's where I'd like to be.
With the birds,
The little sparrows,
But I'll remain a man.
It's an attraction,
It's the spaces
That we can't reach.
I was up there one day
And got the sensation
I didn't want to come down.
I'd rather be
A creature of the air
Than of the earth.

(Killick and Cordonnier, 2000)

If, as I do, you feel that the above constitute compelling reasons why the arts should be offered to people with dementia as a matter of course, why is the provision so tentative and patchy? As an arts officer in Britain charged with finding out what is going on in this area I have no doubt that we have a situation where there are a few oases of excellence surrounded by deserts of neglect, and I doubt whether the picture is more encouraging in other countries.

Money must be one answer. The arts are a comparatively new aspect of dementia care, so they are untried, and there seem inappropriate funds to carry out even so-called 'essential' tasks let alone those which have hitherto been regarded as 'fringe' activities. Lack of training of staff in facilities is another. Where professionals are sparse on the ground others who might be tempted to 'have a go' have few examples to draw on to provide them with encouragement. At Dementia Services Development Centre, Stirling University, we are trying to bypass this drawback by producing books and videos as examples of best practice.

And there is the culture of 'can't do' which still applies to all aspects of dementia care: the idea that the clients need to be offered as little as possible in the way of opportunities because it would be a waste of resources. Here the 'psychosocial' model, represented in Britain by the ideas of Kitwood (Kitwood, 1997), sets out to counteract the worst excess of the 'medical' model, as represented by just about everybody in positions of authority. The evidence of the projects we have run from Stirling covering a variety of art-forms, is that many more people 'can do' in the arts than anyone ever imagined. James McKillop from Glasgow had never taken anything other than family snaps, but since diagnosis he has proved himself a first rate photographer. He may be an exception, but modest achievements seem to be in the reach of many.

To end with here is a poem by Eileen, who had been an art teacher and artist, and since coming to the dementia unit proved herself as inventive with words as previously she had been with paint:

AN EYE-SHOT IN SUMMER

A little eyesight in the middle
Some of it retained for a purpose.
I can see a sleeve of purple.
And then there is yellow in the sky.
The trees are good and dry.
Young and barking.
It's a wonderful setting,
This whole melting scene.
It is opening or seizing?
The view - it's got the ring of expand.

(Benson and Killick, 2002)

References

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