RE-CREATING: THE ROLE OF CREATIVE ACTIVITIES IN MID-LIFE TRANSITION IN RURAL WOMEN’S LIVES

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Abstract

Midlife is a time of significant life transition for many people. While it has been commonly thought of as a time of upheaval, it is increasingly considered a time when growth and renewal is possible. As people live longer and potentially healthier lives, it is important to understand the nature of this transition period and the ways in which people discover it as a period of growth. This project looks at a specific mid-life demographic, women living in rural Saskatchewan who self-define as involved in creative activities. It asks the question what role does creativity play in the strategies women use in the transitions they make at mid-life? A cohort of seven rural women from a similar background and stage in life joined me in answering this question through open-ended individual interviews and art-based research. The complexity of this particular aspect of human experience is captured through a blend of autoethnography, ethnography and narrative. Midlife and creativity are both interstitial places wherein meaning is interrupted, interrogated and re-created. Creativity imbues the ways in which meaning can be re-created at midlife. Creativity helps us to realize the potential at midlife for “a goodness which is sufficient but not idealized” (Jacques 1965, 24).
“The interim, the in-between world is brisk with possibility. And possibility is the gift of creativity.”
- John O’Donohue, The Invisible Embrace Beauty, 233

Part I: Introduction, Background and Methodology

Introduction

By the time my grandmother was in her nineties, her physical world was confined to a 500 square foot apartment. Her body movements were impeded by arthritis and osteoporosis and she had lost a great deal of her sight. Yet even at this stage of a life that would span more than a century, she was one of the most vital people I knew. She lived a full life - with the cares and delights of following four generations of her family, with her keen mental faculties intact and engaged by her frequent visitors and with her active presence in her tiny kitchen, baking the most delicious bread and making carefully crafted cups of tea.

Her most vital force was her creativity, flowing from an undergirding of spirituality. Creativity drove the innovation required to provide for twelve children in hard economic times, but it came into full bloom after the children had grown and time for her personal interests expanded. She began painting landscapes, conventional scenes of mountains and lakes, at the same time remaining providential and proficient in all the homely arts, winning ribbons at the local fair and sharing her abundance with growing generations of her family. Physical infirmities, including dimming sight, resulted in paintings that were more impressionistic and experimental. Then she turned to the tactile medium of clay. I remember a sculpture she made at this time. It was that of a young girl, sitting with her skirts spread about the base - a Rodinesque sculpting of the body, solid and simple, with the face serenely tipped towards the sun. Grandma
didn’t say so, but to me this bit of modeled clay seemed to reflect my little aged grandmother’s own interior image of herself – listening for the voice of her former self.

I am in my 52nd year, midway to my grandmother’s age when she died. The memory of that bit of modeled clay returns to me as I consider a question: What role does creative activity play in the well-being and formation of identity for women during this transitional time commonly known as midlife?

Being creative has always been important to me - as a young girl at play, as a student pursuing a degree in Fine Arts and as a mother of five children, farming in rural Saskatchewan. Creativity, manifested in many varied ways, has always provided me a venue for self-reflection and inquiry. Will it help me through the turmoil of midlife, and furthermore does it build capacity for well-being in the transitions other women experience at midlife?

Through snowball sampling, I assembled a cohort of seven other rural women from a similar background and stage in life to help me to dig a little deeper into this question with open-ended individual interviews and using art-based research. I reflect on these interactions through a blend of auto-ethnography, ethnography and narrative to try to capture the complexity of this particular aspect of human experience. A review of the relevant literature in the area of midlife transition and creativity provides a context for this reflection.

Background

The social construct labeled “midlife” is a time many experience as a time of change, perhaps even a time of significant emotional, social and physical turbulence. The physical aspects of ageing, the departure of children from the home, changes in roles at work, societal views about ageing and the realization that time and options are growing more limited are elements that contribute to a time of conflict and change at midlife. Psychologist Elliot Jacques
(1965) was one of the earliest to write of what he called the midlife crisis, attributing it not only to the changes that happen at this time of life, but to a face-to-face encounter with the finitude of life. He wrote that working through this “crisis” entails a successful mourning of our eventual death (24). More recent research challenges the idea of midlife as a time of crisis (Brim, Ryff & Kessler 2004). Challenges and stressors are attributed to major life events, not necessarily characteristic of midlife or the direct results of ageing. In fact these findings indicate young adulthood, rather than midlife, is a time of more significant life turning points.

Actual crisis at midlife may be less common than popularly assumed. However, as Elaine Wethington found in her study (2000), much depends on whose definition of crisis is being used as a gauge. Self-reported incidence of crisis is much higher than that found by researchers using their own definition of crisis. She writes, “almost any event or feeling socially symbolic of ageing can qualify as a mid-life crisis if the definition is very elastic” (99). Wethington suggests that the perception of the changes at midlife as crisis is cultural, in that it is embedded in popular media and driven by a culture of fear (88).

I am intrigued by the research that indicates that the challenges at this time of life, whether or not viewed as crisis, can also be construed as ones that may generate personal growth. Life-span models of human development recognize that gained capacity in one dimension results from loss in another (Baltes, 1987). Mary Lynn Crow’s study of midlife women concluded that those who were successful in a “crisis” or transition point were those who turned the challenges faced at this time into an opportunity for renewal (1987). While midlife may heighten the risk for depression, it also heightens the potential for growth in the form of a personal paradigm shift (O’Connor & Wolfe, 1991). This is confirmed in Elizabeth Arnold’s study of women 50 to 65 years (2005), which indicates that this is a time of creativity, renewed en-
ergy and authenticity. In fact, as Wethington (2000) concludes in her study, overestimating the risk of crisis at midlife could divert mental health treatment from more serious illness. Therefore, the focus of my inquiry positions the changes and challenges faced at midlife, not as pathology, but as a complex process, rife with potential. The transitions that occur at midlife can be viewed as “a gift of adult life” (Weathington, 90). At the same time, I return to the idea first presented by Jacques that midlife presents an opportunity to resolutely “turn to the past, working it over consciously to the present and weaving it into the concretely limited future” (26).

These conclusions are born out in my own experiences and in that of my fellow participants in this study.

The Canadian Index of Well-being (2011) and the U.S. national survey of midlife Americans, known as MIDUS, undertaken by Brim, Ryff and Kessler (2004), provide useful tools for defining well-being for the purposes of this study. Both works emphasize a call for definition of well-being that considers multiple levels of health, including psychological and social health, and recognizes the benefit of leisure and recreational activity to that health. MIDUS findings highlight the many ways that Americans at midlife are influenced through work, family and community and how they contribute to these domains. The Canadian Index of Wellbeing (CIW) report recognizes the important role of leisure and cultural activities in Canadians’ well-being and provides some valuable insights into the nature and future of the opportunities available to Canadians. It notes that Canadians, especially women, are spending less time on social leisure activities (38), which would encompass some of the activities that we would define as creative. However, the CIW does not look specifically at those particular activities, and neither does MIDUS specifically consider creativity in the domains it examines. Therefore it is appropriate to further consider what role creativity and its manifestation in recreational ac-
activities play in well-being.

**Methodology**

The methods used in this work of exploratory qualitative research are informed by three primary approaches, which are related through similar underlying philosophies – that of phenomenology and a post-modernist appreciation of the co-construction of knowledge within a social context. These three approaches are Portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis 1997), art-based research (Irwin & Springgay 2008) and reflexive research (Etherington 2004).

Portraiture is the name Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis use to describe an approach to qualitative research which aims to be sensitive to both the science and the aesthetics of understanding and communicating the complexities of the human experience. It seeks to understand and communicate the perspective of a group of people from their lived lives by actively engaging and listening for a story, through participatory observation. In this way it shares some of the methods and aims of ethnography (13). It calls for attention to coding, classifying and organizing data, while also attending to the subtleties of detail and nuances of meaning. It is an interpretive and analytical process that uses emergent themes and categories from the data to build a compelling narrative, using metaphor and detail to more completely capture the reality of a lived experience. Triangulation from several sources serves to highlight points of convergence, and what are equally important, points of dissonance.

I began with an open-ended series of questions and a Satisfaction with Life Scale (Diener, E., Emmons, R., Larsen, J., & Griffin, S. 1985) in an individual interview with each participant to allow a mapping out their own defined levels of well-being at midlife and how they understand creative activity affects that well-being. Five themes, defined by their inter-related and overlapping properties, emerged from comparing and contrasting the information
from these interviews, forming a scaffold for the developing of a narrative.

The themes that emerged from the interview data were triangulated and deepened when the participants met as a group six weeks later. The participants were invited to share and discuss their findings from their own art-based research, which they had undertaken since the first interview. Art-based research is action research that is concerned with creating a space or circumstances wherein which questions evolve in ways that are responsive to the participants. Understanding unfolds through a generative and emergent process or a “questing” (Irwin & Springgay 2008, 109). It provides another way of knowing that engages mind and body, and connects self and other (artist and viewer), allowing for a collective interpretation of text and image, and an understanding that is continuously open to further provocation and evolution. Both making art and the discussion elicited by the works are acts of inquiry. Irwin and Springgay explain, “These acts are theoretical, practical and artful ways of creating meaning through recursive, reflective responsive, yet resistant forms of engagement” (117). The experience and the resulting object can serve to both interrogate and celebrate meaning.

The participants were asked to create at least one self-portrait in the medium and style of their choice and these works, along with journaling before and after completing the art, elicited further reflection about their identity at midlife and the role creativity plays in coming to terms with any transitions. Not only the reflections from the individual and solitary act of working on a creative project, but the interaction between participants and the social context of the group affected the outcome of findings from this session.

As noted in the introduction, I began this project with a very personal question. Autoethnography, in the form of an inclusion of my personal narrative, is a crucial part of the study, not only because the question is personal but because reciprocal sharing acknowledges the value of
the participant’s contribution and enhances respect and rapport with the participants (Dickson-Swift, James & Kippen 2007). This requires a practice of reflexive research. Kim Etherington describes reflexivity as being aware of our personal responses and being able to make choices about how we use them in our actions, communications and understandings (17). With this in mind, my own journaling, art work and comments during interviews and the focus group became part of the data. In addition to contributing to the data, they guided some of my questions to the participants. I cultivated an awareness of how my own sensibilities may be influencing both what was being observed and how it was interpreted.

Reciprocal sharing also requires allowing participants a “last word”. Therefore I returned to the participants with a draft report to allow them to reflect on how I have reported our findings and to comment further. At this point they were asked to provide consent on the level of confidentiality they wish to preserve, which dictated whether or not reproductions of their self-portraits are included in this report. All but one participant agreed to the inclusion of their art. These images are reproduced throughout the report as they are discussed and provide an important component of the reporting of the findings.

Part II: Telling the Story

The Women

This story belongs to eight creative women from the rural region of north eastern Saskatchewan, between the ages of 52 and 68. The autoethnographic nature of this project calls for my inclusion in this number. We have different backgrounds, lifestyles, ways in which we earn our living, and ways in which we express our creative natures. Some of us are retired, some are very active volunteers, some are self-employed, and some are working full-time for other em-
ployers. We are farmers, educators, curators, horticulturalists, students and community organizers. We are visual artists, landscape designers, teachers of adults and children, storytellers, poets, clowns, cultural coordinators, musicians and more. We are wives and we are mothers. (See Table 1, Appendix A)

All of us have experienced midlife transitions, characterized by changing states of health, changing roles and relationships in our homes and our communities, and changes in how we see ourselves and how others see us. Our most apparent commonality is that we each identified that the most profound change in our lives happened when our children left home and became independent adults. Some of us identified this as a painful loss, even a crisis point, while others of us identified it as part and parcel of the inevitable changes in life. Either way, each of us understands that this change opened up a space for potential creative renewal.

Most of us rate ourselves moderately high on the Satisfaction with Life Scale. The mean and median rating of our group scores are very close at 5.5/7 and 5.1/7 respectively. However there is a significant range in the rating - our individual self-assessments range from 3.4/7 to 6.8/7. But no matter where we fall on the scale, all of us attribute creative activities to contributing to our sense of well-being. Even those of us who fell below the median and average identify that creative activities increase our satisfaction with life. (See Table 2, Appendix A)

Thematic Rhizome Rootings

In their book, *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari introduce a non-linear model for conceptualization based on a rhizome root. “A rhizome has no beginning or end; it is always in the middle, between things, interbeing, *intermezzo*” (25). In their discussion of art-based research, Irwin and Springgay make a connection to this work in referencing the metaphor of a rhizome to describe the place of inquiry through art, “an interstitial space,
This understanding can be applied, not only to the process of creating art, but to the very experience of mid-life – also an “interstitial space”, where “meanings and understandings are interrogated and ruptured”. Not only does the rhizome metaphor help us to visualize this in-between space but it provides an understanding of multiple and non-hierarchal entry and exit points of data interpretation.

The following five emerging themes in our collective story are conventionally and necessarily laid out in this writing in a linear fashion, but this is not to indicate a hierarchical relation-
ships are always in flux, interconnected with multiple points of manifestation and sublimation (see Fig. 1).

**Inter-active Acceptance**

Carlos Strenger (2009) introduces the idea of “active acceptance” as a position that is in-between resignation and the unrealistic expectation that there are no limits on realizing potential. He bases this concept on Karl Jasper’s idea of “sosein” or “being thus and no other” (46). His contention is that lucid self-knowledge and self-acceptance is the route to full self-development. The “active” part of this idea is that it is done with self-determination, not with passive resignation. This was illustrated during our focus group when one participant presented her self-portraits with the following observation, “You look at what is, not what could have been but what is, and then you go from there.”

The theme inter-active acceptance is a subtle variation on Strenger’s concept. It recognizes that this acceptance is not only active but set in a context, related to what we do and why we do it. Inter-active acceptance requires the practitioner to engage with her world and interrogate meaning through an ongoing process.

Self-portraiture forces one to see the self as an object, creating a certain degree of distance during a process of cognitive and intuitive self-inquiry. In the focus group discussion of our art-based research through self-portraiture, we shared a growing awareness of beauty in the less than perfect and a growing acceptance of our physical and psychological selves. This acceptance was not resignation to the “ravages of time” but a conscious embrace of imperfections. Several women identified looking for beauty and meaning in the anomalies of life, but also in the everydayness and in the flaw as a recurring theme in their artwork.

For example, I drew a realistic depiction of my face but I drew my hair as a thicket of
branches, some in full leaf and others dead branches. I celebrate my vitality and potential renewal in the fully leafed branches but I also recognize my limitations – the death of certain ability and opportunities, even as new ones emerge. I see beauty in the dead branches, as well as the live ones, and claim them as my own. Working on the drawing was a working through of some of the conflicted emotions I have about who I am at this time in my life to an interactive acceptance of my limitations that is, paradoxically, liberating (see Fig 2).

Another participant, sanguine in so many aspects of her life, admitted life-long issues with her body image. During her art-based research into identity, she chose to paint a large painting of a sensuous, undulating and radiant pear. The image of the pear emerges in all its
glory, out of a darkly textured background. There is both a hidden element and an explicit revelation at play in this painting. She said, “Simply my body curves aren’t quite what I would like them to be. But just a minute, I don’t mind the curves of a pear. Actually that is what attracts me to a pear. All pears are unique . . . so maybe I’m unique too and should be content with my curves.” This symbolic inquiry into identity allowed her to more deeply consider her level of acceptance of her physical self. The symbol also celebrates her identity as gardener, farmer and nurturer and yet this is offset by the incongruity of inventive texture and dramatic light and

Fig. 3
dark. It presents an ambiguity that begs further interrogation (see Fig. 3).

Inter-active acceptance is a difficult process, for some of us more than others. Some were wary of an acceptance that seemed more like capitulation. Most of us understand and ultimately accept the push-pull of this struggle between acceptance and the surrender of agency. This struggle was an emerging theme in the artwork, indicating that we use our creative activi-
ties as a way to find meaning in that struggle.

Some experience the release of working through emotions such as anger, resentment and fear through the psychological and kinetic act of creating art. Several participants worked through some of these darker emotions in their self-portraits and described the result as exhilarating. Facing one’s vulnerabilities and voicing the “unspeakable” through art can result in discovering a strength we were not previously aware of possessing. One participant depicted a violent suppression, a disturbing and provoking image, but she experienced a sense of release, freedom and inter-active acceptance through doing the work (see Fig. 4).

An important recurring property of this theme is that most participants accept that creative activities are not just a hobby but a vitally necessary part of our lives. We recognize that being able to turn our focus from others to self is, in part, a function of not being responsible for the hands-on care of our children anymore. We are sensitive to the societal attitudes that de-value creative and artistic pursuits, yet we also are coming to realize that being creative isn’t just what we do, it is who we are. More and more, we inter-actively accept that creativity is a matter of authentic identity, and in doing so, let go of guilt.

**Authentic Identity**

The rhizomatic nature of the relationships between themes is evident in the relationship between inter-active acceptance and authentic identity. Inter-active acceptance allows us to be comfortable in our own skin, allowing a more complete embrace of an identity that feels more authentic. As we create art many of us feel we are returning to a truer self, an essential self – one that might have been subsumed for a time by the responsibilities of our younger years.

An authentic identity means we are less concerned with the exterior self and more concerned with aligning our values, or our inner selves, with what we do. One participant’s self-
portrait was an illuminated calligraphic credo. She lives out that credo in part by performing as a “caring clown”. Clowning, like visual art, provides a way of connecting with others and indirectly addressing difficult or painful issues. There is an echo of a medieval sacred illuminated manuscript in this calligraphic illustration. This is significant and deliberate – her acts of service are grounded in spirituality (see Fig. 5).

Other participants have less surety about who they are and what they believe, and we
can see this expressed in their art. One beautifully fluid self-portrait is a mélange of images that portray a deeply conflicted sense of self. A buoyant element of freedom and joy is counterpointed by images that convey constraint and anchored weight. The artist/participant is portrayed with her head half above the water. “I am between surfacing and submerging”, she observed. Having questions, being resolute in asking them and ultimately accepting ambiguity in the answers is another component of an authentic identity. Asking these questions is key to the process of coming to terms with who we are and how we must live our lives. The questions may not be easily asked or answered but as this artist/researcher related, exploring these perplexing
issues through art turned out to be an exhilarating experience. “It is a way to make sense of things” at a time of life when meaning is disrupted (see Fig 6).

Most of us expressed a desire to be known for who we really are. This is one of the central themes of one of my self-portraits. I collaged an image of myself, a swirl in debris and water-like imagery, partly submerged and partly revealed by the image of a ray of light. The image
represents a spiritual longing to be known for who I really am and free of other’s projections and expectations (see Fig. 7).

Another participant spoke about peeling away layers to discover her authentic self. Her art interrogates identity in part by interrogating the past in both images of herself as a child and her childhood home. She says her desire to look unflinchingly into the past, even the most painful aspects of that past, stretches her definition of self. “During this time in my life, the creative process has helped me to accept change, to unravel some of the past. It is a journey to finding out who I am, not mother, wife, worker, cook or even friend . . . . . . . but me alone.”

Most of us share a strong sense that because creativity is integrated within an authentic identity, we have a vital need to explore our creativity. One participant described the profound relief she feels at midlife “to truly be myself”. She said that the most important way creativity is linked to her well-being at this time in her life is the realization that creativity “is good for me because it is part of my being that has to be manifested.”

**Making a Mark**

Making a mark is about leaving a legacy and living a generative life. A pioneer in the psychosocial stages of life, Eric Erikson (1963) identified midlife as a time of either stagnation or generativity. A recurring theme for us, the women of this story, was the generative act of leaving a legacy through our creative works. Embracing an authentic identity calls for a voice that others can hear and an identity that others can see. We want our children and grandchildren, in particular, and the world, in general, to know who we are. Art is essential to who we are and by calling forth that aspect of our identity, we can express and communicate to others what we feel, what we have experienced and what we have learned; what we have feared and what has given us joy.
Ageism can have the insidious effect of rendering a woman invisible as she grows older. Some of the participants spoke directly of feeling invisible. As one woman reflected in the journaling that accompanied the art-based research, “Feeling like I'm invisible, maybe. Am I really here, or am I just an illusion? When I speak, does anyone really hear me, or care”. Her self-
portrait consisted of an image of a shadow falling across a tangled and layered mass of grasses. Paradoxically, the theme of invisibility in this charcoal drawing can be reinterpreted as an imprint. Art facilitates an encounter with paradox. Her self-portrait is an empowered, connected and spiritual drawing that also contains elements of estrangement, detachment and sorrow. The participant also spoke about the feeling of reclaiming or making her imprint upon the natural environments surrounding her home from which this image was taken. The self-portrait contains vestiges of being-there, if only in shadow. We want to reclaim and imprint our world (see Fig 8).

We make a mark on our families our communities and our world with our art. That mark is not a straight line; that voice is not a clarion bell. There is complexity and puzzlement in the story we have to tell. The mark that we make is a gestural line, making meaning by both what is drawn and what is not. Certain symbols are revealed while others are hidden, and revelation is partially informed by what remains hidden. The desire to be known as our authentic selves is weighted by ambivalence. Art is an important strategy for processing this ambivalence because sometimes what cannot be said directly to others in our lives can be expressed through art. It can provide a protective distance, or a sideways way of facing something that is too painful or dangerous to face head on (Fig 4, 6, 7 & 8 are examples of this). Therefore making a mark, and the revelation therein, has many rhizomatic points of emergence and exit that are not completely under our conscious control. As one participant wrote, “I have externalized that thought (through her art) and it has its own life out in the world.”

**Discovery in Play**

George and Caroline Vaillant (1990) followed a cohort of gifted women over a period of 65 years, assessing their level of creativity, which they defined as putting something in the
world that was not there before. They found that those viewed as most creative showed a
greater level of generativity and adjusted better to growing older. This study alerted me to an-
other theme that became relevant to the observations and reflections of my participants –the im-
portance of play. The Vaillants observe that retention of a capacity for play may be a critical
ingredient for successful ageing (616). Creative activities, which may encompass that of serious
art or more informal social leisure activity, contain an element of play. Psychology and creativ-
ity scholar, Mark Runco (2007), asserts that most people are naturally creative and that encour-
aging people to use their creativity, is a matter of “letting it happen”. Playful, permissive envi-
ronments allow for divergent and original thinking to emerge, and yet society tends to under-
value play, especially when it comes to serious problems (343).

As Runco and other experts in the area of creativity have determined, divergent thinking
is a key component of creativity. Divergent thinking is a response to change. It signifies open-
ness and a predilection to explore and experiment, or in other words, to play. It also signifies a
commitment to puzzle and work through, taking time to try many potential solutions and re-
sponses.

Everyone in this study identified exploration, experimentation and divergence to be part
of this process of art-based research through self-portraiture. We may have begun with a con-
crete, cognitive idea, but we intuitively allowed the process to evolve and change. We con-
sciously and unconsciously played with the materials and with the ideas that emerged from the
images. This facilitated an intense self-reflection but it also sparked a sense of exhilarating free-
dom. One participant described the process as energizing, “an exploration without worry about
what it might mean to someone else . . . just for me”.

Even when the work is hard and the interrogation rigorous, a sense of play is often pre-
sent in a work that is creative. This kind of frame of mind produces a sense of completeness, of being right with the world and being in tune with self, and with the larger world. Everyone identified a sense of joy, such is present during play, to be present in their own creative experiences.
When we “let it happen” as Runco suggests, the work is partly unconscious and intuitive, which can potentially result in some surprising insights later when one looks back. This was reflected in the insights most participants said they gain through their creative explorations. One participant, playing with materials at hand, collaged a recycled mannequin head with symbols of her values and interests. She placed a small photo of herself on the back of the mannequin’s head, “almost as an afterthought”. The placement reflected her belief that appearances are not central to identity. However, in the discussion, she wondered if this symbolizes the sublimation of her own needs to her community activities. The playful process of creating this self-portrait created a surprising insight (see Fig. 9).

**A Place of Belonging**

The place of belonging that we find in our creative activities is both an interior and exterior place. Art provides a safe place where we can confront, or at the very least, express some of our fears and anxieties. Sometimes it provides a place where we can work through loss. Even if the working through is an ongoing process, it provides a place where we can begin the process, sometimes to leave it for awhile and return to again. This place of belonging provides us with a sense of peace, acceptance, safety, confidence and place to both test and accept limits. One of the self-portraits depicts the subject naked, apparently sleeping and cocooned in a swath of sheets. The artist/participant recognizes the image as a safe place of transition. Yet the nakedness represents a vulnerability too; a vulnerability that is reinforced by the unsettling perspective of the viewpoint, directly over top of the subject. Each of the self-portraits, as does every work of creativity, places the creator in an exposed position.
We are able to do this because we feel at home in our art. One participant expressed this dichotomy of vulnerability and safety in these lines from her self-portrait, done in the form of a poem, “I am valued in this landscape, in this world. I stand alone, vulnerable and separate.” (emphasis mine. See Fig. 10). A sense of inherent value, which can be reinforced by those around us, but ultimately must be an intrinsic part of the creative process and our individual and singular understanding of it, creates a place of belonging. All of the participants claimed they had appreciation for the intrinsic value of their creative activities. They wanted a community that also valued their creativity but even without external support, they said they would continue to value their own creativity. This reflects a grounding and a confidence that comes with a place of belonging found in the art itself.

The exterior place of belonging is found in the kinship found in craft guilds and clubs, art classes and other places where we discover like-minded people. Because these people share the experience of being vulnerable and open as they explore their own creativity, they are empathetic and supportive of others who are active in creative pursuits. This support provides us

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am Karl Foerster grass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>standing firmly, providing protection for others near me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>shining golden as the rain coats me, shifting slightly to bear the weight</td>
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<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am Karl Foerster grass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>feeling strongest in the warmth of the sun, the beginning of a new season</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>feeling the heavy weight of snow, bending slightly yet secure that I won’t break</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am valued in this landscape, in this world.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I stand alone, vulnerable and separate.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>I am Karl Foerster grass</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>already anticipating the excitement of new growth in the Spring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>waving in the cool breeze, feeling the gentle change of the new season</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Fig. 10: Self-portrait poem by participant**
with a kind of place of belonging that we rarely find elsewhere. One participant observed, “There isn’t the same kind of competition as there is with some groups – very supportive in ways that other groups are not.” Most of us recognize that this is especially valued in rural regions where such groups are not as readily available as they are in urban areas. In fact those who had found a place of belonging with other like-minded people had gone out of their way to find it. Several women drove long distances to take university art classes or join in art-based activities with other like-minded people.

Creativity is often expressed in deeply private way and yet it is also usually a public expression, shared with other viewers or participants. We want to connect and communicate with others through our creativity but we do it from a private and vulnerable place. We could not do so without the security of a place of belonging within our creative selves, and we are supported and encouraged by a community of like-minded people to whom we also feel we belong. The uprooting that often happens during midlife transitions as our family, work and societal roles change, is mitigated through these relationships.

Part III. Conclusion: Outcomes, outliers and “a goodness which is sufficient”

This exploratory study supports the expectation that midlife, a significantly challenging transitional time for women, is a time that presents an opportunity for renewal and growth. It also suggests that societal supports for creative activities may, in turn, support that renewal and growth. However, this small group of women is not completely representative of the larger rural society. We are middle-class, we belong to the ethnic majority and are well-educated. Even so, this study reveals realities that could possibly be extrapolated to the larger society and should be examined further with other demographics.
One unforeseen outcome of this project is that in the final interview, each of the women emphasized that through the process of participating in this project she became more self-aware of the role creativity plays in her well-being and identity. In this way the project became a site of transformational learning such as described and advocated by adult education scholar, Michael Welton (1998, 370). Welton identifies three challenges to learning due to twenty-first century globalization: deprivation of meaning; depletion of solidarity and de-stabilization of personality (368). This project created valid and dynamic spaces for dialogue, discussion and debate. It opened up a space within community to recreate meaning, rebuild solidarity and stabilize personality. This reflects the potential of adult art education/activities, specifically at mid-life, to enrich, expand and deepen the lifeworld, in a manner that supports the participation and engagement of ordinary individuals in their larger society.

Participation in creative activities, and the reflective and autonomous learning it engenders, aids the fostering a participatory democratic society. Art reflects the life experiences of people trying to make sense of their world. Creating, viewing and discussing art plays an important role in creating meaning from experience. In her exploration of how art is a catalyst for informal adult learning, Randee Lawrence (2008) proposes that alternate perspectives are considered in a creative cognition process that invites intellectual, sensual and emotional responses. The consideration of alternate perspectives is especially useful in generating growth during the transitions of midlife. Perhaps the concept of an artist as a unique individual, set apart from society producing objets d’art is losing significance. A post-modernist perspective suggests that the most valuable aspect of creative workings is not the product but the process. That process can teach valuable skills for living in a world that increasingly demands coping with ambiguity and framing imaginative solutions.
Elements of ethnography are apparent in this study in that I sought to understand and convey the perspective of a particular group of people from their own lived experience. The intention to be reflexive and to invite reciprocal sharing supported the recognition of commonalities of experience that I, the researcher, share with the participants. I took the role of participant observer, common to ethnography, one step further to include my own experiences and art-based research into my own identity as part of the data. This element of autoethnography resulted in my own transformational learning. As themes emerged from our interviews and were deepened through the work of the focus group, I found the discoveries were resonating deeply within my own growing understanding of myself at midlife. But did I project my own personal ideas onto the analysis, seeing what I wanted to see? The final interview confirmed that this report is a credible reflection of, not only my own experience, but the experiences of all the participants. Just as I share in many of the experiences of the participants, I also shared in their transformational learning. This process helped me to recognize that the cultivation of interactive acceptance, authentic identity, making a mark, the discovery of play and a place of belonging through creative activities is essential to my own well-being at midlife.

While this report focuses on creativity at midlife in terms of the potential for well-being, there are outliers to these inter-related themes that, in true rhizomatic fashion, cannot so easily be contained. Some of us are over-whelmed by the changes, depleted and discouraged, despite the opportunities we see open to us at midlife. We feel unappreciated, taken for granted and, in the process, invisible. We feel the pull to explore our creativity more fully than ever but we don’t have the time or the energy we would like to have to do it. We are intrigued by the discoveries to be made through art but find the process of revelation is sometimes too painful and too exhausting.
Yet, even in these darker moments, hope remains. A new and perhaps final season is upon us - our last time to grow, to expand our roots and to set seed. We sense we are standing on a threshold, an in-between place. It is imagination that allows for possibility, even within these bounded, in-between places. John O’Donohue (2004) expresses this in his book, *The Invisible Embrace Beauty: Rediscovering the True Sources of Compassion, Serenity and Hope*:

The awakening to the beauty of your creativity can totally change the way you view limits. When you see the limit not as a confining barrier but as a threshold, you are already beyond. The beauty of imagination helps you to see the limit as an invitation to venture forth and to view the world and your role in it as full of beautiful possibilities. You become aware of new possibilities in how you feel, think and act. The interim, the in-between world is brisk with possibility. And possibility is the gift of creativity (233).

With this thought, I believe we get closer to understanding the link between creativity and the re-creation that can happen at midlife. In my 50th year, I stood before a self-portrait by Rembrandt in New York’s Metropolitan Museum of Art. The ageing artist’s self-scrutiny is unflinching. His face is deeply lined, his nose bulbous and his hair receding and frizzy with grey. His expression is frank, open and intelligent; it is also wary and fatigued. Amidst the dissolution of this aged face, his eyes glow with warm burnt umber light. At the time, I couldn’t explain why I was so drawn to this image. It was only oil paint, canvas and wood, yet seemed inhabited with something vital and real.

Carlos Strenger references this painting in his description of active acceptance that encapsulates the reasons I now recognize explain why I found myself so moved. Strenger says that the old painter’s illusions are past him. Yet even as he takes a clear-eyed view of himself and his limitations he takes what he sees and shapes it into a thing of beauty, a thing to be valued (53). Strenger continues, “Active self-acceptance, like the process of painting a self-portrait involves hard psychic work first and foremost, the ability to look at our lives dispassionately
to discern the character that is reflected in our biographies” (66). Creativity, in its many manifestations, has the potential to both reflect and support that ability to dispassionately look at our biographies, shape it into an imperfect thing of beauty and bring it with us beyond the interspaces and threshold of midlife to a new place.

This returns us to the words of Elliot Jacques, that pioneer of the “midlife crisis”, who describes the potential for “a goodness which is sufficient but not idealized, not subject to hollow perfection” (24). This goodness includes inter-active acceptance, authentic identity, the making of a mark, the discovery of play and a place of belonging, wherein we develop the capacity to celebrate what is and imagine what can be - all the inevitable, terrible and beautiful being and ambivalence of life, past, present and future.
Appendix A

Table 1: Study Sample—Participant Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age/Working status/Marital Status/Children/Self-defined Creative Activities/Self-defined Midlife Transitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Participant 1 | • Age 52.  
• Self-employed.  
• Education—completed university degree, current student.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Drawing, painting, photography, writing, university studies.  
• Children leaving home experienced as loss and opportunity for self-exploration. Recognizes physical and mental depletion and change of social status. Increased responsibility for extended family. Anticipates future changes in work and lifestyle. |
| Participant 2 | • Age 56.  
• Self-employed.  
• Education—some university.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Painting, gardening, university art classes.  
• Children leaving home experienced as a loss. Recent physical changes and health issues. Accepts and adjusts to change and does not see this as a time of significantly difficult transition. |
| Participant 3 | • Age 58.  
• Full-time employed.  
• Education—completed university degree, current student.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Painting, writing, university art classes.  
• Identifies midlife as a time of difficult transitions. “Grieved” when children left home. Marital relationship is undergoing changes. Feels a physical depletion and energy loss related to menopause. Paradoxically, at a time when energy is waning, new professional and creative opportunities are opening up. Feels a sense of urgency. |
| Participant 4 | • Age 62.  
• Full-time employed.  
• Education—completed graduate degree.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Community event organization, graphic design, arts and crafts, teaching children  
• Has a sense of untapped vitality and unexplored options. Ambivalent feelings about balance between authenticity and other’s expectations. However, accepts continual change as part of life, therefore does not define midlife as a time of significant change. |
| Participant 5 | • Age 68.  
• Retired.  
• Education—completed university degree.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Calligraphy, drawing, clowning, story-telling, singing, crafting.  
• 15 years ago faced serious health issues which led to major lifestyle changes, time of “re-coupling” with husband, sees transitions as a natural and inevitable part of life and an opportunity for re-growth. |
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Age/Working status/Marital Status/Children/Self-defined Creative Activities/Self-defined Midlife Transitions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Participant 6 | • Age 54.  
• Full-time employed and self-employed.  
• Education-some university, current student.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Painting, drawing, multi-media, university art classes.  
• Children leaving home experienced as loss but also opportunity for growth in other directions. A time of exploration of identity through art and studies, and time of reflection and acceptance of identity, past and present. |
| Participant 7 | • Age 58.  
• Retired.  
• Education– completed university degree.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Teaching arts and crafts, creating community education projects, gardening, photography, writing.  
• Children leaving home was a painful loss. Personal physical and mental health issues and extended family needs have made midlife transition a challenging time. |
| Participant 8 | • Age 54.  
• Self-employed.  
• Education– some university, current student.  
• Married with grown children.  
• Painting, teaching art, university art classes.  
• Children leaving home was experienced as a profound loss. Transitioning to a time of reclamation of self and place in the world. Experiences some health challenges. |
Table 2: Satisfaction with Life Scale

The SWLS (Diener, E., Emmons, R., Larsen, J. & Griffin, S. 1985) asks participants to rate 5 statements describing their level of satisfaction with life on a 7 point scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The higher the rating, the higher the satisfaction with life. Note that P.# indicates a participant but the number does not correlate with participant numbers in Table 1. The identifying numbered participants are randomly listed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SWLS statements</th>
<th>P.1</th>
<th>P.2</th>
<th>P.3</th>
<th>P.4</th>
<th>P.5</th>
<th>P.6</th>
<th>P.7</th>
<th>P.8</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>In most ways my life is close to ideal.</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The conditions of my life are excellent.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am satisfied with life.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I could live my life over, I would change almost nothing.</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average SWLS rating</td>
<td>6.4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6.8</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The SWLS ratings range from 3.4/7 to 6.8/7. The median rating is 5.1/7. The mean rating is 5.5/7.
Table 3: Emergent Themes and Properties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Identifying Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Inter-active Acceptance</strong></td>
<td>Self-knowledge that leads to self-acceptance is facilitated through creative activities.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance involves embracing imperfection. Seeing beauty in the flaw and opportunity within our limitations and losses.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance is not passive. Interrogation of meaning is on-going and important to acceptance.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Acceptance results in a growing comfort level with lack of resolution or ambivalence.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Increased acceptance and valuing of creative self leads to less guilt and more freedom.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Authentic Identity</strong></td>
<td>There is an increased interest in becoming more self-aware.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is an awareness of a return to an essential self or a true self, which is increasingly free of other’s expectations.</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Alignment of values and lived life becomes more important at midlife.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity is not something you do but is part of who you are.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creativity is valued for its intrinsic personal value, independent of how it is perceived to be valued by the outside world.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Making a Mark</strong></td>
<td>There is a desire to be seen and understood for authentic self.</td>
<td>6/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative expression gives the practitioner a voice.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>There is a desire to leave a legacy for children, grandchildren and others.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative expression is a medium by which to connect with and impact other people.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table continued.....
Table 3 continued....

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Properties</th>
<th>Identifying Participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Discovery in Play</strong></td>
<td>Creative activities are playful activities.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative activities offer opportunity for exploration, experimentation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and divergence.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative activities provide a sense of freedom and joy that is cathartic.</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative, playful activities can lead to some surprising insights.</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A Place of Belonging</strong></td>
<td>Art, itself, provides an inner place of belonging where you feel at home</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>with self.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative expression offers safe place to explore, confront and work through</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>deep emotion.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative activities can offer an exterior place of belonging, where a</td>
<td>8/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>community of like-minded people can be found that provides encouragement</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>and inspiration.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Creative expression offers a medium to connect with others and feel</td>
<td>7/8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>valued for who you are.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


