

The resilience of human creativity.

‘Creativity’: lots of people think that they haven’t got it, and yet everyone has the potential to create something. So why are some people afraid of their creative and artistic abilities?

This blog is my attempt at gathering some thoughts that I’ve been having recently, particularly on the similarities between the creativity of children and the creativity of people with dementia. I don’t think I’m writing to prove a particular point, but more to share my thoughts. Perhaps my emphasis is on the importance of the arts in *everyone’s* lives, whether they consider themselves an artist or not.

This week I attended a conference in Oxford, led by Creative Dementia Arts Network (CDAN), and sat on the train home full of thoughts of how the arts can enhance people’s lives, and on occasions work more wonders than any medication could. I am an artist. Sometimes it’s hard to pin down a concise definition of this, but I have an awareness of my creativity and use it daily, both in work and at home. I play a couple of instruments, I devise and direct theatre, I am a performer... I am also incredibly lucky to work with so many different creative people – performers, children, directors, designers, parents, teachers, musicians (this list is a small example and is continuously growing).

My nan has Dementia with Lewy Bodies; a type of dementia that affects the memory as well as mobility, with symptoms reflective of both Alzheimer’s and Parkinson’s. I see my nan as often as I can, and have seen many changes in her behaviour and health over the last 2 years. Before my nan’s diagnosis, I wouldn’t have thought of her as a creative person; she was just my nan. I doubt she realises it herself but she has always been creative, with a flair for cake decorating and knitting. Since her diagnosis, she has lost the ability to carry out such creative tasks. She has lost the use of one of her hands, has difficulty with coordination and perception, and finds it hard to focus on something for an extensive period of time. However, these changes have also changed my relationship with my nan. They’ve forced me take a step back and look at her almost as a new person. This is bloody hard! And something that I know that my family have struggled to deal with: Brenda is not the Brenda we’ve always known. Dementia affects much more than a person’s ability to remember; it alters their personality.

But what I’ve come to realise is that rather than focusing on what parts of my nan are no longer there, there can be a real joy and excitement by focusing on what she has become. On ‘good days’, when she is feeling well, she has a new playfulness about her and a hilarious cheekiness that often results in comically rude utterings or unusual sayings or a snippet of an upbeat song or some made up ‘nonsensical’ story. Now unfortunately as we become adults, it becomes embedded in us that we must no longer be ‘silly’ or make things up or be too loud or be playful. The one positive that dementia can give (and when someone you love has dementia trust me you have to find the positive!) is that it gives all those boring rules of adulthood a massively satisfying middle finger!

What wonderful imaginations we have when we lose all inhibitions. When we can accept (or forget!) that we don’t give a shit who’s watching or what they think, we can become creative, playful and curious human beings. This is what my nan has become. And I love her all the more for it. We play games, make up stories, play music, have sing alongs, talk ‘nonsense’, make things, make a mess...the minute I accepted that it doesn’t matter if she tells me the same story 30+ times in a visit, and it doesn’t matter if she can’t remember what year it is,

and it doesn't matter if she gets facts wrong, was the minute I got my nan back. And now I can see that she's always been creative.

The similarities between an adult with dementia and a child are endless. I work with children all the time, running workshops with our youth theatres, working in schools and through story telling. I can honestly say I'm having the most fun when I'm with young people, and that's because they generally don't hold back their creativity. Their imaginations are beyond exciting and their sense of humour are like nothing else! All of that can't just disappear the minute we decide (or others decide for us) that we have to grow up, enter the 'real' world and be an adult. "Stop being silly": I cringe whenever I hear an adult telling a child that.

Those imaginations and playful personalities don't go away, they just get suppressed and hidden. If only everyone who comes into contact with people with dementia can be brave and throw away their serious adult act, then I think we'd create a better world for people with dementia to live in. By observing how children play with each other, and make up stories, and remain open to learning I think we can learn a lot about how to interact with people like my nan. Why is it that it's ok for children to outwardly show their emotions, but as adults we find that hard? When a child is angry they'll shout, and when they're upset they'll cry. It's the same for people with dementia. My nan has thrown many 'tantrums' over the last 2 years; outbursts that have seemed out of character. But actually, she has every right to be angry or confused or upset: she's just forgotten that as an adult, she wouldn't usually express her anger by throwing her glasses across the room just as a child would throw a toy. But why not? Why are we afraid of witnessing that from a woman in her 70s in comparison to a child? Perhaps we should consider that it's the people around someone with dementia who should change their way of thinking and behaving, not vice versa. It's not patronising to think of interacting with that person as you would with a child, if anything it's helpful and liberating. Instead of encouraging a person with dementia to reminisce, why not join them in making up a story or creating something new. Reminiscence workshops are all very well, and it's amazing when people with dementia do have sparks of remembering the past, but why keep focusing on the one thing they're losing the ability of doing? Instead, if we can just accept that it's ok to be childish, then I think we can actually have more meaningful interactions with people with dementia.

And this isn't a new idea by any means; there are lots of wonderful people working creatively with people with dementia, and shouting loud and proud about the importance of creativity for the wellbeing of people with dementia and their loved ones. Ladder to the Moon, John Killick, Platform 4 and Chaturangan, among many many others doing amazing things.

I'm going to end by sharing some final thoughts, inspired by an inspirational dancer called Bisakha Sarkar, who I had the pleasure of meeting at the creative dementia conference this week:

- People with dementia still have a **future**. We often forget this. Don't ask them what they used to be, ask them "what do you want to be"? And so begins a conversation or activity driven by imagination and play.
- Don't be afraid to allow someone to expose emotions other than happiness. Why try and force someone to focus on what makes them smile, when what they need to do is express why they're angry first? Happiness will always follow, sometimes it just takes time.

- “Uplift the collective spirit.” In a care home like my nans this is vital, for carers, residents and families. The one thing that is guaranteed to lift people’s spirits is the arts: music, dance, painting, creating, **laughter**.

If everyone who comes into contact with people with dementia can realise that they themselves are not just carers, or doctors, or the devoted family member but are also creative, imaginative and playful people then, until a cure is found, dementia can become a little easier for us all to live with.



Brenda and her homemade Easter bonnet