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**Transformative Writing among Inner-City Adults:  
A Case Study Evaluation of the Open Roads,  
Life Learning Pilot Program**

**By Diane Kristjansson**

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## About the Author

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**Diane Kristjansson** is an adult educator with 20 years of teaching and facilitation experience in public sector and post-secondary institutions. Her teaching and research interests include creativity-centred and learner-centred education, transformative learning theory, adult learning, communication, and positive learning and work environments. She com-

pleted her Master of Adult Education degree at St. Francis Xavier University in Nova Scotia. She has been a director of corporate training and development with the Province of Manitoba, a program leader with The University of British Columbia, Continuing Studies, and a program director in the Division of Continuing Education at The University of Winnipeg.

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# Transformative Writing among Inner-City Adults: A Case Study Evaluation of the Open Roads, Life Learning Pilot Program

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*I think a lot about things now. I will analyze things in my mind and I will rationalize things – the pros and cons kind of thing. It is just awesome. It has made me more patient with everybody and just realizing – to just try and take one day at a time and not to push too much ... if you need help, ask for it. Don't be scared to ask for help. That was a big thing for me ...*

A graduate of the Open Roads,  
Life Learning Pilot Program

Open Roads, Life Learning is a 96 hour transformative writing and life learning program that was piloted over 32 weeks in 2008 – 2009 with adult learners employed by or attending a community drop-in centre (Centre) located in the heart of Winnipeg's low-income inner city. Most of the people who live in the Centre's neighbourhood are Aboriginal, as are the majority of the Centre's employees, many of whom took refuge in the building when they were children and youth in need of a safe and interesting place to spend their time. Empowering former and current attendees by awarding them jobs with responsibility for operating educational, recreational, and cultural programs and activities for inner-city children and youth is an important part of the Centre's mandate.

A senior administrator at the Centre explains that another component of the organization's mandate is to help improve the quality of their employees' lives by encouraging and supporting educational achievement. An *Aboriginal Peoples and Postsecondary Education in Canada* report (Mendelson 2006) tells us that attaining an education continues to be counted as a significant factor in an improved quality of life, particularly among Aboriginal populations.

Almost any job, even a minimum wage job, already demands or soon will require a higher level of numeracy and literacy than today. Whereas once it may have been possible to get and keep a reasonable job with less than high school, failing to get through high school makes a lifetime of poverty increasingly probable (Mendelson 2006: 24).

While growth is reflected in the number of Aboriginal students who do complete secondary and post-secondary programs, evidence shows that the rate at which they complete high school is significantly lower than among the general population. This evidence suggests a direct impact on future post-secondary participation and graduation rates of Aboriginal people, and ultimately on economic standing (Mendelson 2006). Clearly, positive, relevant initiatives supporting educational attainment among Aboriginal populations are worth pursuing.

In January 2008, three of the Centre's administrators initiated a meeting with representatives from a local post-secondary institution to discuss the possibility of offering a post-secondary preparation program to their employees. The post-secondary representatives suggested delivering an existing course, in house, that had been designed to prepare potential students to succeed in college and university studies. The Centre administrators were interested, but concerned, believing the program as described to them would likely intimidate and disengage their employees possibly leading to disappointment and failure rather than success.

Research conducted in Winnipeg's inner-city schools validates this concern by reveal-

ing how mainstream educational systems, founded on the principles of colonialism, “an elaborate system of social control justified on the false grounds of Aboriginal inferiority” (Silver 2006: 19) continue to generate negative experiences among Aboriginal people.

It has proved to be, for far too many Aboriginal children and youth, a foreign place, where they and their people are not respected, where Euro-dominant views of history and life are taken for granted, where Aboriginal teachers and curricula are rare, and where racism is a common experience (Silver 2006: 70).

The Centre decided to develop their own preparation program, one that was relevant and reflected their employees’ life experiences. Positive personal development, or transformation, was a major goal of the new program that would prepare interested employees to succeed in their future career and educational choices by developing their writing, reading, speaking, listening and interpersonal skills. Additionally, the program should help their employees to recognize their strengths and talents and develop confidence in their ability to learn and to succeed in choices they might make in future. The approach used was to encourage participants to write about aspects of their personal lives and their experiences, and then to share their writing with the group. Testing was to be avoided as a way to assess learning.

To this end, Winnipeg educator and facilitator Joanne Klassen<sup>1</sup> was recruited to develop an 8-week program (24 hours) that builds on a transformative and life writing model she introduced in 1998. As an adult educator and a graduate of Joanne’s inaugural Transformative and Life Writing Program™ and Facilitator

Credentialing Program, I was invited by Joanne to co-develop and co-facilitate with her an 8-week (24 hours) program that came to be the first component of the *Open Roads, Life Learning Pilot Program* (Open Roads). Written and anecdotal feedback from the participants and their supervisors at the end of the first component was overwhelmingly positive, and three additional 8-week (72 hours) components were developed and delivered between October 2008 and June 2009. The expanded program became the unit of investigation for this research project. The participants who completed the program participated in in-depth interviews as part of the Case Study Evaluation.

### *Number of Participants*

Eight participants began Open Roads on February 28, 2008, but six completed it. It is worthwhile mentioning that the eighth participant in the program when it began was a high school student and regular attendee at the Centre. She had shown promise in school as a writer and her English teacher had encouraged her to register for the program. But after two classes, she withdrew. We learned through one of the Centre’s administrators that she was uncomfortable being part of a group with men and women she knew as authority figures. She found it difficult to listen to them tell their life stories and hear them speak openly about challenging aspects of their lives. This was an important lesson for us about the impact of authority structures in groups, particularly where safety is paramount. Joanne and I and the Centre administrators agreed that future participant recruitment should take into account hierarchies and distribution of authority and power. If a learning environment is to be

1 Joanne Klassen developed the Transformative and Life Writing™ program model in 1998 that was used as the foundation for the Open Roads, Life Learning Pilot Program. In the past 12 years, more than 500 people have graduated from her transformative writing programs delivered in Canada, England, Australia, the United States and Sweden.

created where participants feel safe enough to share unexamined thoughts and experiences and to take the personal risks that may initiate transformative learning, safety requires in-depth consideration of who is in the room, group agreements, hierarchies, and relationships, in and out of class.

Also significant is that two of the seven remaining participants did not return to the program when the second component began in October. One participant left because he ended his employment with the Centre. The second came to the first class of the second component and then dropped the program. The details of what went on during the week that followed that class were not shared with Joanne or me; however I am aware that a conflict occurred in the workplace that led to the participant choosing to end his involvement with the program. My own journal entry dated October 9, 2008 noted my feeling that his decision not to continue was a loss for the program and for the group, a feeling that was shared by the remaining participants. Five of the six people I interviewed at the end of the program talked about how getting to know this person outside of the workplace had had an impact on them personally and professionally. One of the participants spoke at some length during our interview about losing this person, and his concern that the dynamics of the group might be affected.

That whole experience was saddening because I knew he was enjoying it and he was right into it. Just as the rest of us. But because he hung onto something personal, he made a choice not to be part of it. That was saddening for me that for one, he denied himself a wonderful opportunity to be a part of a really tight cohesive group. But also it was like when you lose someone, you have to go through that separation kind of thing. Is the group going to be the same?

Concerns about any negative impact the loss of their peer may have on the group's dynamics appeared to be quickly allayed with the introduction of a new employee who had been hired earlier in October to work at the Centre. The five remaining participants decided among themselves to approach him about joining the program and their group. When he agreed, they contacted the Centre Administrators to let them know they had selected the Centre's newest employee to be the sixth member of their group. He was a "group recruit," commented one of the Administrators on what she viewed as a show of confidence and a growing sense of empowerment among the participants. "I think it was a great tribute to what was happening for them in terms of feeling comfortable and empowered enough to choose who would join the program with them." The program continued with six participants between the ages of 24 and 50. Four were female, two were male and all six completed the program.

### *Purpose of the Research Project*

The purpose of the research was to evaluate the effectiveness and potential of the *Open Roads, Life Learning Pilot Program* (Open Roads) as a vehicle for transformative learning. A secondary aim was to learn if and how creativity-centred approaches to program development and delivery are linked to transformative learning. Findings strongly suggested that creativity-centred learning activities, particularly journaling and transformative/life writing, did contribute to the success of the program as a vehicle for transformative learning. Furthermore, program participants described personal healing experiences and greater confidence in their ability to succeed in their careers and educational studies as a direct result of their program experience. One of the six interviewees has begun university studies.

## *Research Methodology*

My principle research methodology was case study, a qualitative research approach that allowed for an in-depth evaluation of Open Roads as a vehicle for transformative learning. Evaluative case study includes rich description, interpretation, and judgement typically for the purpose of communicating important information about the unit to stakeholders and for these reasons is well suited to educational program evaluations, such as Open Roads, and for understanding and illuminating particular aspects of adult education practice (Merriam 2005).

I invited the six participants who completed the program to be interviewed as part of the project. Of the six, three were high school graduates and three had completed some high school. One of the high school graduates had completed some post secondary courses.

I also asked the three Centre administrators (one retired from the Centre) who initiated and supported Open Roads, and my co-facilitator to participate as interviewees. All ten expressed their commitment to the program, the research project, and their desire to contribute to the building of an educational program with the potential to make a difference in Winnipeg's inner city.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with the six program graduates, three Centre Administrators and my co-facilitator. The Program Participant Interview Question Guide is included as Appendix A. I created pseudonyms to protect, as much as possible, the anonymity of the adult learners. Additionally, I have drawn from my own field journals and observations during the program.

In addition to recording the interviews for accuracy, I took brief notes as an added precaution. Full scripts for all 10 interviews were prepared by the middle of September 2009. I

then wrote a summary of each interview that included the questions I had asked, paraphrased responses, and some direct quotes from the participants. On November 26, 2009, I presented the six program graduates and my co-facilitator with their interview summaries for data verification. Each person read the summary of their interview, signed and dated the last page indicating they approved the content. I met with the three Centre administrators on December 14, 2009 to present them with the summary of their interviews. Each read, signed and dated the summary of their interview indicating approval of the content.

Interviews were conducted approximately six to eight weeks following completion of the program. One possible limitation of this study is the short time that elapsed between the program conclusion and the data collection phase of the project. It is possible that the results may have been richer and more informative had more time elapsed between the program conclusion and the data collection period. Another limitation is the small number of program participants. Further study of the impact of this approach to transformative learning is warranted.

In selecting data from the interviews for analysis, I chose to focus on the Open Roads participants and their program experience. I was looking for indicators of transformative learning in their comments and experiences, specifically if and how the learning environment and creativity-centred activities had fostered self and critical reflection, transformative learning and personal change. I included data from the interviews conducted with my co-facilitator and the three Centre administrators, each of whom had also been asked if, and in what ways, Open Roads appeared to have fostered self and critical reflection, transformative learning and personal change among the program participants.

### *Definition of Relevant Terms*

**Transformative Learning** is “a process by which previously uncritically assimilated assumptions, beliefs, values and perspectives are questioned and thereby become more open, permeable, and better validated” with the potential to be transformative (Cranton 2005).

**Critical Thinking** is an active process by which learners challenge their personal assumptions through reflection, discussion, listening and a willingness to change their minds, if warranted. It should incorporate a balance of emotion, intuition, and sensory awareness, with rational thinking processes, and is necessary for transformative learning to occur (Brookfield 1987).

**Creativity** is a process for understanding one’s true or authentic self (Fox 2002). A **creativity-centred** educator’s main role is to instil the confidence, trust and courage it takes for learners to live with and honour creativity and the chaos and transformation it initiates. The tougher the life circumstances, the more that imagination and creativity are the key to learning, healing, empowerment and personal transformation (Fox 2002). Creativity-centred tools include transformative and life writing, journaling, visualization, images, metaphor, and imagination.

**Authenticity** means knowing who you are, being genuine and acting in ways that show consistency between values and actions, relating to others in such a way as to encourage their authenticity, and living a critical life, whether as a learner or as an educator (Cranton 2005).

## **Open Roads, Life Learning: The Pilot Program**

### *Participant Recruitment*

Participant recruitment took place in February 2008. Each person was assured that their participation was not mandatory and the decision to attend was theirs to make. During this recruitment phase, Joanne and I worked on how best to approach our eight weeks in the classroom. Consequently, there was little concrete information available to help potential participants decide whether or not to attend the program. Their supervisors explained to them that the program would focus on writing and would help them to develop and/or enhance confidence in their communication skills. One of the administrators told us that three of the employees accepted the invitation immediately, with enthusiasm, while the others were hesitant and needed time to consider the idea.

Everyone invited showed up for the first class on February 28, 2008, although with caution, anxiety, and for one student, scepticism and low confidence. My journal notes from that day observed that the session ended on a confident note, with some of the participants sharing briefly with us their pre-program concerns. Several spoke in more detail about their initial fears and concerns during the in-depth interviews I later conducted. One participant told me: “I wasn’t confident in myself prior to coming in, but that was the motivator for making me participate.” A second participant said: “Like, at the beginning I really didn’t want to go into the program. I didn’t know what it was going to be about and there were a lot of things going on at home.” I have included this information because it says something about the participants’ confidence at that time, but also because it illustrates to some extent what the adult learning literature tells us about three of the basic needs of adult learners: a recognized need to learn about what is being

offered; a need to have some input into deciding what they will learn; and the need to learn in a safe environment (Vella 2002). As program designers and facilitators, relevancy, safety and learner empowerment were our intent, however, when the program was introduced, the participants knew little about the program, or the facilitators, except that we were white women who had been recommended to them by their supervisors.

During the in depth interviews held after the program had ended, I learned that five of the six interviewees had been hesitant to begin the program despite any enthusiasm they may have expressed initially. Still, they chose to take part because they saw the program as an opportunity to improve their communication skills, particularly their writing skills, and because they trusted the judgement of their supervisors. A third participant explained that she had been sceptical about the program but decided to proceed because she believed “they (supervisors) are always looking out for all of the staff and if they think that this is something that we can all benefit from then we won’t be hurt.” To me, this said a great deal about the positive and trusting relationships our participants had with their supervisors, and to the nature of the work environment they were coming from. It also occurred to me that despite all the unknowns, these positive relationships contributed to the sense of safety they needed to take a risk and participate in Open Roads.

Most of the participants I interviewed talked about how their initial fears dissipated quickly once the program began and they came to look forward to Open Roads. One of the learners explained how his confidence grew quickly:

Exercises were introduced in a way I could listen, grasp, and do. It wasn’t mind boggling. It wasn’t confusing. It was fun. I found myself getting enthralled with the dynamics that were going on within our

group ... I found myself sharing in a way that I normally would not otherwise have. So there was a good feeling right off the bat.

Another learner told me that she, too, began looking forward to the program:

Things began to change. It was like getting up, throwing all your things in the car and driving to the country. Because you’re there and you’re away. You are leaving all that stuff at home and that is kind of how it felt in the program. I came to the program and I would sit there and bit by bit, I felt like things were getting lifted off my shoulders.

These comments suggest that the learners were settling in and feeling safe, comfortable and confident in their ability to succeed in the program. These are important elements in creating the kind of environment where transformative learning may occur (Vella 2002).

### *Planning the Program: Component 1*

When Joanne and I met to discuss how we would approach Open Roads, we agreed that for the best possible outcome our approach must focus on the learners, their needs, and their experiences. We wanted to fully engage each one of them in the exploration, understanding, and sharing of their life experiences, while empowering each learner to choose how and what they would explore each week. We were clear that the program outline would be flexible and would respond to the needs, interests, and experiences of the learners, and to do so, individual sessions would have to take shape as the weeks progressed. Our task became how to create a positive, welcoming, and safe environment for this group of learners as they worked to develop their writing, speaking, listening, and interpersonal skills, and confidence in their abilities. Most importantly, we wanted them to see their strengths as human beings and to recognize their ability



to learn and grow. Our task as adult educators was to support and guide this group of learners by contributing to an environment, or learning sanctuary (Lange 2009), where they could develop self-directed and reflective skills with the potential for personal transformation.

### *The Learning Environment*

Lange (2009: 194) explains that “deep transformation, which changes our ways of being, doing and thinking in a profound way, requires the creation of a learning sanctuary for both facilitators and participants”. She identifies three ways that a sanctuary may augment the transformative potential of a program; all three reflect our experience in Open Roads. The first way acknowledges the tendency of many educators to deliberately prepare pedagogy to propel the activities and the learning forward. But transformative learning can not be taught (Cranton 2002). It takes place beneath the agendas, schedules, and curriculum; the facilitator’s role is to “simply try to hold this space open for the needed dynamics to occur” (Lange 2009: 200). The second way to create sanctuary is to bring people into relationship with what they want to learn; in the case of Open Roads, this was the source of their most personal stories. The third aspect of creating sanctuary is the developing and nurturing of committed peer relationships where participants can ask and consider important questions about their lives; questions with the potential to drive the transformative learning process (Lange 2009).

A learning sanctuary would be needed, so we were pleased when we learned that Open Roads would be held in a room with an abundance of natural daylight and fresh air. The warm colours and bright artwork on the walls contributed to a comfortable, non-institutionalized space in which to gather, work, and be creative. It was an ideal classroom for our purposes and we set about creating a sense of

calm and peace in the room by playing soft background music in the half hour before the session began, and during some of the writing activities. We worked to foster a sense that the session would be positive and creative by greeting the students as they arrived and inviting them to choose a “trigger”, which could be a quotation, a toy, a postcard, a rock, before taking their place at the table. The triggers varied each week and were selected to help students begin the inward process of reflection and awareness. There were coloured markers, paper, pens, highlighters, tables and enough chairs to comfortably seat eight. A candle burned in the centre of the joined tables as a symbol of the light within all learners.

The lunch provided each week by the Centre ensured that our basic hunger and thirst needs, as described by Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, were met and we were free to concentrate on the work at hand. As a rule, two of the participants picked lunch up on their way to class; sandwiches, fruit and vegetables. On occasion, one of the learners would bring a dessert she had made to share with the group. Sitting together over a meal prior to beginning gave each of us the added benefit of time – informal, relaxed and positive – to get to know one another better, an important element in the safe environment, or learning sanctuary (Lange 2009), that was developing.

We began each class with the same opening sequence. Here, our intent was twofold; the activities helped to prepare students for the reflective work to come, but the consistency of a positive weekly ritual contributed to the safe environment we wanted to establish. The ritual became something known and comfortable for everyone involved, beginning with a short, focused reading which encouraged reflection and often led to discussion. When asked to comment on a part of the program that was significant to her experience, one of the participants identified the focused reading.

I think the reading exercises where everyone got a chance to read. It wasn't like one person doing it all, or one person taking over the classroom. It felt good because all of us had a little piece and with every little piece, when you put it together, we made a pretty good team.

Clearly, being part of a positive team experience was an important part of the safe learning environment that was being created; one in which transformative learning could be initiated.

The focused reading was followed by five minutes of timed journal writing which was called J5M or Just Five Minutes (Klassen 2003). At the first class, each student was given a journal to write in, along with a three-ring binder, loose leaf paper, a pen, and a highlighter that would remain their personal property. To emphasize the private nature of this writing, students were encouraged to write 'personal and confidential' on the first page of their journal and to take it home with them between classes. The timed writing began by noting the date and time of day at the top of a fresh page and for the next five minutes, they were free to write about whatever was on their mind. At least one student found this five minutes of journal writing to be the most valuable part of the program because of the opportunity it gave him to go inward and think about his life. Acknowledging his tendency to "react" to situations, he recognized the clearing writing exercise as a valuable opportunity to reflect. In his words, journaling

was sort of a rare experience. I could sit and write and do whatever ... I liked the writing experience. For me, it brought me in tune with the here and now. No matter, or regardless of what I came in with, that was the reality check. That was like an inventory of what was going on ... there is a flow going on there ... it helped me to accept a little better and understand what I

was feeling. Because I could see it on paper and I could actually write it.

For another participant, the journal writing reignited an earlier interest in writing, but a comment she made during her interview revealed a growing sense of authenticity and empowerment developing alongside her writing skills. Journaling

made me remember all the things in school and how I did love writing ... Being creative and having no limits as to what to do in writing ... You can be who you want to be, do what you want to do. Make it as scary or funny as it can be or as dramatic as you want. You can control that. There are a lot of things that you can't control, but [the writing] is coming from me. It's like a reflection of yourself and your creativity.

With the journal writing completed, the sharing circle began and each person was invited to address the group. A talking stick, known in class as the magic wand, was passed around the table from speaker to speaker. Many used this opportunity to comment on the focused reading or the trigger they had chosen. Often they would discuss what was going on in their lives at that time and how they felt about it. On occasion, someone would choose not to speak. When someone finished and passed on the wand, the group would thank that person, in unison, using their name by saying, for example, *thank you, Denis*. Saying thank you was an important part of the opening sequence as it served to reinforce the importance of listening deeply, and of respecting and valuing each person's contribution to the group. To ensure safety and to encourage students to make choices in their own best interests, we reminded them each week that their participation was always optional. Joanne and I participated in all the activities alongside the students; writing and reading our own stories, giving and receiving positive feedback, another essential

part of creating a safe space. Our intent was to encourage egalitarian relationships by also telling our stories and sharing what was personal and important in our lives. We wanted to contribute to and be part of the learning sanctuary that was developing.

### *Creating a Learner-Centred Program*

During the second class, we asked the group for feedback on a tentative program schedule we had developed that outlined the themes we proposed covering each week. We explained that we wanted the program to be relevant to their work and life experiences and hoped they would help us to develop the pilot program by providing input into the program direction and feedback on all the learning activities. Additionally, we wanted Open Roads to be meaningful to subsequent students from their community who chose to take the program. As it turned out, contributing to the development of the program was important to the learners and particularly to one individual who said:

I think the other exciting or interesting thing was that we were part of it ... that we were going to build a curriculum ... you and Joanne both came in with the right experience and set the tone ... sort of set it in our lap and gave us the option ... if there is anything you don't like ... that was important that it wasn't just one-way, it was two-way.

With the group's input incorporated into each session and with our classroom space becoming well established as a safe space, we proceeded. Individual sessions were fine-tuned as the program progressed, with each one building on the experience and learning of the previous week. The schedule guided our work but was abandoned or revised if appropriate. Following the opening sequence, Joanne or I would introduce the day's theme and, if appropriate, a creative thinking or learning tool, such as mind mapping or visualization, to help

learners access their story ideas, memories, and emotions. Our main approach was to encourage the students to think and write about their life experiences. Memories and strong emotions associated with those experiences often found their way into the stories whether during the journal writing in the opening sequence or through the life writing activities, in and out of class. Everyone was invited to read or talk about the life writing they did or to read a piece of writing from someone else that meant something to them. One of the learners chose to share a poem with the group that his daughter had written.

During the first component, time was set aside in weeks six and seven for the students to read or talk about a story they had written, pertaining to an event or a period in their lives. This life story was assigned in advance and was strongly encouraged but not mandatory. All but one of the learners presented their stories to the group. Some of the stories were emotional and the tears that were shed during the readings suggested they took courage to write and to share. Others were joyful stories about trips or accomplishments.

The students continued to write personal stories in class during the second component. Some also wrote between classes and brought their work to class to read to the group. My memory and my own journaling during this period showed that I was deeply moved by the increasingly personal subject matter of the stories, the courage and strength each person displayed in reading their story to the rest of the group, their skill as storytellers and their use of language to paint vivid, intense, visual images of the events they described. A strong bond was developing between the group members that seemed to influence their willingness to go deeper with the stories they wrote and shared. The group was creating the space needed for authentic reflection and transformative learning to occur. In one learner's words:

I often found after the first session that there was a lot of trusting, caring – a lot of emotions. People were digging deep within, sharing some intimate moments that they didn't mind sharing ... and really, that just sort of indicated to me that people were comfortable in a trustworthy way.

During my interview with the individual who joined the program during the second component, I asked what it had been like for him to join an already established group. Knowing his coworkers already shared a strong, positive bond did not seem to concern him. In fact, he found the atmosphere in the room to be positive and welcoming.

It was nice because you could be open to everyone there and you didn't have to feel like a stranger ... It was the atmosphere. The way it made me feel inside. Being in the zone. Being myself. Being able to laugh. There was no negative tension or anything like that. If someone was having a sad moment, you would see it and feel concerned for them. It was a comfort. Positive energy from writing and taking the words out of your heart, mind and soul and putting them out there in front of you.

### *Mid-Point Evaluation*

To help clarify and understand the learners' experience at the end of the second component and to help us prepare for the third and fourth components, we met individually during the December 2008 program break with all but one of the participants, who was unavailable during this time. During these one-on-one meetings that lasted from 30 to 60 minutes each, we began our discussion with general questions about the work they did at the Centre and how their experience in Open Roads might be connected to their position at the Centre. Participants spoke positively about their experience in the program. They told us that the personal and team learning they were doing

was the heart of the Open Roads experience for them and the writing and sharing opportunities should continue. They wanted future program activities to build on the supportive atmosphere and the trusting relationships that had developed between participants. Interestingly, each one of them noted an improvement in their willingness and ability to listen to others more compassionately, without judgment, and to manage interpersonal conflict between themselves and other staff members, and between staff members, in a more open, calm, reflective, and objective manner. They described the outcomes of many of the conflict situations they had been involved in, often as a supervisor, as being positive and constructive. Centre administrators concurred with their observations and experiences.

In earlier discussions with the Centre administrators about Open Roads, the idea of introducing individual learning projects during the second half of the program was considered. We thought that projects could be used as an opportunity to build introductory research methods into the program, and to introduce a different style of writing, in keeping with the goals and aims of a post-secondary preparation program. When we asked the program participants if they were interested in working on individual learning projects, the response was mostly positive and affirmative, although one person expressed some reservation. When we probed for understanding, he explained that he liked the program the way it was and didn't see a need to change the activities. He found the creativity-centred activities and life writing to be enough. We were thinking about preparing learners for new careers or successful entry into post-secondary programs, however, clearly not everyone was interested in this direction. Seeing a clear need for learning a new skill is an important motivator for adult learning that appeared to be missing for this individual when he was asked to consider an individual project.

During these interim interviews, participants told us in some detail about the work they do at the Centre. This information was helpful as we continued to think about introducing learning projects into the curriculum in a way that connected to and enhanced the work and philosophy of the Centre. When the program resumed in January 2009, we presented the group with a summary of their comments from the mid-point evaluation for their review, comment, and approval.

Following the mid-point evaluation, individual learning projects were initiated and we provided one-on-one coaching to all but one participant, who was unavailable, to talk about their ideas, progress and challenges. Each student was given time in class to present their learning project to the group; some projects were completed during the program period, while others were in the planning stage. The last four sessions of Open Roads were combined into two full-day sessions on Facilitation Skills. This topic was covered because it was our hope and the Centre's hope that one or more of the staff would eventually deliver the program in-house and within their community.

The story writing and sharing that had been an integral part of each class since February 28, 2008 continued to be the primary focus of every class. No one commented during the in depth interviews on the coaching sessions or the learning projects, but the writing, the sharing, and the support they received from one another continued to come up over and over again.

### *Giving and Receiving Feedback*

Early in the program, we covered the art of giving positive and authentic feedback through a writing tool called a power note (Klassen 2003). These short notes allowed the listeners to tell the writer/reader how the story had connected with them, and which words and phrases most captured their interest.

During the interviews, each participant talked about the power notes and how it felt to receive positive, authentic feedback in writing from their coworkers. One participant referred to the power notes she received as "a real confidence booster ... I still have them. They're a reminder and you kind of look back and remember that day and it was a really good day." She also found writing power notes to other participants to be a positive experience. "Their notes had a big impact on me; I was always hoping that what I wrote to them would have an impact on them too."

Saving the power notes to re-read during difficult times was a common experience for most of the participants. A second participant, for example, explained that "whenever I am feeling lonely or just want a pick me up, I will read my power notes ... It was uplifting for me to read them". Yet another described the power notes as "a fantastic idea. Just a little note. Just between you and that person. It makes it special. You love them. You want to empower them in some way".

A fourth participant also expressed enthusiasm:

I just loved those power notes. I loved giving them too; just sharing with the person that your story touched me in a certain way. Kind of knowing you are not alone; things like that happened to me ... Such positive feedback from people, that is healing and being able to keep these notes and look at them in the future is exciting ... Sometimes you need to read them if you aren't having a good day – to boost your spirits a bit.

They reminded her that she had accomplished something significant. "We did it," she explained. "We went through it all as a team. As friends, coworkers and that, we don't talk like that day to day but to read the notes and then see that person at work; it is neat."

Rereading the power notes “really brings you back to the moment,” explained a fifth person. “The same feeling that you get the first time around. You almost relive it. At least I did personally. But it also reinforced the cohesiveness within the group.” The sixth participant commented on the honesty he sensed in the power notes. “They were telling me what was on their mind. It was welcoming and I felt comfortable.”

This suggests that we had been successful in creating the kind of learning sanctuary that Lange (2009) identifies as being so important for self reflection and the sharing of personal experiences that can lead to transformative learning and positive growth.

### *Transformative Learning*

It seemed that many of the necessary elements for transformative learning to occur were falling into place. A learning sanctuary had taken shape. Participants expressed feeling safe and secure in the classroom and to feeling genuine trust in their coworkers and in the facilitators. They contributed to the direction and development of the program, and commented on how the writing, sharing and feedback activities they took part in led to their growing sense of confidence, and the courage to be vulnerable and take risks through their story writing.

Five of the six participants told me during their interviews that writing their stories had been healing and changed them in some way. When asked to define what healing meant to them, they talked about letting go of something they had kept to themselves for a long time, about sharing a burden, about feeling a weight lifted, and of seeing light where previously it had been dark. Writing and sharing their personal stories helped them to release powerful, negative feelings that had blocked them from moving forward in key areas of their life. The healing stories were like lights turning on,

or the disorienting dilemma described in the transformative learning process (Cranton 2002; Mezirow 2000; Dirkx 1997) that leads individuals to question something they believed to be true about themselves and the world.

Mezirow (2000) identifies a 10-step linear process of transformative learning. Step 1 is the disorienting dilemma which can be as subtle as a look from another person, or as dramatic as a birth or death. The dilemma leads to steps 2, 3, and 4, which are self examination, followed by critical assessment of assumptions, and a conscious connection between the source of discontent and transformation. Individuals who experience transformative learning recognize that the source of their discontent is not exclusive to them, but is shared by others (Mezirow 1981: 7). In steps 5 through 9 a new way of being is explored, a concrete plan of action for acquiring new knowledge and skills is developed and implemented, new roles practiced for familiarity, and the confidence to step into them is developed. At the 10<sup>th</sup> step, transformative learning has occurred.

Perspective transformation, explains Mezirow (1981: 7) is the learning process “by which adults come to recognize culturally induced dependency roles and relationships and the reasons for them and take action to overcome them”. But the likelihood that a complete perspective transformation will occur may depend on the severity of the disorienting dilemma. “Under pressing external circumstances, such as death of a mate, a divorce or a family breadwinner becoming incapacitated, a perspective transformation is more likely to occur” (Mezirow 1981: 7).

Cranton (2002) views transformative learning as less linear than Mezirow’s model and more as a spiral-like process with progression to it. Rather than focus on linear steps, she identifies seven facets of transformative learning beginning with the presentation of an event

that reveals a discrepancy between an uncritically examined belief and something just heard, read, or seen. Uncritically assimilated and unexamined assumptions are purposefully identified, questioned, and examined. Opportunities are made available to consider, discuss, and explore alternative viewpoints and construct new knowledge by consensus.

Dirkx (1997) builds on Mezirow's and Cranton's work by approaching transformative learning holistically, giving equal consideration to both internal and external aspects of self through the use of creativity-centred tools such as imagination and fantasy, stories, narratives, myths, tales, and ritual. He points out that a full understanding of the human experience is unlikely without examining the emotional and subjective, as well as the rational aspects of self.

For at least three of the six participants in this project, the stories they wrote during the program and described as healing appeared to be the disorienting dilemma or discrepancy that initiated self examination and the process of transformative learning. It was an everyday event, a look from Joanne that initiated transformative learning with a fourth participant. For the fifth, the disorienting dilemma occurred prior to beginning the program when his first child was born. The program was an opportunity for him to think critically about this event, the impact it was having on his own life and his ability to be the kind of father he wanted to be. Transformative learning for the sixth person was triggered by the trust he experienced in the relationships that developed in the program. Data from the interviews clearly illustrated that self reflection/examination occurred with all six participants leading to transformative learning. This next section examines the transformative learning experiences of the six participants, beginning with Corina.

### **Corina's Story:**

During our interview, Corina described herself as a strong person and I believed her. But, I recognized that like any human being, she had a soft and vulnerable side and writing had become an important way for her to share that softer side with others and understand what was happening in her life. Life writing can trigger transformation, particularly when the writing grows from a deep, authentic place, where the pain is buried (DeSalvo 1999). Corina's most transformative stories appeared to have come from that deep authentic place also known as the *uncanny* level of story telling where memories are lost or buried and the most significant learning takes place (Karpiak 2003).

During the first half of Open Roads, Corina shared stories about her family, her love of animals, and often both. But it was after several months in the program that she was able to sit down and write her story about being raped several years ago, the story that was her 'disorienting dilemma' leading to transformative learning. The story had been difficult for her to write because of the painful memories it dredged up and she admitted to a lot of crying as she wrote. But she found writing the story to be healing and when it was done, she felt like she was "seeing sunlight for the first time after being incarcerated for a long time." She smiled and chuckled every so often as we talked, even as she described the dark image of prison and incarceration. Her positive tone and the subjective, metaphorical images she used to describe her experience suggested to me that Corina had experienced true creativity, as defined by Fox (2002), as our true Self and the essence of what makes us human. It is basic to our survival and is what connects human beings to the Divine. At one point in our interview she said, "I thought I lost my creativity", which suggests that her authentic Self was hidden from her in a deep, dark place, very much like a prison. As Karpiak (2003)

describes it, she had tapped the uncanny level of story telling.

Corina's experience could be described symbolically as the re/birth of her Self, or her creativity, an image that seems fitting considering the connection she feels with her "Creator". Referring to the difficulty she was having writing the book that was her learning project, she decided to do some additional research. But before beginning, she needed permission. "So, I thought, I am going to ask the Creator. Go out to the bush. Give an offering and ask the Creator for permission to help guide me in writing this book."

Giving birth, whether symbolically or physically, can be difficult and painful, but the results are life changing. She was "seeing sunlight" after a long period of darkness. "I felt—*whole* would be a good word for it. I didn't feel like that deficient little girl anymore." In this situation, rediscovering her creativity or her authentic Self appears to be directly linked to the transformative learning that followed.

With her story written, she wanted to share it with her coworkers in Open Roads but was "very afraid to present it ... I don't want people feeling sorry for me". Ultimately, she made the decision to read the story while in a taxi on her way to class. Still uncertain, she asked the cab driver if she could read the story to him. "He said 'read it'. I started reading the story and he kept saying 'read it louder' and after I finished reading it he said, 'That was a good story. Go and read it'. He empowered me to read my story to the whole class". It is interesting to me how creating a safe environment is not a straightforward matter. Corina's story about gaining confidence and empowerment from a stranger indicates that safety depends on the situation, and may vary between individuals and between situations. In this case, safety was found in being unknown.

Writing and reading that story led Corina to

further self-examination and eventually transformation. As an example, she told me during our interview how every year around the same time she would become depressed,

... sometimes for almost a month ... Then it hit me ... And I came to realize it was about the rape.... This year, honest to God, this was the very first year that I wasn't depressed. It had a lot to do with the program because this is the first year that I really sat down and wrote about it and I didn't have the guts to do that before and with your guidance and Joanne's it was easy to sit down and write about it. I am not saying it was easy. I found it to be very healing".

Making the connection between a yearly recurrence of depression and being raped suggests the physical body is an important site of knowledge and learning, a creative way of knowing referred to as somatic learning (Clark 2001). Corina's insight suggests she came to understand the cause of her depression by being deeply and intimately connected to her physical and emotional memory. Recognizing and transforming physical and emotional patterns suggest transformative learning is underway.

Corina's realization reinforces the importance of providing adult learners with a safe place for exploration and discovery, and for consciously working to build the trusting relationships between learners and between learners and facilitators that support transformative learning. It is also worthwhile noting that without authenticity, or the willingness and ability to be open, genuine, compassionate, and consistent in words and actions, real trust simply would not develop. The role of the facilitator is paramount in such situations as it is typically the facilitator who believes in the learner and their ability to achieve their potential long before the learner does. Cranton and Wright (2008: 40) explain that educators



“hold that sense of possibility until the learner can discover parts of himself or herself that have been lost or hidden”.

When I asked Corina to describe some of the changes she has noticed in herself, she talked about being open minded, being more creative than ever before, and “more loving towards my husband”. And, she said, “I am more forgiving. I used to be so resentful towards ... the people who raped me, basically, I guess. Even with them, I am forgiving with them. I know that their time will come.”

### **Venus’s Story:**

Venus can be quiet in class but she’s an excellent listener and is not afraid to say what is on her mind. She speaks often about the love she feels for her children and grandchildren; the family she shares with her husband of 12 years. Early in the program, she wrote a story about an abusive relationship she had 19 years ago with the father of her first child. She described writing the story and reading it in class to her coworkers as healing, but “really scary, like it was frightening scary”. Berger’s (2004) research into transformational reflection sheds some light on her strong emotional response by explaining that those who find themselves at the edge of knowing, or transformation, will experience powerful emotion ranging from anguish and fear to confusion to enjoyment. When I asked Venus to elaborate on her emotions and what healing meant to her, she described feeling like “a weight had been lifted off me – profusely. It was very emotional and I cried and I was scared but I wasn’t afraid to share what happened.”

Sharing such a painful experience with her coworkers led her to the edge of transformation, and listening to their stories led her to understand that while the details of their experiences may differ, emotionally they had a great deal in common and she was “not alone” with her pain and fear. Recognizing that problems are

shared is an important step in the transformative learning process and one that Venus cleared with grace and compassion.

One of the ladies talked about a bad experience that she went through when she was younger. She was able to share that with us ... She was thankful that she was able to share it. It was healing. She felt relief and not so ashamed. And I guess that makes me feel, I don’t know if it is hopeful or glad ... We never judged her or put her down. We supported her. Hugs. Hugs are important. So it was an experience that not only I, but other people go through. Bad experiences. And we can grow from them and I think that was the most amazing things about the course was that it was so human to everybody.

Her words show that something had changed in her frame of reference (Mezirow 2000) or how she chose to interpret herself in the world. Venus’s frame of reference seemed to grow out of her “troubled” relationship with her adoptive family and likely was absorbed uncritically based on what she experienced in her home. She told me that she had always been a quiet person. “I don’t like using the word shy, because that was the word they used for me when I was growing up”. Being quiet, she explained, was a choice she made because she was afraid “to look funny or sound funny or say the wrong thing”. As an adult, she continued to be quiet, keeping her ideas to herself, believing, “ ... I can’t do it”. As our interview continued, the shift in her frame of reference became even more apparent.

I am allowing people to come in to see the real me with my hurts and my pains, the good, the bad, to accept me for just who I am. The pain is not inside of me anymore. I have let it out. Again, that block is not there. Like fresh air, I can breathe again without being scared”.

This quote from Venus, and especially her words “I can breathe again without being scared”, suggest again that she had found her transformative edge, as described by Berger (2004), and was able to work through the strong emotions that came up as she created a new frame of reference that more accurately reflected her creativity, or true nature. Evidence of transformative learning increased as Venus continued to talk about her new perspective and how she felt about herself:

I never really had high confidence ... I had low self esteem ... But I love myself now ... I think it has a lot to do with sharing and letting things go and not being afraid and opening up and I don't need to worry about silly stuff ... anymore and I can just be me and enjoy me ... It is amazing. Just a simple writing experience, how much you can get out of it. It is amazing.

She also commented on her improved relationship with her parents. As an adult, she chose to restrict her contact with them to special occasions. But her writing, reflection and discussions with her husband “who is the only person that really knows me and can see the changes” led her to view her parents in a more compassionate light. She talked about recognizing that their life experiences, positive and negative, contributed to the people they became and the choices they made. She decided “to accept them for who they are” and to be more openly affectionate towards them.

They are not huggy people. I was never raised with a lot of hugs and kisses ... This is one thing I wanted my kids to have because I didn't have it in my life. I don't remember when I started, but I decided I am going to start giving my mother hugs.

Professionally, Venus's new perspective on life enhanced her confidence in the workplace and made her more willing to reach out in a personal way to the children and youth in her

care. She talked about an experience she had with a Centre attendee:

She was a teenager and was going through teenage stuff and it was hard for her. Family life was not easy for her. A lot of siblings. Growing up too fast for her. We had talked in our group about journal writing and sharing your journal with somebody. And so I told her about Open Roads and what it was and how it had helped me in a personal way; how I was able to write things down and not be afraid to share them ... that you don't have to share if you are not ready – just share in your journal. Then it's out there and when you're ready you can share with somebody. So I gave her a journal and asked her to do this and she was thankful. She said she would do it and she wasn't afraid to do it. It was a good experience to bring Open Roads out and share it with this young lady.

### **Sheryl's Story:**

Sheryl works in security at the Centre. She has four daughters who often take part in the educational and cultural programming at their mother's workplace. Of all the Open Roads participants, Sheryl appeared to me to be the most anxious and uncomfortable at the first session of the program. By the end of Open Roads, I had noted in my journal that I considered her to be one of the program's greatest supporters.

As with Venus, Sheryl discovered that writing about a painful experience and then reading the story in class was cathartic and healing. “The first time that I read my story, it just felt like a relief. It just made me feel like something lifted off me because something had been holding me down.” I am intrigued by the subjective image Sheryl used to explain her experience. The image she chose denotes weight, heaviness, and a loss of freedom, and strongly suggests to me the likelihood that her

story was the disorienting dilemma needed for transformative learning to begin. Additionally, it suggests that Sheryl had been stuck and unable to move forward in her life. Feeling the weight lifted implied that the barrier was gone and personal transformation was possible. Dirkx (2000) explains that the images and symbols that come to our conscious minds from our unconscious and the powerful emotions that accompany them hold great potential for meaningful learning and change.

Sheryl's healing story was about being betrayed by her best friend and her life partner, two people she loved and trusted. Writing and reading her story allowed her to grieve the loss, or symbolic death, of two significant people in her life, an important letting-go process in personal transformation. Scott (1997) explains that during the grieving process, "the emphasis is not on becoming critically aware but rather on becoming aware of the essential in life, in both the outer and inner world. Grieving provides the opportunity for this awareness to happen ... The focus on enlightenment as a letting-go process is useful only when one acknowledges the burden and darkness of pain". According to Sheryl, in the years leading up to writing the story, she frequently thought about the experience and the pain she was experiencing.

I went over and over it in my head and it always came back to blaming myself ... and not getting over the hurt and the pain and not talking about it. If somebody did talk about it I would get up and leave ... I would start crying right away and it was just so hard.

Although she found both the writing and reading of her story difficult and painful, she told me during our interview that she continued to feel better each time she read the story, whether to herself or to someone else. The burden she had carried for so many years was "lifted" with each reading.

the lump in my throat just kept getting smaller and smaller ... other than deaths of people in my family that I care about, that was probably the most traumatic experience I ever (had) in my life ... Just reading one story one day changed all of that, and I felt that I could start trusting people again and maybe even have a relationship again.

Opening to the possibility of being in a relationship again was the "biggest change" Sheryl experienced through this process. During our interview, she talked about how being betrayed led her to "close down" and stop trusting people. As the image she used implied, she was stuck, unable to move forward. In the eight years since that experience, her only close relationships have been with her daughters. Since writing and reading her story, she has started thinking about the possibility of dating, "So that door is opening a little bit. I still have the latch on. Just peeking". A new friendship has also developed.

I think in one of my power notes I wrote to her that I consider her to be one of my best friends now and that was the first time I had said that in a very long time. It was weird. It felt weird for me to say that. I meant it, but I had never called anybody my best friend (since) my youngest daughter was born. I just felt that I could connect with her a lot more. It was just like I knew her for all this time, but I really didn't know her.

Sheryl's words suggest she has experienced transformative learning. Her frame of reference has shifted and she is seeing new possibilities for herself and for her life. During our interview, she credited many of the changes she has experienced to the thinking she has done about who she is and how she wants to be in the world, in other words, she has developed a new perspective of self – a new frame of reference. In the past, she explained, she was critical of herself and would often try

to adapt to another's way of doing or being to avoid criticism or conflict. She explained how that perspective has changed.

I am me and I like myself the way I am and if somebody does not like me that is their problem, or hang up. I am not going to change for anybody else or try and be somebody else ... Everyone has their own opinions and not everyone thinks the same.

This new clarity and the possibilities it presented led her to view many of her most significant relationships differently, particularly those with her children and parents. To illustrate, Sheryl told me that she believed she could protect and keep her daughters safe by "moulding" them to be the way she wanted them to be. That has changed, she explained. "I am just going to be here to support them. If they make a mistake, I will be here to pick them up ... I can question them and ask if they are safe. I can protect them without telling them what to do". Another revelation for Sheryl was "realizing if my mom and dad had Open Roads when they were growing up, maybe things would have been different".

As with Venus, Sheryl credits her coworkers' willingness to tell their own painful stories in class with giving her the confidence she needed to share her experience and the impact it had on her life.

Just being in class with them and listening to them share their stories really helped me a lot ... they were emotional while they were reading their stories but they trusted everyone enough that they could say (the words) out loud ... they trusted me and that made me think then maybe I can start to do that myself now.

Sheryl's words and her observations of her coworkers suggest "that they were embodying new habits of trust rather than suspicion. They

were experimenting with a new way of being in the world" (Lange personal communication April 2010).

### **Angela's Story:**

Typically, Angela would show up for class in one of two moods; happy or unhappy. But by the end of each afternoon session, her mood had improved. She credited this shift in energy to the learning space and how it made her feel, knowing that "if you were coming in an upset mood – knowing that when you come – as soon as you entered the room you felt something positive and nothing negative". She is 20 years old and the mother of a four year old daughter. I enjoyed listening to Angela speak in class and to the stories and poems she wrote and read. She was enthusiastic, had a sense of humour, and was sensitive. Readings, hers or others, often brought tears to her eyes, which she covered up quickly with laughter and a humorous comment. During our interview, she talked about several significant changes that had taken place in her life since beginning Open Roads, beginning with the absence of panic attacks.

Before I started the program, I used to suffer from panic attacks and anxiety attacks. I just felt uneasy all the time and I got depression in a way and when I started coming to the program it gave me, I guess an insight into what maybe was bothering me. Because the writing really helped me a lot to understand where I was coming from. Just to release some tension for whatever seemed to be bothering me. I haven't suffered from them since I started the program.

I asked her if she could recall a specific moment or activity during the program that she associated with the end of her panic attacks, or to a shift in how she viewed herself. Her answer came without hesitation.

I think it was Joanne (co-facilitator). Like the way Joanne used to talk to me. I never really let anybody read my writing or shared it with anybody. I remember Joanne's first comments on one of the first pieces I ever wrote. I don't have it on me, but it was the one where I was sitting and just watching the colours, the movement, and the people. I was wondering what they do. I wonder what their jobs are like. I wonder what their families are like. Just taking a look and I remember when I wrote that and she looked at me with that sparkle in her eye. I never knew someone could praise my writing so much with a look ... it didn't have to be words.

Angela was describing an ordinary event; a simple, everyday experience that was significant to her because it led her to a shift in how she viewed herself and her life. Dirkx (2000) explains that this is not unusual and that transformative learning can occur throughout our everyday lives and does not require the dramatic events that trigger major perspective transformation. Angela's next words confirmed that the look Joanne gave her was the trigger event that led her to think about her life in a more critical way.

Yes, it was more of a look that really got me thinking that maybe I should be taking my writing a little more seriously ... another, too, was she taught me it could be anything I write. It could be a poem. It could be a 20 word sentence. It could be anything and it could be special. It may not be special to you, but it could be special to someone else.

Belenky and Stanton's (2000) research into connected knowing helps to explain the experiences the participants had during the program, but it speaks directly to the positive and trusting relationship that developed between Angela and Joanne. Connected knowing, an approach to knowledge "that provides tools

for bringing even the very young and the silenced into voice so that they might develop their capacities" (Belenky and Stanton 2000: 82), is at the heart of the Open Roads model. It occurs in collaborative, creative and supportive learning environments where the educator's focus is on listening, empathy, building strengths and courage, helping learners to find their voices, and treating each other as equals. Competition and negative criticism have no place in this kind of learning environment. Connected knowing contributed to Angela's growing confidence and her willingness to examine her life.

Honestly, when I was a teenager I would get up an hour earlier and sit on the front porch and write ... I haven't done that for a long time, not since I was 17 or 18. Something happened in my life. I can't pinpoint the moment, but I kind of gave up on writing. I obviously didn't have that appraisal. Like nobody appraised my writing, nobody complimented it. Everybody likes to be complimented for things that they did. I understand now that somebody does not have to tell me it is good to be good. But before, I think I needed that and I think that is why I gave up on my writing.

As the next two excerpts from Angela's interview illustrate, Angela began to recognize the limiting assumptions she had internalized about herself, and was able to begin imagining a new way of being that was closer to her authentic, creative Self; two important elements in the transformative learning process (Mezirow 2000).

I wanted to live in the moment, but I realized that I was holding on to stuff in the past. I had secrets and stuff that was just eating me inside. And with this program, I could write about these things and nobody would judge me ... especially when I wrote my life story. A lot of the stuff I wrote in my life story, nobody really knew about

me. Nobody knew about my struggles and things I have done in my life. It was good to stand there and read it to them and they didn't judge me.

I used to go for looks and stuff like that and when I started writing, I started writing about this ideal guy. I mean really, this guy doesn't even exist. I watch too many movies. So when I started writing and talking to people and looking at myself and what I really want – everything that I thought I wanted for myself – I didn't really want for myself.

Angela made several significant changes in her life during the program that indicate transformative learning was taking place, including learning to “love myself better,” she explained.

In the program, I started looking around and seeing the beauty around me and beauty in people. Looking at myself as if I were a piece of art. And I thought the way I present myself should be like a piece of art ... I am not a bad person and I want people to like me for who I am. And that helped me.

### **Adam's Story:**

Adam was the “group recruit” who joined the program during the second component and quickly fit in like a seamless zipper. I was impressed and energized by the positive presence he brought to our learning environment week after week even when he was tired from being up all night with the newborn son who had entered his world two weeks before he began Open Roads. “It was perfect,” he said, referring to the birth, “and it just changed me completely.” The birth of his son was a major triggering event in Adam's life that led him to think critically about himself and his life. He attributed many of the new possibilities he discovered and explored to the reflective writing exercises he did during Open Roads.

I would say Open Roads, the writing component of it, just the calmness and the professionalism of the two facilitators and the atmosphere and everything, it just helped me better to understand myself and how I deal with situations at work and what not. It is as if it opened more windows and made the screen, or picture, broader and more wider, and more clear and sharp. It enhanced the picture. Making me see more than I saw before. Extra details that I never thought of before.

What became evident during Adam's interview was that the critical reflection he engaged in, during and outside of Open Roads, had helped him to recognize a clear sense of life purpose that had been missing in his life up until that point.

... a month later [after his son's birth] it just hit me. When I was alone with him, just looking at him, watching him sleep, it is so hard to describe it with words. But, I don't know, just to realize that he is here for a reason and he is going to be here every day for the rest of my life. I have to be somebody different. I have to make little changes for the right reasons. He was definitely the right reason at the right time.

Discovering a meaningful life purpose gave Adam focus and direction. He had a clear need and reason for learning. These are important motivators for adult learning (Vella 2002). His words also suggested a sense of immediacy. While this does not necessarily mean speed, it suggested that Adam was ready to begin the process that would transform his life. “Most adults do not have time to waste ... We are willing to work in an appropriate sequence, and we recognize the need for reinforcement, but we want to see something in hand as soon as possible” (Vella 2002: 19). Adam talked about how he began his process.

At first I started slowly and gradually, making sure I didn't just jump into it –

gradually and slowly considering pros and cons and other factors that could lead to possible change. Well, like changing my original intent of what I wanted to be. I changed my routine and what not. What I spent my money on.

Adam found reinforcement through the relationships he formed with other Open Roads participants and with Stanley, a community worker he had met a couple of years earlier at the Centre and recently become reacquainted with. Writing did not come easily to Adam unless he was writing about his son, which made discussion with others about what was going on in his life and what he was thinking an important element in Adam's transformative learning process. These conversations could be considered the oral equivalent to the healing stories his coworkers described during their interviews. If he was feeling distressed or under pressure, he explained,

There were a number of people I talked to ... either Sheryl, or there would be Corina ... maybe my co-worker ... Angela ... I found it very helpful if they could just listen to me, for what it is ... Get it off my mind so I could take it off my shoulders, put it on the ground and then just walk away and smile and go on with my day.

Adam talked at some length about his friend Stanley as a positive influence in his life and as a mentor who influenced him to begin the changes he wanted to make. He talked about becoming reacquainted with Stanley:

He said nice to meet you. And I stuck out my hand – then he looks at me. 'Hey buddy. I don't know what you're sticking out your hand for. I don't want a shake from you. Give me a hug instead.' He gave me a big hug and he said 'It's good to see you back here buddy. I knew you were going down a bad road and I was hoping you would come back soon. And I'm glad

that you're on the good road again, my friend' ... He waited for me on that road and waited till I got back and he extended his hand. And, like, he said 'Okay buddy, let's go forward from here.'

According to Adam, the friendship and support of Stanley "and other people too, who were waiting for me to get back on the good path again" helped him to move forward and persist with the life changes he had committed to making. These supportive relationships, combined with his willingness to think critically about himself and his life led him to new ideas, solutions to problems, and a significant shift in how he viewed himself.

Like some things I wouldn't bother to think about before, then after Open Roads I would think about situations more and think about whatever the subject was. I would analyze it a little deeper. I found that things just came out clearer. I would have a better understanding, but at the same time I was more confident.

An especially interesting part of Adam's story was his initial belief that the direction of his life was set. He recalled having a conversation with his son who was sleeping at the time that revealed a limiting belief he had about himself. "One day you are going to be a man and I want you to be better than I am right now. Whether it is physically, mentally, spiritually, socially, emotionally, all those things, I want you to be better than me." Adam grew up not knowing his father who disappeared from his life soon after he was born. He assumed that when he became a parent, he would be like his father – absent. "I always did believe at one point that I would be somewhat like my father. But after this (Open Roads), I slowly realized that things were going to be different and not everything you hear is true."

Adam changed his negative beliefs about who he is and what he is capable of accomplishing.

He described his thinking process as “not really an ongoing struggle, but repeating it over and over in [my] mind and convincing [myself] things are different – considering all the factors”.

### **Denis’s Story:**

Denis has worked at the Centre for more than 10 years in a leadership role and he referred to himself during our interview as “the gate keeper or the protector”, someone who other people depend on to be strong.

I come off as maybe straight forward and strong built, but that really isn’t my personality. I have a lot of things that I don’t share; weaknesses for lack of a better word. People don’t see them unless I let them in.

He also talked about his tendency to question what he sees and hears. Trust, for Denis, is earned. During our interview, he told me that he had questioned Joanne’s and my motive when the program began.

I often wondered, are you guys just doing this for the sake of doing this, or trying to push us to motivate us into feeling good about what we are doing. I often thought that. They are teachers. They have been at it for awhile and they know how to get into someone’s soul or niche. I questioned that for awhile but then when time went on, I think you two were upfront with us and you were honest with us and it was a working team.

When I asked Denis to describe his significant experiences or memories from the program he began by talking about the group experience; specifically the bond that developed between all of us, participants and facilitators, and the trust he experienced. Without the trust and the safety that Denis came to feel in the room, it is unlikely he would have written or shared

the deeply personal and emotional stories he did. “At some point,” he said, “I thought, this is like a support group in a way.” Writing was an outlet for Denis that gave him permission to reflect on his life and share with others what was on his mind. It “was a way for me again to bring out some of the deepness in Denis that normally nobody would see”. While the writing helped him to excavate his buried memories and deep emotions, it was the experience of opening up and sharing his creative, true nature that he found most healing and that triggered transformative learning.

Through writing, he was able to access what was buried deep inside of him, an area he referred to as a “treasure chest”. Again, an interesting image that suggests the deep, hidden place where a lost sense of self may be found. Healing for Denis meant letting out what was hidden “so someone else knows; so it’s not just mine anymore. I don’t have to carry it, and so that in a sense for me was like a full circle, or a closure to something”. His story appears to be more about his experience of trust and feeling safe enough to allow others to see him as a whole person, someone with strengths and weaknesses, than about any one specific incident. His reference to a full circle suggests that this experience helped him to achieve wholeness, or authenticity.

Did Denis achieve transformation? He confirmed how he had changed with one word; “emotion”. The experience of sharing his deep feelings, and trusting his coworkers enough to allow himself to be vulnerable with them suggests that showing emotion was a significant area of transformative learning and growth for Denis. “I feel for a lot of individuals who shared some of their experiences,” he explained. “I could shed tears comfortably because I could feel what they were sharing. And I was okay with that.”



### *Summary and Conclusions*

Open Roads began an important process of self examination, self discovery, and transformative learning for six participants who completed the program. They wrote and read their personal stories to one another, stories that became deeper and more creative (authentic) with each passing week. I found their words and the images they often used to be powerful and emotional, but it was not until the data collection phase of the project and the participant interviews that I began to understand the real significance that writing their stories had for them. Lange's work on creating a learning sanctuary contains a sentence that resonated with me because it describes so well my own thoughts during those interviews. "It is clear that the activities are conduits to deep learning that goes beyond what I plan and even beyond what is conscious, rational, or even identifiable" (Lange 2009: 200).

Each of the six interviewees surprised me with the raw honesty, the authenticity of their answers to my questions and with the depth of the personal learning and change they described. Their responses made it clear to me that their transformative experiences likely would not have happened, at least not to the same extent, had two basic adult learning principles not been met almost immediately; a safe learning environment based on equality and respect for their needs, interests, ideas, and feelings; and the trusting, supportive personal relationships that developed.

Clearly, the learning environment that was established from day one of the program provided the participants with a place where they could be vulnerable and take risks, where they could access their creativity, or essential true nature, using creativity-centred tools to help them get there. Consistency, whether through the use of a familiar opening sequence, or ritual, that encouraged reflection and focus, or by showing each other genuine

respect, contributed to their growing confidence and the courage to go inward to their creative centres, even when it was painful and difficult to do so. Without the willingness to examine hidden memories and to feel the pain that was generated, the healing and depth of transformative learning may not have happened. Clearly, the use of creativity-centred learning tools, particularly transformative/life writing and journaling, strongly contributed to the success of Open Roads as a vehicle for transformative learning.

The learning environment formed the base or foundation from which the program experience grew, but it was the trust and the strong personal relationships that developed among the participants, and between the participants and facilitators, that made it possible for the transformative learning process to begin. Through the creativity-centred activities that guided and encouraged authenticity, participants came to know one another as multi-dimensional, whole human beings, rather than only as colleagues at work, or learners in a program. The trust and the positive support and feedback they gave each other contributed to the growing confidence to speak about what was on their minds, and to write the stories that helped them to access the uncanny level of story telling where I believe our creativity is found.

They wrote stories about abandonment, violence, addiction, betrayal, seeking acceptance, and love of family. I found it impossible not to be affected by these stories and the strength of the voices many of them were discovering. I was struck by the caring and compassion they showed to each other, to me and to Joanne. The more time I spent with this group, the more they taught me what compassion and non judgement really means.

Inviting participants to contribute to the curriculum was personally empowering for the group. Encouraging them to decide what

they would talk about, what they would write about, if they would write, and what they would share helped us to meet their need to be treated equally, fairly, and to decide what they wanted and needed to learn. Joanne and I became guides and companions in their journey (Berger 2004), introducing the tools, and standing with them as they reached their edge of knowing or transformation, and made the choice to move forward. Yes, we began with an agenda, themes and materials to cover. But we learned that it was the ritual, the creative journal and life writing and the sharing that formed the heart of Open Roads and made it an effective vehicle for transformative learning. It was “the deeper learning that occurs beneath any pedagogical plans” (Lange 2009: 200) that made the difference. In my experience, time has a way of telling the true story and to understand the participants’ transformative experiences, in depth, follow up interviews are needed over the next one, five, 10 and 20 years. These data will tell a richer, deeper, more complete story of what began to happen during the Open Roads program.

Open Roads ended with a graduation and celebration to honour the distance the group had travelled together, but it was also a time of mixed feelings. Personally, I was sad that the program and the experience was ending, a sentiment I heard from most of the participants. But, I felt happiness, too, at the accomplishments we were there to recognize. As the interviews showed, the program and group experience had been an intense, but positive experience. Ending a program that so many had personally invested in without something else to move on to seemed like the wrong thing to do. An alumni writing group was suggested where program graduates, including those who graduate from future Open Roads Programs, may continue to meet. Interest in the idea was unanimous. Most importantly, though, if this new venture proceeds it should be self or group-directed; they should

choose how they want to continue writing and sharing together, if at all. It could also be an opportunity for them to build in more of their own Aboriginal traditions and approaches to learning and to healing, possibly establishing a new and more culturally relevant Open Roads Program.

The six program participants will make excellent mentors, guides and learning companions to others within their inner-city community who wish to experience the healing and transformative potential of (an evolved) Open Roads. To this end, Joanne and I have proposed working with interested program graduates to help them become facilitators of the Open Roads program and of transformative learning. Ultimately, turning the ongoing development and facilitation of the Program over to the Centre entirely could lead to greater empowerment, confidence and commitment to lifelong learning among their employees. The community development possibilities are exciting.

I recall how Open Roads began as an alternative to a mainstream post secondary preparation program. When the Centre Administrators realized that the students who tended to succeed in those programs have graduated from grade 12 at the top of their class, one explained that

it became really clear that was not what we wanted. And yet, we did feel that to overcome the barrier, writing was critical. Many of our staff and attendees are frightened of writing. And so we said, clearly, it is like everything else. We have to set up our own program that works.

Mainstream, post secondary programs tend to be based on competitive approaches and asymmetrical relationships among students, and between students and teachers, that reinforce a capitalist economic system and middle class values (Merriam and Caffarella 1999). Open

Roads, Life Learning is based on connected knowing and creativity-centred approaches to learning that complement many non-mainstream ways of knowing. Following this experience, I am convinced that incorporating non-traditional, creativity-centred approaches to teaching and learning into our mainstream post-secondary programs is essential. Transforming a mainstream educational system to one that is flexible, creative, and democratic, that embraces diversity and multiple ways of knowing as normal and valuable will contribute to a healthier and more compassionate society. The realist in me acknowledges that

transforming our educational system is a tall order and successes will be incremental over an extended period of time, achieved with the courage and commitment of creative individuals and creative groups.

Denis said it very well when I asked him if he had any advice for anyone thinking about taking part in the Open Roads, Life Learning Program. "Be open. Hang in there. Don't give up on it too quickly. You otherwise might miss a wonderful experience that will be with you for the rest of your life."

I couldn't have said it better myself.

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## Appendix A

### A Case Study Evaluation of the Open Roads, Life Learning Pilot Program

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#### Program Participant Interview Questions Guide

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1. I am really interested in hearing about any special experiences you had while taking part in *Open Roads*. By special, I mean any experience(s) that were **important** to you and **meaningful** to you;

So, please think all the way back to February 28, 2008 when you began the program and tell me about any experiences you had as a result of the program that were special for you: important and meaningful.

Could you tell me about those experiences in as much detail as possible? What was happening in the room that day? Who was with you, if anyone? What were you doing? How did you feel that day, during and after the experience?

So, to begin, can you tell me about ...

- any experience(s) where you found yourself completely absorbed in what you were doing?
- any experience(s) that led you to see something very familiar in a different way or from a different perspective?
- any experience(s) that led you to question something you always believed to be true?
- any other special experiences that you would like to mention?

2. When did you realize that the experience(s) was/were important for you? What were you doing at the time?

Possible probe:

- Did you discuss the experience(s) with anyone else? E.g. facilitator, supervisor, friend, family member, co-worker? Describe this process.

3. Please tell me about a significant experience you had *outside* of the *Open Roads* classroom that you think came about as a result of your participation in the program.

Again, please consider experiences that were important and meaningful to you. For instance, were there ...

- any experience(s) that led you to see something very familiar to you in a different way or from a different perspective?
- any experience(s) that led you to question something you always believed to be true?
- a moment when something that took place during *Open Roads* just made sense – or became clear – for the first time?

Possible probes:

- Were you engaged in life writing when you had the important or meaningful experience?
- Were you in discussion with someone?
- Were you by yourself and deep in thought?

4. How has participating in *Open Roads* impacted your life or work, if at all? In particular, have you noticed a ...
  - change(s) in yourself while in your workplace; doing your job and in your relationships with others?
  - change(s) in yourself when you're with your family and friends?

Possible Probe:

  - If you have noticed change(s) in yourself, do you think these changes may be related to any one of the special experiences you described earlier? Please explain.
5. Has anyone commented on these changes (supervisor, co-worker, family, friend)? If yes, what did they say?
6. Do you think your reading, writing, listening, speaking, interpersonal skills have changed since completing the program? Please elaborate.
 

**If life writing hasn't been discussed yet, ask ...**
7. Looking back again, throughout the *Open Roads* program you wrote stories/poems that were drawn from your life. Was the writing difficult for you or did your words flow easily? Please describe the process and how you felt during the process.
8. Describe what it was like for you to read your writing out loud to your co-workers.
9. Describe what it was like for you to receive written and verbal feedback (power notes) about your writing from your co-workers. (How did it feel?)
10. Describe what it was like for you to listen to your co-workers read their stories to you, and what it was like for you to respond to their writing with power notes.
11. Did writing stories about your life lead you to think about your life in a different way or understand something new about yourself? Please elaborate.
12. Each student had the opportunity to facilitate an opening or closing ritual and use a transformative tool. Do you remember this?
 

If so,

  - Do you consider this to have been a significant learning experience for you? Why?
  - Have you used your new facilitation skills in any way since completing the program?
13. Is there anything you now plan to do, or imagine yourself doing, that you hadn't considered doing prior to taking the program? For example, beginning a new hobby? Registering for a new learning program? Please explain.
14. Would you ever consider registering in a post secondary education program? Please elaborate.
15. What could the facilitators have done differently or in addition to – that might have helped your learning in the program?
16. What advice would you give to someone who was about to begin the *Open Roads* program?