

Creating Caring Communities: Finding Meaning in Later Life



By Gail Noppe-Brandon, MA, MPA, MSW

Twenty-years ago in a college classroom, and then later at the Children's Aid Society, I developed Find Your Voice (FYV), a method that helps people create, re-create and enact their stories. FYV encourages clients to consider alternate plot lines and resolutions to their [own] forward-going narratives. I have led hundreds of participants through this exercise, and know well that telling our stories is a basic human need, and a necessity for healing.

Last year I conducted a Find Your Voice Workshop at The Caring Community, a NYC based agency that provides services to seniors. Beginning with a core group of members, I discovered that these seniors had led complex lives, although they were all too often treated like simpletons. For example, Jim had been a psychotherapist before developing dementia and Marcella had travelled the world and collected art before succumbing to major depression. It was hoped that the FYV Workshop would strengthen the participant's ability to interact with others, as part of an effort to reduce their isolation and resistance to services. It was also intended to provide a vehicle to help them to reflect upon the events of their lives, both for the inherent therapeutic value of reminiscence and for the sense-making opportunity that reflection offers. Additionally, as 'dialogue' is sorely lacking from the lives of many seniors, the playwriting format would allow the participants to engage in reading one another's work aloud, together.

Seniors have a large wellspring of memories to draw upon; to help them voice these, we began with a free-write in response to a photograph, which narrowed the field and jogged their memories. I then posited a series of in-depth questions that led them to the articulation of two potential characters with one potential conflict. The free-writes were then shaped in to ideas for short two-character plays, which were re-written many times in response to the group's feedback. This process of revision encouraged the participants to develop a degree of craft surpassing that of private, uncrafted diary writing, and the development of this craft required discipline, thus heightening brain activity. Similarly, the workshop process of offering and listening to helpful feedback boosted interactive social skills. We also held a concluding activity; a public reading of the plays to provide closure for the group.

At first, I was struck by how little the participants knew about one other's lives – despite dining together at the agency for months, or even years. The mainstay of their conversation had been their medical conditions, the weather and the food – none of which was very positive! I asked questions about where each person had grown up, their families of origin, their schooling and the work they went on to do. The diversity, commonalities and depth of experience in the responses were notable. As we shared our stories, the speakers – and the listeners – morphed in to their best selves, listening with increasingly greater attentiveness, stifling outbursts, and speaking to one another as peers rather than as incorrigible children. I modeled nonjudgmental questioning and responding, and assured them that no one would ever

be made to feel that their responses were ridiculous in any way. By the end of the second session, they had already started to become a higher functioning group. Their free writing had elicited deeply personal stories: a pregnant woman trapped with an unloving husband in Iran, a man leaving his wife and speaking about their dead baby for the first time, a promiscuous sixty-year-old woman waiting to learn whether she is HIV positive. These play ideas were drawn from the lives of the writers, but I encouraged them to free themselves of biographical accuracy.

The process of developing the plays allowed the seniors to work through painful memories, and challenged them to think like professionals, rather than people of diminished capacity. Creating characters who were neither all good nor all bad, also allowed them to achieve greater understanding of the characters who had populated their real stages, whether an abusive husband, an unloving parent, or an inconsiderate friend. It was clear to everyone who encountered the work, that a creative, problem-solving activity, with a strong self-reflective component, raised the bar on the meta-cognitive and social skills of these aging people...and that they enjoyed the challenge.

It was also a challenge for me, as the seniors had not been learners for a long time, and kept threatening to quit. However, over six months they each completed a solid, two-character, five to ten page play. Friendships were forged outside of the classroom, and new skills were acquired; in fact, one participant began publishing editorials almost weekly in a local paper. As with all of the other groups I have led, these elderly participants began to advocate for one another, reading one another's work with respect and admiration, and massaging one another's egos after I offered particularly challenging feedback. The final presentation of the plays featured professional actors who were happy to donate their time, and to be offered scarce, age-appropriate roles. An unprecedented turnout of over fifty seniors assembled to hear them. This elderly audience sat spellbound, and even remained for a Q&A at the conclusion. During that discussion, they expressed awe about the work, disbelief that these were first plays, and an ability to relate deeply to such stories as Don's struggle with the way he'd left his father's home fifty year's ago, and Annette's attempt to make sense of her sexuality as a seventy-year old. After the applause, one writer said, "How talented we feel today, when at our age...triumphs are few." I encouraged everyone present, not just the Workshop participants, to continue respectfully sharing their stories over lunch each day... not just to come to The Caring Community, but to become the caring community.

About the Author

Gail Noppe-Brandon, MA, MPA, MSW, has been featured on PBS, authored *Find Your Voice* (Heinemann Press, 2004), founded Find Your Voice, Inc. (www.findyourvoice.us), and works part-time at the Fifth Avenue Center for Counseling & Psychotherapy.