

**OLDER ADULTS, LITERACY, AND QUALITY OF LIFE: A  
NARRATIVE STUDY**

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By

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## ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand through the stories of three older adults, *how literacy has influenced and shaped the quality of their lives*. During a series of conversational interviews, each older adult was able to share stories about their lived experience of literacy and their perception of quality of life. Each adult has lived a unique life. Therefore, as a group, they cannot be viewed homogenously. Portions of their stories do intersect at various points but not in a way that will create generalized theories that can be extended to all older adults.

Although they encountered many obstacles and challenges throughout their lives, especially in the context of education and literacy, the older adults exhibited tenacity, perseverance, and resilience, eventually reaching their goals. One of the commonalities evident from their collection of stories was the enduring values that wove throughout each individual life, from the early years until the present day. These values provided the quality of life which each adult experienced.

The insights gleaned from these three older adults may be helpful to other adults, friends and family, care givers, and service providers including educators who are interested in learning what constitutes quality of life from the perspective of older adults.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

PERMISSION TO USE POSTGRADUATE THESIS .....	i
ABSTRACT .....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS .....	iii
TABLE OF CONTENTS .....	iv
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION .....	1
Researcher Context and Position .....	2
Significance of the Research .....	3
<b>Literacy</b> .....	3
<b>Literacy and Quality of Life</b> .....	5
<b>Literacy and Health</b> .....	5
Purpose of the Study .....	7
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW .....	8
Introduction .....	8
Literacy .....	8
<b>Vernacular Literacy</b> .....	10
<b>Privileged Literacy</b> .....	11
<b>Literacy and Self</b> .....	12
<b>Emancipatory Literacy</b> .....	13
Quality of Life .....	18
<b>Lifelong Learning and Quality of Life</b> .....	20
<i>Leisure Learning</i> .....	21
<i>Lifelong Education</i> .....	22
Literacy and Quality of Life .....	24
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY .....	26
Research Paradigm .....	26
Narrative Inquiry .....	28
Research Method .....	29
<b>Active Interviewing</b> .....	29
<b>Sampling</b> .....	31
<b>Protection of Rights</b> .....	32
<b>Data Analysis</b> .....	32
<b>Data Presentation</b> .....	33
<i>Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Voice</i> .....	33
<b>Trustworthiness of the Findings</b> .....	36
CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF THE STORIES .....	38
Introduction to the Older Adults .....	38
Bjørn’s Story: “Who Cares?” .....	38
Roberta’s Story: “You have to go through some really crappy times – in order to appreciate what you have now.” .....	50
Grammie’s Story: “All that matters in the end is that I was important in the life of a child.” .....	58
CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE STORIES .....	72
Introduction .....	72

School Interrupted .....	72
The Violence of Education .....	75
Lifelong Learning .....	79
Situated Literacies .....	80
Computer Literacy .....	83
Intergenerational Relationships .....	85
Ageism .....	86
Communities of Practice .....	88
Critical Thinking .....	90
Quality of Life .....	92
CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS .....	97
Conclusions .....	97
Implications .....	99
The need for further research .....	101
References .....	103
Appendix A .....	111
Appendix B .....	114
Appendix C .....	116
Appendix D .....	117
Appendix E .....	118

## CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

*He said to me “the clothes line saved my life.” His gaze drifted into the distance and he was no longer in the same room with me. He was no longer an older adult but a much younger man, married and living on the farm.*

*He and his four-year old daughter were already in the car, with the engine running --- just about to back out of the yard --- when --- the clothes line collapsed.*

*It was December --- the middle of winter and the clothes line was laden with a heavy wet wash. He turned off the car engine, put his little daughter safely in the house, and then went to fix the clothes line.*

*By the time he was finished --- a two-day blizzard had engulfed the farm and surrounding area. They were storm-stayed at home.*

*They never did get to town that day --- for groceries and the mail.*

*Others in their farming community were not so fortunate. Some were stranded on the road.*

*Others perished while trying to walk to safety.*

*He brought his gaze back to me and said again in that quiet voice of reflection: “the clothes line save my life.”*

As Graham told me his short story in rich, articulate detail I marvelled at how eloquent he was, how literate. The matching tailored slacks and print shirt he wore reinforced his well-groomed appearance. I had wondered inconsequentially if his watch was a real Rolex or a knock-off. As we sat in his small but comfortable one-room apartment in the modest, government-subsidized housing complex, I wondered about the current circumstances of this intelligent man with his obvious talent for writing and storytelling.

*How had the intervening years brought him to this place in life?*

Graham and I had met initially at a writing workshop for older adults. I found him to be very quick-witted with a great sense of humour, and I immediately thought that he would be ideal for my thesis research on older adults, literacy and quality of life.

A short while later, as I waited on the street in front of the seniors' residence for the first of two city buses that would take me clear across the city into my home neighbourhood, I reflected on my own circumstances: a graduate student, three-quarters of the way through my third university degree --- I could barely afford a bus pass each month.

*How had the intervening years brought me to this place in life?*

I was living proof that intelligence, literacy, and higher education are no guarantee of material success. As I waited for the bus, my post modern sensibilities kicked in and I began to question my assumptions --- my definition of things: *What is the definition of literacy? What is the definition of success? Who decides? Who qualifies as an older adult? When do we get there?*

According to post modernism, if I asked ten people these questions, I would get ten definitions; all different, all unique, and all appropriate. Then I began to wonder what the older adults in my thesis study would tell me if I asked them individually: *"How has literacy shaped the quality of your life?"* I secretly hoped that some or all of them would challenge me by asking: *"What do you mean by literacy? What do you mean by quality of life?"* Would they be dismayed or relieved when I turned the questions back to them?

### **Researcher Context and Position**

I am an older, white, adult female who has led a literate life. This literate life has included formal and informal learning situations and credentialed education. Multiple literacies have had a tremendous influence on the quality of my life and, to a certain extent, my standard of living. But being too literate has its drawbacks. I have been a critical thinker all my life and as my other literacy skills (such as reading, writing, speaking, viewing television and movies, listening to radio, observing the practices of older children and adults around me) became increasingly sophisticated I became more aware as time progressed of the dichotomy between what people said and what they actually did. In fact my father said to my brother and me many times: "Do as I say, not as I do." At least he was honest enough with himself and us to admit that he wasn't perfect and perhaps we should not emulate his example in many things. That may have been a quick and easy way for him to absolve himself of his parental responsibilities as a role model but for me at least, and I'm sure for my younger brother, it amounted to a large hypocrisy. When pressed, both my parents resorted to the proverbial bottom line: "We can do X, Y or Z because we're adults, and you're not."

Now that I'm an adult, I realize how trapped we all are -- both as children and adults -- in the minute-by-minute struggle of either fitting in or not. I have struggled with the concepts of emancipatory literacy and critical theory. I do not want to live my life on the picket line, constantly fighting against injustice. But on the other hand, some forms of exclusion and stereotyping are so insidiously pervasive that they are like acid rain and gradually erode over time even the strongest of character. I have been faced with 'isms' all my life: starting with gender issues, through socio-economic issues, and now reaching into issues of ageism. These "isms" have undermined the extent and forms which the quality of my life has taken.

*Am I the only one to think this way? Have other older adults been similarly affected?*

While doing literature reviews for this thesis, I had the chance to reread *Critical Crosscurrents in Education*. As if for the first time, I understood the solution that Collins (1998a) offers us:

For if violence is very much part of human experience, so are love, and generosity, and caring relationships. And as careful attention to the ways we experience the world, in particular our relationships with others, leads to generous impulses, so the space for violence dwindles. (p.182)

I would say that "isms" are a symptom of violence, of exclusion, and stereotyping. And the solution which Collins (1998a) offers is perfect for me in that I can cultivate my "generous impulses" quietly on a personal level, on a day-to-day basis (a way of being in the world) and not have to spend my elder years on the picket line. For the record, I was on the gender equality picket line during my 20's, 30's, and 40's. I now pass the torch to the younger generation. Cultivating my "generous impulses" mitigates the overwhelming helplessness I often feel when I see, hear, and read about the extent and forms (such as "isms") of violence that are perpetrated on ordinary people who are just trying to do the best they can with the resources at hand. There is a relationship between "isms" and quality of life and literacy is part of the equation, but it is not necessarily positive and not necessarily as simple as: literacy = full well-rewarded employment = high quality of life.

## **Significance of the Research**

### ***Literacy***

Many definitions of literacy exist, from the most fundamental such as "reading and writing" to a much larger concept such as that provided by Strassman (1983) who writes:

“Although literacy has many possible meanings, I [Strassman] prefer a definition that is broad in scope: the ability of individuals to cope with communications within their civilization. This general definition implies that literacy is a cultural phenomenon dependent on environment” (p. 115).

I [the researcher] particularly like Strassman’s concept of literacy because it covers all the bases which I consider to be important: individuals, coping, communications, and civilization. This concept would be equally applicable in the Stone Age as the cave family records a life history on the walls of their home, to contemporary deep space travel and wireless communication experienced by robots and astronauts. Strassman’s concept of literacy has stood the test of time and opens the possibility for multiple literacies in ever-changing contexts.

However, two problems arise with the search for the definitive description of literacy: 1) from a post modern perspective, each person will have her or his own definition of literacy based on her or his experience of life; and 2) a quick internet search shows that there is a wide range of definitions for almost every subject including literacy.

The Expanded Academic ASAP website yielded 5087 entries under the heading: Literacy. Under the heading Quality of Life, there were 4603 entries. When I added the two concepts together: Literacy & Quality of Life, there were only 9 entries. Under the heading: Health, there were 243, 527 entries; Literacy & Health combined produced 233 entries and Standard of Living produced 1008 entries. Google produced 490,399 entries for Definition of Literacy, 2,060,337 entries for Definitions of Quality of Life, and 207,829 Definitions for Literacy and Quality of Life combined.

In terms of well-documented research and related literature, I prefer the Expanded Academic ASAP website as a source of information. It crosses all disciplines and includes academic journal articles from around the world. The majority of all these website entries concerning literacy and quality of life were quantitative studies based on questionnaires and surveys. Even when interview techniques were used, they were not in-depth qualitative interviews. Literacy was evaluated on the basis of skills. Quality of Life was viewed from a health perspective, and although many studies do give a “tip of the hat” to the idea of subjective elements in a quality of life definition, these studies base their analysis on surveys and questionnaires which measure objective elements such as physical health, socioeconomic status, and levels of literacy skills in reading and writing.

## ***Literacy and Quality of Life***

Although Google offers an astounding 207,829 entries for the terms Literacy and Quality of Life combined, the term QOL (Quality of Life) is measured using quantitative methods such as the Quality of Life Index (QOLI) (Ontario Social Development Council, 1997) which looks at such things as the number of people unemployed, the number of bankruptcies, the hours of poor air quality, the number of tonnes diverted from the landfill, etc.

The (QOLI) seems very similar to the “standards of living” measurement which looks at the “quantity and quality of goods and services available to people. It measures such aspects as births, deaths, literacy levels, newspaper circulation, population density, etc.” (“Notes on ‘Quality of Life’ ”, 2006, p. 5).

While the definition provided for Quality of Life *seems* qualitative: “Quality of life is the product of the interplay among social, health, economic and environmental conditions which affect human and social development” (Ontario Social Development Council, 1997), the methods used to measure it are quantitative. In addition, this definition provided by the Ontario Social Development Council is so broad and general that it is not at all helpful. A more detailed analysis of literacy and quality of life is contained in the review of the literature of Chapter Two, but the point to be made here is that despite the large number of studies available on the topics of literacy and quality of life, the majority are quantitative in nature. This would indicate that there is a need for more qualitative research in the area of literacy and quality of life.

## ***Literacy and Health***

In the past twelve years, Canada has been a leader in the field of literacy and health. While we have some excellent programming models, Canada has not yet made a significant contribution to research on literacy and health . .... Literacy has now been recognized internationally as a key factor in determining health. However, the link between literacy and health has not been studied in detail. (Literacy and Health Research in Canada, 2003, p. 1)

This call for more research is admirable but a majority of researchers, practitioners, and policy makers --- in Canada and elsewhere --- operate within narrow definitions. Although “literacy and health research and practice in Canada date back to the late 1980’s” (Rootman & Ronson, 2005, p. 2) the term “health literacy” is a relatively new concept in health promotion research (Speros, 2004; Nutbeam, 2000). The American Medical Association, for example,

defines literacy as “a constellation of skills, including the ability to perform basic reading and numerical tasks required to function in the health care environment” (Speros, 2004, p. 635). This definition confines literacy to a skills level and does not address cultural or situational differences.

Health literacy as a concept is broadened by the US Department of Health and Human Services (2000) which regards it as “the degree to which individuals have the capacity to obtain, process, and understand basic health decisions” (cited in Speros, 2004, p. 635). This concept deliberately joins health and literacy together and allows for an expanded version of each. This takes into account the possibility that each individual has many ways in which to obtain, understand, and use information especially in health-related situations.

“Finally, the World Health Organization (WHO) (1998) offers a definition that encompasses the elements of personal empowerment and action: ‘Health literacy represents the cognitive and social skills which determine the motivation and ability of individuals to gain access to, understand, and use information in ways that promote and maintain good health’” (Speros, 2004, p. 635).

“According to Walker and Avant (1995), defining attributes are those characteristics of a concept that are most frequently associated with the concept, and appear repeatedly in references to the concept. The defining attributes of health literacy that appear consistently in the literature are reading and numeracy skills, comprehension, the capacity to use information in health care decision-making, and successful functioning in the role of health care consumer” (Speros, 2004, p. 636). Regardless of the definitions or concepts used, the research methods are quantitatively based with the objective of providing measurable evidence for policy and program development in the areas of literacy and health (Speros, 2004; Rootman & Ronson, 2005; Nutbeam, 2000; Billek-Sawhney & Reicherter, 2005).

These studies, directly or indirectly link low levels of literacy with poor health. Livingstone (1999) hints that perhaps there is not a problem with low levels of literacy but more the case of a well-educated workforce faced with low levels of full-time, well-paid employment. His hypothesis is similar to that which interests me. *Suppose older adults have high levels of education (formal and/or informal) and literacy (vernacular and/or privileged) as well as an excellent quality of life?* This quality of life may not be readily evident according to mainstream society’s definition of health or ostentatious standards of living. In my view, “*quality of life*”

isn't the same as "*standard of living*" but not everyone would agree. Quality of life is "the product of the interplay among social, health, economic, and environmental conditions which affect human and social development", and standard of living "is a measure of the quantity and quality of goods and services available to people" ("Notes on Quality of Life", 2006, p. 5).

This discussion of views and definitions is, however, slightly premature and possibly irrelevant because it will be up to each individual older adult in my study to define for himself or herself the meaning of "*literacy*" and "*quality of life*" and to talk about how these concepts relate to each other, if at all, in the particular context of their lives.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to understand through the stories of three older adults, *how literacy has influenced and shaped the quality of their lives*. During our discussions, I was also interested to find out their personal concept of literacy and whether it had changed over the years. As well, I wondered how literacy related to his or her concept of self or identity and if there had been a pivotal moment in their life with respect to literacy. I also wanted to understand their personal concept of quality of life and if that was related in any way to literacy.

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

### Introduction: Literacy

Literacy is continually in flux. The functions and contexts of literacy have changed over the past several decades to meet new economic and social challenges. One example of this change is the definition of literacy. At one time the term *literacy* was a stand-alone noun commonly accepted to mean the ability to read and write. This ability to read and to write “was long ago described by Jeffery & Maginn (1979) as ‘the narrowest possible view of literacy’ ” (Cornes, 1994, p. 107).

Langer (1987, pp. 2-3) suggests that rather than reading and writing, literacy is the ability to think and reason like a literate person. One could ask: “*What is a literate person?*” and “*Who decides?*” She emphasizes that literacy involves how people think, learn, and change and that society changes as a function of the changes in its people. Although Langer (1987) makes the point that literacy is not a set of independent skills associated with reading or writing, she does retain the idea of skills when stating that literacy is the application of particular skills for specific purposes in specific contexts.

The term ‘literacy’ gradually expanded to include math literacy and then, computer literacy. The list of constructs now preceding the term literacy seems to be infinite. The following list is by no means exhaustive but represents some of the current wave of literacies:

**Academic literacy** is regarded as “learning to read, write, and speak the language of the academy with all of the conventions of its discourse” and requires “analysis and synthesis of sophisticated texts” as well as competent and persuasive writing (Maloney, 2003, p. 665).

**Information literacy** could be considered a marriage between library research skills and technological skills. However, some researcher-writers are trying to move the concept of information literacy beyond the idea that it is a discrete skill and should be conceived as a process-oriented literacy (Norgaard, 2003).

**Public Health Literacy** involves exploration and debate of various issues such as law, economics and the environment, through the lens of public health. In order for professionals from various disciplines to understand the public health implications of the laws, rules and regulations they draft, enforce, litigate and adjudicate, they need to be more firmly grounded in the theory, practice and problems of public health (Parmet & Robbins, 2003).

**Women's Literacy** includes the “creative energies and survival strategies of women who ‘manage’ the day-to-day on the edges of social power.” This includes “multiple languages and coding systems and critical thinking skills, and literacies that are not print-based” (Miller, 2003, p. 45). It's interesting to note that “women's literacy” has been mentioned in the literature as a specific and separate type of literacy. There is no mention of “men's literacy.” Is this because it doesn't exist? Or because it is so ubiquitous that it defies mention?

**Arts-based Literacy** is a powerful combination of building communication skills through artistic creativity and personal expression (Bitz, 2004).

**Visual Literacy** describes comprehension and retention of reading material through visual images formed in the reader's mind (Whelan, 2004).

Other literacies mentioned in published literature include: emotional literacy, scientific literacy, environmental literacy, global literacy, civic literacy, financial literacy, market and business cycle literacy, world literacy, TV literacy, and music literacy. Of course family literacy, school literacy, workplace literacy, media literacy, and computer literacy are terms which have become commonplace.

Graff (1987) points out that “there are many kinds of literacies” and that “an understanding of any one type of literacy requires special care in qualifying terms and specifying what precisely is meant by reference to ‘literacy.’ These many ‘literacies’ . . . are conceptually distinct but nonetheless interrelated. The nature of those relationships requires sustained conceptual and empirical attention” (p. 32).

These various definitions or uses of the term ‘literacy’ have in common the premise that literacy (in any subject area) requires a certain level of functional skills and knowledge specific to the subject. It is also recognized that some or all of the literacy skills required (such as analysis and synthesis) are learned in social practice rather than taught by “practice on discrete skills in a workbook” (Maloney, 2003, p. 665).

*If literacy is continually changing where are the older adults situated in this plethora of possible literacies? What contextual skills and knowledge do they use and how does it affect the quality of their lives?*

Barton and Hamilton (1998) highlight the fact that there are literacies and “not simply some universal literacy in which all people engage” (Kazemek, 2004, p. 450).

These literacies are sets of social practices; are often processes of informal and vernacular usage (such as grocery lists and greeting cards); vary according to different aspects of life, personal needs, and interests; and are embedded in complex webs of language use, media, and technology. (Kazemak, 2004, p. 450)

I agree with Barton and Hamilton (1998) that all literacies and aspects of literacy can be roughly divided into two major categories: vernacular (self-generated), and privileged (dominant, institutionalised).

### ***Vernacular Literacy***

Barton and Hamilton (1998) distinguish between vernacular and privileged literacies: Vernacular literacies have their origins in the purposes of everyday life but are not regulated, codified or systematised by the explicit rules and procedures of formal social institutions. Whilst many vernacular literacies are influential and valued in people's day-to-day lives, they are also ignored in education. They do not count as 'real' literacy and neither are the informal social networks that sustain these literacies drawn upon or acknowledged. They are not highly valued by formal educational institutions although they exist in dialogic relationship to these institutions. (Hamilton, 2001, p. 179)

A dialogic relationship is one where a conversation exists between the two entities. The entities do not have to be equal to one another but they can communicate nonetheless. This is also true of the relationship between vernacular literacies and other formal institutions such as government and business. I regard mainstream businesses as formal institutions because they are part of the valued and privileged segments of our current society. I would argue that vernacular literacies have their own regulated and systematic codes and vernacular literacies can be included in privileged literacies and vice versa.

For example: A family may designate Saturday night as 'games night at home' and eventually the activity becomes regulated over time with such habits as the adult daughter and eleven-year-old grandson arriving at grandmother's house with the game of choice. Grandmother has made fresh popcorn and bought soda pop from the local grocery store. The game goes no later than eleven o'clock. Vernacular literacy included within a privileged literacy could be a parent appearing at the children's school as a special guest who is there to share knowledge and the experience of making perogies (a Ukrainian food). Privileged literacy included in vernacular

literacy could be a government form (such as income tax) being filled out at home with the help of a neighbour or friend.

Barton attempts in the *New Literacy Studies* (Street, 2003) to show how people take various aspects of privileged literacies and incorporate them into their individual, vernacular literacies. *New Literacy Studies* (Street, 2003) represents a new tradition surrounding literacy, recognizing multiple literacies that are less acquisition of skills and more social practise. These literacies vary according to time and space and are contested in relations of power. No matter what activity we do, we have multiple literacies and social practice. (L. Wason-Ellam, personal communication, March, 18, 2006).

### *Privileged Literacy*

Dominant or privileged literacies are those associated with formal organisations, such as the school, the church, the work-place, the legal system, commerce, medical and welfare bureaucracies. They are part of the specialised discourses of bounded communities of practice, and are defined, codified and standardised in terms of the formal purposes of the institution, rather than in terms of the multiple and shifting purposes of individual citizens and their communities. Associated with dominant literacies there are professional experts and teachers through whom access to knowledge is controlled. To the extent that we can group these dominant literacies together, they are given high value, legally and culturally. Dominant literacies are powerful in proportion to the power of the institution that shapes them. (Hamilton, 2001, p. 179)

Stuckey (1991) and Hamilton (2001) show how international adult literacy surveys are examples of the way in which powerful discourse develops around the issue of literacy and how knowledge about literacy is organized. Darville (1999), and Hamilton and Barton (2000) argue that these surveys re-define literacy to fit in with the projected needs of a global, capitalist society which includes the ideal, consumer-oriented citizen who is responsive to multiple new contexts for literacy use; in the process of doing so, the surveys “justify a vision of what literacy should be, rather than being based on peoples’ lived experiences. This is an institutional vision that has little to do with supporting people to use and control literacy for their own purposes. It privileges some literacies and deletes other, vernacular practices and then presents its finding as the ‘truth’ about literacy” (Hamilton, 2001, p. 184).

It would seem that literacy is defined in terms of contemporary times, which includes values and dominant cultural purposes and goals. In this sense, the definition of literacy will always change (Gambell, personal communication, December 08, 2004). However, literacy will always be subject to control by the dominant group in society. It is to the benefit of mainstream society to simplify the definition of literacy and to structure and codify its use; this ensures more complete control over literacy and the power it confers. If literacy is acknowledged to be more cultural and contextual practice than simple skill, mainstream society loses much of its previously held power to define literacy and its uses. Merrifield, Bingman, Hemphill, and Bennet deMarries (1997) highlight this dilemma: “We have no simple words for literacy as many-faceted skills, as social and cultural practices embedded in particular contexts, constantly being redefined by individuals and social groups . . . ” (p. 2). Hamilton (2001) cautions that “we must keep reminding people that the literacies promoted by dominant (privileged) policies are not the only literacies and to substantiate this through the detail of convincing ethnographic research” (p. 194).

### *Literacy and Self*

“Stories, passion, interest, multiple sources, varied language use” form a particular chain of events or pattern of stories. All of our literacy paths are unique and governed by our particular life histories, contexts, sponsors, and oftentimes ‘luck of the draw’ (Kazemek, 2004, p. 450). “Multiple literacy practices are also a sign of stratification and struggle” (Brandt, 2001, p. 8). We must value our own unique journey and see that it is a link in a chain of stories that stretch from us the individual to the wider world (Kazemek, 2004, p. 451). This is a life-long journey.

The complex interrelationship between literacy and self --- how we create our literacies and how our literacies create us -- is a territory ripe for exploration (Goodson, 2003, cited in Williams, 2003, p. 178). Our sense of self is an internal concept and somewhat stable. Our sense of identity is external, socially contingent, and performed. Consequently, we have “multiple shifting identities determined by culture and context, and they are sometimes in conflict with one another” (Williams, 2003, p. 178).

We can see this idea of identity as external and socially contingent in the context of identity cards or passports; student cards are another example. Each card or piece of identification represents part of an external, socially contingent part of our selves but is not the whole self. My Saskatchewan photo-enhanced driver’s license gives me a necessary identifier of a bona fide

driver and allows me to drive a vehicle in Canada. However, if I want to drive a vehicle in another country, I may have to apply for an International Driver's License. This would give me an additional identifier. My university student card gives me part of the recognized identity of a graduate student, but my alumni card is the one that shows I am a previous graduate of this university. A Rogers Video card provides part of another identity. And so it goes. I can mix and match my identities and change them with changing circumstances and need. My internal 'self' remains basically the same.

All of this is particularly important to the context of literacy. "The way we arrange words, choose to disclose or not, assume our audience, and construct our sense of credibility through language is all inextricably bound up with issues of identity" (Williams, 2003, p. 180). In the guise of a graduate student writing this thesis, I am using the language of the academy for the most part, although I am deliberately allowing my voice to be heard loud and clear, and also the voices of my participants. However, when I write letters to friends or write an article for the local newspaper, I assume a different audience and arrange my words according to another of my many identities; friend or populist, freelance writer.

The overlapping, different literacies that happen are always influenced, valued or devalued, in relation to cultural context. Literacy practices are influenced by issues of power, institutions, and social goals (Hamilton & Barton, 2000).

In terms of identity, this means that our conceptions of literacy and our perceptions of who uses it, for what ends, and in what circumstances always depend on interactions between people. Literacy is never disconnected from identity. People whose identities don't fit the scripts of the dominant culture's narratives often are silenced. (Williams, 2003, p. 181)

*Have older adults been silenced? Do their literacies and identities fit the scripts provided by mainstream culture? How does this affect the quality of their lives?*

### ***Emancipatory Literacy***

Emancipatory literacy is viewed "as one of the major vehicles by which 'oppressed' people are able to participate in the socio historical transformation of their society" (Walmsley, 1981, p. 84). Based on the work of Freire and Macedo (1987), emancipatory literacy is thought of as the acquisition of reading and writing skills (reading the word) combined with the ability to

think critically (reading the world) which will provide the platform for personal and political reform.

Literacy can only be emancipatory and critical to the extent that it is conducted in the language of the people. It is through the native language that students “name their world” and begin to establish a dialectical relationship with the dominant class in the process of transforming the social and political structure that imprison them in their “culture of silence.” Thus, a person is literate to the extent that he or she is able to use language for social and political reconstruction. (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 159)

Although many influential scholars and academics such as bell hooks (1994) have been inspired by the ideas, writings, and teachings of Freire, it is also widely acknowledged that the very things which emancipatory literacy is designed to overthrow (white, male, middle class dominance) are the things which can and more often than not, prevent the reading, writing, and critical thinking skills of literate “others” from changing the status quo. This problem is evident all the way from the third world village to the North American or European academy. White females are only slightly less implicated. Although they may be oppressed themselves by male dominance, they are also oppressors of other minority groups, by virtue of their whiteness and their middle class status.

There are two major aspects to the problem of trying to overthrow the establishment: 1) white, middle class people who are potential allies in the fight against oppression, often do not realize how embedded they are in the social, political, educational, and economic status quo. Their altruistic intentions may be undermined by unrecognized discriminatory and patronizing ways of thinking and acting. Rather than building bridges, literally and figuratively, these potential “helpers” insult and alienate the very ones they are trying to help. bell hooks (1994) illustrates this point with an example from her university career:

What does it mean when a white female English professor is eager to include a work by Toni Morrison on the syllabus of her course but then teaches that work without ever making reference to race or ethnicity? I have heard individual white women ‘boast’ about how they have shown students that black writers are ‘as good’ as the white male canon when they do not call attention to race. Clearly, such pedagogy is not an interrogation of the biases conventional canons (if not all canons) establish, but yet another form of tokenism. (p. 3)

To her credit, bell hooks includes herself as an unwitting perpetrator of bias: “Multiculturalism compels educators to recognize the narrow boundaries that have shaped the way knowledge is shared in the classroom. It forces us all to recognize our complicity in accepting and perpetuating biases of any kind” (p. 44).

2) Once past this cultural “faux pas”, the helpers may become literal victims of their success and drag their protégées with them. As Brookfield (1987) points out:

Educators and helping professionals who encourage people to ask these awkward questions about imbalances in power structures and wealth distribution are likely to be criticized by gatekeepers of the dominant culture. Helpers who try to promote political learning may risk (at best) public criticism or (at worst) loss of their livelihoods or, in some regimes, even their lives. (pp. 170-171)

This censure is not confined to the third world village but appears at every level of society in every country including the academy. While Collins (1998a) advocates for change within educational institutions, he also cautions against what he describes as “idiosyncratic gestures against authority” and “individualistic acts of defiance on the part of an educator” (p. 73). Doing so can:

lead to marginalization or dismissal without establishing a widely appreciated ethical point or a worthwhile political gain. Apart from the hardship involved for the individual concerned, and for any dependents he or she may have, the dismissal of a lone educational critic serves to demoralize others who might otherwise be inclined, at propitious moments, to call for scrutiny of taken-for-granted management practices. (p. 73)

Street (2001, p. 120) highlights the dangers inherent in “celebrating local (literacy) practices that are no longer appropriate in a modern, indeed ‘post modern’ condition where ‘empowerment’ requires high communicative skills including formal literacy.” He advocates for a pedagogical approach that is sensitive to context and local needs, one that builds on the strengths of local literacy practices and helps to incorporate them into mainstream practices if that is the wish of local learners.

His approach poses a solution for the problem that Macedo (Freire & Macedo, 1987, p. 47) presents in a conversation with Freire:

The notion of emancipatory literacy suggests two dimensions of literacy. On the one hand, students have to become literate about their histories, experiences, and the culture

of their immediate environments. On the other hand, they must also appropriate those codes and cultures of the dominant spheres so they can transcend their own environments. There is often an enormous tension between these two dimensions of literacy. How can emancipatory literacy deal effectively with this tension so as not to suffocate either dimension?

Ogbu (2000) has studied the cultural and academic coping skills which black students bring with them into mainstream educational institutions. The students who do well academically have learned how to “play the game” long enough to succeed in white, mainstream society. Those students who “play the game” while retaining their own culture and language have successfully “dealt with the tension between the two dimensions.”

bell hooks (1994, p. 168) quotes a line from an Adrienne Rich poem: “*This is the oppressor’s languages yet I need it to talk to you.*” bell hooks (1994, p. 168) points out that she knows it is not the language that hurts, but “what the oppressors do with it, how they shape it to become a territory that limits and defines, how they make it a weapon that can shame, humiliate, colonize.” But the point is well taken: we (myself included) often need to learn the language of our oppressors in order to play their game and win. However, as Ogbu shows in his work, in order to truly win, we must retain our authentic selves; our first language and culture, while we learn and play the game of our oppressors. We must find ways to successfully deal with the tension between the two dimensions.

One way to do this is to use our critical thinking skills to see through the rhetoric so often espoused by those in positions of power. Clarkson (2001) says:

It is impossible to imagine a robust economy without an informed electorate. A population that reads, questions, and exercises its rights with confidence safeguards the balance of powers that regulates government, promotes a diversified and strong economy, and oversees the integrity of social programs.

Our collective well-being, however, ultimately springs from the advancement of each citizen ....While literacy confers full participation in the public arena; it also bestows unlimited possibilities for personal growth. (p.vii)

I am sure that former Governor General Adrienne Clarkson believes in the verity of her words. However, I think the phrase “exercises its rights with confidence” bears closer scrutiny. Over the past decade, media and pollsters have repeatedly reported on disenfranchisement of

voters, low turnout at the polls, and increasing apathy and cynicism among citizens regarding government, the economy, and social programs. In addition, “our collective well-being” has been and continues to be a myth because many citizens are marginalized and silenced. This marginalization and silencing has more to do with the “isms” --- such as ageism, racism, and sexism --- than with literacy (Stuckey, 1991).

In my view, literacy does not or can not confer “full participation” in any arena including the public arena, and similarly is unable to bestow “unlimited possibilities for personal growth.” The acquisition of literacy may assist some individuals to improve their personal circumstances which may include a participatory role in civic activities but I argue that “full participation” and “unlimited possibilities” are determined by factors other than literacy.

Research suggests that people with low literacy skills are keenly aware of the social, economic and political forces besides literacy that shape their lives (Fagan, 1988). In light of systemic forces, improving one’s literacy skills may seem a weak tool against economic displacement or poverty, educational inequality, and other social conditions (NAPO, 1990; Ziegahn, 1992). Achieving a higher literacy skill level may be less important than having credentials (Hoddinott, 1998), especially in the current context of underemployment, where highly credentialed people are increasingly filling jobs previously occupied by those with fewer formal credentials. This may be one of the reasons why a longitudinal study by Malicky and Norman (1994) found that the initial job-related optimism of more than 80 percent of the 94 learners ended with discouragement in reaction to the realities of the labour market. (Long & Middleton, 2001, p. 21)

Lifelong learning and adult education are considered to be emancipatory forms of literacy. But it’s interesting to note that the Education Branch Library at the University of Saskatchewan does not recognize the term “adult literacy” in its internal, computerized catalogue of library materials. A notice pops up to inform you that the search term the Library uses is “functional literacy.” In my view, this reduces adult literacy to its lowest form: a skills-based notion of literacy that focuses on reading and writing. It has the effect of negating any critical thinking skills the adults may have and does not address the myriad of vernacular literacies they have been accumulating since birth. As Long (2001) rightly tells us, those with low literacy skills (meaning

reading and writing) are highly aware of other systemic forces (economic, social, and political) which affect their lives far more than literacy (p. 21).

### **Quality of Life**

The Ontario Social Development Council (1997) defines quality of life as “the product of the interplay among social, health, economic and environmental conditions which affect human and social development” (p. 5). I am partial to this definition because it is broad enough to cover both objective and subjective elements as well as individual and collective or social experience

The Quality of Life Research Center, Denmark (2006) makes the point that quality of life research often distinguishes between subjective and objective elements. “Subjective quality of life is about feeling good and being satisfied with things in general. Objective quality of life is about fulfilling the societal and cultural demands for material wealth, social status and physical well-being” (p. 3). Although Quality of Life research looks at both objective and subjective elements, Standards of Living is an objective “measure of the quantity and quality of goods and services available to people” such as the number of doctors available, literacy levels, newspaper circulation, the number of cars or TVs per capita, and so on. (“Notes on ‘Quality of Life’ ”, 2006, p. 5).

As with literacy, there is no single definition of quality of life. Haas (1999) says that although many definitions of quality of life exist, most lack a conceptual framework or theoretical orientation. According to its website, the Quality of Life Research Unit at the University of Toronto has been “developing conceptual models and instruments for research, evaluation and assessment since 1991.” A visit to the website shows that although the conceptual model used by the Research Unit is broad and encompasses three major life domains (Being, Belonging and Becoming), the instrument which has been developed over the past five years and is now being used extensively on-line and elsewhere to capture data, is a quantitative Adult Quality of Life Profile (also known as a questionnaire). The items on the questionnaire cover subjective topics such as psychological and spiritual well-being; however the data collection method is not naturalistic or qualitative, but rather it is quantitative.

This is a trend which is common in published literature on quality of life: when subjective elements are studied, they are measured using quantitative instruments. However, the majority of studies are concerned with objective elements such as physical and mental health, educational levels or economic factors. For example, Huppert, Brayne, Jagger and Metz (2000) were able to

identify over 50 British longitudinal studies concerned with aging or older adults which examined a diverse range of measures covering the major areas of relevance to quality of life. They found that most of the studies were concerned primarily with physical health; only nine studies focused primarily on social, educational, or economic factors.

Wright's study (2000) used an on-line questionnaire to examine a sample of social support messages generated by members of a SeniorNet community. This study is similar to that of the University of Toronto study in that it surveyed subjective quality of life factors using an on-line quantitative questionnaire.

The use of questionnaires and surveys is the most common method of collecting data in quality of life studies (Armstrong & McKechnie, 2003; Wright, 2000; Huppert et al., 2000; Walters, Munro, & Brazier, 2001; Cartwright, Hickman, Bevan, & Shupert, 2004; Phelan, Anderson, LaCroix, & Larson, 2004; Mowad, 2004; Smith, Borchelt, Maier, & Jopp, 2002) and these same researchers are calling for more quantitative studies to address gaps in the knowledge base for 'health-related quality of life.' 'Health-related' attributes are the most commonly measured aspects in quality of life studies (Farquhar, 1995, p. 1440).

These and other studies on aging and quality of life have in common the premise that finding the key to longevity and health for older adults will reduce medical and social costs and thus be a benefit to society (Walters et al., 2001; Cartwright et al., 2004; Huppert et al., 2000; Farquhar, 1995). Very little thought or conscious effort has been expended to find out what older adults themselves value. Although quality of life is a concept with extreme relevance for older adults, empirically based knowledge is limited (Foreman & Kleinpell, 1990; Moore, Newsome, Payne, & Tiansawad, 1993); in addition, personal factors rarely have been studied, although they are viewed as critically important (Friedman, 1997). I would consider this oversight to be a covert indication of ageism.

Phelan et al. (2004), when studying older adults, use the term "successful aging" and found that published work describing attributes of successful aging presented a narrow definition which did not include all four of the dimensions given by the older adults themselves: physical, functional, psychological, and social health.

Some work has been carried out to begin identifying lay definitions of quality of life. For example, Hall (1976) asked subjects what they thought of when they heard the words

“quality of life.” The largest single category referred to was the family, home life and marriage. (Farquhar, 1995, p. 1440)

Slevin et al., (1988) and Calman (1984) have argued that the components of quality of life are personal; therefore an approach where subjects create their own definitions may be a more appropriate measure. To that end, Farquhar (1995) conducted a three-stage study of older adults. In stage one, 70 respondents completed a survey and were also asked a brief set of unprompted open questions about the quality of their lives. The answers were written down by the researcher verbatim and then coded. In stage two, in-depth unstructured interviews were conducted with forty participants, and in stage three focus groups were conducted in order to identify a wider, societal or community view of quality of life. Farquhar’s study was based on the premise that “some of the problems of defining and measuring quality of life can be dealt with by asking people to describe the quality of their own lives, in their own words, using their own frames of reference” (p. 1441). Phelan et. al. (2004) state that “developing a definition of successful aging that includes the perspective of older adults would be useful . . . in helping researchers develop their own definitions of successful aging but also . . . would improve the ability of providers to offer patient-centered care” (p. 211).

Aside from this focus on definitions and patient-centered care, Phelan et al. (2004) states that “Qualitative studies would allow more careful exploration of the meaning of specific constructs across diverse groups. Second, research is needed to determine whether specific attributes of successful aging are missing. Quite possibly, there are other beliefs about successful aging that have not been captured by the published literature (e.g., inner contentment, spirituality)” (p. 215). As well, a large number of studies in the gerontological literature focus on the assessment of negative aspects and neglect the positive side of well-being (Smith et al., 2002).

Based on the paucity of qualitative data gathered directly from older adults about their perceptions and experience of quality of life, in this current study I have used a narrative inquiry methodology so that the voice of the participants might ring true in their own idiom.

### ***Lifelong Learning and Quality of Life***

Quality of life may be linked to lifelong learning through two distinct avenues: 1) leisure learning over the life span and, 2) lifelong education as a means to employment and a decent standard of living which in turn may provide quality of life.

## ***1) Leisure Learning***

Leisure learning may encompass almost any activity; it may be formal or informal. However, two particular trends in learning activities have developed over the last few decades: a) educational travel, and at the other end of the spectrum: b) world wide web learning.

### ***a) Educational travel***

“Educational travel is defined as a program in which participants travel to a location as a group with the primary purpose of engaging in a learning experience directly related to the location” (Bodger, 1998, p. 2). Two of the touted benefits of educational travel are: providing an “immediate and personal experience of an event, place, or issue” and, “providing the opportunity to combine leisure with a learning experience that is directed and meaningful” (pp. 2-3).

According to Bodger (p. 4) the typical participant in an English-speaking educational travel program is a single or widowed female, aged 46 or older from a diverse background which could include academics, secretaries, labourers and civil servants.

Despite that fact that many participants will take further trips (many of them will travel on more than one program each year) the educational travel market is still small. “In Britain in 1991, slightly more than 1 percent of adults of all ages had taken an educational vacation of any type” (Leisure Consultants, 1992, as cited in Bodger, 1998, p. 5).

Although many people predict a dramatic increase in educational travel over the next 20 years (p. 5), there are several barriers which must be overcome: perception of the programs, and cost. “Many (people) may see educational travel in a poor light, equating it with school or hard work, rather than viewing it as an enjoyable widening of their horizons” and “Educational travel cannot compete with normal package travel on price; the educational element is too expensive” (p. 5). For those individuals who have limited means or have suffered through negative formal educational processes in the past, educational travel may not appeal.

### ***b) World wide web learning***

World Wide Web Learning is similar to travel education in that it presupposes a certain level of income, health, and functional literacy skills on the part of the learners. “Literacy now includes ‘information-processing skills’, including the ability to use the Web” (Boshier, Wilson, & Qayyum, 1999, p. 276). Learning via the internet ranges from informal browsing to registration in on-line courses. One disadvantage to internet learning is the heavy reliance on reading skills and low levels of hands-on learning opportunities.

“For some adult educators, the (inter) Net holds promise as a means of lifelong education potentially free from the indignities of schooling, an electronic exemplar of anarchist-utopianism” (Bosher et al., 1999, p. 276). However, Bosher et al. (1999, p. 278) point out that most internet sites are in the US and a large number of links are connected to US cultural content. This US hegemony on the internet has implications for smaller nations and indigenous, non-English-speaking learners and the way in which “the US is constructed as the ‘centre’ and everyone else as ‘other.’ Bosher et al. (1999, p 277) points out that “Far too many courses treat the Web as a blackboard and involve the reading of too much text and a complete absence of links to sources outside the course.”

If older adults enjoy learning new things on the internet and have the financial means to underpin their internet activities, they should be encouraged to do so. However, Roszak (1986) cautions that bonds between individuals, within families, and communities may be jeopardized by an overly enthusiastic adaptation to cyber culture where face-to-face interactions among people are replaced by a vast network of isolated individuals pecking at keyboards and honing their skills as consumers in a commodified cyber land.

## ***2) Lifelong Education (Lifelong Learning)***

Seventy-five percent of the older adults in the study by Phelan et al. (2001) said that “continuing to learn new things” was important. Because the study was quantitative in nature, the respondents were not given an opportunity to say “why.” Perhaps it has something to do with aspects mentioned by Faure et al. (1972):

Learning to live, learning to learn, so as to be able to absorb new knowledge all through life, learning to think freely and critically; learning to love the world and make it more human; learning to develop in and through creative work. (p. 69)

Learning over the life span for its own sake and to increase the quality of one’s life is separate and different from the co-opted version we see in other guises such as adult education, continuing education, and self-directed learning. Unfortunately, the terms ‘lifelong learning’ and ‘lifelong education’ have become synonymous (Collins, 1998b, p. 51; Titmus, 1999, p. 344). This has had the effect of privileging institutionalised formal education for adults and devaluing vernacular or informal learning. Adult education or lifelong learning is currently suffering the same fate as literacy; it is being defined by the dominant culture and then packaged and commodified for specific economic purposes. Individual needs (including quality of life) are

irrelevant unless they contribute to the advancement of mainstream society (Grace, 2000; Illeris, 2003; Martin, 2003).

Lifelong education is faced with the same limiting factors as literacy when being considered emancipatory. As Collins (1998b) states: “The emancipatory pedagogy entailed prefigures a learning society that admittedly cannot be fully realized under prevailing conditions of advanced capitalism” (p. 47).

Illeris (2003) and Grace (2000) agree with Collins. Illeris (2003) says that “During the last decade, the issue of lifelong learning, which was once launched as a project of emancipation, has become more integrated into the labour market and employment policies of governments and international organizations” (p. 13). In his study, Illeris (2003) chose to investigate current adult education from the perspective of the learners. He found that:

Most adult learners approach education in very ambivalent ways. The majority of participants enter (adult education programs) because they are more or less forced to do so, and not because of an inner drive or interest. In practice, they typically develop a variety of psychological defence strategies to avoid learning that challenges their identity and personal ways of thinking, reacting and behaving. In general, it seems to be basically characteristic of adult learning that: adults have very little inclination to really learn something they do not perceive as meaningful for their own life goals; adults in their learning draw on the resources they have; and adults take as much responsibility for their learning as they want to take (if they are allowed to do so). (p. 14)

Added to the coercive effect of such educational policies is the “exclusionary mainstream modern practice in which the typical adult learner (is) younger, educated, white, and middle class” (Grace, 2000, p. 145). Crowther (2000), in a review of the literature on participation in adult and community education, found that local, national, and international studies have consistently shown that it is the “higher social classes, the young, (the) men and those seeking vocational education who are already educated who participate more. . . . It is the materially better off, the more educated and the more socially active who participate” (p. 479).

This has the effect of marginalizing a whole host of other groups of people. Crowther (2000) suggests that in order to widen this narrow, instrumental, and vocational view of adult education, we need to view education as a function of social relationships and widen our perception about “where learning occurs and what might count as ‘participation’”. Also, it locates

the ‘learner’ in a social context rather than as an isolated individual. This involves a shift of register from the individual to the collective” (p. 481).

The study by Illeris (2003) is one of the very few which has sought to investigate adult education from the learners’ perspective. As well, most of the literature dealing with lifelong learning views it as lifelong education or adult education and discusses the ramifications of policy, politics, participation, and programs. Older adults or quality of life is rarely mentioned even in passing.

### *Literacy and Quality of Life*

A direct link between literacy and quality of life or standard of living is hard to prove. However if ‘health’ is used as a synonym for quality of life, a panoply of literature suddenly opens and a direct link with literacy is more likely to be identified. Rootman and Ronson (2005) reviewed current literature and research on literacy and health and identified priorities for research on this topic in Canada. They found that “low literacy has direct and indirect impacts on health” (p. S62).

They conducted their literature review using the following definitions as a framework:

General literacy includes reading and listening ability, numeracy, speaking ability, negotiation skills, critical thinking and judgement. Health literacy is thought to include the ability to find, understand and communicate health information and to assess it. Other literacies are thought to include computer literacy, cultural literacy, media literacy and scientific literacy. (p. S63)

Possible direct and indirect effects of literacy on health were also listed: “Direct effects include medication use and safety practices; indirect effects include use of services, lifestyles, income, work environment and stress levels” (p. S63). Rootman and Ronson (2005) conclude that “we clearly need more research on the relationships between literacy, health literacy and other literacies in understanding literacy and health” (p.S67) and “quality of life outcomes” (p. S74). Health literacy is a relatively new concept in health promotion research (Nutbeam, 2000; Speros, 2005).

Researchers and policy makers often use the phrase “health literacy” to describe a set of skills needed to function in the health care environment. To date, however, research in this area has focused on the relationship between reading ability and a variety of health outcomes. In most cases, reading ability was measured with one of three (unspecified)

instruments. No studies have measured the value of health literacy as a broader construct. (DeWalt et al., 2004, p. 1228)

After an extensive review of the literature on the relationship between literacy and health outcomes, Rootman and Ronson (2005) and DeWalt et al. (2004) concluded that low literacy is associated with poor or adverse health outcomes. However, they acknowledge that literacy was viewed as “reading” and measured as such. Health was not considered from a wider perspective such as quality of life.

Most studies see remediation as a two-prong approach: increase the functioning literacy skills of the patients, and work to ensure the effectiveness of patient education materials. Nutbeam (2000) is one of the few researchers to identify the failings of past educational programs to address social and economic determinants of health. He says that:

Improving health literacy in a population involves more than the transmission of health information, although that remains a fundamental task. . . . If we are to achieve the ultimate goal . . . (of) trying to promote greater independence and empowerment among the individuals and communities we work with, we will need to acknowledge and understand the political aspects to education, focused on overcoming structural barriers to health. (p. 267)

The majority of the studies reviewed focussed on measurements and instruments and a narrow concept of literacy and of health. Nutbeam (2000) mentions in passing the “political aspects of education” and the “structural barriers to health.” The fact that he is highlighting these issues is a good first step but does not go very far at all. In my view, the structural barriers to health are social and economic. Poor people don’t eat very well and often live and work in unhealthy environments. We as a society also have more to consider than just the political aspects of education. Politics is everywhere. As Collins (1998a,b) and others have pointed out, emancipatory literacy and lifelong education only go so far.

It is clear from a review of the literature on literacy and health, that the concept of “quality of life” has not been incorporated prominently in the research. Most of the studies reviewed have the goal of reducing health care costs and increasing the effectiveness of the programs and services available to patients.

## **CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **Research Paradigm**

Epistemology can be roughly translated to mean “how people know what they know” (Sleeter, 2001, p. 213). For me the answer is “I know what I know because I’ve lived through it.” Or what other people might say is their “lived experience.” And this “lived experience” takes place within a context that interacts with and helps to create the experience. The epistemology chosen for this study is post-modern narrative research or more specifically, narrative inquiry.

bell hooks (1994) speaks of the challenges and rewards of claiming a knowledge based from one’s immediate experiences and sharing that knowledge through personal narratives which are strategic:

. . . different, more radical subject matter does not create a liberatory pedagogy, . . . a simple practice like including personal experience may be more constructively challenging than simply changing the curriculum. One of the ways you can be written off quickly as a professor by colleagues who are suspicious of progressive pedagogy is to allow your students, or yourself, to talk about experience; sharing personal narratives yet linking that knowledge with academic information really enhances our capacity to know. When one speaks from the perspective of one’s immediate experiences . . . (one is able) to claim a knowledge base from which (one) can speak. . . . Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice so that you can also speak freely about other subjects. (p. 148)

I believe that each of us has our own, individual and unique version of reality based on our “lived experience.” Although the focus of my study is not about “reality” per se, the notion of “reality” underpins the philosophy of the study. My notion of “reality” fits with the nature of qualitative research which says “the world, or reality, is not the fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon that it is assumed to be in positivist, quantitative research. Instead, there are multiple constructions and interpretations of reality that are in flux and that change over time. Qualitative researchers are interested in understanding what those interpretations are at a particular point in time and in a particular context” (Merriam, 2002, p. 3-4).

In this particular study, I was interested in understanding the lived experiences (or interpretations of realities) of three older adults in relation to literacy and quality of life as they are expressed by those adults in story form or narrative. “Qualitative research values and explores the meaning people place on their life experiences. Qualitative researchers try to understand these by observing and talking to people in their everyday settings with as little disruption to those settings as possible” (Merrifield et al., 1997, p. 12).

In the context of this study, I had conversations (a series of three ninety-minute interviews) with the three adults. The two females were interviewed in their own homes. This was a privilege for me and also allowed me to understand their lives from an observational point of view as well as through the conversations we had together.

The other participant and I met for coffee at a bistro which was a regular haunt for him. This is where we exchanged the transcripts. I joked that we might be mistaken for CIA agents because we were always surreptitiously passing unmarked brown envelopes across the table to one another. But it also gave me a chance to see him in a natural habitat and interacting with some of the regulars in his life. We took turns paying for the coffee. This was important to both of us although we never discussed it. It enhanced the feeling of two friends meeting for coffee rather than the unequal power relationship where the interviewer solicits the interviewee with a free coffee.

The view of the world that I am working from is based on a post modern perspective characterized by Merriam (2002) as “one of uncertainty, fragmentation, diversity, and plurality. There are many truths, and all generalizations, hierarchies, typologies, and binaries (good/bad, right/wrong, male/female, etc.) are ‘contested,’ ‘troubled,’ or ‘challenged’ ” (p. 10).

Although the three adults in my study are older (over fifty-five) they cannot be viewed homogenously. Each one has lived a very different life and has arrived at this current place in life through a series of unique experiences. Parts of their stories do intersect briefly at various points with commonalities but not in a way that is substantial enough to create generalized theories that can be extended to all older adults.

I agree with the concerns expressed by Denzin and Lincoln (2000) whether “the lived experience of someone else can be captured” and that “such experience, it is now argued, is created in the social text written by the researcher” (p.17). I fear that this is true, now that I have gone through the process of trying to capture someone’s experience and presenting it through

text; a quilt of text – mine and theirs and published literature. The weaving and sewing belongs to me and necessitates choice. I have tried to involve the participants in the choice-making as we moved through the various stages of the process; from the conversations to the collection process, review and presentation. But regardless of how carefully and attentively we move through the process, the process itself and the final product will always be incomplete. If we did the whole thing over again, it would be different each time. Having said all that, I will also say that the process was worth it for me and for my participants. I know this because follow-up conversations I have had with the older adults have revealed that some epiphanies occurred as a result of this study.

“Qualitative research is conducted not to confirm or disconfirm earlier findings, but rather to contribute to a process of continuous revision and enrichment of understanding of the experience or form of action under study” (Elliott, Fischer, & Rennie, 1994, as cited in Lincoln, 1995, p. 278). The purpose of my study was to understand through the stories of three older adults, *how literacy has influenced and shaped the quality of their lives*.

“LeCompte (1993) argues that it is the responsibility of serious qualitative research to ‘seek out the silenced because their perspectives are often counter-hegemonic’” (Lincoln, 1995, p. 282). Aside from the fact that I am an older adult (over fifty-five) and often have felt silenced myself when in situations where I am in the minority or part of an underprivileged group, it became obvious very quickly while doing the preliminary literature review for this study that there are very few *qualitative* studies which have focused on older adults. Most studies of older adults are quantitative. These quantitative studies collect data but do not give voice to the older adults and allow them to tell their stories.

### **Narrative Inquiry**

According to Connelly and Clandinin (1990) “It is equally correct to say “inquiry into narrative” as it is “narrative inquiry.” By this they mean “narrative is both phenomenon and method. Narrative names the structured quality of experience to be studied, and it names the patterns of inquiry for its study. To preserve this distinction (they) use the reasonably well-established device of calling the phenomenon “story” and the inquiry “narrative.” Thus (they) say that people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of those lives, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience” (p. 2).

Thus, the “story told” becomes both the experience to be studied and the method of expressing and collecting that experience. Casey (1995, cited in Sleeter, 2001, p. 229) makes the point that “in an increasingly alienating world, storytelling is the way to put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition.”

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) emphasize that: “A sense of equality between participants is particularly important in narrative inquiry . . . . a process of collaboration involving mutual storytelling and restorying as the research proceeds . . . constructing a relationship in which both voices are heard” (p. 4). One of the tasks of the narrative researcher is to move “beyond the telling of the lived story to tell the research story” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10). I was able to do that by journaling and writing field notes to provide a research context for the stories the older adults told. “In the process of writing the research story, the thread of the research inquiry becomes part of the researcher’s purpose” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10).

## **Research Method**

I found the idea of “*post modern interviewing*” interesting (Fontana & Frey, 2000). In order to decrease the influence of the researcher both in the method of data collection and in presentation, the “voices of the subjects are recorded with minimal influence from the researcher.” This is a specific type of interviewing called *polyphonic*. In this type of interviewing, the researcher maintains a low profile and lets the participants do most of the talking and story-telling.

However, I knew that I wanted my voice to be part of the “chorus”, and based on past experience with older adults, I know that I am not able to be a detached, robot-like interviewer. “*Interpretive interactionism*” seemed more my style. It added a new element to the “creative and polyphonic interviewing associated with postmodernism”, that of “*epiphanies*” which Denzin (1989a, as cited in Fontana & Frey, 2000) described as “those interactional moments that leave marks on people’s lives (and) have the potential for creating transformational experiences for the person” (p. 657). These epiphanies did occur for all of us, the participants and for me as well.

### ***Active Interviewing***

Holstein and Gubrium (1997) describe “active interviewing” as a kind of limited ‘improvisational’ performance which is spontaneous, yet structured by the interviewer, who is also an active participant. The active interview is a conversation and therefore “the active interview guide is advisory, more of a conversational agenda than a procedural directive”

(Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 76). Active interviewing is the method that I used to collect the stories of the three older adults. The three ninety-minute interviews that I had with each of the three participants were semi-structured conversations where I was also an active participant. The active interviews were less interview and more conversation full of story-telling and reflection.

Murray (1982) provides a wonderful description of conversation. Although he provides the description in relation to the act of writing, the description is also appropriate for the type of conversation that arises from the active interview: “. . . as a conversation between two workmen muttering to each other at the workbench. The self speaks, the other self listens and responds. The self proposes, the other self considers. The self makes, the other self evaluates. The two selves collaborate: a problem is spotted, discussed, defined; solutions are proposed, rejected, suggested, attempted, tested, discarded, accepted” (p. 163).

Tierney (1993) describes how “authority is discounted and dialogue becomes essential” in a postmodernist view of research. “Rather than researcher-researched relationships where one individual is powerful because of the knowledge he/she holds and the other is powerless because of a lack thereof, individuals become engaged in modes of dialogue where all individuals are collaborators and participants” (p. 128).

Since an “active interview” needs some organization or structure, I used the three-interview series method (Seidman, 1998) to keep myself and the older adults focussed and organized. I tape recorded each ninety-minute interview and transcribed the tapes myself. I had previous experience doing this, so I knew how long it would take and how much energy it would use. Three interviews of 90 minutes each were reasonable in terms of developing a comfortable working relationship with each of the three adults and provided enough time to “plumb the experience and to place it in context” (Seidman, 1998, p. 11).

A week to ten days between interviews allowed all participants to reflect on the interviews and the process itself. I journaled as a way of writing the reflexive research story and made field notes of “the circumstances surrounding the interview to provide details of the context to which the conversation might have been addressed” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 78).

During the course of the story-collecting process, I interviewed three older adults. The fourth participant, an older man, died of a heart attack just a few weeks before his series of interviews were to begin. Although previous to his death, he and his family had graciously allowed me access to some autobiographical stories and poems that he had written the winter

before, I was not able in the end to successfully include them in this thesis. Unfortunately, Graham was not strong enough after his heart attack to undergo the interview process and thus was unable to tell us directly what his personal concept was of literacy, quality of life, and if there was a connection between the two concepts.

### **Sampling**

“Sampling for an active interview is an ongoing process; designating a group of respondents is tentative, provisional, and sometimes even spontaneous” (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, p. 74). Since the site of my original research “quandary” was a government-subsidized seniors’ housing complex, I returned there for selection of two of my participants. I had two males in mind. They were participants in a series of creative writing workshop for older adults. They had an interest in writing and story-telling and skill in doing so. I had already met both of them although not in the context of my thesis research. I felt that perhaps I had a partial entry into the research context. I had also identified two female participants: one was a participant in a writing workshop for older adults and I had had several visits with her since that time. Again, she is a great storyteller with an interest in writing. The other female had been a volunteer literacy tutor.

I used purposive sampling to select the four, English-speaking, Caucasian, older adults; two males and two females who lived either in their own house or a senior residence. In purposive sampling, the researcher uses knowledge about a group to ensure that individuals who exhibit a particular attribute are included in the study. In this case, the individuals were adults over the age of 55 who exhibited interest and previous participation in literacy-related activities. I was very attracted to those who had a sense of humour; natural, colourful, story-telling abilities, and were quick-witted. The sense of humour and colourful story-telling abilities were more important to me than their previous participation in literacy activities. I was also more interested in non-traditional or vernacular literacies.

The choice of words for the title of my study is deliberate, as is the order of the concepts in the title. The study is about older adults (over fifty-five) as opposed to those who are middle-aged (35 – 40). I felt that these older adults would have had many years of profound experience but would also (at their present age) be vigorously active in many interesting pursuits. I was interested in the concept of literacy as a large, complex (not easily defined), life-long process that is, at the same time, very personal and context specific. I deliberately did not use the term “adult

literacy” because it has limiting connotations such as confining literacy to the adult years. I wanted to hear stories from the older adults about literacy across the life-span. Also, “adult literacy” has become synonymous with terms such as “functional literacy” and “lifelong learning.” This study is not about those concepts per se. The final of the three concepts I wanted to study in depth was that of quality of life and how it could be viewed through the lens of older adulthood and through a lifelong literacy lens. I did not want to collect quantitative data through a survey or questionnaire. I wanted to hear stories told by older adults who were humorous, colourful story-tellers with many years of poignant life experience.

The potential participants were chosen from five separate groups of older adults who had previously participated in a series of creative writing workshops. The four prospective adults at that time, were not known to each other. The researcher knew the participants through interacting with them separately (at different times and places) as a researcher/writer during the winter of 2002-2003. Each prospective respondent was approached by telephone and asked to participate in the study.

### **Protection of Rights**

In addition to collaboration during the active interviews, the choosing of stories to include in my thesis and the writing of the “research story”, my three participants were protected by informed consent (Appendix B, Appendix C, and Appendix D), University Ethics Committee approval (Appendix A) and thesis review through my M.Ed. thesis advisory committee.

### **Data Analysis**

“In qualitative research, data analysis is *simultaneous* with data collection. That is, one begins analyzing data with the first interview . . . . Simultaneous data collection and analysis allows the researcher to make adjustments along the way, even to the point of redirecting data collection and to ‘test emerging concepts, themes, and categories against subsequent data’ (Merriam, 2002, p. 14).

In my case, I began data analysis simultaneously with my first journal entry, reflecting the beginning of the creation of the “research story”. As each older adult interview unfolded, I wove into the analysis the transcripts from that interview and the accompanying field notes describing the conversational context of that interview.

From an active interview perspective, the stories were analysed to show:

The dynamic interrelatedness of the *whats* and the *hows*. Respondents' answers and comments are not viewed as reality reports delivered from a fixed repository. Instead, they are considered for the ways that they construct aspects of reality in collaboration with the interviewer. The focus is as much on the assembly process as on what is assembled . . . . The analytic objective is not merely to describe the situated production of talk, but to show how what is being said related to the experiences and lives being studied . . . . and to show how interview responses are produced in the interaction between interviewer and respondent. (Holstein & Gubrium, 1995, pp. 79-80)

The active interviews I had with each participant were conversations or “story-swappings” where we each contributed to the discussion. As the three-interview process progressed and our trust and comfort levels deepened, our sharing became more open and honest. Although most of the stories came from the other participants (which was the intent of the study) I also shared with them some of my thoughts and experiences as they may have related to the topic at hand.

Although I had given a copy of the interview questions (Appendix E) to the participants in advance of the first interview, we did not tie ourselves to the questions. If a good story got going, I did not interrupt or try to redirect the flow. We came back to some of the topics suggested by the questions at a later date.

In between the interviews, I transcribed the tapes verbatim. I regarded the verbatim aspect as extremely important. Although I did not analyse the transcripts from a strictly discourse analysis point of view (Tannen, 1987) it was important to include the speech patterns, hesitations, repetitions of key words or phrases, emphasis placed on certain words, sentence fragments, and the sound effects (a rueful laugh, an agonized sigh, the tapping of a strong finger on the table for emphasis). These are human expressions of experience and language, unique and highly personal. To erase those things through streamlined transcripts not only erases the verbal thumbprint from each story but in the end negates the whole underlying reason for embarking on the study in the first place: to hear in their own unique voices (literal and figurative) the stories of older adults.

## **Data Presentation**

### ***Confidentiality, Anonymity, and Voice***

Barton and Hamilton (1998, p. 63) highlight the delicate balance needed between two conflicting traditions: anonymity and voice. Social science research dictates that people have the

right to anonymity and “the knowledge that what they say will be treated as confidential, and respected as such.” The tradition in community education and adult education is that “people have a right to be heard and named in research, and that research writings can give voice and prominence to people’s lives.”

In order to balance out these two contradictory aspects of data presentation, I gave my participants the choice of creating a pseudonym for themselves or using their actual names. Two of the participants used their real names and one person used a nickname. In addition to the use of his real name, one participant was willing to include a poem which he had written and published. As outlined in the protocol on the research study consent form (Appendix B), the participants and I changed the names of other people and places to protect their identity and left out some details in the participants’ stories such as dates of events or other identifying features.

The participants were given several opportunities to control the revealing nature of their stories. During the interviews, all the participants felt free to say such things as “this is confidential” or “don’t include that in your thesis.” They also had the opportunity to end the interview prematurely, before the end of the ninety minutes. This happened on several occasions due to stress and fatigue. After the interviews were transcribed, each participant had a week to ten days to review the transcripts and make any changes, additions, or deletions. After reading their stories, several participants asked that certain portions not be used due to the sensitive nature of the story and the implications for other members of their family.

Once the transcripts were approved, the writing of Chapters Four and Five began. Each participant had the chance to read the part of Chapter Four that pertained to their story and all of Chapter Five. Comments from the participants ranged from “I feel comfortable”, “I’m not embarrassed”, “this process has been good for me because I see myself in a different light”, to “I’m impressed with Chapter Five and the theories that you discussed.”

I explained to the participants why I had included their stories verbatim, with pauses, repetitions, stress points, and made-up words like “comfortsy.” I have read other theses where the narratives have been smoothed out and the “uhms” and “ahs” deleted. In my view, this is a form of sanitization, a way to make things or people hegemonic. That isn’t the way we think or talk. It takes the personality out of the storytelling.

Murray (1982) talks about the evolution of the text as the writer writes and reads. His description of the text is also applicable to the text that develops as the conversation takes place

between the researcher and the participant. The following accurately describes the way the text originates orally and how it appears after it has been transcribed verbatim:

. . . fragments of language as well as completed units of language, what isn't on the page as well as what is on the page, what should be left out as well as what should be put in. Even patterns and designs – sketches of possible relationships between pieces of information or fragments of rhetoric or language – that we do not usually consider language are read and discussed by the self and the other self. (p. 165)

Verbatim transcripts capture the reflexive nature of 'thinking out loud.'

It is also a way for the reader to hear the distinct personality of the speaker. Van Manen (1990) states that "lived experience is soaked through with language. We are able to recall and reflect on experience thanks to language" (p. 38). He continues by claiming that "Research and theorizing that simplifies life, without reminding us of its fundamental ambiguity and mystery, thereby distorts and shallows-out life, failing to reveal its depthful character and contours" (p. 152).

I have presented my data as a "research story" about the collaborative storytelling/sharing and writing which took place between the three older adults and me. "Because collaboration occurs from beginning to end in narrative inquiry, plot outlines are continually revised as consultation takes place over written materials and as further data are collected to develop points of importance in the revised story" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 11).

In Chapter Four, each of the three adult narratives commences with a poem. The poems presented themselves to me in a spontaneous fashion as part of the surrounding context of the interviews. Since the interviews with Grammie and with Roberta took place in their homes, I was able to see the framed poems hanging in their daily living space. Each of these two poems (authors unknown) was given to them by a close friend or family member; someone who knew them well and understood what they valued. In the case of Roberta, it was "sacrifice" and "making it better" (for others). "Being important in the life of a child" was of value to Grammie. Bjørn's story begins with a poem that he wrote and published. When I saw the title: "Who Cares?" – I knew the poem was reflective of the values that were important to Bjørn because I heard and saw "caring" reflected in everything that Bjørn said and did; how he conducted himself on a day-to-day basis with everyone that he encountered, myself included. I chose the titles for Chapter Four based on three criteria: 1) stories that illustrated and supported the personal philosophy of each adult as it was originally expressed in the poem which begins each section; 2)

stories that surfaced as a result of conversations centered around the interview questions (Appendix E), and 3) stories that were highly idiosyncratic of each individual. For example, Roberta was wont to say: “I only made the same mistake, once.” Each of the three criteria is intertwined and support and validate each other.

### **Trustworthiness of the Findings**

“The best guideline is whether enough data in the form of quotes from interviews, episodes from field observations or documentary evidence are presented to support adequately and convincingly the study’s findings. In qualitative research, it is the rich, thick descriptions, the words (not numbers) that persuade the reader of the trustworthiness of the findings” (Merriam, 2002, p. 15). The series of three interviews with each participant yielded 300 pages of transcripts in total; approximately 100 pages per participant. The poems discovered serendipitously at the beginning of the first interviews, served as a strong thread which wove through the story collecting and reviewing process and added to the richness of the data as well as assisting in the sorting and choosing of the stories to present in Chapter Four.

Although Lincoln and Guba (1985) substitute the notion of “trustworthiness” for that of validity, “the three-interview structure incorporates features that enhance the accomplishment of validity. It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages interviewing participants over the course of one to three weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say.

Furthermore, by interviewing a number of participants, we can connect their experiences and check the comments of one participant against those of others. Finally, the goal of the process is to understand how our participants understand and make meaning of their experience. If the interview structure works to allow them to make sense to themselves as well as to the interviewer, then it has gone a long way toward validity ” (Seidman, 1998, p. 17).

Connelly and Clandinin (1990) warn that narrative, like other qualitative methods, relies on criteria other than validity, reliability, and generalizability. The language and criteria for narrative inquiry are still under development and therefore, “each inquirer must search for, and defend, the criteria that best apply to his or her work” (p. 7).

Chapman (1997) confessed that she was kept “honest and respectful” about her writing of stories because she had to “account” to the five research participants. She gave back her

interpretation of their words and stories, letting them contest or deny her words about them (pp. 36 – 37). I have tried to do the same. Although it was anxiety-producing to present my work to my participants and sit quietly and wait for their comments, it was a necessary step in the entire process for all of us. In the end it helped to bring about closure and kept the circle of equal participation in- tact.

## CHAPTER FOUR: PRESENTATION OF THE STORIES

### Introduction to the Older Adults

Each of the three adult narratives commences with a poem. Embodied within the poem is the personal philosophy of each adult. The poem which begins Bjørn's story was written and published by him. The poem which begins Grammie's story was given to her by a friend (author unknown) and the poem which begins Roberta's story was given to her by one of her sons (author unknown).

### Bjørn's Story

*WHO CARES?  
(An Inmate's Soliloquy)  
Bjørn T.*

*This year I'll be forty years old. Who cares?*

*Never a night passes without me waking in a cold sweat. Who cares?*

*I've been in jail longer than I've been on the street. Who cares?*

*I was three years old when I went into a foster home. By my fourth birthday I was on the run, living off the land in the marsh on my way home to Mother and Dad. The foster parents found me and took me back. They strapped me and locked me in my bedroom for hours. Once I was locked there for three days. Who cares?*

*I'm the eighth of twelve kids. All the younger ones spent their time in foster homes before going to jail. Dad was a drinker. He said he was only celebrating his winnings. He was a great hunter, and today his name is attached to the biggest canoe race held each summer at home. I remember the night he died. My brother woke him while adding wood to the fire. He yelled for another beer and we kids clung to the walls looking for the safety of the corners. "Go start the skidoo!" he ordered. He fell to the floor as he tried to stand. He crawled out the door. Three days later they found his body, who cares?*

*Foster homes drove me mad.*

*I was a good student. I liked school. I was well behaved. Who cared?*

*By my thirteenth birthday I was in custody, serving time for arson. They said I burnt down the school. I did not burn that school, but who cares? I decided I'll show them and see who cares.*

*The truth didn't matter. I wasn't believed, who cares?*

*Until seven years ago I'd been in every Pen in the west. I was locked down for months at a time. The guards were afraid of me. They thought I was dangerous and crazy. I was transferred from one place to another. I was handcuffed and shackled and two guards would accompany me aboard the plane – last on and first off.*

*I've walked over bodies, shanked and bleeding as they died. I've been stabbed eight times and I've stabbed others. Who cares?*

*The only home I've known is here, where I am now. Seven years ago I was welcomed by one who cared.*

*Now do I?*

When Bjørn and I first met a few years ago, he was attending the first session of a writing workshop for older adults. I was there to introduce myself as a researcher interested in doing some follow-up interviews with the participants about literacy and the quality of their lives. At the end of the session, we chatted and I told Bjørn some of the details of the research project. He was very congenial and offered that he had a background in psychology that had introduced him to research techniques. In regard to the research I was proposing, he asked directly: “What’s the hidden agenda”.

I knew then that he was very astute and if involved in any research project he would be sure to keep the researcher honest. Aside from that intriguing aspect of his personality, I was also curious to know more about the work that he had done within the criminal justice system.

When the series of writing workshops came to an end, an anthology was published of the participants’ writing. One of Bjørn’s contributions was the poem: An Inmate’s Soliloquy. This

poem is about a young man who lived with Bjørn for eight years after he got out of prison. Bjørn explained how their friendship developed:

Well, I was a counselor. So I didn't see anyone unless they were referred to me by a family member, fellow inmate or someone just knew by reputation. Not my particular reputation but the organization's reputation. I'd do about 120 clients a year, new clients and then there would be the ongoing ones.

And every year there would be one or two who would worm their way into your heart and soul.

And now I keep in touch, just to let him know that there are people out there. It's nice to be in contact.

I loved that work because it was good of the heart. It was maybe my 'missionary soul' coming out. (laughs)

The word "care" appears eleven times in this poem. I wanted to include the poem in this thesis because the poem itself and the word "care" epitomize Bjørn. When asked directly: "What is quality of life for you?" Bjørn answered: "To be 'accepted' – to be 'enjoyed' – as an individual – And – to be able to 'give'".

"Caring" in Bjørn's mind is a two-way street: to be cared about is important but caring for and about others is equally important. This "caring" is illustrated by the notion of acceptance or lack of discrimination; inclusiveness within a group, a community and, society as a whole. The essential importance of "inclusiveness" was highlighted when Bjørn spoke about his four heroes:

I've been reading the story of David in the Bible. One of my 'heroes' in life is David the 'rascal'. He slept with all these women and God still accepted him. He killed all these people. He lied. He cheated. He did everything that a human man could ever do. (laughs) And *still* – he's one of my heroes; acceptable to God. And he was a warrior and a compassionate, caring man.

And my next hero is Sitting Bull. How much *love* he had for his people, trying to keep them safe from the Americans. And how he was denied because of the old 'I'm the Big Brother' – from Washington to Ottawa. (laughs)

And my third hero is Pierre Trudeau. I can't think of anyone in our national history who has challenged us as individuals, to have an idea of who we are, more than him. (laughs) Now, he didn't care whether it looks the same as his – just – "You'd better have an idea of *why* you're here and *what* you're doing."

I mean he did his "fuddle-duddle" and his pirouettes and all that but he made us think. We didn't have to do that before. You either liked somebody or you didn't.

Ah – Kennedy because he was so un-American. (chuckles) I mean he was very *compassionate*. He was not “I’m the *best* in the world.” He’d say: “we.” He was very inclusive. When you listen to Kennedy, he continuously made you feel a part of the people. And that is not part of the America that I know.

And I call them all – my cornerstones.

Bjørn talked about his concept of friendship and how that relates to inclusiveness:

Which takes me to a saying by a Sioux Chief: it’s easy to be true to kin whose same blood runs through your veins. It’s easy to be true to a wife – which is built on passion? But the test of a real friend is to be true to that man or that woman who has none of these other things. You know?

Your family goes on forever and you think that’s part of it. Because you’re married to someone or sleeping with someone you’ve got a commitment there – but a friend is *chosen*. And you really have to work at that one.

And to be true to that and if they stand by you when you go down – ah –h-h-h-h (sighs deeply) –

Then you have a friend.

### **“There’s a comforting from being familiar”**

According to Bjørn it’s natural and explainable to want to be in a community of “like kind.” Our comfort zone is there and society actually fosters that. It’s valuable and important and may be necessary up to a point but then it becomes a trap, a ghetto. Too much sameness fosters isolation and discrimination against us and others.

And we tend to ‘sub-culture’ ourselves. So we live in comfortable communities. That’s why we have slums because the unemployed and the illiterate *need* the protection of – ‘same kind’. So that’s why we develop our community of rich and slum.

The unknown is very fearful. *There’s a comforting from being familiar* – even if it’s a ‘bad – familiar’ experience.

He gives an example of the negative aspect of “like kind/ community” when he talks about former inmates and aboriginal people being trapped in their ghettos of poverty and unemployment and how hard it is to change. It’s “familiar even a bad familiar.”

Life changes. You know there is a beginning and an end. And you go full circle but there’s also all these little circles as you’re going through. Memory sort of stagnates your ability to go on if you live in the past. However – you need the past to get to the future.

And our life experiences dictate our ability to project ourselves into the unknown. That's very frightening.

I think of all the people I've worked with who've suffered a *worse* abuse than I ever have. I think in particular of sexual abuse. You've already developed skills to numb yourself. However it's easier to live with what you know than the unknown.

You get so far – and alcoholics are like this too – and drug users. You know: “Yeah – we're going to start with a *clean page* and we're not going to do this anymore.” They go so far and the unknown is *so* frightening that it's easier to live with the past than the future.

You *know* what's going to happen. It's a comfort zone. It's a predictable bit of history as opposed to the 'unknown'.

And I've had too many experiences working with immigrants and refugees. I think maybe our First Nations people experience this totally. Being natural parents the thing you want for your children is an *improvement* of what you had in your life. People coming off reserves, their goal is to give a better opportunity (to their children). And they end up in the slum parts of the city with the inability – because of lack of experience and education – to find a *reasonably* good employment if *any* employment. So you just go down hill because you've got nothing to do. What do you do to fill your time?

### **“Where I live it's like a ghetto”**

: A 'senior's ghetto' is as bad as a 'poverty ghetto'. Ageism – the 'isms' – are bad too; discrimination because of 'ism' whether it be gender or age

*Where I live it's like a ghetto* – to me. I go to the mall and the average age (laughs) – of the people in the mall – is about seventy-five and the traffic jams are created by walkers. And seniors tend to hold conventions in doorways and that's where the 'hard of hearing' gather too – because you have to yell at one another. You're 'familiarily focused on yourself' and no one else matters. So you can block a doorway and you can have a traffic jam on *both* sides and be bewildered why people are angry (laughs) at you.

Now I live between two high schools and we're the only breathing people after four o'clock. (laughs) And there's *no* interaction – so the isolation has become very prevalent and you're *not* beyond the neighbors. And I'm bothered by the neighborhood I'm living in.

There's no inter-generational interaction in there so you don't experience the needs, wants, joys and sadness of others.

### **“You need a very broad spectrum to have a fullness in life.”**

The full spectrum of life is both chronological (two and a half years or one hundred years, for example) and experiential: PMS, a cut finger, planting a cherry tree, or drinking pink

lemonade while sitting in a rocking chair. The number of experiences we have is also determined by the number of years we have lived. It's all relative.

In order to experience what Bjørn calls the “full spectrum of life” we have to have opportunities to interact with other age groups and activities:

I don't think you give that up. I don't think you *fulfill* that need ever in your life. There maybe more comfort in comparing arthritic pain with somebody else who has arthritis at your age, but you still need to know that there's a bruise on a seven-year old from being kicked playing soccer. Or that a 30-year old has a burn from cooking in the oven. Or that there's a *scratch* on a man's hand from pounding a nail. (laughs)

You need all those kinds of interactions and you've got to know the success of children in school or promotions of people in job positions. Or women knowing – being able to share – sympathize with somebody going through a bad PMS period (laughs) or divorce or men have to do their own *stupidity* – with their corny jokes that no one else understands but a man. (laughs) It's a sense of community if there's comfort and there's need to be with like-kind. But you can't be *exclusive*. And that's a political movement – (laughs ruefully) – that has to be started.

In order to achieve fullness in life, you need to have a very broad spectrum of interests and activities:

*You need a very broad spectrum to have a fullness in life.*

That's what we need at all times – a very large interest range; to be cognizant of what's going on in the world, watching the news – watching movies – watching sports.

My great nephew's full 'spectrum of life' is limited by two and a half years of experience as compared to someone who has 101 years of experience. But they're both living where they should be.

**“That's really important – to be liked.”**

Bjørn values and nurtures those intergenerational relationships that are “inclusive” and “accepting.” He views these intergenerational relationships as a way to avoid ageism and also the isolation which so often accompanies the aging process. He described the special relationship which he has with his great nephew:

A great nephew who *likes* me. (chuckles) *And that's really important – to be liked.* He reminded me he was two and a half. He'll be *three* on the second of October. He enunciates most words extremely well. And he said my name with great clarity: “Uncle B j ø r n.” (laughs)

He likes coming to my place because I have a rocking chair that he can rock in. The last two or three times I've been *there*, I've had pink lemonade. So he tells his mother yesterday that he'd like to come up and rock in my chair and have pink lemonade. And he was inviting me over to his house for coffee and I said I couldn't go because I had to wait for a phone call. And he said: sniff "I'm disappointed." (laughs)

So I told him I would call him today and I would join him for coffee and he said: "You can look at our cherry tree." 'Cause earlier in the year his mother bought a flowering cherry tree.

Bjørn also appreciates older adults who are positive in nature and living life to the fullest regardless of actual age or health status. He briefly mentioned one of his neighbours.

This *delightful* little lady who loves people is very nice. She's also part of the 'book-group'. She's *vibrant*. And while she reads her religious magazines she also contributes in so many ways and she's so *loving* you know that she likes you when she talks to you.

She's a good neighbor. I like her. Part of *my* community.

**"I need to believe that I can put my arms around everyone."**

In all parts of his daily life, Bjørn makes a point of focusing on the positive and works hard at accepting and being accepted unconditionally.

So somewhere along the line I have said that I have a very simple philosophy of being non-judgmental and unconditional. I do this religious/philosophic thing of your duty. The first duty is to love God with all the "alls." You know – with all your heart, with all your mind, with all your soul and what ever else goes with that. The second is to love your neighbor as your self. You can't love your neighbor unless you're non-judgmental and unconditionally accepting.

And our society is not very generous in its total acceptance. I don't have many facts to back up that statement but ethnicity is a real stigma. And whether you live in the west side or the east side is a determining factor. Where you buy your groceries? (laughs) How often do you go to the second hand store? All these things are realities that determine your self worth in your mind and what others think. If we allow it.

His attempts to accept people unconditionally have been tempered by betrayals in real life yet he continues to work at living his "philosophy", doing so with his eyes and heart wide open and laced with wry humor:

So – it's *my* philosophy. *I need to believe that I can put my arms around everyone*. Even though they deceive me from time-to-time. (laughs).

**"Knowing that you can do something and being frightened is a foolish attitude."**

An example of “inclusiveness” and lack of discrimination that Bjørn enjoys as a white person is the Aboriginal culture and ceremonies like “sweats.” He also talks about “sweats” as an example of his own “comfort zone” versus his fears (or foolishness).

I’m having (laughs) an intriguing thought process here. Ah – *foolishness* – in that context I think was related to – ‘fears’. Knowing that you can do something and being *frightened* of doing it is a foolish attitude.

Introducing yourself to a stranger. The method we use to approach? And in that first initial contact – is a foolish act too. Worrying about what people think of you. That’s something we’re all very worried about.

I would *love* to be able to feel at ease on a First Nations Indian Reserve. And – you see – I don’t know whether I would or I wouldn’t – being left there for a few days.

I’m very comfortable going to a ‘Sweat’. *No* – I lie. I’m very comfortable going to a ‘Ceremonial – *Feast*’. I’m comfortable being taken into the ‘Inner Circle’ at the ‘Ceremonial – *Feast*’. At – ‘*Sweats*’ – I’m *not* comfortable in a pair of shorts and going into the sweat lodge.

Bjørn is very self-aware and honest about his fears. He knows where the boundaries exist around his comfort zones and what issues he needs to face in order to move beyond those limitations.

**“Literacy goes well beyond just the reading and writing.”**

In Bjørn’s mind, literacy is a broad-based notion which goes well beyond a set of discrete skills like reading and writing. Literacy is communication which allows a person to function in present-day society.

My personal definition of literacy is to *function* in the current world and society so that I do not make errors ever. That I can understand what’s going on. That my concepts are strongly inquisitive. *Literacy goes well beyond just the reading and writing*. It’s communication. It’s skills connected with communication. How do you demonstrate affection or displeasure, anger, *all* the emotions?

The ability to read is *still* an essential part, a *basic* part of life. And I’m not going to challenge anyone on where it comes in the pyramid of success. You know? (laughs)

Literacy is something that’s ongoing. Once you learn to read and write – and arithmetic – does not mean that’s —all you’re going to need. It’s an ongoing skill development.

According to Bjørn, if you “care” about people and want to be “inclusive” you don’t use “literacy” or lack of literacy as a method of exclusion.

We do that (discriminate) with our abilities to communicate and to read. “Well – what does it say – now?” And “Did you read the fine print?” (laughs) (taps the table strongly for emphasis) “Well – If you’d read that you’d have known it was only for so many days!”

Unfortunately, mainstream society uses literacy as a tool of discrimination, another way to maintain the status quo. Since dominant society devalues minority literacies, it therefore devalues minority identities and silences their voices. This is in keeping with the power and control which the dominant society exerts over marginalized groups as a whole. Literacy is just another way to devalue and silence the marginalized (Stuckey, 1991).

When someone becomes literate and knows exactly how to *function*, you’ve got no control. If you can keep them from needing to ask for help you’ve got control. So the old adage that education is a dangerous tool is very real.

Bjørn highlights the dilemma surrounding literacy. We say that we want all people to be literate but perhaps not too literate.

**“I am not computer literate.”**

Computer literacy is a specific type of literacy that can be used by society to exclude certain people. “If literacy is often located in unequal social relationships, this inequality is most apparent in the access to literacy resources which people have. . . . These resources include . . . technical skills and equipment, as well as sites and supports for learning. These may be institutionally based or informal” (Barton & Hamilton, 1998, p. 17).

Bjørn described his current place in the scheme of things:

I’m actually left out in part of life right now. I am not computer literate. I know I can become computer literate or I can become *functional* on a computer the moment I decide.

Bjørn’s computer literacy is contextual. Until he needs computer skills for a specific purpose or context, he won’t make a point of acquiring them.

Until my need is *totally there*, I don’t need all the knowledge that’s out there in the world unless it’s *functional*. Unless you keep using it – you don’t need all the equipment. And so this is what I’m doing with – computers.

Yagelski (2000, p. 135) makes the point that “. . . technologies like email complicate our very conceptions and practices of literacy and thus have the potential to alter the meaning of literacy in our lives.” Bjørn agrees:

There are words that we use today – if you're into the computer system. I haven't advanced – so there are a lot of things I don't know. But people sit down and talk about being into "email." They're creating new words all the time to shorten them.

He readily admits that it's his own choice right now that is keeping him away from computer literacy:

And I'm out of the loop. And right now I don't feel bad about it. However (laughs) I *might* feel bad when I want to get into those.

And the interesting thing is all my writing now that I do; I do 'long hand.'

Then I want to give it to some one to translate into the modern technology. I can type. I can word process. But after that – don't ask me to do anything.

I usually have to get someone to turn on the computer. (laughs)

Again, Bjørn is aware of his self-imposed limitations and accepts them with grace and humor, knowing full well that when he is ready to take the next step his will do so.

**“We've gotten into technical literacy.”**

Bjørn expresses a sentiment about technical literacy that is similar to the one he has about computer literacy; we develop the necessary skills as a way to adapt to a changing world or we get left behind.

Literacy changes.

*We've gotten into technical literacy*; how to program everything from a toaster to a coffee pot – to a *bank* machine.

And those are skills that you develop – as they're needed. So we *progress* – as our world changes. We pick up skills *or* we get depressed and left behind (a touch of rueful humor in his voice).

He gives an example of being left behind and what it was like for the person involved:

I was talking about this gentleman. I don't know how long he was in jail. As he was getting out – they had bank machines and bank cards. I mean he knew what a credit card was. (laughs) But going up to a bank machine and being able to access money was totally unfamiliar to him and very frightening. He was needing to have someone with him when he went to the bank even if he *wasn't* going to use the automatic teller.

He was just *so* uncomfortable with the new technology; street lights and *signs* and computers. Mind you – in jail – most everyone got to use the computer. It was a literacy tool there. And they often found out what they didn't know by sitting down and punching

in your name. The difference between capital letters and small letters is a real thing – in jail.

So many inmates could never write. They only *printed*. I mean they could print as fast as I could write (laughs) but they still only printed.

**“People learning to read is a wonderful experience.”**

Bjørn has only good things to say about people learning to read. He views it as very emancipatory: allowing people to participate in the world of print (signs, maps, newspapers) and as a path to employment.

When we talk about literacy and we see them advertising somebody 65 – learning to read – the *joy* is still there because they’ve accomplished something and they’re achieving things they’ve never learned before.

*People learning to read is a wonderful experience.* It gets them jobs. It gets them openings and they can read signs, directions, maps, and newspapers.

There’s just *so much*; writing their names –even. I didn’t think it was possible for people *not* to be able to sign a cheque today. But there *are* people out there who *cannot* write their own name. And you have to do an X and a couple witnesses. I mean it’s so far beyond me in the year 2000. But there were – there are.

I know of people who can’t read. It doesn’t mean they can’t read *anything* but they always take a letter they get to one of their closest intimate friends – to read. So they don’t miss anything.

When we have *less* mental capacity than *other*. And what the needs are. You know? What do you call literacy for someone who has a very low IQ? That’s a question that’s been raised in *my* mind.

However, he realizes that the playing field of literacy is not even for everyone and he worries about those who may have more challenges.

**“It’s not material things, it’s emotional.”**

Literacy (vernacular and formal) allows Bjørn to communicate and take part in his various communities: an informal book club, an informal writing group, Folk Fest, aboriginal feasts and ceremonies, spiritual – religious traditions, and cultural events. These activities contribute in large measure to Bjørn’s version of “quality of life.” This takes place within the limits of his situations.

It’s *not* material things; it’s *emotional*. To be happy and *safe* and secure with your feelings and emotions. That’s much more valuable.

And you have to be able to laugh at yourself and enjoy yourself as well as being successful and *functional*. A part of the function of living is also humor. You have to be able to *laugh* at yourself. Don't take yourself so seriously. (gives a big sigh). You can't program yourself like a computer. Even before computers, people tried to do that.

Life is worth living – if you're *not* abused. I'm thinking about being abusive but at the same time, none of us want to be *abused*. But we have to be cognizant and recognize some of our weaknesses that allow *us* to *be* – abusive.

Bjørn realizes that we all have a good and a bad side, just like his four heroes. But he fervently believes that we also are worthy of love and acceptance and that is what makes life worth living.

## Roberta's Story

*Mom,*

*All the things you have done  
The nights you stayed awake  
To make it better  
when it was wrong.  
You did it for my sake  
Sacrifice isn't easy but  
Moms do what they should  
And I can never repay you  
But I wish I could  
God gave me the dearest Mother*

*And whether I'm near or far  
I'll always cherish  
You Mom,  
Because love is what  
You are!  
(author unknown)*

A copy of this poem hangs, framed in the hallway of Roberta's apartment, at the juncture of the sitting room, kitchen and front door. It is at the epicenter of Roberta's physical living space, and her orientation to life. This plaque was given to her by one of her sons. The love and thanks that he is expressing is specifically from son to mother. But the sacrifice he mentions and the "things you did to make it better when it was wrong" permeates her life and transcends the limits of mother to child.

Roberta was sacrificing and making things better for others at an early age. As the eldest of three children, she had to take on adult responsibilities when her mother became ill:

I have two brothers and we didn't have a really happy childhood. My mom was really; really sick and things just went down the tubes.

"Gallopig" M.S. (multiple sclerosis) is what my mother had and she got real sick – real fast.

I didn't have any choice, I *had* to work hard.

When Mom got sick I was twelve – thereabouts. Twelve and a half. One brother was six and the other one was a baby.

My youngest brother – he called me one time and he said: “You know Roberta – you’re the only Mom I can remember.”

And Mom couldn’t walk anymore so I did *a lot* of stuff that no twelve year old should have to do. And I tell people that I never *did* have a teenage life – ‘cause after I left there I got married. What a ‘jackass’ idea that was.

The needs of her family robbed her of her teenage years but also caused her school career to be interrupted and dislocated:

I was sixteen when we moved back there and of course, the transition *wasn’t* – (laughs) really smooth.

I wanted *so* badly to carry on with my business course. And my grandma and grandpa were still living in the city then and I could have stayed with them. I had done Grade Nine and Ten and I wanted to go back and finish my high school with the business course. But they wouldn’t let me.

They needed me at home. That’s *not* the excuse they used but I *know* that’s why. And I think that’s probably the reason I got married so dog-gone young.

I wanted to be a secretary. You know in those days girls were kinda limited to what they could become. But if I was good at anything in school – I was good at my business course.

It was a *good* course. And at that time you took *four* years and so by the time you were done you had the equivalent of whatever you get when you go to business school. But anyway it didn’t happen so –

Roberta is philosophical now about the situation but at the time it happened, it had a profound affect on her life.

**“I was trying to cram three years into one.”**

Roberta described how difficult it was to switch from the optional curriculum of a city school to the standardized curriculum of a small town school:

In the city I had been taking a business course. And of course while you’re taking a business course there are some things that you don’t *have* to take. Like – one of the maths was – Trigonometry – Something I wasn’t very good at anyway. So I moved out there and of course they didn’t offer business courses. And I had *not* taken any French. I didn’t have to take French in the city. But in the small town school I *did*.

So here I was – *trying to cram three years of – a couple of different things – into one*. And I was never any good at *any* of the maths. Finally the light bulb went on. (laughs) I was never all that great but at least I passed it. Well – the French – was just a lost cause. I

never did get any good at that. I think I flunked it. And –at the end of Grade Eleven, I was seventeen and I just fell in love. (laughs)

I *wanted* to get married and so I did.

**“I didn’t take my Grade twelve – until I was forty-something.”**

Going back to school in her forties, to obtain a Grade Twelve certificate was a reenactment of earlier years in terms of hard work and commitment.

(laughs) I actually took my Grade Twelve by correspondence. And I did ten subjects and it was *tough*. Oh, man! I’d been out of school for over twenty years.

One of the classes was Home Economics. They ask you to make a blouse or darn a sock or whatever. I remember making this blouse this one time – *and* darning a sock – and sending these projects in and I got A ++ (laughs)

I never told them how old I was. And a little note on the back of my assignment: “Best job that we’ve ever seen” – yack, yack, yack. And I thought: “How am I going to tell them – I’ve been doing this for thirty years?” (laughs)

But I did really well. I was quite proud of myself. And I wrote the Departmentals at the local high school. By this time we had a whole high school.

And I wrote my exam with my daughter. She was writing her Grade Twelve exams at the same time I was.

(laughs) She said: “I never saw anything so funny-lookin in my life.”

She said: “There’s Mom – sitting with all these young people. A fist full of pencils in one hand and a batch of erasers in the other hand. Didn’t turn her head. Was sweating like a horse. Wouldn’t even say hello.” (laughs)

But I *passed* and I graduated with the rest of them.

If I’d been smart – I’d have gone on and taken my university.

Roberta laughed a lot as she vividly described what it was like to write the Grade Twelve exams but she also expressed pride in her achievement and a faint regret that she hadn’t gone on to university.

**“I mean what the hay I could type.”**

Although Roberta’s formal schooling was interrupted and she ended up with a career that was different from what she had originally planned, the informal skills such as typing, cooking and music that she acquired along the way, provided her with enjoyment.

It was horrible. In the afternoon and night I went to business college. And then I ended up being a bar maid – or a *cook*. (laughs)

*I mean* – “*what the hay*” – *I could type*. And I haven’t lost that. I’m not as *fast* as my kids but I don’t have to stare at my hands either. (laughs)

I do a lot of it since I got this computer.

**“I’m not exactly what you’d call a computer guru.”**

Roberta uses her computer extensively for email and typing posters and song sheets for activities in her building but she is still feeling somewhat intimidated by new communications technology.

And my oldest grand son – he’s twenty-two. Will be on his next birthday. He’s a computer expert. I’ve been trying to get him to move back to Saskatchewan because I could handle having a computer expert ‘close by’. Because *I’m not exactly what you’d call a computer guru*.

Well I wouldn’t have a computer but my sons got me that for my sixty-fifth birthday.

They said they’re trying to drag me into the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.

**“It’s something you can use your whole lifetime.”**

Roberta values her informal skills such as typing, music and cooking.

It’s the same with music. Even if you don’t have a lot of formal training it’s something you can use your whole life time. I have anyway.

You know – it’s a *fun* thing. The other lady that lives here (in my building), she plays the piano and I play the organ. We had a *gig* – here –one night. The Services for the Seniors hired us to play for their Christmas Social. One of the gals who’s on the Board of the Services for Seniors came in and she’s listening to us practice one day and she said: “Oh – that sounds *so* polished.”

(laughs) We just laughed and said: “Yah – right! Polished we ain’t.”

But we *do* have a lot of fun and the people in here – I think for the most part – they enjoy it.

These skills are a form of vernacular literacy and allow Roberta to contribute to her various communities.

**“Like neighbors depending on neighbors type-thing.”**

Roberta values friendship and the (reciprocal) helping of neighbors. It started when she was a farm wife and mother of three young children. In midlife, these values were expressed and found again in various career situations:

It wasn't just cooking up north that was interesting – it was – just the fact that I was there. I especially enjoyed the Yukon because the people used to be on the farms here. And – “friendly” – “helpful” – you know – *Like neighbors depending on – neighbors type-thing.* And I *really* enjoyed that.

This also carries over to the present situation in her Senior Residence:

You know – small town life is annoying some times because everybody *knows* what everybody's doing. And they're a little narrow-minded maybe. But if somebody is in need, they're right there. They're *right – there*. And that's what life is like in this building.

Roberta appreciates the sense of community she experiences within her building and the feeling that she can depend on friends for help when needed.

**“I've always been able to laugh at things.”**

Harrowing incidents occurred on the farm when Roberta was doing the work of a hired man, but also learning as she went along. Her courage and sense of humor helped to alleviate the stressful situations:

I've always been able to laugh at things.

I would do these stupid damn things. You know, I was such a dummy on the farm when I first got there. I was born and raised in (the city).

Didn't know one end of a farm from another. I didn't have a *clue*.

So I started driving the truck *and* the tractors *and* the combines and all those things that go with it. But (laughs) I really didn't have a clue. (laughs) And I made *so many* mistakes. (laughs)

We had a lot of hills out in our country and a three-ton truck. I had never driven anything bigger than a car before. And you know, you couldn't *stop* to take the load off the combine. You had to do it on the go. Anyhow, I took one *dump* from the combine and he's going on. I was coming up behind him. I had to go up a hill and I could see (laughs) he was waiting for me and I got excited because he was waiting for me. And I got *half-way* up this hill -- I forgot to put it in *low*.

(laughs) And I *stalled*. And of course -- naturally -- the first thing I did was put the clutch in and the brakes on, at the same time. And I was like this (leans back at a sharp angle) and my life is flashing before my eyes. And I went *backwards* down the hill.

*Scared -- me -- to -- death.*

And I finally put it in *low* and I got up the hill.

Well -- you know -- I got to be madder than heck when it happened and then of course I'd get to thinking about it. And I'd go and do my coffee with my 'buds' and we'd start laughing. And it ended up that everybody in town -- the *whole area knew* (laughs) -- my latest 'faux-pas.'

**“I only made the same mistake once.”**

(laughs) Thank God! *I only made the same mistake 'once'* (laughs). But I made quite a few of them. (laughs) They were pretty disastrous. (laughs)

We had a big Quonset and in the back part was a grain bin. And *barley* of all things was in there. And the only way you could load the truck from this bin was that the truck had to sit outside at the back end of the Quonset. And it was on a bit of a slant, so the truck was like this. (gestures with her hand). And he said: “I want you in the back of the truck. You level the grain as it comes out of the auger.”

Well of course he goes back into the grain bin and he doesn't see me or *care*. (laughs) He never told me I had to move my feet once in awhile.

(laughs) Here's all this stuff coming out of the auger. *And* the truck's on a slant. And I'm getting right up to my waist in barley. And I *couldn't* move my feet.

I was stuck tighter than a tic. And the grain is going over the side of the truck.

And I'm hollering and hollering.

(laughs) And banging the end of the auger head with my grain shovel.

Oh, I wouldn't have died. But I could see all this grain going over the truck box.

That was another one of my 'faux-pas.' I made quite a few. And of course I would go into town and I'd tell my 'buds' and we'd have a good laugh. And then of course everybody would say: “I hear Roberta did such and such and so-on and so-on.”

**“My quality of life has just vastly improved.”**

Once she reached the “magic sixty-five” as she calls it, Roberta was comfortably settled into her senior complex and receiving her pension. Freed at last from the need to earn a living and take care of others, Roberta can now relax somewhat and enjoy leisure activities:

Well you know – you talk about quality of life. *My* quality of life since I turned into a senior has *vastly* improved (laughs). A senior is the magic sixty-five when you start getting a pension. I don’t know how *magic* it is but that’s what I classify as being a senior.

You know the best thing that happened to me – ever – for my *whole* lifetime – was turning into a senior.

My oldest son, he couldn’t figure out how come I’m *so* goofy – crazy – and laughing all the time. He said: “You know, I can’t believe that you are *really* happy. How can anybody be happy – living by themselves?” (laughs)

And I said: “I think that’s why”. (laughs) “I mean – because I only have myself to think about anymore.”

*My quality of life has just vastly improved.* I love it here and I like my “time of life.” And I don’t plan on leaving too soon.

There’s nothing more *horrible* (laughs) than a whole raft of seniors that are unhappy with themselves and complain. Now I sit and I look at myself and I think: “Self – what the heck have you got to complain about – for God sakes? Life doesn’t get much better than this.”

But I really do think – that you have to “go without” – somewhere along the line. Or live in some kind of a crappy situation in order to appreciate where you are where your life is now.

I’ve never been happier in my life and I had to wait ‘til I was damn near 70. It finally came – *eventually* and a lot of these things that happened, I can remember them and I can talk about them but I don’t have to  *dwell*. It’s okay to glance back once in awhile to remind yourself where you came from but it’s not good to stare.

If I dwelled on all of the things that taxed me over my life – *my God* – I’d be a basket case by now.

I’ve got a lot to be grateful for. And the last twelve years since I came in here – it’s been good. I get frustrated as heck – ‘cause (laughs) I get tired of old people – after a while. But I wouldn’t wanta – be anywhere else. I can’t think of any place else I’d like to be.

I’d like my family to be a little *closer* – but – you know – they’re not. So you can’t expect them to rearrange their lives to accommodate my *occasional* pang of loneliness – which is

very occasional. So life's *good*. It's really good. It's not all that *exciting* (laughs). But it's good.

But I tell ya, it makes me feel grateful – 'Knock on wood' – I'm as healthy as I am.

Roberta would enjoy seeing her children and grandchildren more often. However, she accepts the situation as it is and appreciates her now comfortable lifestyle.

**“Nobody owes me squat.”**

Although Roberta has worked hard all her life, and continues to do so within her senior community, she still reveals a staunchly independent side and doesn't feel that she has earned the right to just sit and collect a handout:

*“Nobody owes me squat.”* I haven't done anything to earn this. And it makes me *real* grateful. How many countries are there where they don't give a rat's ass about you when you're old?

You couldn't give me the States. And you know, some of these poorer countries - third world countries, they may think that they care about the person as they get old. They probably stick 'em out in a ditch some place and wait for them to die. I think we're extremely *lucky*. I'm really grateful.

She repeatedly expressed gratitude for her present situation with its comfortable housing, economic security, and the caring of family and friends.

## Grammie's Story

*A hundred years  
from now it will not  
matter what my bank  
account was,  
the sort of house  
I lived in, or the kind  
of car I drove.  
But the world may be different because  
I was important  
in the life of a  
Child.*

(author unknown)

One hot summer evening, I [the researcher] was sitting quietly in a small church classroom waiting for a meeting to start. It had been an extremely busy day and I was feeling somewhat tired and not very alert. About a dozen ladies of various ages sat around the table. I found myself staring at one of them for several minutes before I realized that a miniature plastic tooth brush was dangling from each ear. Then I started to smile. I had found my third research participant.

After the meeting I asked Grammie about her earrings and found out that she was a former Kindergarten teacher. She had a very large collection of earrings gathered over several decades. Quite a few of them, like the toothbrushes, were theme-related. She was famous among her former students for her earrings.

Once the thesis research interviews began, I went to Grammie's house once every two weeks. I would take the apple fritters and Grammie would make the tea. As I was standing in the small passageway between the kitchen and dining room on my first visit, I saw the above poem, beautifully done in cross stitch, framed and hanging on the wall. Even though the interviews had yet to begin and we barely knew each other, I instinctively knew that this poem embodied the spirit of the woman known as Grammie.

**“Literacy means that I can function in the world.”**

Grammie's personal concept of literacy is broad in the sense that it encompasses “functioning in the world” yet it is based on the narrow skill of “reading.

*Literacy means that I can function in the world. I'm able to read and absorb, comprehend what I'm reading; that I can enjoy frivolous reading. That I can take part in the politics of the day. That I can raise my family. That I can work at a job and contribute to society. It's just part of who I am.*

I can't *imagine* not being able to read.

(Literacy includes) *everything*. It's everything.

Although Grammie emphasizes that literacy is "everything", she really stresses the importance of being able to read.

**"There was no question that we were going to be educated."**

And I mean from the beginning both my parents were fantastic, *voracious* readers, and read everything that there was. Dad had I don't know how many newspapers on the go at once. So I was just raised that this was part of the whole of life; daily life.

And at the time that I was young, phonics had come back in but at the time my sisters were young, phonics was not in so it was all sight words. So they (my parents) were really into this. *There was no question that we were going to be educated.*

Grammie was important in the life of a child at an early age. One of her jobs was to read to her younger brother:

I had only one younger brother. One of his earliest memories in life was of me coming home from school and reading to him. And that was one of my jobs when I got home from school was to read to my younger brother. (laughs)

It was mostly Mom and Dad who read to us. But I think because there were two girls, five boys and me then another younger brother. Of course the boys were off doing their thing. But it was my job to come home and read to my younger brother.

We had a few books but in those days it was more you used the public library. Dad had a *huge* library of books but for adults and his work. We had *some* books but books were *very* expensive then and it was more important to put the milk on the table, you know with nine kids.

And the library was above the hall and it stunk to high heaven. (laughs)

And you went in there and got your books. And you didn't hesitate even though it stunk. You got out. (laughs) But I remember kind of resenting having to read to my brother because I wanted to read my own stuff. But I always had to read to him before I could read my own. (laughs)

Grammie fondly remembers reading in the early years. Her favourite books were the *Wizard of Oz* and *Anne of Green Gables*. The town library influenced her reading selections: “Just whatever was available in the library – that’s what you read.” Her younger brother also liked to hear the *Wizard of Oz* during their after-school reading sessions together.

In addition to the reading, Grammie also enjoyed the physical nature of the books themselves:

And I love the feel of that paper. Those older books have that heavier – there’s just something about it.

And the touch of it was just *so* nice. And the feeling as you turned the pages. It used to irritate me *so* much that people would dog-ear the pages – you know. ‘Cause in *our* books we never – books were *valuable*. We didn’t draw in them, write in them, touch them, wreck them in any way. We didn’t eat while we were – you know.

And then I went on to things like Costain’s books. I love his writing. I love mystery and romance and historical fiction.

Grammie enjoyed writing when young, but has not pursued that activity in later years.

I used to write *a lot* of stories when I was young. I loved that. I always sort of had the secret ambition that maybe I’d be a writer some day but somehow there’s never been the time. And I guess if it was really a *driving* thing I would have made the time.

### **“I was the one that would help other children with their reading”**

Grammie continued to be important in the lives of many children even though she had barely started school herself.

I had a *wonderful* Grade One and Grade Two teacher. We didn’t have Kindergarten then. But I *still* remember the Grade One teacher’s name.

I don’t know whether I read earlier. All I remember was that if she had to leave the room for any reason, I was the one that was left in charge of the classroom.

*I was the one that would help other children with their reading* -- you know. I remember that *clearly*. And I remember in Grade Two my mother would knit all these dresses for me. Well, there were days in that classroom where it was so unbearably *hot* that the teacher would take off her -- she always wore a little smock and I would get to wear her smock.

(Says with laughter in her voice) So I was *definitely* Teacher’s Pet.

And I just *loved* those women -- you know.

I didn't have *any* pre-conceived ideas at all. I just remember going and *loving* it. I remember participating in Grade One I think in the Oratory Contest and I *won* the thing. It was Christopher Robin Saying His Prayers.

And I just remember everything about it being positive. You remember how they used to make that purple sort of jelly? And then they'd run off their (papers).

I remember standing there watching her doing that one day and there was *nothing* that I didn't like at all.

So, I don't know where it came from. That's why I believe that a *good* teacher is *born*, not necessarily created. I just think you have those instincts *in* you. The same as for an artist or anything else. I think it's there.

**“It was just so dramatically different.”**

Grammie found Grade Seven and Grade Eight a challenge; not academically but socially:

And I found a really big difference – moving from a small town to a big city. *It was just so dramatically different.* A different province. The first school I went to – I found it really *tough*. They were just totally exclusive.

And then after Christmas – that was – a totally different set up. There was something about that other school that was terribly unfriendly. And the next school they were so different you know, everybody was bright and friendly.

Then the next year we changed schools. You know there were a lot of schools you left for those reasons. And I look at people now. I was very determined for my children that they should go through the same school – right through school – because of my experiences. So they went right from beginning of school and then when they chose a high school they either went to one school or the other but they still had friends going to the school. And I wonder what the difference will be ultimately in a person's life.

Well, it would be interesting to know. Do my children have a greater sense of security or a greater sense of worth? Did it make any difference at all that they were in the same school all along?

And the difference between these kids and those kids were – we didn't voice our unhappiness or our difficulties. It was just what you had to do to get through. Whereas *today* – what's happened? – that there are so many people who are depressed or committing suicide or bullied or – whatever. And I *know* there was bullying back then – I'm not saying there wasn't. But, I don't remember telling my Mother or my Dad how unhappy I was or how – you know – we didn't want a change. I mean this was just the way it was and you went with it and did what you had to do. So what's changed? I guess the saying that each generation is totally different from their parents and that they were going to make up for whatever their parent's deficiencies were. So, I guess each generation does whatever it does.

### **“You don’t develop the life-long friendships”**

Grammie did well academically but suffered in terms of the exclusionary aspects of school culture, both in high school and at university:

Growing up, I was in *four* different schools in one year alone. And then in high school – three schools in my four years of high school. *So you don’t develop the life-long friendships.* And the other thing that really affected it was I didn’t drink and I didn’t smoke and I didn’t fool around. So that means you have a *very* small group that you can really relate to. At least that’s the way I found it in high school.

I’d had three years and I couldn’t *tolerate* the university life any longer. What *really bothered* me *so* much about university was – I don’t drink and there was *so* much partying and drinking. But *more* than that it was the *attitude* – that if you were university – you were *elite* – you were Ivory Tower. And I could *not* tolerate that attitude. So I wanted to get *out teaching* as fast as I could. I didn’t like university – but I knew if I wanted to get to where I wanted to be – I had to “*jump the hoops.*”

### **“All I wanted to do was teach.”**

Grammie’s favourite subject in school was always English. She majored in English at university. In her own mind her future career as an elementary school teacher was never in doubt:

Always! That’s the only thing I *ever* wanted to do. From the time I hit Grade One. That was *all I wanted to do was teach.*

Grammie is still amazed at how determined she was then to become a teacher, especially in light of the discouragement she received from her parents:

How does a person come to this, because I was discouraged *a lot* by my parents. My mother by *necessity* had become a teacher. She wanted to be a nurse and there was no money so she had to go to that three-month thing that they had at the Teacher’s College in the old days. And she disliked teaching intensely. My father was a teacher because he had to make the money to go back to law school.

So *both* my parents really didn’t care for teaching and they really discouraged me from going there. And they *really* pushed me toward law because there were three siblings that went into law. And *they* felt that teaching didn’t give you what you needed. Well I guess that’s all I ever wanted to do. So they didn’t discourage me from when I said *this* is what I want to do. That was *fine!* But then I needed to get my degrees to do it. There was no question then that you were going to go to university to do it.

### **“By gum I’ll show them.”**

Grammie worked hard to obtain her university education and was determined to finish her degrees so as to not disappoint her parents. She was also anxious to leave university and start her teaching career:

I *did* switch then (from Arts to Education) and did my year of Education and went out to teach with my Standard. And then I took night classes the first year I taught. Well I can't remember if the first year I taught I took classes. Because I think, I *didn't* because you're *so* -- that first year is *so heavy*.

You're up 'till past midnight *every night* trying to get your classes in order.

So then I took Summer School and then next year I took a couple night classes -- *then* Summer School.

I finished my *first* degree. And *then* I took a year off and did my second degree. I thought -- and again -- there's this -- if your parents think you're *not* going to do it: "*By gum I'll show them.*" I'll make *sure* that I get it so they're not going to be disappointed in me.

And the last year I had to get special permission to take *two* classes but they gave it to me. So then you're teaching all day and going to night classes *two* nights and *studying* and everything. But you can do that when you're young. It's a little harder to do when you're older.

I don't know -- people seem to look at the university as if it's the "be-all" and the "end-all". And I think as long as you get an *education*. I don't care what it is, you need to be educated to do something. I don't care whether it's technical school or what it is. To have this attitude that you're *superior* because you're an intellectual. How many people are out there who are very, very bright but just never went to university?

**"I was so grateful that I had my education to fall back on."**

Teaching was also her mainstay in later life, providing her with a good income and flexible schedule while raising her own children as a single parent:

I had both my degrees. And then when things went sour (with my marriage) *I was so grateful that I had my education to fall back on*. Because what would I have done to raise three children if I hadn't had it?

When going back to teaching you still felt that you could be with the family. Because even though I was teaching out-of-town in the little out-lying areas -- I could be home by soon after four -- and I could still be there all the weekends and holidays for the children, you know. Which if you work in another job it's not necessarily the case.

And I found interestingly enough -- I was *more* fulfilled with my teaching *after* I had the children when I went back -- than before.

I think that there's a certain maturity or the fact that when I was teaching as a young woman I was still looking forward to having my own family. So there was always that *other* focus. But once you have your family you have it. And so you can enjoy the other part.

Before I stopped to have the children it was always Grade Three – Four. And I loved that. I *loved* teaching, solidifying the reading skills that they'd had in Grade One and Two. Because Grade Three really is solidifying.

But when I went back they asked me if I would take Kindergarten. They offered me my choice that day of full-time Grade One temporarily or a half-time Kindergarten. It just happened that my parents were both not very well and I still had my teenagers to home so the Kindergarten worked out beautifully for me. I was a little bit apprehensive about it. But once I got into it I absolutely loved it. Bringing the kids just to the point of -- you know -- just to the point of being able to jump off. It felt so good when the Grade One teacher would tell me how the children had come in *so* well-prepared that she was able to get right down to what they needed to do.

**“They had veered away completely from phonetics.”**

There was a time when education took a turn away from the traditional basics and Grammie disagreed with the new trend:

I remember around the time my kids were going to school when they veered away and when I went back to teaching -- *they had veered away completely from phonetics*. And from learning your multiplication skills. I had to work with my kids at home to do these things.

I found that *very* distressing because if you're memorizing all your *facts* you're training your brain. And if you're learning phonetic skills you can dissect anything you need to dissect at some future date. You can learn *anything* you need to learn. But if you're *just* doing Whole Language and me *really* disagreed with *Whole Language* and the people who were involved with it at that time who thought: “This is the answer.”

Well *it isn't* the answer. And I think an eclectic approach *has* to be. And of course the bright kids learned with the Whole Language *but* the slower kids struggled.

So when I went back to teaching I thought: “Well . . . I don't really *care* if they think Whole Language is the answer. I will just do my thing *under the cover*. And make sure that these children have what they need.”

And I think we have a whole generation of kids who can *not* do a “ten-percent of something.” Who can't figure out a word and how to sound a word -- how to look it up in the dictionary. Because they weren't taught any of those skills.

Around the time that I was thinking of going back teaching, I went to the school and suggested that they would be far better off if they could have some half-time teachers each teaching in their area of expertise. So that -- say -- if I went back I would be teaching *all* the Language Arts. And they told me at that time that there was *no* way this was going to happen.

I said: “You would be getting *more* than fifty percent out of *each* teacher, because they’re teaching in their *own* area so they’re going to dedicate themselves *fully* to this.

They absolutely refuted that. This was *not* going to happen. Well a lot of years later -- here we are -- *exactly* where I suggested. So I really *disagreed* with the way they were thinking back then.

I’ve told my children that they need to keep a very close eye on what’s happening at school. Because they’re not getting what they need to know. And the bonus for my son was that I said to him: “I didn’t like university but I knew if I wanted to get where I wanted to be I had to “jump the hoops.” And I said: “This is what you need to learn now – in life. ‘Cause you may not like the teacher but you still have to treat her with respect and you have to do what you have to do to get where you want to be.”

**“You have to have the “tough love.”**

The most important relationship that Grammie has now is the one with her grandchildren. The essence of her relationship with them is embodied in the poem which hangs in her kitchen:

I believe that the more people the children have in their lives – to love them – the greater the chances are that they will succeed. Because before they stop to do anything – it won’t be: “Is this a licking offence or a talking offence?” It will be: “What will --?” You know? “If I *do* this – will so and so be disappointed in me?”

And my grandsons are already saying to me – when I get annoyed with their behaviour: “Are you disappointed in us?” You know? So *hopefully* – this will have some influence on their minds – that – there *are* people who care. And you don’t want to disappoint the people who care. Of course – that’s just the way – I feel. I’m not afraid for – people to be disappointed in – me. But I don’t want to disappoint the people that I care about.

*You have to have the “tough love”* and you have to be the parent and not the friend. But I think with today’s generation – it has to go even further than that. I mean – you really *can’t* be afraid to say: “*No* – you’re *not* doing that – even if I have to chain you in your room – you’re not doing it.” And I think that’s hard to do.

The boys are supposed to start soccer today. And they asked last night -- was I going to come to their game? They were so thrilled that I was actually going to come. So I know that that will change as time goes on but my feeling has always been that I need to spend as much time and be *as* involved as I can, in the first six years of their lives. Because if I *am* and I build a solid relationship with them and even though it *may change* over time -- it’ll be there.

**“I have friendships that are very valuable.”**

Because her family moved so often during her elementary and high school years, Grammie wasn’t able to make many lifetime friendships then. However, she later realized that

she would still be able to have long and enduring friendships as an adult. That realization guides her relationships now:

{I turned it} over in my mind – and (decided) that I would *always have friendships*. That was the turning point for me in terms of friendships. Nobody gets kicked out of my life – *unless* – they're *so* toxic that I can't take them anymore. And I find *I have friendships that are very valuable*.

I was filling out the passport application yesterday. And the two people I put down – oh – I've had them in my life for 30 to 45 years. And – I thought: “Well that's *good*. I *do* have some – very *long* time friends.” You know? That survived all of this nonsense.

Respect and honesty are important aspects for Grammie in her relationships:

I think for all of us that has to be in the back of our minds when we're trying to be honest. How can you have a relationship that isn't based on respect and truth?

And if somebody doesn't leave you with your dignity and your respect – how can you possibly have a relationship?

It works the other way too. I mean, aside from the fact that I expect to be treated with dignity and respect, if I *do not* treat somebody else with dignity and respect – what does that say about the way I feel about them? And how can I be friends with them – if I *don't* respect who they are?

She realizes how much energy it takes to build a new friendship. Therefore she is very careful about protecting the integrity of the ones she has now:

I find too, that as I go through various experiences with my friend, I think about getting older and how much energy it takes to build a friendship.

And to determine as you go along whether you really want this person for a friend – or whether you just want them for an acquaintance? And how much time you actually have for this? And I find myself a little more reluctant – to get involved in the process -- yet I say to myself: “YES” – you need to continue to do this.”

That's what it's like for me with friendships at “this stage in life.” I mean I will do virtually everything to protect the friendships that I have. And I find a small reluctance to get involved again but then if I find that “my soul” is just connecting somehow with another person then that sort of – it just drops away. Now I'm willing to spend the time and the energy that it involves. But there has to be a connection, otherwise – just to do it for the sake of doing it? – No!

It has to be a relationship where you're willing, because otherwise the resentment grows so fast.

I know that I am open to it and that I must keep myself open to it because in the space of a week, friends can move away – can enter into something else that's going on.

Grammie values solitude as well as her time with other people. She strives to find a healthy balance between the two:

I love being with people but I'm an introvert too and I really need my time by myself. It just happened that last week was a "wild week" and I was out every night doing something. It was all stuff that I enjoy doing. Everything was great! But by Saturday, when I was able to cancel out on the Saturday night, I was so happy to just be at home by myself.

It has a lot to do with becoming comfortable with yourself; accepting that it's okay – that you're good company for yourself. I think it takes a while to get there too.

**"I didn't want to become sort of recluse."**

Grammie prepared for retirement by trying a number of volunteer activities in advance. She was worried about the possibility of becoming a recluse if she didn't stay active and in contact with a variety of people:

I tried a number of things before I retired because I was nervous about what might happen when I retired. And *I didn't want to become sort of recluse*. And I knew that being an introvert I could easily be. So I tried different things.

I thought: "Oh well maybe I'll give it a try." (Volunteering at a second hand shop) And it turned out to be perfect because it was nothing to do with what I did for a career and I told them up front: "I have *no* experience with anything like this but I'm willing to learn". So it's great fun.

(laughs) And it's such a win-win situation for everybody. I go and do just whatever they ask me to do that day.

*Twice* a week. For the most part I have a pretty good relationship with everybody. We joke around and do our work and it's very *relaxed* and I really quite enjoy that.

Now I think I'll just sit tight until the grandchildren are all in school. And just stick with what I have. Once they're all in school maybe things will change a bit. 'Cause then their horizons broaden and Grandma isn't just *quite so* important.

Her grandchildren are still her most important and enjoyable relationship; one which she will continue as long as possible.

**"I'm thinking that maybe my reading will take a different turn."**

Reading still plays a major role in Grammie's life:

Now I have to read my favourite newspaper back-to-back every morning to find out what's going on in the world.

I read everything – in the paper and discuss with people

There's a turning point in your life when you become *more* interested in the global.

*I'm thinking that maybe my reading will take a different turn. I can never get enough time, because there's just too many other things to do. But my sister – loves to read political and historical books. She can discuss endlessly and knows everything that's ever happened.*

I think that ultimately I'm going to have to try that direction because listening to her talk is *so* fascinating.

Reading is also important to other members of Grammie's family and influences her decisions about reading material.

**“Literacy changes as you change.”**

I'm such a technological illiterate. I'm not a machine person. So for me it will always be the written word. And I think like many people – I absorb better “seeing it” and “experiencing.”

Grammie doesn't immerse herself in technology, but she does have email with her computer. By itself, the Internet isn't appealing but she regards it as a way to stay in touch with family and friends:

I've seen people use it (the Internet) for all kinds of research and so on. Oh – for the first little while I had it I experimented with it but I found that it took time away from the things I wanted to do. So – it's just basically a way for me to – if the kids need to contact me quickly – then you know – so I go up every night and check the emails and so it's used for maybe ten minutes a day and that's it.

I just can't get into going on the Internet to do things. There are other things that need to be done or that I *want* to do – *way* before that.

I didn't want to spend a lot of money on it (the computer) so my son-in-law had an extra one at home and he loaned it to me to try. But I was *so* afraid that I would become addicted to it, that I was almost *afraid* to have it in my house. But I tried it and I knew – no, this is not something I would become addicted to. I think I have an addictive personality – like I will cross stitch to the end of the earth and read or what ever – you know.

Grammie will use the telephone just to stay in touch but she prefers actual contact in person:

I'd rather see people face-to-face but if we have to talk -- you know? My friend has moved away and so we keep in touch several times a week by telephone. But I'd much rather be having a face-to-face conversation.

Even banking. You know, I still want face-to-face banking so that if something goes wrong I can say: "Okay I talked to Phyllis on such a day at such a time." This totally impersonal banking -- I don't like at all.

Maybe, there again, it comes back to the fact that I'm not a machine person. (Laughs)

**"I do need the love and affection of the people around me."**

When talking about quality of life, Grammie has two priorities; economic security, and the love of family and friends. As she thinks out loud, she admits that she needs enough money to be able to buy what she needs, but in the end it seems that relationships will triumph:

It will always be family and friends. That's the single most important thing. Close to that is health because if there's *none* then you don't have any quality with your family and friends. The quality of my life definitely would have been affected very negatively had I not had an education. Following the hard time I had with my husband, I had to go back to work. The way I wanted to. So I did that. *But I do need the love and affection of the people around me.* And I need *enough* money to be able to buy what I *need* to buy.

Now -- I think I'm in a fairly secure position. That I have enough that if I want to go and buy something special for the kids I can do that. I can take them to do special things. To a movie. If I didn't have any money that would really affect my quality of life.

When times were tough our quality of life didn't *suffer* in that -- the kids grew and learned from the fact that, well they can't do this special thing because that cost too much money. But we had a very close relationship. We were *happy* so I don't think that money necessarily is the answer. It's relationships all the way down the line.

And I think that *really* shows up when a person's sick and you have to be by yourself. And have time to think about that? You know what's really important...

Just the fact that you're alone and people are going about their lives and suddenly you're in this little bubble. And you think: "Wow this is what life would be like if I didn't have these relationships." So I'm *very* protective of my relationships.

But as I say if they become toxic then I'm very aware of that too and I don't hold on to unhealthy relationships just for the sake of having a relationship. Her love of people extends even to her solitary leisure activities:

I had taken some sewing in public school so I was able to sew a straight seam. So I could follow a pattern and do that. My mother did a lot of knitting and she taught me to knit before I even started school.

And of course I love to do handwork. I love cross stitching and crocheting and all that sort of thing. So – I mean basically that’s what I like to do – reading and handwork with my quiet time.

But if you notice almost all the – anything that I’ve done – it’s always “*people*” – I don’t do scenery – It always has a person in it.

And right now I’m working on a series of pictures – one for each member of the family with Teddy Bears and Bunnies. The “cuddlies” – you know, “the love.”

**“Decisions that you make affect the rest of your life.”**

Grammie reflects on her life and appreciates the hardships she has endured and the strength she has gained as a result of her struggles:

I’m *constantly* amazed by how decisions that you make when you’re in your early twenties have affected the rest of your life. And you don’t think about consequences at *that* point in time. You think you are doing the right things.

I think about it from the perspective of -- you make a choice in your life and *then* the negative *and* the positive comes from it.

I remember once -- somebody described the quilt -- “God in the Sky.” We’re on the highway down below. We can *only see* as far ahead as our car will allow us to see. But God’s view from the sky can see the piecework of the whole quilt. And how true that is because in retrospect you look back and you think: “Oh -- *that’s* why that happened.” But at the time you’re so devastated.

And that’s very hard to do when you’re in a lot of pain and anguish. And I think of -- well *three* times -- *four* times in my life when I’ve been in such anguish that I’ve hardly known how to put one foot ahead of the other. But now with enough life experience, I *know* that I will survive whatever life throws at me.

Although she has known pain and loss during her lifetime, the love and friendship Grammie has cultivated with family and close friends give her the strength and nurturing to survive whatever life brings her way. These values comprise true quality of life for Grammie.

## **Summary**

The poems and stories in Chapter Four illustrate for us what is of value for each of the three participants. These values were present in the early years of each participant's life and continued to be important throughout their lives, including the present. Literacy (vernacular and formal) gave each participant the chance to express their values in social contexts and communities of practise.

The acquisition of these various literacies was achieved over a life span and was often fraught with challenge and adversity. Each participant persevered with determination and hard work, eventually reaching a place in their lives where they could take pride in their achievements and reap the rewards. These challenges and rewards are discussed in Chapter Five.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: REFLECTIONS ON THE STORIES**

### **Introduction**

Although Roberta, Grammie, and Bjørn are three unique individuals with different stories to tell, there were some similarities in their life experiences which resonated with me and were related to literacy and quality of life: school interrupted, the violence of education, lifelong learning, situated literacies, computer literacy, intergenerational relationships, communities of practice, critical thinking, and quality of life. In advance of the interviews, I had researched the literature under the broad concepts of literacy, quality of life, health, and lifelong learning. As I had hoped and expected, the range of topics we eventually discussed during the interviews were far more complex and wide-ranging. Once the broad themes emerged in the transcripts, I undertook a second literature review that was specifically focused around these nine themes. It was the data that led the literature search. For example, I had not anticipated that all three participants would have had their early school careers interrupted in such a way that they would have to exert tenacity in order to finish their education. As well, I had no preconceived notions of what “quality of life” might hold for each of them individually or collectively as a group. I was struck overall by the obstacles each adult had to face and overcome during their lifetime. Their resiliency and courage was eventually rewarded and now they have reached a place in their lives where they can take pride in their accomplishments and feel that they did indeed triumph.

### **School Interrupted**

Due to circumstances beyond their control, Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta had their school careers interrupted more than once at various stages along the way. These ruptures had profound consequences for all three individuals, continuing to reverberate throughout the rest of their lives.

Roberta had wanted to be a secretary and was very good at her business courses in high school. Forced to move with her family to a small town whose high school didn't offer business courses but did offer French and trigonometry, Roberta abandoned her dream of becoming a secretary. She left high school early to marry a local farmer. Years later at age forty, she completed her Grade Twelve and moved to the city. Although she did complete a business course in the city, she fell back on skills that she had honed to a high degree during her years as a farm

wife and mother. Cooking was one of those skills. But Roberta has no illusions about what that could provide her in terms of future benefits:

I was working as a cook. There's not a whole lotta benefits in cooking jobs. In fact none at all. And part of that time I was married to a second farmer. So I hadn't had a lot of time working to get a decent Canada Pension. So – (laughs) I was pretty destitute.

“The ‘winners’ in today’s winner-take-all labor markets are differentiated by advanced levels of educational attainment, especially higher degrees” (Elman & O’Rand, 2004, p. 123). Elman and O’Rand (2004) in their study of baby-boomers, found those with advantaged social origins completed postsecondary degrees early, which, in turn, yielded higher wages and more time for wage growth through occupational advancement. “The most advantaged youth have school careers marked by uninterrupted, early attainment” (p. 130). A pathway of cumulative disadvantage was also evident in their research findings, where those least advantaged left school early in life, did not return as adults and, as a consequence, earned low wages.

“Life events that promoted adult school re-entry include a young age of labor market entry for men and women, having a child early in life for women, and military experience for men” (p. 140). “Life course influences differ by gender: each child reduces men’s wages by about 31% but reduces women’s wages by 127%” (p. 146 – 147). “Newly acquired A.D. degrees, vocational certifications, or even new graduate or professional degrees do not significantly increase the hourly wages of men or women who return to school” (p. 147). “The enduring effects of social origins and ascribed statuses on educational transitions in adulthood are starkly evident. Childhood socioeconomic status has long-term effects that are not completely reduced by adult strategies to improve human capital” (p. 154).

Collins (1998a) admits that students who “drop out” will “probably have to settle for less skillful, casual jobs, or the prospects of unemployment” (p. 87). But he couches this observation with the additional caveat that “students who apply themselves to school work are more likely to gain the educational qualifications which will eventually afford them access to better paying, more prestigious jobs” (p. 87). Applying themselves to school includes taking school work seriously and passing examinations. This view places enormous responsibility on the shoulders of the students themselves. What happens if circumstances in the life of the student are not supportive of school goals? Collins (1998a) believes that the “chances of participating successfully at this game are stacked in favor of the middle and upper classes, but students of all

classes understand what is at stake” (p. 87). I think his choice of the words ‘game’ and ‘stacked’ are particularly relevant.

For Grammie, school interruptions were of a different kind. She attended school continuously until she obtained her teaching certificate at university. However, her school career took place at many different schools from a small town to a big city. She is still very aware of the consequences of the dislocation: “We changed schools so often that I don’t have any friendships from childhood. (We were) moving on constantly. It doesn’t mean anything for me to go to any reunion.”

Bjørn’s school career was characterized by both types of interruptions: geographical and educational:

When I was in grade three, they couldn’t find a teacher for my rural school. So I went to my maternal grandparents for three months. The homesickness and the aloneness was evident. In grade six , I had to go to school in shifts. I don’t remember whether I went from eight in the morning till noon or I went from noon till five. Because the post-war babies were exploding. They had to build a new classroom.

The school career interruptions experienced by Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta were due mainly to two distinct but intercepting causes: 1) the needs of the family and, 2) the needs of the educational system. The needs of the learners were superficially considered if at all. And if identified or acknowledged, those learner needs were, in the end, subordinated to the needs of the family: elder care, child care (siblings), geographic relocation, switching schools, and the needs of the educational system: urban schools vs. rural schools, lack of teachers, inadequate school facilities, rigid course requirements, standardized assessment and testing, limited courses available, and mainstream educational practices that marginalized “others.” I have deliberately used the term “needs” rather than “limitations” when speaking of the educational system because I believe there is enough evidence to show that the need to sustain mainstream educational practices, siphons resources away from marginalized groups of students (Stuckey, 1991).

Bjørn illustrated how the combined needs of the school system and the family could easily and forcibly work to help undermine a young student’s educational career:

I [Bjørn }think I told you last week about a boy who liked school but was always late. And the teachers went to his house and found out his mom and dad, who were good alcoholics, had drunk all night and couldn’t get up in time to get the kids off to school. So they went

together and bought the young man an alarm clock. And suddenly he started to be late *again* and they wondered why. And he said: “Well Dad didn’t like it so he threw the clock against the wall and broke it.” So, I mean his current situation was *not* very conducive to allowing him to achieve what he wanted to achieve. So he *struggled* with it. And he could have been disciplined by the teachers: “Okay, if you continue to be late you’re not going to *pass*.” So they had to deal with the reality that it wasn’t *his* fault that he wasn’t getting to school on time.

Portelli and Vibert (2001) provide an example of how the needs of the educational system can inflict unwarranted consequences on students who do not fit the mould:

In one of the schools in which we worked, a grade four child who was a beginning reader was coded by his school as having a reading disorder. Talking to the child, his teacher discovered that for his entire school career the child had spent no more than six months in any one classroom because his father, a construction worker, had been moving all over the country in search of work. In the context of working with the child, the teacher learned that the child’s “reading problem” had little to do with reading or academic ability at all, and everything to do with a level of anxiety and disruption in his life that made learning to read difficult and, apparently, irrelevant. Like many educational problems, this child’s learning problem was a consequence of a much larger social problem (under employment and the creation of surplus labor markets) manifested in schooling. (p. 75)

Learning problems as consequence of larger social problems fall under the rubric of the violence of education. Students struggle with difficult circumstances both at home and at school. Schools alone cannot cure all the ills of society, but they must at least make an attempt to see beyond the obvious and provide some measure of help and understanding to students who are not completely in the mainstream.

### **The Violence of Education**

Stuckey (1991) does not agree with the North American myth of a classless society where equal opportunities exist for all; where hard work will guarantee success; where education is the key to achievement and literacy is the key to education. She says that “Literacy itself can be understood only in its social and political context, and that context, once the mythology has been stripped away, can be seen as one of entrenched class structure in which those who have power have a vested interest in keeping it” (p. vii). Stuckey (1991) calls this the “violence of literacy.” I

see this same type of violence perpetrated throughout the educational system. Teachers are also caught in the class struggle. According to Cochran-Smith (1991), teachers reinforce and reproduce the system that exploits both them and their students. For example, Bjorn may have experienced bullying in situations other than school but the point to be made is that the school experience is not exempt and in fact, may contribute because they are trying to maintain the status quo (Stuckey, 1991).

The fragments of schooling which Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta experienced were characterized by an extended time-line and, more importantly, by exclusionary events such as ethnic and cultural discrimination, bullying, and institutional policies and practice. These exclusionary events were not confined to isolated school settings or to early school years; they occurred in city schools, small town schools, elementary grades, high school and at university.

Bjørn experienced difficulties at every grade level. In grades one and two, the school teacher boarded with his mother and father. In grade five he was invited “not to sing.” He remembers the event as one of persecution and victimization:

One of my very first experiences with being a victim or being persecuted was when I was in grade five. There may have been others but this one *really* sticks out in my mind. The teacher says to me: “*Don’t sing!* You can move your lips – but *don’t sing.*” (Says in a waspish voice). That was my first *real* put down. My *really* big put down. And that negated much of my schooling.

Bjørn’s parents were avid readers, especially his father which means that Bjørn saw reading modeled in his home from an early age. Nevertheless, he struggled with reading in school, especially reading out loud which was standard educational practice in those days. Bjørn was quick to learn but by his own admission he “was not a reader *verbally*. And I used to ah –h –h—h *die* – when I had to get up and read a paragraph. And at that time they were *still* getting up to read. And you stood by the edge of your desk and ‘*pow*’ (Makes a noise like an explosion).” He looks beyond the skill of reading to the larger implications. “Your ability to communicate is so *essential*. And your self-confidence *dictates* your ability.” It wasn’t until he entered university that he achieved the ability to read with comfort. He summed it up by saying: “I don’t remember very many happy things with teachers in school.”

As well, Bjørn had the added experience of being “an ethnic oddity in grades one, two, three and four.” His own first language was lost by then and he was outnumbered by the

Ukrainians on the playground. He knew more of their language than he did of his own and also more of English which was the standard language of the educational system. Students are frequently required to efface their own cultural background and experience in order to succeed in schools (Bowman & Stott, 1994; Heath, 1983).

When Roberta's family moved from the city to a very small town, her educational world also narrowed. "I went to school in the city until I finished grade ten. Then we moved to a little farty town. So I had grade eleven in a really, really, small, small – (laughs) school. It was a bit of a shock. (Laughs) Well, the whole high school was in *one* room." She also became a victim of the provincial standardized curriculum:

While you're taking a business course there are some things that you don't *have* to take. Like one of the maths was trigonometry -- Something I wasn't very good at anyway. And I had *not* taken any French. So here I was trying to cram three years of a couple different things into *one*.

A standard or common curricula is believed to ensure equity by providing 'a level playing field.' Such a belief assumes that all students come to school with the same advantages, the same cultural capital. However, the evidence shows that they do not (Delpit, 1988; Gee, 1990; Griffith, 1995).

Grammie was an accomplished student who succeeded academically. However, she experienced the exclusionary aspects of school culture when she attended three different schools within four years of high school and didn't fit into the social culture of drinking and smoking. Under those circumstances it was difficult for her to develop life-long friendships. During her three years at university, she didn't fit into the atmosphere of partying and drinking or, more importantly for her, the attitude of elitism. By her own admission, she "didn't like university" but she persevered long enough to obtain her teaching certificate which was her primary goal.

This is what Collins (1998a, p. 87) refers to as "participating successfully at this game" (of school work). Grammie knew what was "at stake" because she had had these values instilled in her at an early age by her parents and older siblings. She said of her parents: ". . . they were really into this. There was no question that we were going to be educated."

For Grammie, Roberta and Bjørn, these exclusionary events led to a non-enjoyment of school in general and a mistrust and lack of interest in "going back to school" as older adults. At the present time, all three of them continue to be involved in intellectual pursuits but notably

informal and not through accredited educational institutions. Although all three are intelligent, very hardworking and motivated, they are disillusioned about past school experiences and have little interest in taking further classes in formal educational settings.

Grammie has considered going back to university to audit a class now that they have free university classes for seniors through the Extension Division but is not convinced that it's the right thing for her:

I've *thought* about it but there just never seems to be the time. I'm thinking that even when *all* the grandchildren are at school – it would have to be something that *really* interested me. And I'm not sure that I couldn't get what I want from books.

This statement is quite revealing for Grammie, because she especially enjoys face-to-face people contact. If she is choosing to do her learning through books rather than in the company of other people, the educational system has some answering to do. Although distance education courses are popular with some and fill a definite need, they appeal more to those who enjoy spending time on the computer. Grammie is not one of those people.

Roberta values “hands on learning.” She also values the work ethic and independence: not having to depend on someone else or being helpless. This was apparent in her comments about a friend:

I had a friend a couple of years younger than me. She's what I call a professional student. And she was *always* going to school – always, always, always. I said to myself: “Self – I am *not* going to be like that person”. She is taking up *valuable* space (chuckles) in university where some young person *might* better fill that space. She didn't have to pay for it. And she never had – *no* intentions of going out and working. *Absolutely* none!

When speaking about her friend, Roberta exhibited an ambivalence about formal education similar to that expressed by Yagelski (2000, p. 27) who received mixed messages about literacy and education from his parents and grandparents who were Polish immigrants: education was a way to succeed in American society *but* it “was a belief tempered by scepticism toward formal schooling and intellectual life, a scepticism complicated by widespread notions of ‘common sense’ and wariness about too much book learning. Scepticism . . . intensified by the treatment many . . . received in the context of formal schooling.” Wagner and Sternberg (1986) have a similar view. They believe that

success in the real world happens as a result of learning that is not based on formal instruction.

### **Lifelong Learning**

“ . . . whether people are motivated to learn beyond the end of compulsory education, and have the capacity to do so, depends very much on what happens to them during the schools years” (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 1).

I agree that school years do have lasting effects on people but I think that the word “motivated” as it is used here, hints that people who don’t continue to learn after the end of compulsory education are lazy compared to mainstream standards. Also, the word “learn” as it is used here is a euphemism for “go to school.” In my view, learning is innate and starts with birth and ends with death (as we know it at the present time) and is mostly informal, obtained by modeling (conscious imitation) and osmosis (learning from the modeling of others but in such a way that we are virtually unaware the process is happening).

Thomas (1998) believes that:

Learning is an essential survival activity, and it manifests itself to varying degrees at all stages of an organism’s life span. In the human context, learning demands and releases energy, takes time, is irreversible and cannot be coerced. Learning is most commonly a process that takes place within human groups of all kinds: families, associations, corporations, communities and states, for example . . . individuals learn more as members than they do as students. The context of learning, therefore—as distinct from the source—is primarily collective, a context of action, of passion and engagement. (p. 358)

The point that Thomas makes is well-taken. Individuals learn more in a context of action, as members of a group, rather than as students. This has implications for formal education.

Hargreaves (2004) points out the dangers.

It is . . . a disconcerting fact that by the time they have reached the end of compulsory schooling, about a third of young people have been turned off formal learning, most of whom have a strong sense of failure. They have learned little, which is bad enough. Even worse, however, is the fact that their inborn capacity to learn has also been damaged. (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 26)

When Brookes (2004, p. vi) says that: “The timing and pace of change are critical, but often neglected issues in creating a culture of lifelong learning” he is referring to the timing and

pace of change “within formal educational institutions.” But I think it’s facile to speak of “creating a culture” as though you are making a dress, building a house, or baking a cake. Cultures arise over time as a result of shared commonalities. There is no “template” or “timeline.” He continues by saying that the “pervasive lack of clarity about the meaning of lifelong learning – is an obvious source of concern.” And that “today, a taxonomy of interpretations would range from a conventional minimalist ‘makeover’ of all forms of post secondary education . . . to the transforming ideal of an interconnected process of cumulative learning, extending from ‘cradle – to – grave’ and having the learner at the heart of the process.”

Here again Brookes (2004) pre-supposes that there is choice involved and volition in terms of learning, that learning is a separate entity which exists “outside” the learner. How else would you be able to place the learner back at the heart of the process (of learning)? What he really means is “education” not “learning.” In my view without the learner there is no learning. Essentially what he has done is commodify the “learning process” which in turn becomes a pawn of power and control.

Hargreaves (2004) admits that:

Lessons are the hallowed form of provision in educational institutions, but the learning in which we engage during life does not come neatly bundled up as a lesson. In life we learn in trying to accomplish larger and more complex tasks in real situations where success or failure have very real consequences. (p. 2)

This is true for all the participants in my study but never more so than for Roberta who was a farm wife and mother. During the interview process, she related several stories of harrowing incidents which occurred on the farm. She was doing the work of a hired man but learning as she went along. Then as now, her ribald sense of humor provided relief from the stress and danger involved. Regardless of the hardships involved in these learning processes, Roberta valued the “hands-on” learning.

### **Situated Literacies**

Literacy, like learning, is situated in a context and involves social practices. Literacy may be formal or informal but it is always contextual and social. While Barton and Hamilton (1998) base their research on ethnographic studies of literacy and look for new ways to understand people’s social and cultural lives, they confine their focus to reading and writing. On the other hand, Langer (1987, p. 2) advocates a view of literacy that is broader than just reading and

writing. Her *sociocognitive* perspective “incorporates social practices, conceptions of reading and writing, and literacy as a way of thinking.” She alleges that “from this view literacy (a) is culturally based, (b) involves the higher intellectual skills appropriate to the culture, and (c) is learned by children as they interact with their families and communities.”

Lytle and Wolfe (1989) distinguish four broad views or approaches to the concept of literacy: literacy as discrete skills, literacy as discrete tasks, literacy as social and cultural practices, and literacy as critical reflection and action. These views are progressively more complex and more interconnected with context. Each has its own associated theory and educational practices.

*Literacy as skills* views literacy as a set of discrete skills that exist regardless of context. It is assumed that these skills (primarily encoding and decoding words) must be mastered first, before other content or skills can be learned. This view has permeated “academic,” or school-like, approaches to literacy education for many years.

*Literacy as tasks* views literacy in relation to accomplishing specific tasks, usually life or work tasks. At its broadest, this approach to literacy concentrates on the *use* of literacy in any aspect of life, but it has flourished recently especially in the context of job-related literacy. . .

*Literacy as practices* places literacy tasks squarely in their social and cultural settings. Proponents of this view recognize that literacy tasks change in different settings. Literacy tasks that are essential in one context may be insignificant in another. . .

*Literacy as critical reflection and action* is a view quite widespread in literacy campaigns of the Third World “South” but less common in the United States. This approach views literacy as the route to personal empowerment and social change. Paulo Freire, the most influential proponent of this approach, summed up its essence when he suggested that people need to be able to read their world and write their own history. (Freire & Macedo, 1987 as cited in Merrifield, 1997 p. 3)

The literacies which Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta use and have used in their daily lives, span the entire spectrum provided by Lytle and Wolfe (1989). For example, Bjørn readily acknowledges that “reading, writing and math” are the basic skills which underpin his concept of literacy. However, he has other literacy skills (cultural, spiritual and artistic) which also contribute to his quality of life and allow him to participate in communities of like-minded people. He feels accepted and valued by the other members of his various communities. This acceptance is a cornerstone of his concept of quality of life.

Bjørn has a natural talent for music, literature, languages, and the arts (most notably, theatre design and folk dance). Over the years he has become highly literate in these areas, due for the most part to his passionate interest and participation rather than formal education. Bjørn has continued to follow his passions over the years and now they form the basis for his ‘quality of life’. He has also refined the art of maximizing his resources and leads a busy and productive life not dependent on vast amounts of wealth.

Grammie is similar to Bjørn in her concept of literacy. Her wide view is predicated on a good grounding in the basics, especially reading. She said of herself as a teacher: “I was such a big one for the basics and now they’re finally coming back a little bit more to basics.” Reading has been an essential part of her life from the very beginning. Her career as a teacher was extremely satisfying but it is interesting to note that at the present time her volunteer activities do not centre on literacy or teaching. She made a point of mentioning that:

And it turned out to be *perfect* because it was nothing to do with what I did for a career and I told them up front: “I have *no* experience with anything like this but I’m willing to learn”. So it’s great fun. It’s such a *win-win* situation for everybody. So twice a week, I go and do just whatever they ask me to do that day.

For the most part I have a pretty good relationship with every body. And we joke around and do our work and it’s very relaxed. I really quite enjoy that.

Grammie’s enjoyment in this situation centers on the interpersonal relationships she has with the people at the shop where she volunteers and the freedom from heavy responsibility. Although she continues to read as a solitary pleasure, she prefers not to be involved in reading as a work-related activity.

Roberta has many skills such as music, typing, cooking, knitting and sewing which she has honed to a high degree over the years. She has used these literacies to earn a living but now

that she receives a pension, the pressure to make money has lessened. At the present time, she is able to use her fine skills for enjoyment, hers and others in her community of seniors, friends, and family.

People learn to use literacy activities for particular purposes, and they learn particular strategies for completing those activities, based upon the context in which the activities take place. Hence the context in which literacy is used and learned lead to particular ways of thinking and doing” (Langer, 1987, p. 12). As Langer points out, “. . . literacy is a culturally–based *way of thinking* rather than a simple act of reading and writing” (p. 17).

Throughout their lives, starting from a very early age, Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta learned to not only survive but to excel in certain areas. This was achieved through grit, determination, hard work and natural talent. Formal institutions such as schools, government agencies, the legal system, and workplaces seldom supported or assisted them and more often than not, provided more obstacles and situations for exclusion. Vernacular literacies (Hamilton, 2001, p 179) are those that have their origins in the purposes of everyday life. These literacies are “situated” in contexts and involve social interactions.

### **Computer Literacy**

Computer literacy is also ‘social’ and ‘contextual’. It is based on a technology that has infiltrated the lives of everyone, even older adults. Roberta and Grammie have adult sons who are knowledgeable about computer technology and have situated that technology into the lives and homes of their mothers for the purpose of communication, email especially, but also word-processing for family history stories. Bjørn is moving forward with the technology, albeit with some lingering hesitation. A voracious writer with many plans for future stories and books, he realizes that having access to a computer is becoming increasingly important.

Viewed from these perspectives, the older adults in the study are similar to those in the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Fox et al., 2001) which found that “84% of wired seniors say they first got Internet access for reasons unrelated to work or school. Of those, 48% say they were encouraged to do so by family members – a higher percentage than any other age group. . . . Nearly 3 in 5 online senior citizens (56%) say that the Internet has improved their connections with family. And the top Internet activity among 93% of seniors who go online is email” (p. 2). According to Fox et al., (2001) “a prime reason (seniors) go online is to connect with their children and grandchildren, not with their friends” (p. 5). This is certainly true for

Grammie and Roberta. Neither mentioned email correspondence with friends but did say that they use email to stay in touch with their children and grandchildren.

The Library Technology Report (2004) gives five reasons why “older adults lag beyond the rest of the population in Internet usage:

- They simply do not have the time to learn.
- They feel intimidated by new technology.
- They are on a budget and cannot afford the technology or the telecommunication costs.
- They do not know what a computer can do for them.
- They may not be able to find a class that acknowledges the foibles of aging” (p. 34).

The report relates that “seniors aren’t avoiding going online because they are incapable of learning how to use computers. Most just need a reason and an opportunity . . . .” (p. 34)

In the case of Grammie and Roberta, the reasons for going online were the same: to maintain ties with children and grandchildren. And both women were given the opportunity to become computer literate by male members of their families. Roberta said: “Well I wouldn’t have a computer but my sons got me that for my sixty-fifth birthday.” She appreciates the fact that once her Internet charges are paid she “can email as much as I like without it costing me any *more*.” Grammie’s son-in-law had an extra computer at home and loaned it to her so she could try it out before committing a lot of money. Basically, the computer is a way for her children to contact her quickly and she checks her email every night. However, beyond those ten minutes a day, the Internet is not a priority for her.

Grammie, Roberta and Bjørn all admit to a certain hesitation when it comes to new technology, computer and otherwise. Roberta confessed: “I’m not exactly what you’d call – a computer guru.” Grammie said about herself: “I’m such a technological illiterate. I’m not a machine person.” And although Bjørn admits that at the present time he is “not computer literate”, he also knows he can become computer literate the moment he decides that it is something he needs for a specific purpose. Otherwise in his mind, it’s just superfluous knowledge.

## Intergenerational Relationships

Intergenerational relationships are important for two reasons: a) they prevent isolation and the “ghetto” syndrome, and b) they provide opportunities for the “full spectrum of life.” Pattilo (2003) describes a ghetto as “. . . a system of spatially-based . . . segregation and subjugation that . . . circumscribes the visions, interactions, and life possibilities of its residents” (p. 1049).

Roberta and Bjørn live in senior residences. Grammie is still in her own house but has her name on a waiting list for a senior’s high rise. Graham had been living in a senior’s apartment building prior to his death. Upon reflection, I can see that the size of the space is not what determines whether or not something is a ghetto. Segregation plays a more important role. If Grammie were confined to her house with limited interaction to others, especially younger and older others, she would begin to feel isolated and I suspect her quality of life would diminish. Although she enjoys time alone to do her cross stitching and reading, it is more the “pause that refreshes” than a prolonged isolation. She has the power to choose when to end that period of aloneness. The importance to her of regular contact with others was illustrated when she shared a memory of a time when she was “home alone” recovering from surgery:

I think that *really* shows up when a person’s sick and you have to be by yourself. And have time to think about that? You know what’s really important.

Bjørn and Roberta appreciate having a comfortable residence and the friendship and sense of community of other older adults in their buildings, but they have no illusions about their situations. They do not want to be confined solely to that space or to those people. They value opportunities to interact with people of other ages and activities, outside of their normal living space.

According to Sabelli et al. (2003) “Current culture segregates generations . . . enormous geographical mobility . . . diminishes the relation between parents and their adult children, and thereby also excludes grandparents from the life of their grandchildren” (p. 769). Roberta especially is affected by the geographic mobility of her adult children and grandchildren. Her daughter lives in Ontario and one of her sons lives in the United States with his wife and two young daughters. Roberta tries to visit them as often as possible but it is very expensive and physically taxing to travel such distances. Grammie is more fortunate in that she sees *some* of her grandchildren and adult children every day but she currently lives alone in her own house.

Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) make the point that “Spatial segregation by age occurs when individuals of different ages do not occupy the same space and hence cannot engage in face-to-face interactions” (p.347). This is what is happening in senior residences and nursing homes. Even those seniors who have their own apartments, such as Roberta and Bjørn, must make the extra effort to seek out activities and venues which include individuals of different ages. According to Hagestad and Uhlenberg, age segregation matters because it “blocks essential opportunities for individuals to meet, interact, and move beyond “us versus them” distinctions” (p. 349). This relates to the inclusiveness and full spectrum of life that Bjørn has so eloquently described.

The participants in this study truly valued their friendships and family ties to people in other age groups from Bjørn’s two and a half year old grand-nephew to Roberta’s friend and neighbor who is 91. Bjørn characterized his neighborhood as a “senior ghetto” sandwiched between two high schools. After four o’clock in the afternoon, “we are the only breathing people left.” He works hard to maintain his activities and relationships with people of all ages. He dislikes the term “senior” and says that ageism is unfortunately very prevalent in today’s society. Palmore (2001) would agree.

### **Ageism**

Ageism is the “systematic stereotyping of and discrimination against people because they are old, just as racism and sexism accomplish this with skin color and gender” (Butler 1969, p. 243). Hagestad and Uhlenberg (2005) point out that Butler’s definition of ageism is directed at old people only and is characterized by negative connotations. They present a new focus by Levy & Banaji (2002) which describes ageism as “. . . feeling, belief, or behavior in response to an individual’s or group’s perceived chronological age” (p. 50). This means that young people, especially teenagers, are also faced with age-related stereotyping and discrimination. Even if we (as older adults) have the opportunity to interact with people of other age groups our quality of life within those interactions depends on acceptance. The degree to which our acceptance is unconditional will determine the amount of ageism we experience.

Butler (1995) refers to ageism as the third great *ism* of our society (followed by racism and sexism) although, according to Levy and Banaji (2002) ageism is typically much more difficult to detect. As an older person, I dispute the fact that ageism is harder to detect. Those

who are being discriminated against (whether young or old) are usually painfully aware when it's happening.

Ageism is also experienced within the larger society through media representation, interaction with authorities and formal institutions. "Multiple studies have been conducted on the stereotyping of older adults in regard to appearance and clothing (Skinner & Chowdhary, 1998) and the examination of television commercials that occur during primetime (Tupper, 1995), to an analysis of graduate social work students' perceptions of older women portrayed in a regularly televised series (Cohen, 2002)" (Schuldberg, 2005, p. 443). Brookfield (2005) refers to *all* adults not just older adults and says that: "Contemporary forms of alienation are evident in the ways adults develop a "marketing orientation" to life and see the development of identity as equivalent to assembling and marketing an attractive "personality package" (p. xiii).

Roberta has an intimate group of women friends who have known each other for many years although they are now geographically dispersed. For years now, they have referred to themselves as *The Golden Girls*. According to Roberta "everybody wanted to be – *Blanche* – (laughs)." With characteristic ribald humor, Roberta takes aging in stride although she wasn't always so sanguine:

I know this gal, one time she looked at me and she looked at me and she looked at me. Finally I said: "What? Are you trying to figure out whether I'm a senior or not?" "Well – ya –" she said, "And you know, we *can't* ask." (Laughs)

And I said: "Well – I *am*. The next time it comes up; *just* ask them if they're eligible for the discount."

But I remember, I was asked if I was a senior when I was *forty*. Gosh – I was ticked. *Ticked*. (Laughs)

Roberta has a particular idea in mind of how a senior lady should look and act:

Just like when you were talking before – about – this estrogen – for the hot flashes.

I was on estrogen for a little while and then somebody said one of the side effects was – ah – facial hair?

And I thought: "Oh – hell – I'd rather have the *sweats* – than a *moustache*."

According to Calsanti & Slevin (2001), ". . . old age does matter, but *not* in the sense of "homogenizing" or making the old similar but instead, in the sense of creating multiple experiences of aging. As a form of oppression, ageism *does* touch on everyone, even those who

are the most advantaged and privileged in our society” (p. 39). The older adults in the study illustrate the notion that there are multiple experiences of aging. They have also been touched by the effects of ageism despite any advantages or privileges they may have as individuals in our society. It is also important to note that aging is a collective cultural construct although most people view it as an inescapable biological process (Sabelli et al., 2003, p. 767).

### **Communities of Practice**

“... the term ‘community’ assumed a distinctive meaning in sociology referring both to personal relationships and to the fact that they should be established within a specific locality” (Jarvis, 2004, p. 57). This definition by Jarvis (2004) emphasizes the geographic notion of community. Upon reflection, the idea of an Internet community would be included in his definition because a locality does not have to be a place circumscribed by sticks, stones or dirt.

Wenger (1998) links the idea of community with practices and says that it involves groups of people (a community) who have similar concerns or problems, or are passionate about a subject, and who increase their knowledge and expertise (practices) by interacting regularly. This would be true of Internet communities or in-person interaction. Lave and Wenger (1991) propose that learning is a process of participation in communities of practice, participation that is at first legitimately peripheral but that increases gradually in engagement and complexity.

Hargreaves (2004, p. 30) points out that there are “natural communities built on age, sex, ethnicity, class and religion, as well as natural communities that cut across these categories.” He equates communities of practice with culture and says that new members of a community learn much through observation and imitation. However, they are not “merely acquiring new knowledge and skills: they are being inducted into a culture that will eventually transform their identity and the way in which they define themselves.”

Bjørn is a member of many communities of practice. The ones he values the most are the ones which are inclusive and intergenerational. His participation in his Folk Fest community allows him to enjoy his first language and culture. It is also a way for him to mentor new members joining the community. As he takes part in the First Nations community of traditions and culture, he is eventually being transformed and redefined, himself. He appreciates the fact that he has been welcomed into that community and is working hard to overcome his fears related to his comfort zone.

Grammie has reveled in “kid culture” all her life. She enjoyed being the “teacher’s pet” when she was an elementary school student. When it came time for her to be the kindergarten teacher she exhibited another form of literacy. It wasn’t through printed words on a page but she conveyed information and knowledge, a whole range of literacies to the children through theme-related activities:

When we did our food unit, I had a friend make me a pig costume. Eugene and Emily were friends, and Emily was a pig. And so I had a pig costume with a little tutu.

(Laughs) So on the day that we read Emily and Elizabeth and kicked off our Food Unit, I would be Emily (laughs) and when we did Thanksgiving we would discuss all the costumes and I would wear my *Pilgrim* costume. When we did Nursery Rhymes then I was Mother Hubbard and we all dressed as a Nursery Rhyme character. I don’t know, whatever you can do to encourage the kids to learn and to make it fun. You know?

As a grandmother, she wanted to set an example for her grandchildren but at the same time provide a comfortable and nurturing environment:

And I wanted my home to be a child-friendly home when the grandchildren came along. It’s because I’ll always be the eternal child. So that when the grandchildren came in I could teach them to respect things -- that I wasn’t going to be shattered if some thing was used or broken.

And then of course I have mostly a baseball team. (Laughs) So of course they don’t necessarily appreciate all the little “*dolly things*” around the room.

Hargreaves (2004) adds to Wenger’s (1998) description of communities of practice:

The community aspect refers to members who interact, learn together, build relationships, and develop an identity and sense of belonging based on mutual commitment. The practice aspect denotes a set of socially defined ways of doing things: common standards and agreed routines that create a basis for action, communication, problem solving, performance and accountability. (p. 88)

I think the important distinction here between Wenger’s (1998) and Hargreaves’ (2004) definition of communities of practice is the aspect of identity development, sense of belonging based on mutual commitment, common standards, agreed routines, and accountability. Wenger’s definition (1998) ends at the point of “interaction” between members, whereas Hargreaves emphasizes the idea of identity and a sense of belonging. The other four items -- commitment,

standards, agreed routines, and accountability -- would provide a level of trust and stability for members of the community.

“The only ‘proof’ of membership [in a community] is fellowship, the nod of recognition from someone in the same community, someone who says to you what neither of us could prove to a third party: ‘we know’ ” (Fish, 1980, p.184). This concept of community by Fish (1980) relates to Hargreaves’ notion of identity and a sense of belonging.

Unconditional acceptance is the Holy Grail which most of us find only once in a while. Inclusion as part of a community has been and continues to be vitally important to all the older adults in this study. Lack of acceptance by others during some of the years of formal schooling created a poor quality of life for Grammie, Roberta and Bjørn. Now, as older adults they have more skills and experience with which to mediate situations that are less than attractive. They have more power in the decision-making process about what activities and people they will devote their time and energy to. All the participants in this study were adamant about avoiding negative situations and people who were chronic complainers. Poor health or limited finances were not acceptable reasons for continued negativity. The participants in this study had also faced those challenges and were working hard to remain positive and to fully participate in activities which they enjoyed.

### **Critical Thinking**

The ability to think critically is a process not an outcome (Brookfield, 1987, p. 6) and it is embedded in critical theory. “As a body of work, critical theory is grounded in three core assumptions regarding the way the world is organized:

1. That apparently open, Western democracies are actually highly unequal societies in which economic inequity, racism, and class discrimination are empirical realities.
2. That the way this state of affairs is reproduced and seems to be normal, neutral, natural, and inevitable (thereby heading off potential challenges to the system) is through the dissemination of dominant ideology.
3. That critical theory attempts to understand this state of affairs as a necessary prelude to changing it” (Brookfield, 2005, p. viii).

“Learning to think critically is one of the most significant activities of adult life. When we become critical thinkers we develop an awareness of the assumptions under which we, and

others, think and act. We learn to pay attention to the context in which our actions and ideas are generated. We become skeptical of quick-fix solutions, of single answers to problems, and of claims to universal truth. We also become open to alternative ways of looking at, and behaving in, the world” (Brookfield, 1987, p. ix). Brookfield (1987, 2005) and Collins (1998a, 1998b) define critical theory and critical thinking, outlining the characteristics and the relevancies for education, lifelong learning, and basically every facet of life. My only observation of their treatment of critical theory is that the emphasis is on adult critical thinking. This is understandable because both are adult educators and advocate adult education as a way to awaken adults to critical theory and its *process* of critical thinking, eventually perhaps leading to change in self and in society.

From what I have observed in myself and others, critical thinking is part of the learning process which starts at birth, and continues until death. As infants or children, we may not be consciously aware that we are learning or thinking critically. We may not be able to express our critical thoughts with the eloquent language of an educated adult but we are still able to think critically. Indeed, I would submit that adults are more fearful of the unedited blurts of children, in or out of the classroom, than they would like to admit. I think that is why we have the old saying: “Children should be seen and not heard.”

There is a humorous anecdote told in my family of origin about me as a child of four. I had been forced to stay with a bossy old neighbour woman for a day or so while my mother was in the hospital giving birth to my younger brother. When my father came to take me home, the bossy old woman was making quite a show of fawning over me. With clear-eyed directness I said out loud: “Don’t call me dearie! You made me eat them beans!”

All the participants in my study are critical thinkers and have been since a very young age. They have been continually questioning themselves, the events in their lives and other people (Brookfield, 1987, 2005, Collins (1998a, 1998b). Their ability to think critically was also very apparent during the interview process for this study. As Bjørn said: “What you’re doing is making me identify my own reasons for being like I am. Which isn’t bad. (Laughs). You just never sit down and think enough – in a manner that makes you – understand?” He was also very honest about the unwanted limitations he puts on himself and described it as “being fascinated by my own foolishness.” By foolishness he means “fear.”

Roberta expresses her critical thinking through humor that is uncompromising: “Well I’ll tell you, if I hadn’t had a sense of humor, I probably would have slit my wrists a long time ago.” In addition to her well-honed sense of humor she is extremely self-aware of her role in past and present situations and the implications: hard work, sacrifice, hands-on learning in life and death situations. In her current situation, she dislikes complaining seniors, she appreciates what she has now, neighbors helping neighbors, would like her family to be closer but she understands why they aren’t and accepts the situation as it is.

According to Shannon (1995) a reflexive concept of literacy explores what it means to be literate in one’s own life and this critical reflection may lead to action and change. He goes on to say that “our intellectual autonomy increases when we examine the political interests embedded in our words and actions and when we introduce different ways of living, social organizations, values and ideas to be weighed against those that we already possess” (p. 36). Shannon’s “reflexive concept of literacy” is very similar to that of Lytle and Wolfe (1989) who regard their fourth and most complex view of literacy as “critical reflection and action.”

The older adults in the study demonstrated a “reflexive concept of literacy” when they took part in my thesis research. In order to do that we “reflected” on our lives and personal histories and cultures as a way to bring meaning to our lives. Shannon (1995) describes this process as rereading the texts of our past and in doing so; we find human connections and see how social structures affect our lives.

Penick and Fallshore (2005) suggest that “life review goes beyond the more basic use of reminiscence and simple review of the past. It uses the past to contribute to present-day identity, and the inclusion of a future component in the process of life review can aid in further developing personal meaning and self-identity in later life” (p. 32).

### **Quality of Life**

As with literacy and lifelong learning, there is no single agreed-upon definition of quality of life. Penick and Fallshore (2005), in their research, use the term “personal meaning” and borrow Reker and Wong’s definition: “The cognizance of order, coherence, and purpose in one’s existence, the pursuit and attainment of worthwhile goals and an accompanying sense of fulfillment” (1988, p. 221).

According to Raphael et al., (1994, cited in Mowad, 2004, p. 294) “quality of life is a dynamic, complex, subjective, and multidimensional phenomenon that refers to the degree to

which a person enjoys the important possibilities of his or her life.” The fields of sociology and economics focus on objective criteria for sources of “well being” such as acceptable housing, access to health-care and community resources, mental health, and economic stability. The field of psychology emphasizes the importance of an individual’s subjective experience of life Smith et al. (2002, p. 718).

To further complicate matters, the term “health” is often used alongside or interchangeably with the term “quality of life”. Smith (et al., 2002) link health with the term “sense of well-being”. Although Penick and Fallshore (2005, p. 21) admit that “one way of measuring these variables is through qualitative research” they and most other researchers (Smith et al., 2002; Mowad, 2004; Lawton et al., 1999; McWilliam et al., 1999; Silverstein & Parker, 2002) of quality of life among seniors have chosen a quantitative method. These statistics tell us “how many” or the “what” but they do not tell us “why.”

The things (objective and subjective) which comprise quality of life for Bjørn, Grammie, and Roberta have remained consistent throughout their entire lives. This is apparent in not only their answers to the direct question: “what is quality of life for you?” but more importantly in the stories and memories they shared with me. A thread runs through each of their stories and is embodied in the poem at the beginning of each story.

Bjørn and Roberta are different from Grammie in that their version of quality of life embodies the very things they were denied in the early years of their lives. For Bjørn, “unconditional acceptance” is his Holy Grail. When asked directly, “What is quality of life for you?” Bjørn answered, “To be ‘accepted’ – to be ‘enjoyed’ – as an individual. And to be able to ‘give’”. “Caring” in Bjørn’s mind is a two-way street: to be cared about *is* important but caring for and about others is equally important. This “caring” is illustrated by the notion of acceptance or lack of discrimination, inclusiveness within a group, a community, and society as a whole.

Finding “your place” in the world is not easy. It’s a balancing act because as Bjørn so vividly described, it’s easy to become trapped in a ghetto of “like-minded” people such as seniors. One is automatically part of the group due to age, race or sex but if that is one’s only identity, one is restricted and not able to experience what Bjørn described as the “full spectrum of life” which is predicated on two things: intergenerational interactions and one’s own chronologically-based experiences of life.

Although, like the rest of us, Bjørn needs a certain standard of living (housing, food, clothing, etc.) to be comfortable, his focus is on the psychological or subjective aspects of quality of life:

It's *not* material things – it's *emotional*. To be happy and *safe* and *secure* with your feelings and emotions. That's much more valuable.

And you have to be able to laugh at yourself and enjoy yourself, as well as being successful and functional. And a part of the *function* of living is also humor. You have to be able to *laugh* at yourself. Don't take yourself so seriously. (gives a big sigh). You can't program yourself like a computer. And even before computers – people tried to do that. Life is worth living – if you're *not* abused.

These are the things he missed in early life and values now above all else.

Roberta's current quality of life is an interesting combination of objective (comfortable housing and economic security) and subjective (time for herself and lack of responsibility for others) elements:

*My* quality of life since I turned into a senior has *vastly* improved (laughs). A senior is the magic sixty-five when you start getting a pension.

My oldest son couldn't figure out, how come I'm *so* goofy – crazy – and laughing all the time. He said: "You know, I can't believe that you are *really* happy. How can anybody be happy, living by themselves?" (laughs) And I said: "I think that's why. (laughs) I mean – because I only have myself to think about anymore."

Reaching sixty-five and becoming eligible for the Old Age Pension gave her the economic security and freedom she had not been able to secure during her working years. But her quality of life is based on more than that alone. From at least age twelve if not before, Roberta was taking care of others: her parents and her siblings. Once she married and had her own children, those additional people were added to her roster. Elder care and child care continued for most of her life. Now that her parents are gone, and her adult children are on their own, Roberta has the opportunity for the first time in her life to take time for herself and enjoy some of her lifelong activities such as music and handwork. She maintains a healthy network of intergenerational relationships which she enjoys, but the burden of taking care of others has been lifted.

Grammie has always been important in the life of a child. First, she was important in the life of her younger brother. Then she was important to other grade one students, helping them learn to read and taking charge when the teacher was temporarily absent from the classroom. As a young wife and mother, Grammie was important to her own children and now that tradition has carried forward and she is very involved on a day-to-day basis with the raising of her grandchildren. Being important in the life of a child takes precedence for Grammie over material wealth or other life successes.

She admits that she is grateful for the income that her teaching career provided, especially when she was raising her own children as a newly single mother. However, when pressed for clarification, she comes down on the side of “people and relationships” as what is most important to her in the end:

It will always be family and friends. That’s the single most important thing. Close to that is health because if there’s *none* then you don’t have any quality with your family and friends. The quality of my life definitely would have been affected very negatively had I not had an education. Following the hard time I had with my husband, I had to go back to work. But I *do* need the love and affection of the people around me. And I need *enough* money to be able to buy what I need.

I don’t think that money necessarily is the answer. It’s relationships all the way down the line.

In terms of relationships or friendships, Grammie values them now as part of her current quality of life, because she didn’t have many when she was growing up due to the numerous geographical relocations her family experienced. This valuing of something that was missing in earlier years is similar to Roberta and Bjørn’s criteria for current quality of life.

Although, each of the participants in the study had unique criteria for their version of quality of life, the literature yielded some specific details that were consistent with some of their observations. Rapkin and Fischer (1992) found that older women wanted to maintain their independence and live in a predictable environment, whereas older men preferred an energetic lifestyle. I would say that this is true of Grammie and Roberta who both spoke of the need to support themselves financially after their marriages ended. They also shared at length the difficulties they had to overcome to provide a stable environment for themselves and their children.

Penick and Fallshore (2005, p. 29) found that active seniors considered “preserving human values and ideas,” and “engaging in personal relationships with family and friends” to be among their strongest sources of meaning. “Meeting basic, everyday needs” and “feeling financially secure” were important but not to such a high degree. “Acquiring material possessions in order to enjoy the good life” was least important. All the adults in the study indicated in one way or another that preserving human values and ideas was important to them. One way they sought to do that was through ongoing interaction with valued family members and close friends.

“Increasing participation in activities improved quality of life among those who had less than weekly contact with family members but was not very consequential for those with greater than weekly involvement with their family members” (Silverstein & Parker, 2002, P. 541). This is true of the older adults in the study. Bjørn and Roberta have less than weekly contact with family members (especially children and grandchildren) but are very active in their various communities. Grammie, on the other hand, sees some of her grandchildren every day, and for her that is a priority. She has coffee with her brother once a week and participates in her volunteer activities and other community events with friends, but those interactions are second in importance.

No one in this study ever started a sentence with: “When I win the lottery . . . .” There was a complete lack of concern with acquiring material possessions. Friendships, family ties, health, intellectual stimulation, and an active lifestyle (including travel but not necessarily exotic and expensive) were more important.

## CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

### Conclusions

A review of the literature of literacy and quality of life has revealed that there is no “one” definition of either concept. There are multiple definitions and multiple characteristics depending on which lens is used for viewing. The three older adults in this study each have their own unique version of literacy based on their lived experiences and the changing context of their daily lives. This could be called the “unique definition of literacy.”

Literacy of any kind, vernacular or mainstream, can be used as a tool for exclusion or inclusion. The participants in my study experienced many exclusionary events at various stages along the way. Stuckey (1991) says that “literacy neither imprisons nor frees people; it merely embodies the enormous complexities of how and why some people live comfortably and others do not” (p. 68). Merrifield et al., (1997) concur: “Literacy is only one factor in the complex social and economic interrelationships in the lives of poor and working people.” I would say that this is true of the privileged in society as well.

The adults in the study endured formal education for the most part. There were periodic instances of enjoyment but their struggle and suffering were evident. The episodes of formal education were undertaken in order to achieve the accreditation and skills necessary to provide the comforts of life. The real “quality of life” which the adults have enjoyed is experienced in the realm of interpersonal relationships, most notably family and friends. This is consistent with the research of Penick and Fallshore (2005) who found that active seniors considered “preserving human values and ideas,” and “engaging in personal relationships with family and friends” to be among their strongest sources of meaning. “Meeting basic, everyday needs” and “feeling financially secure” were important but not to such a high degree. “Acquiring material possessions in order to enjoy the good life” was least important (p. 29).

All the adults in the study indicated in one way or another that preserving human values and ideas was important to them. One way they sought to do that was through ongoing interaction with valued family members and close friends. The older adults also valued intergenerational relationships because the relationships prevented the isolation and ageism which so often accompanies age segregation and provided opportunities for a “full spectrum of life.” As older adults, our quality of life within those interactions depends on acceptance. The

degree to which our acceptance is unconditional will determine the amount of ageism we experience.

Calasanti and Slevin (2001) make the point that “. . . old age does matter, but *not* in the sense of ‘homogenizing’ or making the old similar, but instead in the sense of creating multiple experiences of aging” (p. 39). The older adults in this study illustrate the notion that there *are* multiple experiences of aging and that they have been touched by the effects of ageism despite any advantages or privileges they may have as individuals in our society. Older adults are not a homogenous group; each older adult is a unique individual with a unique life history. Parts of their stories do intersect briefly at various points with commonalities but not in a way that is substantial enough to create generalized theories that can be extended to all older adults.

Quality of life for the older adults in this study consisted of the very things they valued in their earlier years. These essential human values such as intergenerational relationships which are accepting, have remained constant over the years and have not changed. The literature shows that there is no “one” definition of quality of life. More importantly, the three adults in this study have shown clearly that each one of them have their own version of quality of life. So in that respect, here too we have the notion that the concept of “quality of life” is unique. It is a quality of life of “one.”

As we have seen in the literature and in this study of three older adults, literacy and quality of life are complex issues continually changing over time as society and people change. Since all of this is continually in flux and subject to varying perceptions, it is difficult if not impossible to identify and show a direct cause and effect relationship between the two concepts, literacy and quality of life. There are some linkages, however, (social and contextual) but they are as complex and individualistic as the concepts of literacy and quality of life themselves.

Although Bloome (1998) refers to “literacy,” his comment is equally apt to any concept which merits study: “. . . literacy needs to be understood locally and historically (both in terms of histories of individuals and in terms of the histories of the places and the social relationships in which they find themselves) . . . rather than focus on what is universal about literacy practices, research on literary practices needs to focus on the particular” (p. xiv).

Quantitative studies may seek to establish a direct cause and effect relationship between literacy and quality of life. However, I would submit that these studies would have the motivating factor of supporting the interests of the purveyors of literacy and of quality of life or “health”

which is the term used more often in recent literature. If we truly wish to understand the lived experiences of older adults from multiple perspectives, literacy, quality of life, or otherwise, we need to listen to and gather their personal stories, told in their own words and in their own idiom.

### **Implications**

Literacy, and education by extension can be used as a tool for exclusion or inclusion (Stuckey, 1991). Educators and curriculum developers need to understand the far reaching consequences of the exclusionary aspects of educational experiences on both adults and children. “The curriculum remains class related at least explicitly in school, but now less so than in the past” (Hargreaves, 2004, p. 6). Literacy, and education needs to be inclusive of other cultures, languages, and life experiences; not as an accessory but as an integral part of the whole educative process from cradle to grave. As the older adults in this study have shown, they value intergenerational, face-to-face contact on a regular basis. This has direct implications for education and literacy. Intergenerational learning situations, both formal and vernacular, benefit the young and the old (Hagestad & Uhlenberg, 2005; Schuldberg, 2005). It is also important to address a range of learning styles; hands-on and real life learning as well as a range of literacies, mainstream and vernacular.

Technology, especially computer technology is becoming more important in general society in global times. However, the older adults in this study view it as a minor convenience in their daily lives and would prefer to be in the company of their children, grandchildren, siblings, or friends. The computer is not an adequate substitute for contact with real people. Although the adults in this study did not specifically talk about physical limitations in relation to computer use or digital cameras for example, it is not hard to imagine that someone with failing eyesight or advanced arthritis in the hands, would have difficulty typing on a computer keyboard, operating a mouse or a digital camera. This has implications for adult educators, librarians, and leisure service or health care providers who are working specifically with older adults. In addition to possible physical limitations, there is also the need to consider the cost inherent in purchasing and continually upgrading computers, digital cameras, cell phones, and other current technology. This cost is beyond the reach of many older adults who may live on a small fixed income. As well, extensive use of a home computer can be an isolating factor when it replaces physical activity and face-to-face interaction with other people. Also, the majority of internet web sites contain US

mainstream content (Boshier, et al., 1999). This harks back to the need to be inclusive of other cultures, languages, and life experiences.

The older adults in this study also valued financial security and the ability to meet basic everyday needs. For those adults who were able to acquire a mainstream education and as a result a well-paid career and healthy pension, their financial security was assured. However, not every older adult is so fortunate. Some, like farm wives for example, traditionally worked without pay and therefore did not acquire a pension. This has implications for governments and employers. The contributions that older adults have made and are continuing to make to society, need to be recognized in several ways. The unpaid labour of women especially, in the areas of care giving of children or seniors, and as partners in business or on the farm need to be factored into Canada Pension Plans, Old Age Pension or supplements, housing subsidies and employment programs. Mandatory retirement needs to be reconsidered, because it's based on the "notion that paid labour in old age is a choice and not a financial necessity" (Calasanti & Slevin, 2001, p. 4).

In addition, many older adults are able to use their life-long skills to make a substantial contribution to specific groups of people, either through paid work or as a volunteer. For the older adults in this study, contributions such as these occurred in tandem with their intergenerational relationships; both as a result of those relationships and, as the catalyst for the relationships. These life-long skills are directly tied to the literacies that the older adults acquired along the way; vernacular literacies like cooking, music, or folk dancing, and mainstream literacies like reading and writing.

The quality of life that the older adults in this study have achieved is predicated on human values; values that were important to them in the early years and continue to be now. This has implications for health care providers, family and friends. The importance of these individual values should not be underestimated. It was these very values that enabled the older adults to persist through many challenging circumstances and reach their current place in life. Other older adults who are struggling with the concept of quality of life, may be helped, if they are able to identify their own enduring values. Health care providers, educators, family and friends can also help older adults identify ways to express those values more frequently. As Penick and Fallshore (2005) point out "active seniors have a stronger sense of personal meaning" (p. 30).

Government and service agencies have a role to play as well; they can help to provide a stable lifestyle and a measure of economic security so that older adults are free at last from the

burden of unrelenting work and the caretaking of others. This would leave time, energy, and other resources available for the pursuit of activities that provide personal meaning and quality of life.

### **The need for further research**

It is important that we take the time to listen to the stories that older adults have to tell and not assume that we know what is best for them. This relates to the idea that older adults are individuals not a homogenous group. The telling of stories is important because it gives voice to those who may be marginalized or silenced (bell hooks, 1994; LeCompte, 1993, as cited in Lincoln, 1995, p. 282). LeCompte (1993) argues that it is the responsibility of serious qualitative researchers to “seek out the silenced because their perspectives are often counter-hegemonic” (as cited in Lincoln, 1995, p. 282). Story-telling is also important because “in an increasingly alienating world, (it) is the way to put shards of experience together, to (re)construct identity, community, and tradition” (Casey, 1995, as cited in Sleeter, 2001, p. 229).

There are very few qualitative studies which have focused on older adults; most of the studies of older adults are quantitative. Phelan et al., (2004) says that “qualitative studies (of older adults) would allow more careful exploration of the meaning of specific constructs across diverse groups” and that “research is needed to determine whether specific attributes of successful aging are missing (from the published literature)” (p. 215). Smith et al., (2002) makes the point that a large number of studies in the gerontological literature focus on the assessment of negative aspects and neglect the positive side of well-being. Attention to the enduring, positive, human values that were demonstrated by the older adults in this study, is an example of how the positive side of quality of life could be studied.

In terms of a specific construct, “quality of life can only be described and measured in individual terms: as the components constituting quality of life are personal, an approach where subjects create their own definitions may be a more appropriate measure” (Slevin et al., 1988; Calman, 1984).

According to Bloome (1998) this approach is equally relevant to the study of literacy. He says that “research on literary practices needs to focus on the particular” and he specifically emphasizes that in order to understand literacy we need to understand individual histories (which include histories of places and social relationships that are integral to those individual histories) (p. xiv). It is clear from a review of the literature on literacy and health, that the concept of

“quality of life” has not figured prominently in the research. Rootman and Ronson (2005) conclude that “we clearly need more research on the relationships between literacy, health literacy and other literacies in understanding literacy and health” (p. S67) and “quality of life outcomes” (p. S74).

Quantitative research can provide a vast amount of valuable data of an objective nature, such as “*how many*” or “*what*.” However, to truly understand the meaning people place on their life experiences, “*the why*” and “*the how*,” we need to listen to their stories. This is especially true for people who have not been given the opportunity to talk and be heard.

In this study, three older adults reflected on the importance of literacy in the social rhythms of their daily lives. Access to education gave them different possibilities. Their perceptions add to the understandings of the social basis of literacy as the findings suggest that every literacy practice is different with its own patterns of use. For all three participants, lifelong learning was the active construction of knowledge at various times in their lives. Each one decided to become literate, to actively learn, and to make changes in their life.

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## Appendix A

### UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON ETHICS IN BEHAVIORAL SCIENCE RESEARCH Application for Approval of Research Protocol

**1a. Student Researcher:** D. Lynne Townsend

Thesis towards M.Ed. (Curriculum Studies)

**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam

**1b. Anticipated Dates of the study:** September 1, 2004 – August 30, 2005

**2. Title of Study:** Older Adults, Literacy, and The Quality of Life: A Narrative Study

**3. Purpose of the Study:** To capture in the stories of the older adults the ways in which literacy has shaped the quality of their past and present lives.

**4. Funding:** No funding available or required.

**5. Participants:** The study will focus on four older adults: two males and two females who currently live in specific senior residences in Saskatoon. Three of these older adults have been participants in a creative writing workshop during the winter of 2002 – 2003 and the fourth adult has previously been a volunteer literacy tutor. Each prospective respondent will be approached and asked to participate in the study.

**6. Consent:** The participants will be informed of their rights as participants verbally and in writing. The written consent forms (see attached samples) will be read and explained to each participant prior to signing. A copy of the signed consent forms will be given to the participant for his or her personal records.

**7. Research Design and Methodology:** Each of the four older adults will be interviewed three times (alone) for 90 minutes. The active interviews (or conversations) will be audio-taped with prior permission of the participants. The tapes will be transcribed, analysed and selected stories will be written into the text of the “research story” (Thesis). At the conclusion of the three-interview process, a focus group (group interview) will take place involving the four older adults. The group interview will last 90 minutes and will be audio-taped with prior permission of the participants. The tapes will be transcribed, analysed and selected stories will be written into the text of the “research story” (Thesis).

**8. Storage of Data:** (All data (journal entries, field notes, transcripts, tapes and artifacts) will be securely stored and retained by Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Department of Curriculum Studies, for a minimum of five years at the University of Saskatchewan in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

**9. Dissemination of Results:** Data collected and interpretations of the study will be submitted to the Thesis Committee for evaluation and defence. As well, the data and interpretations may be used for journal articles or conference presentations.

**10. Risk or deception:** Deception is not an issue in the study. Participants will be made aware of the purpose of the study and why they have been asked to participate. Time and length for participant conversations (interviews) will be established so as not to be obtrusive.

**11. Confidentiality:** Anonymity and confidentiality will be maintained throughout the study. Confidentiality will be maintained by using pseudonyms for the actual names of the participants on the tapes, transcripts, analysis and any written summaries that result from this study other than the consent/assent forms, unless the participant wishes that his/her real name be used.

**12. Data/Transcript Release:** The participants will be given the opportunity to review the final transcript of each interview including the group interview, and be requested to sign a transcript release form wherein they acknowledge by their signature that the transcript accurately reflects what they said or intended to say. Participants have the right to withdraw any or all of their responses. A sample data/transcript release form is attached.

**13. Debriefing and feedback:** Debriefing conversations will be conducted separately with each of the four participants at the time that the transcripts are returned and the release forms are signed. The participants will have access to the Thesis.

This Research Proposal has been reviewed by:

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Jessica Latshaw, Department Head

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Thesis Supervisor

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
D. Lynne Townsend, Graduate Student Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**UNIVERSITY OF SASKATCHEWAN  
BEHAVIOURAL RESEARCH ETHICS BOARD**

<http://www.usask.ca/research/ethics.shtml>

**NAME:** Linda Wason-Ellam (Lynne Townsend)  
Curriculum Studies

**DATE:** March 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005

The University of Saskatchewan Behavioral Research Ethics Board has reviewed the Application of Ethics Approval for your research study “Older Adults, Literacy, and The Quality of Life: A Narrative Study” (Beh #04-267). Thank you for your thoughtful and carefully prepared application.

1. Your study has been **APPROVED**.
2. Any significant changes to your proposed method, or your consent and recruitment procedures should be reported to the Chair for Research Ethics Board consideration in advance of its implementation.
3. The term of this approval is for 5 years.
4. This approval is valid for one year. A status report must be submitted annually to the Chair of the Research Ethics Board in order to extend approval. This certificate will automatically be invalidated if a status report form is not received within one month of the anniversary date. Please refer to the website for further instructions <http://www.usask.ca/research/behavrsc.shtml>

I wish you a successful and informative study.

---

Dr. Valerie Thompson, Chair  
University of Saskatchewan  
Behavioral Research Ethics Board

VT/cc

## Appendix B

### CONSENT FORM (Individual Interviews)

*You are invited to participate in a study entitled (Older Adults, Literacy, and The Quality of Life: A Narrative Study). Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.*

**Researcher:** D. Lynne Townsend, Graduate Student, Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. Phone number: (306) 244-4057.

**Thesis Supervisor:** Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor, Department of Curriculum Studies, College of Education, University of Saskatchewan. Phone number: 966-7578.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this study is to capture in the stories of four older adults (two males and two females) the ways in which literacy has shaped the quality of their past and present lives.

**Procedure:** You will be interviewed three times (alone) for 90 minutes. The active interviews (or conversations) will be audio-taped. The tapes will be transcribed, analysed and selected stories will be written into the text of the “research story” (Thesis). After your interview(s), and prior to the data being included in the Thesis, you will be given the opportunity to review the transcript of your interview(s), and to add, alter, or delete information from the transcripts as you see fit. You will be requested to sign a transcript release form wherein you acknowledge by your signature that the transcript accurately reflects what you said or intended to say. You have the right to withdraw any or all of your responses.

The length of time entailed by participating in the study will be approximately 10 to 12 weeks. There will be ten days to two weeks between interviews to allow for transcription of the tapes and review of the typed transcripts.

**Potential Risks:** There are no risks or deception in the study. You have been made aware of the purpose of the study and why you have been asked to participate. It is not anticipated that any of the questions will become uncomfortable.

**Storage of Data:** All data (journal entries, field notes, transcripts, tapes and artifacts) will be securely stored and retained by Dr. Linda Wason-Ellam, Professor, Department of Curriculum Studies, for a minimum of five years at the University of Saskatchewan in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

**Confidentiality:** Data collected and interpretations of the study will be submitted in the form of a Thesis to the Thesis Committee for evaluation and defence. As well, the data and interpretations may be used for journal articles or conference presentations; however your identity will be kept confidential. Confidentiality will be maintained by using a pseudonym for you on the tapes, transcripts, analysis and any written summaries that result from this study other than the consent forms, unless you wish that your real name be used. Since the data will be collected in the form of personal stories including direct quotations, all other identifying information (such as the

names of family members, employers, groups, institutions, cities and towns, dates of event etc.) will be removed from the data.

**Right to withdraw:** *You may withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort. If you withdraw from the study at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed. During the taped interviews you may refuse to answer individual questions. You may also request that the tape recorder be shut off at any time.*

If the study extends past 12 weeks, I will advise you of any new information that could have a bearing on your decision to participate. I will seek your ongoing consent in writing.

**Questions:** *If you have any questions concerning the study, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided above if you have any questions at a later date. This study has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board on (Date)*

\_\_\_\_\_. *Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Office of Research Services (966-2084). Out of town participants may call collect. At the end of the study, you will have the opportunity to read the manuscript.*

**Consent to Participate:** *I have read and understood the description provided above; I have been provided with an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered satisfactorily. I consent to participate in the study described above, understanding that I may withdraw this consent at any time. A copy of this consent form has been given to me for my records.*

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Participant)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Signature of Researcher)

**Appendix C**

**CONSENT FOR RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study, and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with D. Lynne Townsend. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to D. Lynne Townsend to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

I choose to use the following pseudonym in the thesis: \_\_\_\_\_

Or, I give permission to use my actual first name in the thesis \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Researcher

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Appendix D**

**PARTICIPANT SIGN OFF RELEASE FORM**

**RESEARCH STUDY:** OLDER ADULTS, LITERACY AND QUALITY OF LIFE

**RESEARCHER:** D. Lynne Townsend

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the story of \_\_\_\_\_ in (Chapter Four) and final interpretation (Chapter Five) drawn by D. Lynne Townsend, and I agree that they accurately reflect what I shared in the interviews. I hereby give my permission for inclusion of the above material in D. Lynne Townsend's (researcher) final written thesis, and/or to be used in the manner described in the information and consent form. I am satisfied with the efforts that have been taken to ensure that any identifying information in these materials has been altered or eliminated. I have a copy of the Sign-off Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Participant's Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
D. Lynne Townsend (Researcher) Signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

## **Appendix E**

### **INTERVIEW QUESTIONS**

1. How has literacy shaped the quality of your life: past, present or future?
2. How would you describe your personal concept of literacy?
3. Has your personal conception of literacy changed over the years?
4. How would you describe your personal concept of quality of life?
5. Has your personal conception of quality of life changed over the years?
6. In your mind, how does literacy relate to your sense of yourself?
7. Is that different from your sense of identity or identities?
8. In what ways?
9. Tell me about a pivotal moment in your life surrounding the issue of literacy.
10. What effect has that had on you and your life?
11. Have you had moments where you disagreed with what society or school or business has had to say about literacy?
12. Tell me more about that.
13. Is there anything that you would change if you could go back in time?
14. What are your plans for the future?
15. Tell me about the things you value most about your life right now and how they might relate to your personal concept of literacy.