

# SEEING HER STORIES

An art based inquiry

Carla van Laar

This book presents the research project “Seeing Her Stories” that was completed in fulfilment of the qualification Doctor of Therapeutic Arts Practice.

First published 2020

by Caravanlaar.com

27 Wilson Avenue, Brunswick, Victoria 3056, Australia.

Copyright 2020 Carla van Laar

All artworks copyright of Carla van Laar

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopy, recording or any other information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publisher.

ISBN 978-0-6487679-0-9

Design by Vic Segedin, Dragonfly Design.

Printed and bound by IngramSpark.







# Chapter 9

## Life enhancement

What can happen when a woman's  
stories are seen?

We can feel that our lives have  
been enhanced

*Possibility, insight, meaning*

*Optimistic enjoyment and intention*

*Ease, exploration, emergence*

*Wellbeing and healing*



## Life enhancement

“Life” can refer to the animated ways in which we grow, metabolise, reproduce and adapt, or the state of being human – our very existence, our own biography, or principles that are vivifying and quickening, that keep us alive (life, n.d.). To “enhance” life would mean to intensify and magnify life, raising it to a higher degree, and make life more valuable (enhance, n.d.). The notion of “life enhancement” signifies that, through certain activities, processes and experiences, the value and quality of life can be enriched. This can be thought of as “quality of life” and is often written about using terms such as “health” and “wellbeing”. The World Health Organisation highlights that “health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity” (World Health Organisation, n.d.).

Robinson and Daly (2014) write:

Finding good evidence for the positive effect of arts programmes on the health of individuals and communities is something of a Holy Grail: we all believe in it but, so the argument goes in the health literature, compelling evidence that it really works is elusive (Hamilton et al., 2003, p. 245)

After presenting a brief discussion of “life enhancement” in art therapy research and literature, this chapter focuses on the ways in which participants described “life enhancement” as a ripple effect of seeing her stories, providing insight into how life enhancement was experienced throughout this art based research project.

The theme of this chapter, “life enhancement”, has been implied through the stories in the previous chapters. In seeing a woman’s stories, we can experience presence, and be aware of our embodied responses, notice changes and appreciate the value of continuity, contexts, risk and safety. “Seeing her stories” has also been shown to be embedded in a relational ground where connection and co-creation are evident. These experiences occurred in ways that were experienced and described as “life enhancing” in various ways. Participants expressed enjoyment in the process, and how exploration, personal development and change were meaningful and supported their wellbeing and healing. This chapter summarises all that has preceded, and returns to the participants’ own words in order to illuminate what was “life enhancing” about their experiences in the “Seeing her stories” inquiry.



Experiences of seeing stories can also occur in ways that are distressing, hurtful or life diminishing. The harmful effects of seeing certain kinds of stories has been discussed by Berger (1972) in *Ways of Seeing* and Wolf (1991) in *The Beauty Myth*. They discuss images that tell stories of women from the perspective of an objectifying male gaze. They consider the persistent seeing of these kinds of stories to be damaging on a cultural level by contributing to myths that objectify and disempower women. The consequences are commercialisation of body altering practices, including chemicals and procedures, and distress for individuals around issues of body image, self-esteem and sense of worth (Grogan, 2016). History shows us examples of art used as propaganda to promote pro-war attitudes such as racism and fear (Jowett and O'Donnell, 2014). Jowett and O'Donnell (2014) describe how these kinds of visual stories influence viewers:

A careful and predetermined plan of prefabricated symbol manipulation is used to communicate an objective to an audience. The objective that is sought endeavours to reinforce or modify the attitudes, or the behaviour, or both of an audience. (p. 4)

Knowing that seeing some such stories can have life diminishing ripple effects energises my curiosity to continue investigating how we can create conditions where seeing subjugated stories contributes to wellbeing, healing, and is life enhancing, regardless of whether these stories are her, his or their stories.

Authors in the fields of art therapy and arts and health have linked life enhancement, health and wellbeing with access to and participation in art based

activities (McNiff, 2016; Slayton, D'Archer & Kaplan, 2010; Daykin & Joss, 2016; Binnie, Dudley, Quiroga & Rampling, 2013). Some take a broad philosophical view, others focus on outcomes, and some look more closely at experiences of life enhancement by attending to the qualities of peoples' lived experiencing. McNiff (2016) has offered an expansive perspective – that when we engage in art based practices we participate in the creative life energy of the universe, and that this energetic flow is the basis of all healing. Many published studies look specifically for evidence of reduction in unwanted symptoms such as anxiety or isolation, and increases in protective factors or wanted states such as relaxation or cooperative behaviour (Slayton, D'Archer & Kaplan, 2010). The evidence is scarce, as I have mentioned. Daykin and Joss (2016) have responded to the perceived need for an evidence base in art based practice by offering a framework for evaluating arts projects for health and wellbeing. This framework (Daykin & Joss, 2016) focuses on how target groups' needs are assessed, ways to identify appropriate outcome measures- such as participation, mental wellbeing and observed behaviour – and also ways to evaluate art program processes and impacts using quantitative and qualitative methods. Rather than focusing exclusively on outcomes for participants, this framework encourages reflection on the qualities of processes in art based programs. Binnie (2013) expanded on traditional approaches to generating evidence of the links between art and wellbeing. She was particularly interested in links between seeing artworks and wellbeing, and asked the question, “Does viewing art in the museum reduce anxiety and improve wellbeing?” (Binnie, 2013, p. 191). While this question

reflects the dominant practice of looking for evidence of reduced symptoms and increased health, in her discussion, Binnie (2013) highlights that:

Improvements of positive affect, which boost mental wellbeing in general, can also improve cognitive processes such as problem solving and social interaction (Ashby et al., 1999). This could suggest that positive reactions to the experience of viewing art in a museum could also be longer lasting than instances of a change in mood. (p. 192)

In this passage, Binnie alludes to the idea that seeing artworks can have ripple effects that are ongoing and life enhancing, that somehow enrich quality of life for the viewers. Unlike “outcomes”, “qualities” that enhance life are, at the least, difficult to quantify, and are perhaps even unquantifiable. These kinds of life enhancing “qualities” are experienced rather than observed and can be best understood through first hand description rather than measurement. Catherine Hyland Moon (2002) implores art therapists to make use of artistic and poetic language for conveying art based experiences. She says:

Poetic language draws the listener in, inviting empathic participation in that which is being described, and inviting authentic response. These qualities of poetic language offer potential antidotes for the problematic characteristics of the dominant discourse in medical and mental health, and a balancing effect for the medical model’s detached, diagnostic language for interpreting human behaviour. (C. H. Moon, 2002, p. 270)

I see this distinction as crucial for the field of art therapy. Accordingly, in this chapter I explore the qualities of “Seeing her stories” that participants said contributed to the emergence of “life enhancement” as a consistent theme throughout this research project. I do this by presenting the insights shared by the research participants, images from this art based inquiry, and reflections from my research journal. I conclude the chapter by summarising the distinctive contribution that the understandings about life enhancement generated by this inquiry can make to the fields of art therapy, arts and health, and community engagement.

### **Life enhancing ripple effects of seeing her stories: Qualities of experiencing: interest, enablement, joy, and meaning**

The previous and following stories of this research reveal the ways that the participants and myself described the life enhancing ripple effects of “Seeing her stories”. We use words that relate to qualities of feeling interested, such as “discovery”, “inspiration” and “fascination”. We communicate being enabled through “possibilities for change”, “choices”, and “actions”. We share our experiences of joy and meaning as we describe our “great fun”, “wonder”, “realisation”, “understanding”, “beliefs”, “knowledge”, “values”, and “love”.

Here is an excerpt from my conversation with Nicola at her house where she describes the links between her seeing of my story, her song-writing, beliefs and actions in the world.

*I ask Nicola if she can talk about any meanings, actions or other ripple effects that she connects with her response to the painting of the woman on the cliff.*

*“Yes! And that’s the song! ‘Be’. For me, song writing is a sub-conscious thing; you don’t know what you’re thinking until you write it, then you look back on it and go, ‘Oh, that’s what I think!’ Writing it cements it, and then it becomes an action. The response is sub-conscious, when you discover what it is and take your brain and you cement it, I realise what I’m thinking about, I write it down, I realise what I’m trying to say.*

*It becomes a belief system and actions”.*

Nicola’s description here reflects the process of art as a way of knowing, or practice as research. Her description here relates well to Heron and Reason’s (2008) expanded paradigm of knowing, and if we simplified her multi-layered experiencing in accordance with their model, we could imagine that she has engaged in experiential knowing through her seeing of my image and later her own song writing, presentational knowing in the performance through music and words, propositional knowing in creating a belief system, and practical knowing about how to put her beliefs into action. The life enhancing properties that Nicola depicts within this process include discovering, realising, believing and actioning. Her insights and learning are personally significant because they have application in her immediate life.

At the research dinner party, Marty also highlighted discovery as an important and life

enhancing aspect of being involved in the “Seeing her stories” research project. For her, seeing the artworks and reflecting on the experience is connected with being exposed to many enjoyable feelings, an expanded sense of knowing, and new possibilities for practice. These are all part of discovering through seeing her stories and its ripple effects. She said:

*“Well I have been involved in research for a long time, and of course in Carla’s life for a long time. And I think that research is about finding out about things that we don’t already know. And so for me, Carla’s Master’s research really showed me what arts based research can be, and I found that amazingly inspiring because it is a little bit outside of the convention. We may know that these things exist, but to actually be closely exposed to it, enables you to know it, in a much more real way. And so I found that really quite fascinating, as well as very inspiring, and of course I was very proud of the work that Carla did.*

*I do think, that with this current project, it’s really been a privilege for me to see it unfolding, and along the way, it’s been wonderful to see the artworks, and to see the portraits, it’s all great fun, and I feel that the whole project is very enriching, but at the same time, that the sense of discovery, the sense of finding out about this style of research and what it can accomplish, and what it can communicate, and how this kind of research enriches knowledge, and contributes to understanding in a very complex way. It’s really wonderful to find out about this through Carla’s work, to be exposed to it, and to find out things that I wouldn’t be exposed to otherwise and have the opportunity to find out.”*

Marty highlights a number of overlapping themes that help us to understand how being engaged in seeing artworks can be life enhancing.

Figure 9.2 Nicola describing a pivotal moment at the dinner party, 2010.



She acknowledges the complexity of knowing and understanding. The emphasis she places on meaning making processes shows us something of her value system – that these things are important to her. She accentuates exposure to new research and involvement in the process as significant, and describes how these experiences are generative and inspiring, showing that her involvement has been motivating and energising.

During my dialogue with Jan we spent time conversationally unpacking her experience of seeing my painting and then responding through making a visual image. Jan's descriptions, like Nicola's and Marty's, illuminate how personal insights, meaning making, and possibilities for life enhancing changes can all be part of the seeing experience and its flow-on effects. Jan noted that she is usually a "glass half empty" kind of person and was surprised that her response was to see the positive and joyful rather than the disturbing. She said:

*"Often when I am moved by a painting it is something disturbing, and I respond to that, but in this I did the flip side, and I quite like that."*

Jan's contemplations show how she appreciates recognising and changing personal

patterns of seeing towards more optimistic seeing as a life enhancing shift.

Nicola similarly shared a personally transforming response to her seeing of the woman on the cliff painting. Here, she talks about the seeing being a precursor to a pivotal moment in which she felt compelled to make a choice that enabled her to "move forward" in her life:

*"For me, it was about transformation. You either move through the darkness, and you get to the light, or you stay frozen where you are, and life ceases to exist. And for me, that then became that pivotal moment of – do you actually open those boxes, those dark, scary, dangerous places, you know, they're all based around the same themes, pretty much, and get the gold, or do you stay like a statue forever, and not move forward?"*

*"So, for me, that kind of symbolised that moment in life, where you choose to face the demons, or lose your spirit, essentially."*

The explorative discussion among the dinner party guests about their personal experiences of life enhancing connections generated further optimistic understandings about the possibilities of engaging the arts for social wellbeing and healing. Nicola shared that her perspective and valuing of art's capacity to effect social change had shifted through the process of being engaged in the "Seeing her stories" research project. She said,

*"I think I came to this out of pure friendship and love for Carla. We worked together doing art with young people; we were always rambling about*



*art and the value of art, and I've always had an internal conflict, about being an artist versus having economics and politics degrees and feeling that I wanted to do something constructive in the world, and so we've had many a discussion about the value of art, and ways that we can effect change. So this was a very fascinating process to be involved in...*

*Thank you for the journey, for the things that it shone the light on. I think we all have this knowledge deep inside us, and then it's moments like this that shines the light on it, and then you know that knowledge, and it brings it to the light."*

Here is another brief passage of dialogue from the dinner party between Jan and myself. Jan has just finished telling the group some of the things she has appreciated about my process in this research that included playfulness, discovery, decisions along the way and experimenting. I am genuinely surprised! This snippet illustrates how, in our meeting within this shared territory of unfolding and exploration, Jan's ability to enjoy the process was enabling, empowering and life enhancing for me as an art based researcher.

*"That's amazing", I respond, reflectively, "Because everything that you just said, I felt that you were enabling me, to do that! Everything that you just said that you were enjoying!"*

*Jan replies, "I just thought you were going to go ahead and do it anyway, so I may as well go along for the ride and enjoy it!"*

*"Aaaah, thanks!"*



Figure 9.3 Me telling Jan that she had enabled me to do my art based research.

As I read back over the words, ideas and meanings that were shared and generated during the dinner party, I am myself moved emotionally by the experience of attending with presence to what was communicated, and how the knowings were expressed. My intentions throughout the project have always included my wish to observe carefully, to encounter what is there, and to do this in ways that are art based, interconnected and organic. I have held the intention to avoid psychologising or psycho-analysing the people and material in this study. This process has kept me engaged, fascinated and immersed for a decade of my life. I have come to a realisation myself that I deeply desired to see what could happen if I stayed true to my conviction and belief in art. Could understandings, knowledge and language emerge without privileging another field of practice? Could the central presence of art based practice be a core strength and valuable in its own right? I have found that it can. The practices, language and knowing of the arts provide me with a life enhancing territory to explore, map, traverse, travel and meet with others in. This territory is enabling.

The image of the roller coaster ride behind me during the exchange between Jan



Figure 9.4 “Tree view”. Carla van Laar, 2016.

This painting reminds me of unconventional ways to see a tree, and of looking up, an optimistic perspective.

and myself visually speaks of the many ups and downs, twists and turns, glee and terror that have been part of the shared journeys within this research story. It reminds me of the complex web of meaning that we have been weaving and creating together through sharing our stories through our arts and interactions about seeing her stories. The web of meaning we have created is life enhancing in multiply connected and interwoven layers. These layers include explorations through seeing and all of our senses, through inquiring, reflecting, unfolding, rambling, absorbing, responding, thinking, guessing, showing, exposing, bringing, sharing, song writing, speaking, and representing.

In our own words, the life enhancing layers include our enjoyments, of ease, delight, liking, preferring, gratitude, fascination, pride and amazement.

They involve our insights, perspectives, realisations, recollections, awarenesses, understandings, discoveries, knowledges and belief systems about the themes and patterns of our lives.

They open up possibilities, opportunities and actions that are generative, optimistic, enabling, positive, constructive, inspiring and wonderful through which we can face fears, remember how to be, work together, effect change, make valuable contributions, accomplish things and involve each other.

As the participants expressed at the dinner party focus group, the layers enhance our wellbeing through fun, love, friendship and togetherness, connecting us, affirming and validating our life and existence. They are healing for us in ways that are enriching, transforming our life experiences, facilitating choices, co-creative and empowering. They support life enhancing changes that occur over time, as we choose, are moved, connect, open up, cease things and emerge.

These complex layers are made up of and co-create threads of meaning. They hold intentions, symbols and values that, when interlaced together, weave story-worlds that become places and territories that bring quality to our lives when we inhabit them together.

I have illustrated that the life enhancing qualities and ripple effects described by participants in the “Seeing her stories” project included experiences that were variations on the themes of interest, enablement, joy and meaning. In attempting to understand how it is that these qualities are life enhancing, it is

unpleasant but informative to imagine a life devoid of interest, enablement, joy and meaning. In the absence of these life enhancing qualities, life would become dull, detrimental, distressing and futile. It is upsetting to imagine such a life; it would be a life of suffering and despair. This kind of existence can be conceived of as mental ill-health, dis-ease or “lost soul” (McNiff, 2016, p. 8). The understandings generated through the “Seeing her stories” inquiry are resonant with strengths based approaches that emphasise resilience, empowerment, collaboration, motivation, hope, learning and sustainability (Hammond, 2010).

The strengths approach as a philosophy of practice draws one away from an emphasis on procedures, techniques and knowledge as the keys to change. It reminds us that every person, family, group and community holds the key to their own transformation and meaningful change process. The real challenge is and always has been whether we are willing to fully embrace this way of approaching or working with people. If we do, then the change starts with us, not with those we serve. (Hammond, 2010, p. 7)

Health and quality of life depend not only on the absence of disease, but also on the presence of life enhancing qualities such as interest, enablement, joy and meaning. These are qualities that help us to adapt, respond, heal, regenerate and grow, to feel alive, well and soul-full. The qualities of interest, enablement, joy and meaning can be ripple effects of participating in art based projects, as they were for participants in the “Seeing her stories” research project, whose involvement began with the simple experience of viewing artworks painted by a woman. Understanding how these seeing experiences had ripple effects that flowed into participants’ broader lives in ways that were interesting, enabling, joyful, meaningful and life enhancing adds a layer of meaning to previous understandings of the relationships between art and wellbeing, and is one of the distinctive contributions of this inquiry.

In the next chapter I look at the implications of the “Seeing her stories” research findings.



Figure 9.5 “Henry and me on the rollercoaster”. Carla van Laar, 2008.