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★ September 17, 2018

Folding time: walk-talking joint moments in the nursing home

By Laura Vermeulen

We knew each other from the drop-in centre. Aspects of our daily life concerns had been shared. ‘We’ were drop-in centre participants: the majority had been diagnosed with a form of dementia and were living alone. Others were volunteering, overseeing the daily course of events or, like myself, doing research. We had shared with Willem (74) attempts at keeping up daily life in the face of memory loss and others’ concerned support. This encompassed practices of eating well, of looking after keys and bicycles that tended to get lost, of caring for one’s house, and of being in close contact with GPs, neighbours and relatives.

Willem had shared with us reflections on his rich and troubled life. Through these reflections, we had become familiar with the way he transformed narratives about his past into life mottos that enabled him to get out of bed every day. We knew how the way he plotted his future was rooted in place-based practices that were intimately linked to the inner city apartment and neighbourhood he lived in, and which harboured many of his memories. We also thought we could, to some humble extent, support Willem by engaging him in drop-in centre projects.

In the spring of 2016, despite their efforts to stay together in their worried concern for his situation, the network of people surrounding Willem broke down. In the traces of that social network falling apart, Willem quickly moved to a nursing home. No longer able to walk the streets with him that we had often explored together while talking about his life, I was afraid we had lost him as a person whom we could ask how he was doing. That we had lost the

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opportunity to share a world with him by joining him in his place-based practices of routines, projects and plans.

Days, months and a year into Willem's stay at the nursing home taught us that this was not the case. Willem's first period in his new residency was marked by him making new plans. With some of these plans, most of the people surrounding Willem could, however loving or grim they were, easily relate to them. Such as when he told his daughter that he had fallen in love again, or when he shared plans to move back to the big city with visiting drop-in centre friends. In other plans, it was more difficult for us to partake. This included the moment when Willem told his daughter that he was very happy because he had seen his mother again. His mother, whom he had told me before had died when he was in his forties, he now knew to be applying for a position in the nursing home's staff! Yet despite the fact that Willem drew on times very different from the ones we thought of when narrating his current situation, he still seemed to create a time-world we could join in on. By speaking about his mother as applying for a job at the home, Willem made far-away moments in time meet our shared world of his current situation in the nursing home.

I learned more about the way Willem created joint moments by folding time when I visited him one day in May 2017. On the evening of that day, Willem hugged me when he saw me, and took my arm. We didn't go upstairs for a coffee in the home's restaurant as we usually did. Instead, we quickly found ourselves walk-talking[1] the dimly lit nursing home corridors, exploring paths I imagined him walking often during his days on the closed ward.

As I asked Willem how life was, he told me that more people were about to visit him soon. This was a good development, he thought. It showed him that he had "not fallen out of the lap yet" (*Dat betekent dat ik nog niet uit de schoot gevallen ben*).[2] Without these visits, he pondered, it would be difficult to cope. "And that is another thing", he said as we were approaching a small bench at the end of the corridor before turning right into another hallway. "My mother died."

Here Willem stopped. He did not look at me, but his voice had lowered, and, looking up, I saw that his eyes were softening. We were standing there, still supporting each other's arms. I softly commented on the gravity of his loss, confirming how his mother had been a very important woman, and he told me how the loss had severely affected him. "I have really..." he said, and then he suddenly bent his knees, pulling my own arm down along with him, and stood upright again. "I could feel it from here" – he lifted up his shirt collar at the back of his neck – "to there" – and he briefly lifted his leg and reached forward to pull at the cloth of his trousers covering his knee.

A moment later, we started walking again, and I asked Willem how he was coping. He brought in comments on his current situation. "The thing is", he pondered, "I now have to concoct something myself (*Nu moet ik er iets van gaan brouwen*). And that is not very easy these days", he added in a weak voice, looking at me with a faint smile. "There is little fuel left (*Maar het gas is een beetje op*)."

Turning into the bright light of the ward's living room a moment later, Willem's tone of voice returned to the positive bustle I was so familiar with. This, however, did not prevent him from saying that he had to continue living, hoping that other people still liked him being around, and that he continued to aim to return to the big city. When I asked him why he wanted to return, he

said that he was “kept busy with activities” at the nursing home, but that the place “[did] not really allow [him] to live.” “Live my *own* life”, he added frowning. Then he smiled faintly.

During this evening conversation, Willem wove together an account of his current situation that I marked as unusually grim, and a story about the difficult loss of his mother that, chronologically speaking, must have taken place thirty years ago. In doing so, he not only made far away moments in time meet in a way that strengthened their respective messages. By both plotting his story along a stroll on his familiar ward, and by physically pulling me along in his moment of despair, he allowed me to join in, for a tiny moment, in his world that was rimmed with a sense of abandonment by others and by his own life energies that particular evening.

A year into Willem’s nursing home residency, the question of whether we could share a world with him had proved not to be dependent on us sharing daily concerns and place-based practices with similar orientations in time. Shared worlds could be created by folding time together, narratively and viscerally, by walk-talking joint moments in the nursing home.

[1] The term “talk-walk” has been used in the context of the [walking seminar hosted by Annemarie Mol](#) at the University of Amsterdam. The initiative’s blog page reads: “Talking-while-walking enhances thinking in ways not attainable behind a desk or in a seminar sitting down.” My reversal of ‘walking’ and ‘talking’ in this case is meant to emphasise the primacy of walking in this encounter I had with Willem. It was walking and exploring instead of talking that we set out for.

[2] Willem’s language use is particularly creative in this instance. By saying “*dat ik nog niet uit de schoot gevallen ben*”, he implicitly combines three expressions: 1) ‘falling off the lap’ (*van de schoot vallen*); 2) ‘falling out of favour’ (*uit de gratie vallen*); and 3) ‘being born of the womb’ (*uit de schoot geboren worden*).

Laura Vermeulen is a PhD candidate at the Long Term Care and Dementia research team at the University of Amsterdam. Her dissertation explores world-building processes as engaged in by community dwelling and single-living people with dementia in The Netherlands. Probing stillness, sociality and time in the everyday lives of her interlocutors, Laura discusses the withdrawal of everyday life worlds using phenomenological and philosophical approaches as a lens. Alongside her work on her dissertation Laura has conducted several projects in applied and collaborative anthropology. She recently finished a large-scale evaluation project on a care workers’ training programme funded by the Ministry of Health. Laura currently works at an academic learning lab, the Ben Sajatcentre. She is co-author of “Dementia and the good life.

Collaborations with the field.” (Medical Anthropology Theory, February 6th, 2018) and of “Moments of collaboration: practicing relating differently in dialogue meetings.” (paper in progress).

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