

## NARRATIVE EXPLORATION OF THE LETTERBOX: A PORTAL TO LEARNING ABOUT HOME

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### INTRODUCTION

Home is a place that is key to humanity while home, can be explored by research, this research is enriched and given meaning by the sharing of narrative experience. Narratives are explored as a tool for student reflection about home. This article offers a brief discussion of home as a place, then distills the letterbox as the conduit between home and the outside world by sharing three different types of narrative: a client poem, student nurse reflective narrative and a children's picture book.

*We shape our dwellings, and afterwards our dwellings shape us*

(Winston Churchill, n.d.)

More than a repository for mail; the letterbox can be interpreted as a symbol of home, a significant place that is central to wellbeing and peoples' sense of self. The exploration of the humble letterbox hints at what home means for the storyteller; narratives make meaningful the realities of the everyday routines, the diversity of humanity and the changes inherent in the passing of time. The narratives discussed below describe lives and experiences, noticed, and collected by the storyteller – a feature of narrative inquiry (Berger & Quinney, 2005).

### Background

Home is a concept that is explored by academics across several health and social professions. Mallett (2004) describes the family home as, "...a formative dwelling place, a place of origin and return, a place on which to embark on a journey" (p. 62). Williams (2004) expands that home may or may not be a positive place, it may be a refuge from the world, or a prison that keeps you isolated. Where home is adapted to compensate for disability, its meaning can also change for the person (Morgan, Boniface & Reagon, 2016). There are many advantages to "ageing in place", the concept by which older adults are able to age in their own home and community rather than an aged care facility (Grimmer, Kay, Foot & Pastakia, 2015). In addition to cost effectiveness, and longer life independence, resilience and autonomy, a sense of self is fostered through a personal home base and home community that provides attachment, familiarity, connection, practical and financial assistance, activity and feelings of security (Grimmer et al., 2015).

Researchers understand home to be a multidimensional concept (Mallett, 2004; Williams, 2004). Williams (2004) developed three dimensions to the meaning of home based on clients' stories: the familiar, a central function and home as a protector. However, individual client's voices and sense of self are not often heard in discussions of the meaning of home.

## The place of narratives in nursing

Historically the nursing profession has valued stories and narratives since the 1850's as a research pedagogy, an educational tool and a clinical skill to share and explore client experience and context (Hall & Powell, 2011). Definitions of story and narrative differ across disciplines, however this article uses narrative to refer to formalized storytelling "...that reflects time-ordered events with a discernible plot and cast of characters and that imparts personal and cultural information from the teller to the audience in a coherent whole" (Hall & Powell, 2011, np). For nurses, clients and students, sharing client and health worker narratives can be a way of unfolding meaning. The stories highlight details important to the writer; patient or client, and encourage the reader to explore multiple perspectives (Tevendale & Armstrong, 2015; Owen, 2004). Reflecting through writing and hearing stories can illuminate both students' and clients' values and knowledge: developing an understanding of peoples' lived experiences by building, interpreting and deconstructing narrative knowing (Greenfield, 2015; McAllister, John, Gray, Williams, Barnes et al., 2009; Diekelmann, 2001; Evans & Severtson, 2001; McDrury & Alterio, 2000; Churchill, nd).

Client's stories challenge practitioners to identify what is most important to patients, to sharpen or widen their focus; and for patients, to distill the essence of their experience (Tevendale & Armstrong, 2015; McAllister et al., 2009; Owen, 2004). Another sort of narrative valuable in learning is literature from published sources providing a rich seam to be mined by educators wanting to deepen student understanding and empathy (Carroll, 2011; Raingruber, 2009; Brown, Kirkpatrick, Mangum & Avery, 2008; Krautz, 2007; Leffers & Martin, 2004; Koenig & Zorn, 2002). Crawley, Ditzell and Walton (2012) report that illustrated literature, such as a well-chosen children's story book is associated with students exploring the space in between the words and the pictures – multiple perspectives, potential interpretations and meanings.

Within Western society, the letterbox marks the boundary between the world and the individualised haven or hell of the home. Narrative responses to the letterbox reflect what meaning the narrator makes from this symbol of place. By choosing narrative as a way of making meaning, personal interpretations are highlighted, which may obscure other aspects of meaning from alternative theoretical bases (Park, 2010); such as the academic theory of home. The following three narratives of home as a place illustrate the layers of meaning that can be evoked through client poetry, student reflective narrative and a children's picture-book – all with the common thread of the letterbox.

### Client narratives – a personal experience

In my personal nursing practice, I have found "the letterbox drop" to be a very meaningful moment. This is when you have just had a home visit with the client, and you are seen out the door; down the path, to the letterbox, then opens up; and asks the questions or tells their experience in words they couldn't say within their partner's hearing (disturbing their sense of home as safety); but needed to tell you, the nurse, before you went out the gate – finishing the home visit. Some time ago I found myself in the client's shoes, and (while leaning on my letterbox); remarked to my clinician that the world seemed to be spinning faster and faster, and I felt I had been thrown off in a heap, while it spun on without me. I wrote this poem over the next few weeks, reflecting on what I felt about the changing nature of myself in home.

## Our Story: Mail Box Musing

*One metal box  
Sentry to my bastille  
Staunch, resolute  
Yet with a definite wobble  
Marked by time  
Not quite sure who it is,  
(one numeral is nestled in the tufted grass)  
But standing.  
Once host to Easter treats,  
childrens' muddy boots,  
borrowed books  
blue, wafer thin tidbits from afar;  
memories fondly probe  
the tender bruise of loss.  
Conduit now,  
my next appointment, medication reviewed, stamped, approved.  
And yes, the unexpected handwritten note:  
"Please check your garden for my lost cat"  
Dead?  
My receptacle of living news,  
I swear it's further away each month  
But we're still standing,  
Albeit on a lean*

As a patient, writing the poem encouraged me to look a little deeper; to realise that as a result of my health challenges I was cutting myself off from the world (rather than it rejecting me), and that new losses amplified the pain of early losses glossed over. I could feel my own determination – and this gave me somewhere to start; to rehabilitate myself back into my own community.

### **Student reflective narratives – why do it?**

Churchill (nd) describes how writing about their clients in a narrative framework, allowed nursing students to process and make sense of their clinical experience. Quoting Florence Nightingale, “Observation tells us the fact, reflection the meaning of the fact” (Nightingale, cited by Churchill, nd); health professionals are encouraged to write narrative reflections of their clinical experience. This form of reflective, formal storytelling invites ... “additional layers of interpretation and meaning making” (Greenfield, 2015, p. 2) and evolves practice from a care-based focus to uncover and explore the complex web of client context, values and societal issues (Greenfield, 2015). Jack (2015) found that poetry writing supported nursing students to increase their understanding of a subject, learn about themselves, and grow in confidence and empathy for others.

In the below excerpt from a reflective essay a nursing student used her first impressions of a client's home to challenge her own assumptions, and reflect that meaning can only be made by the person living within the home, integral to their personal sense of self.

Driving by Mister Grant's home, it reveals a cold, uninvited feeling. There is never a car in the driveway, an overgrown garden, a bent, graphitized mailbox and never any clothes on the line. This is the view of the outsider; but for Mister Grant, it is a place of joy and a social barrier from the outside world. Classical music swells the walls, cluttered with keepsakes and photographs from generations passed. Mister Grant resides in the home he grew up in as a boy. He returned home in the late eighties to care for his mother after her stroke, and ironically is now living there independently and gets care following his own stroke.

(Cited with permission, pseudonyms used)

### **Can an illustrated children's story help learning?**

In addition to health students and professionals writing narrative reflections, literature is richly sown with stories that illustrate human experience, yet provide a 'safe' place for reflective learning. Sources used by nurse educators include novels, biographies, poetry, and films (Raingruber, 2009; Brown et al., 2008; Leffers & Martin, 2004; Koenig & Zorn, 2002). Exploration of literature enriches factually presented texts with a human dimension and context (Carroll, 2011; Krautz, 2007; Darbyshire, 1995).

Children's picture books are designed to be read, and re-read. Crafted to hold attention and draw the listener into the multiple layers of the story, through the interplay of words and illustrations (Crawley, 2009; Lynch-Brown & Tomlinson, 2008). Complex human concepts are folded into about 100 words, with multiple interpretations hinted at within the illustrations. Crawley et al., (2012), Krautz (2007) and Davidson (2004) all employ picture books in nursing contexts, encouraging students to use a reflective interpretive approach, challenging pre-conceptions and building empathy. Structured teacher strategy is effective when encouraging reflective learning from children's picture books, Crawley et al., (2012) describe a model they have utilized to explore grief and death- a delicate subject to teach.

The children's picture book, *Old Henry* (Blos & Gammell, 1987) explores diversity, communication, community and home using a range of literary techniques, for example humor, subversion, different character perspectives and character development. All of these themes are relevant for nurses working with clients in the community, and students have their own pre-conceived ideas about whether Henry is free spirit, or a health hazard.

Henry moves into an empty house in a close-knit community. But he doesn't fit in with societal norms. The book illustrates a home that looks dilapidated and overgrown, including a personalised, but neglected letterbox, stuffed with unread mail

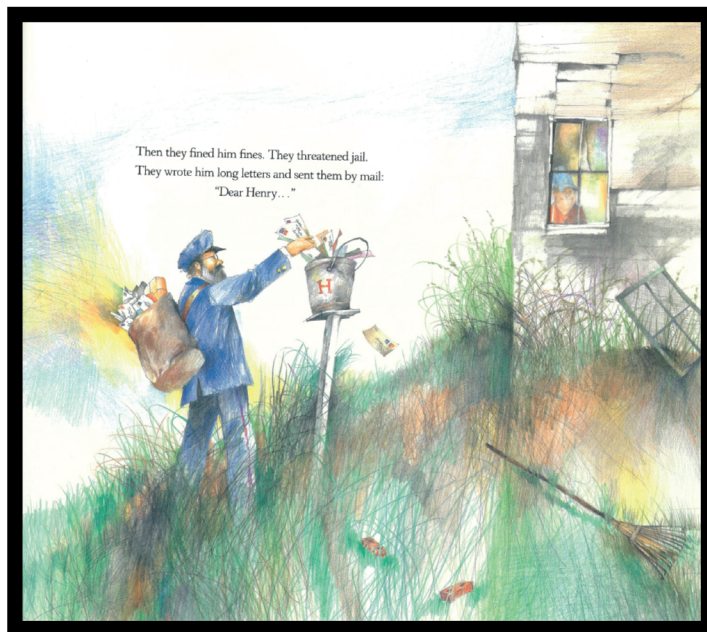


Figure 1. Old Henry, the Postie and the Letterbox  
Source: Blos and Gammell (1987, np)

The repeated phrase "That place is a disgrace", emphasizes the community response – but as the reader we know that this home is beloved; Henry's sanctuary where his birds fly free and nature has priority over control.

The neighbours make attempts to connect; but Henry just won't conform. Henry retreats from the community's ongoing but intrusive helpfulness, not recognizing that his home's edges are fused and morphed into his surrounding community. He abandons his house, taking his letterbox with him, holding it close to his chest, sitting in a paddock in Dakota with all his belongings – waiting for the letter that brings him home – with negotiated terms of re-engagement.



Figure 2. Old Henry- open to communication  
Source: Blos and Gammell (1987, np)

I find the value of using this picture book as a learning tool is in actively reading it aloud, interspersed with a range of rhetorical questions designed to encourage student reflection, to unfold the differing perspectives, and to relate the illustrations and concepts to practice situations. For example in the illustration above, the overflowing letterbox instigates discussion about how to communicate with clients in a way that is meaningful to them; the letterbox is both a barrier to communication, and the marker of the boundary of Henry's sanctuary. In the second illustration (Diagram 2) – the last of the book, Henry is homeless, but the letterbox is clutched tight, like a reminder of the home he felt driven from; and a conduit for reconciliation. Henry shapes where he lives, but it is a reciprocal arrangement.

## CONCLUSION

Narratives are a powerful tool for reflective learning about what home means to an individual client. Each of the three differing uses of narrative above enabled the writer, and the reader to make a bridge between space and time, the letterbox and home, and enter the world of others. They also open a window into the values we interpret others' reality from, by encouraging exploration of multiple perspectives. Educators who teach students about the meaning of the home, aging in place, and rehabilitation are aiming to build student practice that is empathetic to the complexities involved. The client's voice needs to be heard. With practice, nurse educators can enhance reflective learning opportunities for students when their teaching strategies include developing and appreciating narratives.

**Josie Crawley** has been involved in nurse education in both the community and education institutions for over 25 years. She is passionate about opportunities for health promotion in primary health; and her research platform explores the place of narratives within nursing education.

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