

"TELLING OUR STORIES"

Notes from February 2003 VAN Meeting

Tuesday, February 14, 2003, Fridley Community Center

PRESENT

Bob Anderson, Maureen Bruce, Julie Bursik, Thor Carlson, Nancy Cosgriff, William Cox, Joan Davies, Mary Ellen Dower, Merrywayne Elvig, Alice Evans, Chuck Gribble, Kari Berit Gustafson, Madeline Hamermesh, Jan Hively (Recorder), Paula Holden, Rhoda Holden, Louise Huebner, Gordon Jacobson, Janet Jacobson, Melinda Ludwiczak, Barbara Kast, Patsy Kuentz, Larry Long, Toni Middleton, Stephanie Mosher, Kevin Norberg, Robert Pope, Grace Ramseyer, Gordon Rose, Pat Samples, Barbara Satin, Gretchen Scheffel, Deb Seaberg, Eve Semmelroth, Ray Seth, Isabel Slator, Connie Thompson, Mary O'Brien Tyrrell, Ronn Williamson

INTRODUCTIONS

Jan Hively thanked Connie Thompson, VAN member and director of the Fridley Senior Center, for hosting the meeting. Connie talked about the broad range of activities in this new wing of the Fridley Community Center, and offered a tour after the program.

All of the participants introduced themselves, telling who they were without making any reference to their career or organizational affiliation.

WRITING MEMORIES, MADELINE HAMERMESH

Melinda Ludwiczak, director of the Skyway Senior Center in downtown Minneapolis, and a member of the VAN Leadership Group, introduced Madeline Hamermesh. Madeline is an 80-year-old who lives in downtown Minneapolis and volunteers at the Skyway Senior Center. She has taught English at the U and has published her own memoirs. Eight years ago, the University's Elder Learning Institute (ELI) director, Steve Benson, asked if she would teach ELI students how to write their memoirs. She has taught the 8-session class 14 times since then, with many students repeating several times. Her interest is in stimulating writing about actual experiences, not in being a psychologist or social worker.

Everyone writes and reads something each week. Madeline starts the course by asking the participants to do some free writing in response to a question such as, "List 27 things that you are," or "Describe your first job." Then she talks about memory. We remember what we want to remember, what is personally memorable. We may have shared an experience with someone else, but may have entirely different memories of the experience. Madeline hands out a bibliography of "how-to" books. In the last session of the course, she collects one piece from each participant to create a group anthology that is circulated.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MEMORY-WRITERS. Madeline handed out a list of some memorable event of the last century, and suggested that we might write about where we were, what we were doing, how we were living, and how we felt about it, when each of these events occurred. She also wrote a list of approaches to stimulate "Summing Up,"

such as "How I want to be remembered..." and "My life has been largely influenced by..." General areas of life about which people have memories include births, deaths, jobs, good friends, hobbies, books, and clothes. Madeline also handed out "MEMORY TRIGGERS" to stimulate thoughts about our early years, people we've known, feelings we've had, and turning points in our lives.

TELLING YOUR LIFE STORY, MARY O'BRIEN TYRRELL

Mary Tyrrell helps elders reminisce and write their life stories. The autobiography is then published in deluxe edition and becomes a family heirloom. Her business is called Memoirs, Inc. She is a member of the national Association of Personal Historians, which has 300 members. <www.personalhistorians.org>

Of course, the history of elders reminiscing and telling their stories goes all the way back in time. It is particularly strong in the Native American tradition. In 1963, a psychologist named Robert Butler noticed that reminiscing appeared to be a natural activity rather than the first step to senility, as most people then saw it. He encouraged reminiscence and life review, and started the International Longevity Institute in NYC.

THE AGE OF MEMOIR. In 1996, James Atlas wrote about how the novel has been replaced by the memoir in a NY Times article about memoirists, called "Age of Memoir." The Information Age has made it easier to write or record memoirs. It's easier to access and archive information. Everyone has a story to tell. That understanding is part of the democratization of the world. For most people, what gets in the way of memoir writing is simply not taking the time. Getting it done is mood elevating. It makes the writer/subject feel important when the book is published. They see their grandkids reading it. The children recognize the history of survival in their families. The readers understand the universality of life experiences.

VIDEO. Mary showed excerpts from the video for which she was a consultant, called "The Joys and Surprises of Telling Your Life Story", published by the International Institute of Reminiscence and Life Review. <www.reminiscenceandlifereview.org> The video is available for \$15 from this non-profit: Bi-Folkal Productions, 809 Williamson St, Madison, WI 53703, Tel. 800-568-5357. The film shows people talking about the process and product of being guided through the process of creating a personal history. It describes the life story as a cube, created from three continuums: from reminiscence to life review, from private to public, from focus on content to focus on process. Robert Butler describes life review as the process of coming to terms with your life. It is evaluative.

VETERANS HISTORY PROJECT. Mary mentioned the Veterans Project initiated by the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress, 101 Independence Avenue, Washington, D.C. 20540. They want all of the stories of people who have served in all of the wars. It is suggested that families help with this project. The Web site is <www.loc.gov/folklife/vets/> or Tel. 202-707-4916.

FORMATS. You can publish or reproduce your life history in many different formats.. Some personal historians work exclusively with video, others with audio cassettes or CDROMs, others transcribe notes from interviews. The main message is, "Don't wait! Get it done now -- or certainly when you feel that you have arrived at the right developmental stage to do it." Mary recommended, "How to Write the Story of Your Life," by Frank P. Thomas, Writers Digest Books, \$12.95.

DISCUSSION. William Cox commented that he had taken a book on a cross country drive with his wife, called, "1001 Questions about Your Life." His experience of using the questions to interview his wife was great for both of them. Mary commented that couples hear new things when they tell their life histories, even though they've been married for 50 or 60 years.

"ELDERS' WISDOM, CHILDREN'S SONG", LARRY LONG

Larry Long is a troubadour -- musician, community organizer, and educator. For the past several years, Larry has been developing an intergenerational learning curriculum, working with teachers and schools throughout the U.S. Community elders go into schools and talk about their lives and work, and children write and perform songs with Larry, using the words of the elders. Sharing the platform with other community performers, they present choral readings and songs at a Community Celebration. Together, they create a remarkable celebration of humanity and hard work.

Larry talked about his grandfather, who owned a fish market in Iowa. He was also a lay minister and a poet. He started a Dial a Poem service and wrote a new poem each day for the recording. The last line of his last poem was, "When does one grow old? One is old, my friend, I say, When one can't dream of a better day."

We don't usually get the opportunity to hear each other's stories. One result of the lack of broad-based sharing is our society's divisions -- by class, complexion and culture. The Elders Wisdom, Children's Song (EWCS) program celebrates diversity. The community should be the base for learning. With consolidations and busing, etc., there are fewer ways for grandparents to become involved with their grandchildren's education. EWCS validates stories of community, builds reconciliation, fulfills education standards in a variety of ways, and encourages a different way of encouraging literacy. Larry showed a video with excerpts from a number of different schools.

Larry transcribes the interviews with elders. The students mark up the transcript and decide on the focus for the choral reading and song that they then develop with Larry. They learn punctuation, capitalization, etc. as they edit the rough transcript. They learn how to interview, how to listen to the story, and how to give respect to different traditions. They work as a team to create the performance. Reconciliation occurs and community is built.

The Veterans Project is terrific. However, we should also hear from the conscientious objectors, the members of the peace movement, the doctors and nurses. The stories of

war are the stories of all of our people. Larry handed out brochures and will be happy to send EWCS materials in response to inquiries to <larryl@larrylong.org>.

CHALLENGE TO RAISE MATCH FOR CHALLENGE GRANT

Jan Hively reported that VAN has received a \$35,000 challenge grant from The Atlantic Philanthropies to promote vital aging. VAN has been given \$20,000 toward the match from the U of M President's Office. The task is raise the remaining \$15,000 as soon as possible so that VAN can receive the grant and fill the VAN Coordinator's position.

Jan asked every participant to consider how they can help raise the match by seeking a contribution from their employer or civic organization or by making out a check to the U of MN Foundation and sending it in. Tax-deductible contributions should be sent to the U of M Foundation, c/o Vital Programs Fund #6025, McNamara Alumni Center, 200 Oak Street SE, Ste 500, Minneapolis, MN 55455. Donors can honor vital agers or offer a memorial to someone who is deceased. If they send the name and address for those being honored along with the contribution, an acknowledgement will be sent to that person/family.

NEXT MEETING

Tuesday, March 11, 10 to noon

Luther Seminary, Board Room, 2nd floor of Olson Campus Center

"Spirituality and Aging"

Janet Ramsey, Luther Seminary Professor

William Cox and Rick Kessler, "From Aging to Saging"

Gloria Swanson, Prince of Peace Church