

## Chapter 5. Patchwork Stories: an arts project that celebrates and weaves our connections together

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### **Abstract**

*Patchwork Stories* is inspired by the tradition of using story as a response to people asking for advice and guidance. Our research project gathers personal stories and experiences to offer each other; stories that without advice or direct answers, tell us what it may take to turn towards one another.

Founded in 2012 by researchers from the Universities of UT Austin and Exeter UK, *Patchwork Stories* explores the potential of storytelling in building community connections. Through an interactive storytelling process with community participants, an aural patchwork of personal stories and experiences is created and shared. Through a participatory installation, the process of weaving provides a physical representation of the interconnectedness between strangers and friends.

This paper introduces 'storytravelling', a flexible term to describe intentional acts of giving and receiving stories. Both project facilitators and project participants are 'storytravellers'; the facilitating 'storytravellers' create conditions in which individual contributions are nurtured and valued and the participating 'storytravellers' contribute through sharing their own stories and actively listening to others.

This paper outlines the process of storytravelling; engaging with simple acts of reciprocity that validate connection and community; making possible social inclusion and healing

**Keywords:**community, story, connection, weaving.

## Theoretical background

We associate community with meeting our need to belong. In his book *Community: seeking safety in an insecure world*, Baumann identifies the longing for community being driven by a thirst for safety. He describes a 'peg community' as one created with the purpose of finding safety with others and yet necessarily fails 'to quench the thirst for security' because it doesn't address the great insecurity we experience in these changing times'. (Blackshaw, 2005, p.104).

Arts practitioners are familiar with the process of creating a community with each new project; beginning the process knowing that the end of it will signify loss for many members of this new community. This loss is far from an expression of a failed community but is instead an affective response to an experience of belonging.

Amiee Carrillo Rowe's work 'aims to render transparent the political conditions and effects of our belonging' and explores how we respond to the command to 'Be Longing'. (Rowe, 2005, p.16). Discovering the various ways in which we can, and do create ties and connections is part of the work of bringing our attention to 'the politics at stake in our belonging, and to envision an alternative.' (Rowe, 2005, p.16).

In *Patchwork Stories*, individuals not only exchange stories from their lives and experiences, they see and hear their stories in relationship to others as part of an audio clip or as words and images on fabric that are woven into a single piece of material. These artistic exchanges, as both literal and metaphorical intersections, create an opportunity for seeing and understanding our experiences as part of something larger than ourselves, as part of a community of experiences.

This project demonstrates how in listening to the words of those we live and walk amongst, we find the threads that connect us. The acts of sharing and weaving remind us that creating connections requires each of us to do something; actions of weaving, building and imagining; an act of turning towards, instead of away.

### **Description of the experience**

3 years ago I was 49, working in a University, feeling trapped by the position I had found myself in, with teaching and administrative responsibilities increasingly removing me from my artist and facilitator practice. During this time I found myself returning to an image in my head; a group of women are sitting around a table, sewing and talking about their lives; stories of hope, betrayal, gratitude.

I spoke about this image with my artist daughter, Carina Ripley. Her conviction that the image could translate into a socially engaged artist project provided necessary stimulus. Through dialogue with Megan Alrutz, a dear friend and colleague, this image became the seed for a practical research project. Together we imagined an interactive installation, the audience wearing headphones, tuning in to the women's conversations, finding hope and help in what they heard.

From these beginnings Patchwork Stories was born; a project that uses aural and visual material to create patchworks both of sound and image, spanning communities in Devon, UK and Austin, Texas, USA.

At the heart of Patchwork Stories is this vital question for our times...

'What does it take to turn towards one another?'

The answer is simple and yet vast; it requires that we make connections with each other. A simple and powerful way we make connections is through the act of giving, through being heard and the experience of being needed.

Patchwork Stories is an arts-based journey to find stories that, without advice or direct answers, tells us what it may take to 'turn towards one another'.

Answers to this vital question are around us all the time, demonstrated every day by people as they go about their lives, and yet, because these answers come from everyday experiences of ordinary people they are too little appreciated as guidance and profound wisdom. Patchwork Stories seeks these demonstrations of everyday answers to the question, finds them in the stories of those we live and walk amongst, records them and shares them with others through an aesthetically and socially engaged frame.

The heartbeat of Patchwork Stories are the 'storytravellers'; a group of individuals, often artists or people deeply engaged with their communities, who help to gather and share people's everyday stories, embedded wisdom.

The Storytraveller, carrying a sound recorder, visits places both familiar and unknown, meeting with strangers and friends, gathering stories from those they live and walk amongst. The Storytraveller creates a dialogue within an interview setting, sharing personal stories and using story prompts to facilitate others to share theirs. As the storytraveller listens, they are seeking answers to the deep questions they carry in their own hearts. The recorded stories are collated, edited into short aural patchworks with the stories of other people, and presented in an immersive performance environment in which visitors are invited to listen and reflect on what they've heard. Guided by project Storytravellers, visitors sit at a table and illustrate strips

of material with images, words or marks that express their responses to what they heard. Visitors then weave these strips of fabric together to create one large piece of material, a physical patchwork that mirrors the aural.

Storytravelling is a deep listening, inspired by belief in the power of story and narrative to be meaningful. The story traveller understands that stories, whether ancient myth or personal narratives, are the tools humans have developed to guide us and support us as we walk through the extraordinary experience of being here on this earth. As humans we are able to both be in the world and observe our place in it at the same time. In observation we are able to reflect, plan, judge and make decisions. The storytraveller rejoices in this unique ability to observe and pay attention to who we are and how, and to help others begin to do the same.

Last year, running the project in Austin, Texas, one of the storytravelling team members, seeking advice about what it takes to provide support to others had asked for responses to this story prompt...

'A time when someone I love stood by me even though it was probably difficult'.

A visitor to the installation recorded this personal response to the prompt:

*I was mad at my mom. I was 16.*

*She turned my Dad over to the police. She was mad at him and wanted him to know she was serious. So he was arrested.*

*I took a small bag and moved to my uncle's.*

*He let me live there and be a teenager, and stay up late, and leave takeaway leftovers everywhere. I wrecked his car and ran up his phone bill.*

*He never said anything mean about me.*

*He never said anything mean about my parents.*

*He helped me with my homework He gave me money to see movies with my friends. He did my laundry. He woke me up for school.*

*I stole some money from him. He let me think he didn't know.*

*I was driving his car and my girlfriend thought I was gonna hit some pigeons. I sped up, she covered her eyes. The birds flew off but I smacked the window from the inside so it would feel like we hit a bird. I broke the window. She screamed. We laughed. I lied to my uncle about it.*

*My Dad had a drug problem.*

*I woke up one morning and decided to go back home.*

*I don't think I thanked my uncle for a decade.*

Retrieved from: <http://www.patchworkstories.net/stood-by.html> (30 January 2017).

To the team member who posed that story prompt, the response she heard was a reminder of the bigger picture, the landscape of trust and hope that often is available if we choose.

For others, this story stimulated a conversation about the kind of uncles or aunts we are, of the extent to which we would support a nephew or niece, the capacity we have to offer safe haven to someone, no questions asked. The story invites us all to see where we place ourselves on the spectrum of unconditional support and brings us face to face with the ways in which we may have turned away, or have wanted to, or the times when we too have stood by someone we love, even though it was difficult.

The storytravelling process is without judgment. Everyone has an experience, a story of a time when as supporter or supported, someone has stepped up for a person in need. The sharing of these experiences generates connections, the recorded and edited stories in response to the prompt create an aural patchwork, a testimony of the untapped wisdom that lives within us.

Brother David, a Franciscan monk describes this beautifully:

*'Some insights of our human heart are so deep that only a story can help bring them home to ourselves and share them with others.'*

## **Results**

One of the project participants, Lucy, had an experience that further illustrates the concept of making connection through the act of giving and the experience of being needed.

The story prompt Lucy responded to was 'A time in your life when someone was there for you'.

Lucy told about an old friend who had travelled back from India before the end of her holiday on hearing of Lucy's sudden loss of her mother. As she told the story her face softened, her eyes shone. She wanted to talk about this friend, about the times they'd shared, about their adventures and those small moments that make up a friendship. She told of a holiday dare, when together they agreed to jump into the sea off a big cliff. Her friend went first and Lucy followed, but after the exhilaration of the jump, she was shaking with fear and couldn't get back up the cliff. Her friend at the top of the cliff shouted encouragement and told her exactly where to put her hands and feet. It took an hour, but Lucy made it to the top. It was a moment in her life

she'd not thought about for many years; a small experience within the bigger picture of her eventful life.

When she later visited the Patchwork Stories installation, she put headphones on and heard her own voice telling that story back to her, now edited alongside other stories of people taking risks, needing help, being there for each other.

After experiencing the installation and other visitors' response to it, Lucy was surprised and overwhelmed to discover that the small moment she had described could offer guidance and inspiration for others. She commented later that she finally understood the Patchwork Stories project, she understood that she could be like 'an elder', a wise one, and that if someone was wondering whether they should dare to take a risk or not, they might find an answer in her story.

Through this process, Lucy was both giving to others and experiencing being needed. Whether or not she meets those who listen to her story, she is connected to the aural patchwork, and the impact of her stories are woven into the fabric created, literally, physically, and metaphorically.

Patchwork Stories installations challenge Baumann's notion that 'peg communities' fail to meet their promise. A PS installation facilitates a flow of power; the guided can become guides, visitors become participants. The shifting dynamics invite deep reflection about how we build connections and shape our past and future stories.

The long-term value of this is not dependent on the future existence of that particular grouping of people or the location itself; the short-term PS community shares more than being in the same place at the same time. Values, hopes and experiences are shared with a focus on support and



appreciation of each person's contribution. The quality of connection generated can continue beyond the duration of the installation; experiencing both needing and being needed in the same moment can have lasting impacts on if and how we turn toward one another.

## **Discussion**

The experiences described demonstrate two things born from 'storytravelling':

- personal insights emerge through placing stories in conversation with each other
- a quality of connection between strangers and friends that grows from seeing ourselves in each other or in each other's experiences

Let's return to the story about the young man and his uncle; hearing this within the context of Patchwork Stories, we are invited to respond to it more deeply than solely as a well-constructed and moving story. The storytravelling framework enables listeners to reflect on their own responses to the story, and enter into critical conversations with others. The process of listening and reflecting builds connections through discovery both of what we share and of the uniqueness of our own experiences. We may respond very differently to situations requiring support, but we all appreciate the necessity of giving and receiving support in our lives, regardless of our circumstances.

Moreover, Lucy's story demonstrates how seeing and hearing your own personal story framed in an artistic setting, helps us value our own experiences as wisdom, as something critical or important to others. It

relocates or shifts perceptions of knowledge, value, and wisdom. We discover that even during those times when we have felt small or powerless, our actions offer guidance to others and that there is deep wisdom to be found in our experiences. We are invited to reclaim ourselves as authors of a life that is valued by and valuable to others. We discover that the arts might in fact help us connect to ourselves and to each other in critical and healing ways.

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