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Conference Report: May 30-31, 2008



The Third International Conference on Creative Expression, Communication and Dementia brought together speakers from Canada, Australia, and the U.S., to the Emily Carr Institute in the beautiful surroundings of Granville Island in Vancouver, British Columbia. The conference focussed on a multi-disciplinary presentation of art and science, and was hosted by the Society for the Arts in Dementia Care (also known as CECD, or Creative Expression, Communication and Dementia, established in 2005) and the Canadian Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction (INMHA). The aim of the conference was to bridge the gap that exists between researchers, therapists, psychologists and gerontologists, and continue to develop informed strategies, therapies, methods and activities that work.

Conference events included lectures, discussions, a gala dinner with introductions and awards for all of the speakers' accomplishments, a concert and an art show. **Dr. Dalia Gottlieb-Tanaka**, the conference's inspired and driven master mind and organizer, presented a wide variety of specialists with different perspectives on the arts and sciences in dementia care. Topics ranged from popular melodies to neuropeptides, through communal humming, deep political analysis, eloquent personal stories, inspiring spiritual advocacy, clowns with a mission in hospitals in Australia, and a new healing method for depressed elders that seems to work. The common thread was a passionate commitment to the improvement of the quality of life of people with dementia, and for all of us who share the experience of life with them.

With the title "**Mindscapes**", art from Canada, Australia, Israel and the USA was presented to the public, and reflected the subtle world of similarities and individuality in the paintings, drawings, mixed media and rug weaving from seniors with dementia. It was all there: it was eye opening, inspiring, intellectual, intuitive and personal.

My thoughts keep going back to the lecture of medical anthropologist Dr. **Janice Graham**, who delineated the ties between government, pharmaceutical industry and the medical complex, in a precise and passionate way. These ties, according to her ongoing study, is the main obstacle to renewal in national health care, where medication is still the central paradigm. Her driven and rapid-fire attack on the institutions that seem to have monopolized health care in Canada reminded me of Michael Moore's sharp and deliberate fury. When I asked for a transcript of her lecture, I was told to wait for publication of her research, which must be imminent and will create a ripple effect in the Canadian establishment.

Occupational therapist, dementia consultant, and chair of the Society for the Arts in Dementia Care Australia **Hilary Lee** demonstrated the dedication and commitment that exists on her

continent for the well-being of people with dementia, and the search for therapies that integrate personality and cultural background. She introduced the "Spark of Life" method, which is inspired by non-western approaches to spirituality, and a Buddhist reverence for the divine in every person. In the words of "Spark of Life" founder **Jane Verity**, it is "*not a cure, but a gentle, practical and celebratory approach to human relationships and communication, dedicated to uplifting the spirit of people with dementia*". It is based on "unlocking" the spirit within the patient, through a specially designed program for caregivers at home and in care facilities. This is accomplished through playfulness and unyielding respect for the individual.



Australia's most senior and highly regarded practitioner and advocate of music therapy, Dr. **Ruth Bright**, sang and played the piano in a demonstration that evoked the feelings and memories that families share in their favorite songs. She emphasized personal contact, knowledge of culture and background and empathy. In her lecture titled *Coping with Change* she spoke about her start as an art therapist and the small miracles she witnessed with her accordion in children's hospitals forty years ago. A true healer, she continues to advocate for the importance of music in dementia care, with lectures in universities in Canada and the U.S., and her own private practice in dementia care facilities in Sydney.

Yale Professor of dramaturgy and dramatic criticism Dr. **Elinor Fuchs** brought a personal story of caring for her mother with Alzheimer's disease, which she published in her book *Making an Exit*, in 2005. Her professional training and experience with theater helped her with the acceptance of the shifts in her mother's reality and engage with the world from a different perspective, withholding judgement. Her message to the audience was bittersweet, and when I commented that she was lucky to have had the chance of knowing her mother through Alzheimer's disease, she looked puzzled at first. Her reaction reflected all there is to know about her experience: there was no other way; this was what came into her life and this is how her love for theater inspired the caregiver relationship with her mother.

Dr. **Susan McFadden**, University of Wisconsin professor of psychology, shared her beautiful views on the connection between spirituality and creativity of people with dementia, and brought the audience back to the deeper roots of human existence. From her vantage point it might seem that Alzheimer's disease and dementia(s) are potential healing experiences for humanity, and bring our own need for a more contemplative way of living into a real form. Being present in the moment is all there is left when planning, anticipating and reflecting together is gone. Coincidentally this is also one of the highest goals of spiritual awareness.

Scientific Director of the Canadian Institute of Neurosciences, Mental Health and Addiction (INMHA), the Douglas Hospital Research Center and McGill University professor, Dr. **Remi Quirion** presented the latest research findings in the search for a cure for Alzheimer's destruction of neurons in the brain. His research team has isolated the protein transthyretin (TTR), which is active in the regulation of learning and memory, and is a valuable piece of the puzzle to find a cure. He also confessed that among many loves he nurtures in his life, the arts and mental health are an important one. He showed amazing works of past "Mindscapes" exhibits, and shared his views on the similarities between arts and science. To be successful in these human endeavors one must have inventiveness, intuition, 'a nose', be creative, be open to other ideas and challenges, and cross boundaries.

Artist and author, dean of Lesley College (Mass.) Dr. **Shaun McNiff** demonstrated just that in a spontaneous group therapy session that engaged the audience in humming, waving, clapping and wondering. For a moment everyone left the confined space of their own mind and accepted the challenge of free association, moving in what he calls the "slipstream" of awareness. The threshold: normative behavior. The reward: openness to others, better understanding and acceptance of individual differences, recognition of the shared experience of life, joy, creativity, happiness.

Dr. **Peter Spitzer**, a medical doctor from Bowral in New South Wales (Australia), came on stage dressed as a clown to introduce the Humour Foundation, which he co-founded. He works with a growing staff of talented artists and performers in hospitals, and alleviates the pressure of the workplace with laughter and foolishness. It works as well as medicine, it tackles pain and depression and it introduces the festive as a healing tool.

Dr. Dalia Gottlieb-Tanaka and Dr. **Peter Graf** from the University of British Columbia, in collaboration with Hilary Lee in Australia, introduced the Creative-Expressive Abilities Assessment tool (CEAA). This collaboration between the visual and performing arts and academic research made it possible to quantify creative-expressive abilities developed from a qualitative perspective. This tool is the first of its kind and allows for the careful observation and documentation of creative abilities in seniors with dementia. It includes a 27-item evaluation chart that relates to memory, attention span, language, the psychosocial, reasoning and problem solving, emotion and culture.

Missing from the conference was my email friend, anthropologist and psychologist, Dr. **Patricia Baines**, who unfortunately broke her wrist just before the conference. She was going to talk about her experience of being taught to listen to Aboriginal elders, and her publication for Alzheimer's Australia, *Nurturing the heart: creativity, art therapy and dementia*. In her place **Katherine Tumes** took the stage and showed us that the new generation of artists and healers (or should we say art therapists) from Australia is local and brings its own vibrant heritage to the experience of creativity.



Sources:

- To download '*Nurturing the heart*', by Patricia Baines:
<http://www.alzheimers.org.au/upload/ArtTherapy.pdf>
- To order the Creative-Expressive Abilities Assessment tool kit:
www.dementia-activities.com
- The Society for the Arts in Dementia Care:

<http://www.cecd-society.org/>

-The Spark of Life Club Program:

<http://www.dementiacareaustralia.com/index.php/the-spark-of-life-club-program.html>

-CECD Conference Brochure:

<http://www.cecd-society.org/2008/>

- *Making an Exit*, by Elinor Fuchs:

<http://makinganexit.com/bio.html>

- The Humour Foundation:

<http://www.humourfoundation.com.au/>

Conference speakers:

- Ruth Bright, Dr, AM, past president of the Australian National Music Therapy Association and the World Federation of Music Therapy and adjunct lecturer at the Australian University of New England's School of Health

-Elinor Fuchs, PhD, professor of dramaturgy and dramatic criticism at the School of Drama, Yale University, New Haven

-Dalia Gottlieb-Tanaka, PhD, chair, The Society for the Arts in Dementia Care (Canada), adjunct professor, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

-Peter Graf, PhD, professor of psychology, department of psychology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver

-Janice Graham, PhD, professor, faculty of medicine, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia

-Hilary Lee, MSc, occupational therapist and artist; chair, The Society for the Arts in Dementia Care Australia, Perth

-Susan MacFadden, PhD, professor of psychology at the university of Wisconsin, Oshkosh

-Shaun McNiff, PhD, psychologist and artist, university professor and dean, Lesley College, Boston

-Peter Spitzer, MD, MB BS, FACRRM, Churchill Fellow, co-founder, medical director and chairman of the Humour Foundation in Australia

-Remi Quirion, PhD, scientific director, DHRC & INMHA, professor at McGill University, Montreal