

Reflections on Ageing and Creativity – Mila Harter

Keynote Address, September 9th, 2016

Good morning everyone. It is my honour to be here at this conference on Creativity and Ageing, and to be speaking to you on the same topic. I do this with some apprehension and nervousness as I know that the audience includes people with expertise in related areas. At the same time, I am eager to share my particular experiences and thoughts with you.

I have a background of working as a pharmacist, then moving into public administration and career counselling. Coupled with changing careers, I have changed residences on many, many occasions and, in the process, moved from Africa, to the U.K. and to Canada.

Another big change for me was when I stopped working several years later. The commonly used term is "retirement" but it is not a term that I like to use as it implies a withdrawal, or having less involvement. I prefer to simply call it a transition into another phase of life. This transition was a daunting one, even though I had stopped work at a time of my choice. The structure in my life literally seemed to disintegrate, my network of people shrank, leaving me disorientated, and I struggled to find my bearings.

I gradually realized that I had time and energy to indulge in some kind of new activity and only I could make it happen. So, I joined Amnesty International as I am interested in this type of activism. I also felt the need for some additional involvement that would give me a creative outlet, knowing I would be stepping out of my comfort zone and finally investing some energy into a long-neglected area of my life.

It was at this time that I found out about At This Age, a group of seniors that meet weekly under the banner of Creative Expressions Activities. I decided to join, and having attended the program for 2 years, I am now an alumnus of the Vernon group. The program, as you may know, was conceived by Dr. Gottlieb-Tanaka, the Chair of the Society for Arts in Dementia Care. She also facilitates the sessions using her extensive expertise and knowledge.

The At This Age program became a diving board for my involvement in the creative arts. So I would like to share with you the benefits I derived from being part of this group. When I joined, individuals in this group were not diagnosed with dementia, although as time progressed, we had new members who were. Whatever anyone's situation, the group always accepted and welcomed each new person.

As an aside, I am familiar with the impacts of dementia. My 87 year old mother lives in a retirement home not far from here. She moved here from Toronto about 6 years ago and in the last 4 years, her memory and cognitive skills have declined. Although she functions well physically and socially in her living environment, she cannot cope with her financial and legal matters anymore. So I have stepped in to take care of this for her. Because of her cognitive decline, our communication is often fraught with misunderstanding and I am trying to develop and exercise as much patience as I can when I deal with her. I encourage her to participate in the weekly craft classes among other things, and I absolutely love the things she makes as a result.

The At This Age weekly sessions involved a smorgasbord of activities such as writing, painting, collage, making things, music, scriptwriting, acting and singing, discussions on a variety of topics. We also took our activities outdoors and went on day and overnight trips, hiked in Kalamalka Park or walked along the beach. The activities were far more than I can list here.

Participating in these sessions was a freeing and enjoyable learning experience, a first for me, an immersion into various creative art forms. I explored, took risks without too much concern about the acceptability of what I was creating. The process has given me a deeper appreciation of all creative expressions however elementary the level, and I realize that something special happens when an individual engages in the act of creating whether at home, on stage, in print, and so on. Creativity, I have discovered, has no bounds in how it manifests itself if given the opportunity.

An additional benefit was the camaraderie and the relationships I formed within the group. I valued the diverse points of view expressed by other members. I enjoyed their personalities, the revelations about their backgrounds and life experiences, and the unexpected contributions they made to the sessions. There was humour and laughter, sadness, reflection, minor conflicts that were resolved. I cherished the freedom to express myself in a climate of trust, without fear of being judged.

This regular social interaction gave me the gift of friends, a group of women with whom I continue to socialize. I cannot say enough about the importance of having social networks at my age. They enrich my life in ways I cannot measure, and I know that my overall well-being depends to a large extent on these networks. They support me, enlarge my worldview, show me different ways of approaching life's challenges, and give me my sense of belonging. Through the program, I also began to know and appreciate the local community at large, something I could not do previously as I mostly worked out of town.

After 2 years of regular participation, I felt the time had come to move on. I now sing in a choir which consists of women and men mostly younger than I am. I have the challenges of developing my singing technique, continually learning new repertoire and music theory, learning how to pronounce Italian and sometimes German words, performing, and becoming comfortable with a new group culture.

We have all looked critically at ourselves in the mirror at some point and felt pangs of despair at our ageing skin, greying hair and sagging muscles. Well, disconcerting as the visual image can be, the natural process of ageing won't go away. We are stuck with it. All we can do is to make the best of what we have left.

Reconciling to our ageing bodies and dealing with the illnesses that often crop up are not easy tasks. There can often be isolation and loneliness, and as time goes by, the loss of friends or family members. The statistic is that 1/3rd of seniors suffer from depression and anxiety. And, of course, the spectre of getting dementia looms large. The picture appears bleak.

However, I do not feel that because my body has aged, that I am worth less than when I was younger. I do not feel that because I am older now, that my spirit has been diminished in any way. I am still that younger person at heart and I know for a fact, that we as older people possess a wealth of inner resources and have so much to contribute.

Allowing creativity to have a place in our lives in whatever form we choose, is a way to tap into those inherent qualities. In doing so, our lives can only be enhanced, our mental and emotional states can only benefit. We develop purpose and friendships which are so necessary. Involvement in creative activities is known to stave off dementia for awhile. So, make the time and find the space.

We can bring creative solutions to everyday problems, and the creative aspect into our daily life rituals, but involving oneself in at least one creative activity on a regular and ongoing basis allows us to reap countless benefits as we age.

As older individuals, we still have important things to say, do, create. We are, all of us without exception, creative beings. We are blazing trails in the things we accomplish and how we do things, in our "can do" attitudes. Witness the continuing

many successes of older people in the arts. They exist in our communities and families; never mind the famous accomplished icons of our time.

My husband who is a classically trained musician has, at the age of 72, just joined a community jazz band and is wrestling with the basics of the Jazz idiom. A cousin of mine recently had a showing of her beautiful watercolour works. She is in her late seventies.

People in their later years everywhere are rediscovering meaning and purpose through the arts. Even for a small town like Vernon, the opportunities abound. I am amazed at the number of posters at the local library for pottery, sculpture and painting groups, writing and story-telling circles, dance, fibre arts, music groups of all kinds, film-making workshops, etc.

In closing, I would like to say that we are in the midst of totally changing the paradigm of what it means to age, and we are creating a blueprint of how to age in healthy ways. The precedent for integrating the creative arts into our lives has already been set by those before us, and the benefits of doing so speak for themselves. There's really not much more to be said, except that we owe it to ourselves most of all, to do the same.

Thank you.