

## Making Connections

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Not long into the first UK lockdown in 2020, Edinburgh Recovery Activities (ERA) decided to offer an online creative writing course. What emerged was Making Connections, a 6-week zoom programme run over June and July, with around 10 participants. The purpose was to give people the opportunity to express themselves, develop their writing and meet with others.

Creative writing can be a means through which we examine our experience of ourselves, the world around us and the relationship between the two. From the beginning, the course did not make assumptions about whether people wrote already, or what they might want to write, but hoped to offer the opportunity to develop their writing, to explore different types of writing if that was of interest and, most importantly, to be creative and expressive.

The idea of making connections opened up a series of themes which were explored across the weeks. These included:

**Inside/outside:** the connection between ourselves and the world; how we act in and on the world and how the world acts in and on us.

**Particular/universal:** connections between our own specific personal characteristics, identities, histories and experience and the generalised story of humanity, world history and common experience.

**Personal/political:** personal experience often has a political dimension, and political structures and processes always have personal consequences.

**Micro/macro:** the way that small-scale personal or local-level experience relates to the bigger picture - national, international or global; how macro world events impact on personal experience.

**Internal/external:** how our own internal, personal psychological experience, preoccupations, fears, pleasures or concerns react with the world at large and vice versa.

**Familiar/strange:** things that are familiar, ordinary, banal or taken-for-granted can be made strange - we see them in a new light if taken from a different angle; at the same time, experiences that may on the face of it seem strange can be made familiar or even universal.

**Past/present/future:** The past lives on in the present and the future. Universal, grand history and particular, personal histories connect. The present may influence how we re-read/reassess the past and think about the future. The past can be made real and present, and imagining the future can give us a different eye on the present or the past

We recognised that some people would be more drawn to the personal, private, intimate, even spiritual end of the spectrum while others would prefer starting from outside themselves. Either way, we hoped to give people the chance to stretch themselves over the course. Each week participants were given exercises and prompts to encourage their writing and time was allowed for both writing and reading to each other. From the outset, after some initial reticence, it was obvious that those taking part were keen both to develop their own creative voice, and to share their writing with each other and, eventually, a much wider audience.

The programme of sessions was as follows:

**1. Introduction to tutors, participants and programme**

Connections, voice, medium, level, audience

**2. Starting from somewhere**

Drawing on experience, imagination, aspiration

**3. Inside out**

Using focused prompts to stimulate writing from first person outwards

**4. Outside in**

Using random prompts to stimulate imagination

**5. Putting things together**

Developing stories from serial prompts

## 6. Taking it further

Individual and collective writing

Towards the end, the participants decided they would like to publish a collection of their work and *Letters from Lockdown* was the result. The stories were subsequently read as a podcast at the Portobello Book Festival. The group still meets, and a second publication *Might as well face it. You're addicted!* is already underway.

A pdf of Letters from Lockdown is available on the Concept website

Paper copies are available from ERA [jemma.eveleigh@evoc.org.uk](mailto:jemma.eveleigh@evoc.org.uk)

Facebook: [edinburghrecoveryactivities](https://www.facebook.com/edinburghrecoveryactivities)

Twitter: @EdinburghRecov1

Instagram: [edinburgh\\_recovery\\_activities](https://www.instagram.com/edinburgh_recovery_activities)

The podcast can be heard at <https://portobellobookfestival.com/>

Two stories from the publication are reproduced here:

## Judgement Bingo

### Ruby Tuesday

As the country is currently in Lockdown due to a global health pandemic, we would like to invite you to take part in Judgement Bingo. We think this is a *fun distraction* for all UK citizens over the age of 18 to take part in. *Please feel free to include your kids in-between home-schooling.*

By playing along you get a lifetime supply of self- righteous anger!

Enclosed you will find your very own marker pen and Judgement Bingo card made from non-biodegradable plastic that is easily cleaned for your convenience! As well as this, all you need is a good conceited attitude and a sense of holier than thou. This is a terrific way to keep spirits up and create some good old-fashioned competition with your fellows – whilst judging them!

As you will see, we have suggested a few ways for you to judge people: not socially distancing correctly whilst queuing, people going up and down the aisles wrongly in the supermarket, young people... just in general. Our personal favourite is sneering at

‘benefit claimants’ whilst you’re furloughed from work and still being paid by government subsidies.

We highly recommend having a socially-distanced get together with your neighbours to drink elderflower and frangipani-infused gin or prosecco, whilst sanctimoniously taking the moral high ground over those of a lower social standing than you.

We do strongly advise and encourage you to come up with your own creative ways to sit in judgment on others whilst we work together through these unprecedented times.

You will see on the reverse of your card that you can also accumulate *smug points*. Smug points can be won in a variety of ways. For instance, did you vote for a political party who was in favour of austerity at the last election but still hang out your window every Thursday evening clapping for the NHS and carers? Congratulations! You will see you’ve earned yourself substantial smug points! Clapping and hurraing is a terrific way to show your appreciation of NHS nurses. We personally like to cheer as much on Thursday evenings as we did when the vote went through against their pay increase. Other ways to achieve smug points include baking your own soda bread, colour coordinating your bookshelf and calling anyone not obeying the rules a ‘fucktard’.

By keeping your judgement at a micro level, we are hoping to divert all attention away from the government’s abysmal response to the pandemic. Thankfully, we can continue to compare ourselves to our American friends and say we got it better than them. Can you believe they were recommending ingesting bleach instead of singing Happy Birthday whilst washing your hands? Preposterous! Also, as we are no longer in the EU, we can have our chums in the media continue to bleat that Italy has the worst death rate in Europe – even though our own figures are far worse than theirs!

Finally, we urge you to allow your political leaders their Churchill moments. After all, some of them are Covid survivors themselves. We should also remind you not to pay attention to anyone in an advisory role; everyone knows there is no better way for you to check your eyesight than a 250-mile family drive. Any anger you have towards them we recommend you instead use to sit in contempt on others, be that your neighbours, friends on social media or those you see whilst out for a leisurely stroll. Remember...

Stay Alert > Stay Smug > Keep Judging!

Kind regards,

The Ministry of Faultfinders

(From *Letters from Lockdown* (2020) Edinburgh Recovery Activities)

## Shielding

*Stephen Christopher*

The old man sat in his living room, the smoke from his cigarette spiralling into the sunlight that had cut the room almost exactly in half. The effect of the light and smoke had given his untidy front room an air of almost art-deco sophistication that he knew would disappear as soon as some miserable, portentous cloud came drifting on by. He liked to keep the windows open because of the smell. He had never been the cleanest man; however, it would appear that the old rock'n'roll self-care routine did not pair well with old age. His leg was in agony. He stubbed out the cigarette and drained his third mug of tea that morning. He was pretty sure the cut on his leg was infected. It smelt like it anyway. He had no inclination to take the bandage off and survey the damage. He wasn't even sure he could stretch that far. He had dealt with blisters, cuts and infections his whole adult life and he was still here. He limped through to the kitchenette and stared at the tea stained mugs, greasy plates and half empty cans of dog food before putting on the kettle and lighting another cigarette.

Lockdown. He had been in and out of institutions since the age of ten following the death of his father. Boarding school and hospitals had given him three meals a day and absolute fear of any kind of authority; priests or doctors. In fact, when he thought about it, maybe *they* were why he just couldn't get round to tending his wounds or doing the dishes. He was still that child, sitting cross-legged on the floor, watching his dad taking his last painful breaths. He sat back down on the couch as the room darkened, and exhaled smoke into the shadows, listening to the phone ring and ring.

He lay in bed, thankful that the incessant knocking on the front door had stopped. Night-time was when the pain changed, transforming almost magically as soon as he got into bed. During the day the pain was something he could identify with, something that was part of him, and he accepted it. At night though it felt like something that was being done *to* him, so sharp that it almost had a malevolence, reaching into the household and pushing him down into his bed. His skin had always been bad. At school he had been the only child that was not allowed to get the belt as it would leave welts and scabs that wouldn't heal. The priests had been happy to inflict pain, but they did not like seeing the bloody proof of it day after day. This had marked him out to the other boys. They had called him *the leper*. They used to announce his arrival in the dinner hall by ringing a bell and making the sign of the cross, whispering and laughing as he made his way up to his table. He would sit with burning fury, cursing the fists that would crack and split if he had tried to fight. It was memories like these that came to him at night. The effect was so overwhelming and raw that it merged with the pain from his wounds to create a new distress without any single source, one that would take over his body until the sun came up.

In the morning he limped to the front door and picked up the post and put it unopened with the rest of his letters next to the piano. It used to be the centre piece of his home, and back in the days when he had guests round, he would have showed it off by playing some rock standards - maybe some Little Richard. But now it was just a table,

covered in piles of other useless things. Can something be ornamental if it is only seen by one man, day after day? Before the Covid, his daughter had come round to help him tidy up, to make the place, 'liveable' as she had cruelly put it. He remembered her pressing down on one of the keys and them both being strangely embarrassed at the richness of the sound in the drab, grey room. She had asked him if he would ever write music again and he had replied that she needed to have patience. They both knew that music was a part of his past and these conversations were something you had to do unless you wanted to spend an afternoon round at your father's talking about death. He can't have spoken to her for about a month. Recently, she had been speaking to him like a child, calling *him* and telling *him* what he could and couldn't do. He wasn't allowed to go outside - she would do his shopping. He wasn't allowed to go and see his grandchildren - she would bring them to his window. But by then, if truth be told, he had already stopped eating and the only thing he needed had been cigarettes. In fact the only time he had left the house had been in the middle of the night to shove a handwritten note and £300 into the neighbour's opposite. The next morning, he had listened in bed as pack after pack had been deposited through his letter box like an old school puggy that kept paying out. It was always *his* habits under the microscope and never hers.

So what if he liked a puff? She'll be at home with the kids drinking her wine. It was *her* that had to do some serious self-examination.

He noticed a black silhouette framed by the window, neck craned and hands against the glass, surveying the damage through the slats of the bandage-white blinds.

The old man pulled open the door with both hands, anticipating the wall that would break his fall. The silhouette flashed past him, holding her masked face in the crook of her right arm. The official-looking woman asked him if she could switch on the lights as she pulled the blinds up, bathing them both in the morning light. He saw now that she was standing in his faeces. He thought he saw a flash of recognition in her eyes as she brought out a notebook. Well, it was his home and he had managed quite easily to step *around* the shit! He watched as she walked around his home, wondering if he should put some clothes on. He was sure he had some somewhere. He wanted to tell her that this wasn't all there *was*! He thought about showing her the sketches he had drawn in Paris – the ones of the cats playing saxophones. They had really made his wife laugh. The Jazz Cats they had called them. The woman picked up one of the mouldy mugs and he had an urge to tell her about the vegetarian dinner parties he used to throw in Stockbridge. He would play the guitar afterwards, and his friends would joke that he didn't know if he was Linda or Paul. He wanted the woman to stop looking at the filth and pick up one of his photo albums. He wanted her to see that he used to have flesh on his bones, colour on his cheeks. He had been quite handsome, he thought. The old man limped over to the dusty piano and lifted the lid. He sat down at the stool and asked the woman if she could sing.

(From *Letters from Lockdown*, 2020, Edinburgh Recovery Activities)