Foreword to A. E. Carson's **We All Become Stories**

Listening

The world lives in order to develop lines in its face.

– T.E. Hulme

Not everyone likes old people — and that seems to be true in all cultures and times. Wisdom and benevolence are fine, and we certainly need grandparents, particularly if they can babysit! Yet so many people assume aging means declining competence, failing memory, lack of vitality. As well, both the good and the bad qualities imply that everyone ages the same — no room for individual variation. Active, achieving old persons are proclaimed as exceptions.

Such low expectations make life difficult for older adults. People tend to talk down to the old, especially if they show signs of age — forgetfulness, hearing problems, or impaired mobility. Older adults are especially vulnerable to such assumptions in times of transition and loss — retirement, bereavement, health problems, and major birthdays. Talking down — and talking up — send the message that people should act their age.

Students and social/health professionals in my classes and workshops on aging usually ask for a list of rules for speaking to older adults. I initially said no, because lists assume that people are all the same. Now I end talks with my one-word rule — "Listen!" If we focus on older persons to understand who they are and what they are trying to tell us, we naturally look them in the eye, speak as we would to any adult, and let them express themselves. This book is all about listening to older adults.

Ann Elizabeth Carson's *We All Become Stories* lets us ***listen*** to 12 aging voices plus one. We are offered the portraits and stories of 12 individuals interviewed about their aging, especially the roles of memory in their later years. Very importantly we also hear the author's voice. We can listen to Carson as interviewer and interpreter but also as writer reflecting on her own aging. Mary Catherine Bateson's critically acclaimed *Composing a Further Life* (2010) also integrates thoughts of her own aging with presentation of the life stories of her aging interviewees.

Carson's academic orientation comes through in her initial focus on intellectual aspects of memory, her gradual movement toward inclusion of sensory/body memory, and her

documentation of the process of that movement. Her psychotherapist training (and, she acknowledges, her training as a parent) comes through in her attentive listening, probing questions, reformulations for interviewee response, and use of multiple sessions to capture each story. The engaging text is immeasurably enriched by Carson's commentary on the process of how she met the person, how she initially understood something, and how she eventually worked out the meaning of a person's central stance toward aging, life and memory.

Carson the poet is most evident in the evocative poems presenting each individual's story. As a capstone for each chapter, the poem sets a life in music and metaphor, with a touch of mystery. The poems underline the message from one of the participants that words can only point to the memories.

Carson's poetic style enriches the storytelling. Her sensory descriptions make it easier to understand the complex concepts of sensory awareness and sensory memories. For example, she describes meeting Meyer:

> *I hear Meyer before I meet him, playing piano at one of the island's evening singsongs. Hunched over the keyboard, head jutting forward in concentration, his long bony legs in narrow black trousers angle his knees above his waist, thrust his elbows up on either side — making his sweatered arms look like wings unfolding.*

The interviews were conducted long ago — some initiated as long as four decades earlier. Rather than appearing out of date, the interviews and life stories have a contemporary feel. Indeed, the special strength of the presentation is the way Carson weaves in her perspectives from different time periods.

At the time of the conversations on a remote island off the coast of Maine, aging was remote as well — Carson was in her late 40s. At the time of writing she is in her mid 80s — aging no longer as remote as an island in the Atlantic Ocean.

Readers learn about Carson's changing perspectives on aging — partly through the advancing years but also through her relationships with these aging individuals and by helping them to delve into lessons learned during their long lives. Carson's growing perspectives on the lives of her aging storytellers are integrated into the text — some about her contemporary reactions which led to further probes in the interviews, other information gathered about

interviewees after their deaths, and still other thoughts emerging at the time of writing the book based on her own learning and aging experiences.

Through these life stories we come to see aging as a journey — a metaphor held to the fore in this volume by the frequent mention of walking or hiking on the island — alone or in pairs on a trail, or together in community to view the sunset.

> *And surprisingly, as my body keeps falling apart and rotting, my painting is improving by leaps and more leaps — and it amazes me that while I can hardly work for more than 20 minutes without getting pooped, my painting is zooming, both design-wise and colour-wise, the feelings come pouring out. With every gain there's a loss and contrariwise*. ~ Lev

One of Carson's aims is to enable her interviewees, her readers, and herself to see memory beyond the usual age-related forgetfulness of names, appointments, intentions, and misplaced objects. Our whole life is memory — in our minds and in our bodies. As Rivka is quoted, "to be alone and not to be able to tell your story is 'to forget your life.'"

In narrative gerontology, Randall and Kenyon (2001) use the terms 'life-as-story' and 'life-as-journey' to convey the notion Carson captures with her title *We All Become Stories*. In Christina Baldwin (2005)'s terms, Carson serves here as *storycatcher* — she listens deeply so that elders can work out their own aging life story while she reflects, tells and retells her own.

Carson is interested in how older people view memory and how these views affect adaptation to the shifting circumstances and abilities of old age. She probes the typical memory complaints of old age in most detail with Martha in the first story. Her teacher persona comes through here — about learning to attribute memory lapses to situation and lack of attention — attributions which can prevent self-fulfilling age stereotypes. She also nudges interviewees to take a broader view of aging memory — to include long-term memories felt through vision, hearing, touch, emotions, and bodily sensations.

> *People criticize old people for remembering the past more than the present, but I don't know about that. I think it's very nice to remember people you used to like and things you used to do.* ~ Beatrice

To me the importance of memory is what you can learn from it—your or somebody else's.
~ Meyer

Ann Carson models for us how engaged listening to aging individuals can foster personhood, knowing an individual as a unique person — not as a stereotype. Her candid curiosity and respect draw out her aging storytellers, enabling them to teach lessons significant for our own aging and for how and why we communicate with elders.

References

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