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Reflexivity and an Arts-based Inquiry during Covid-19 times

Janet L. Kuhnke

Cape Breton University, Canada *Email:* JanetKuhnke@cbu.ca

Abstract: This paper examines the role of reflexivity and arts-based activities as a medium for reflexivity, during Covid-19 times. Using an autobiographical performative inquiry research methodology, the role of reflexive practice and art-based activities are explored as part of managing during times of crisis. The author considers Covid-19 as a ‘stop’; a stop is a moment in time when attention is called forward from life events. Stops are moments that interrupt one’s life, and that evoke new questioning of what could be and to consider new possibilities. To understand this process the life of Emily Carr, a Canadian artist, is reflected upon to explore the emotions surrounding critical life events as related to ones’ well-being. Finally, the role of pushing back in challenging times is travelled; and finally, death is explored as part of life.

Keywords: Arts-based research, reflexivity, Covid-19, autobiography, performative inquiry

The importance of reflexive practice, and arts-based activities as a medium for reflexivity, may occur alongside each other, and as part of maintaining well-being during Covid-times¹. To say that times are normal would not be truthful; we are living in a pandemic! In early March 2020, I began to keep a journal about living during a pandemic. This paper is a qualitative analysis of a four-month period during the pandemic and reflects a critique of art created and journals. Performative inquiry guides the exploration of reflexivity practice and arts-based inquiry, including reflecting on the role of a ‘stop’, a moment that interrupts, pauses, and evokes thinking about new possibilities in life.

In this autobiographical, performative paper, I describe my art created and journals, and reflect on the work of Emily Carr². Emily Carr (1871-1945) is a well-known Canadian artist and writer. She spent most of her life traversing Aboriginal lands and bushes of northwest Canada. She travelled to California, England, and France to grow her gift of painting vast skies and big trees (National Gallery of Canada, 2019). The life and works of Emily Carr were specifically explored, as she often reflects on her health, emotions, her diverse “paintings, ceramics, sculptures, and hooked rugs...and her yearning for spirituality” in her life and art (Farrell, 2007, p. 1).

¹ Covid-times, is my term for the living we experience during the pandemic of the Coronavirus 19 disease (Covid-19) (World Health Organization [WHO], 2020, August 13).

² Emily Carr is a well-known Canadian artist (Shadbolt, 1990). I have visited her home in Victoria, British Columbia and spent hours in art galleries studying her art, writing, and creative works. Her colours are rich, deep, and warm are truth-telling in her yearning for emotion and spirituality (Farrell, 2007).

Background: Reflexivity

Reflexive practice is a purposeful, active engagement in critical self-awareness conducted while educating, researching, and living (Finlay, 2017). Specifically, leaning into contextual-discursive reflexivity aids in exploring pandemic living (contextual and situational) and life events of the researcher (Finlay, 2017). This practice can be contested, is irregular, “swampy... [and is] evolving” (Finlay, 2002, p. 209). It includes a paying attention to an individual’s self-awareness and asks us how “relational and ethical dilemmas...[can] permeate the entire research process” in which we engage (Finlay, 2012, p. 317). Reflexive journals and arts-based activities may be analyzed as data when seeking to grow as an individual, nurse, and academic (Finlay, 2012).

As well, self-reflexivity can aid in unravelling the pressures and the hidden agendas and stressors in our lives and writings (Finlay, 2002). It is a purposeful activity that seeks to unwind the challenges threaded through our research, teaching, and clinical practice. This is especially true during a pandemic. Rodham and colleagues (2020) remind us that in times of crisis, self-reflexivity and introspection is of utmost benefit. This is especially important as educators, researchers, and practitioners move to operationalize and transition practices, therapies, and support groups to phone and online formats. During the pandemic we ask, how do we share meditations, readings, music, and arts-based activities that aim to soothe the tensions and distress experienced by persons living in a pandemic (Rodham et al., 2020)?

Arts-based Activities as a Medium for Reflexivity

Complementing reflexivity is critical arts-based activities, that may viewed be a medium to express reflexivity. Reflexivity and art created, in tandem and in motion, support a deep examination and add a rich layer of explanation as we strive to live during a pandemic. Susan Finley (2011), states that all forms of media are potential constructs for inquiry, not only formal arts but the informal venues can be a persons’ or “a people’s pedagogy” (2011, p. 443).

Frameworks Guiding this Inquiry

Methodologically, a performative inquiry research approach is embraced as an overarching framework in this study. Fels (1998), describes performance inquiry research as a “journey of knowing, doing, being, creating and that it is through performative inquiry that we may come to an ‘*interstanding*’

of our journey/landscape that is the imagining of our universe” (1998, p. 28). Performative inquiry aims to draw our attention “to those moments that invite us to pause and reflect on the pedagogical significance of such moments for our work, for our relationships with others, or who we are in the world” (Fels, 2012, p. 51). In this paper, performance data are displayed in short stories from the authors journals (Greene, 1995). Alongside each story are colourful art objects and images created (Fels, 2012).

During the pandemic, my garden and digging objects from the earth became my base from which to create and perform. I rescued items of old that have survived the movement of water, sand, soil and frost. As they emerged, I identified objects as potential art, helping me make sense of pandemic living. I journaled regularly and sketched my thoughts onto paper (Fels, 2012). A critical arts-based approach, as a medium for reflexivity, helped to “make use of affective experiences, senses, and emotions. Its’ practitioners explore the bounds of space and place where the human body is a tool for gathering and exploring meaning in experience” (Finley, 2011, p. 444).

Exploring narratives and individual stories and lives leads to insights about living (Roberts, 2002). As well, to release the imagination and think of possibilities Greene (1995), reminds us that narratives and scripts helps us understand our situation, relationships, and self. She states:

We are appreciative now of storytelling as a mode of knowing, of the connection between the narrative and the growth of identity, and the importance of shaping our own stories and, at the same time, opening ourselves to other stories in all their variety and their different degrees of articulateness. (1995, p. 186)

Concept of a “Stop”

During this time of reflection and transition I turned to the work of Robert Applebaum (1995) and the concept of a ‘stop’. A stop is a time when life can be made “luminous, transparent and transformed” (p. 135). Applebaum, described a stop as a place of choice, thoughtfulness, and of “two diverging pathways” (p. 16); a time when life that previously seemed predictable, now is uncharted, and not yet known.

Fels (2012), in her discussion of performative inquiry further describes a stop as:

A moment of risk, a moment of opportunity. A stop arises when we are surprised or awakened to the moment; we become alert to the suspicion that something else, some other way of being in a relationship or in action, is possible.

We stop and question: *Wait a minute, this moment matters!* A stop tugs on our sleeve, and says, *listen, there is another way to engage, to respond, to interact.* A stop occurs when we come to see or experience things, events, or relationships form a different perspective or understanding. Stops may occur in everyday living and in our work in any field of endeavor in which we engage; they emerge through creative play [art created], through encounters with others, in which we recognize absence, a gap, a dissonance, a possibility newly perceived. (2012, p. 53)

Creating Space During Covid-times: I Start with a Story

During Covid-times, I continued to live - albeit differently. I am living quietly. I am learning to work online and to talk on e-technology platforms with growing confidence from the safety of my home office. I reflected, oh, this is not so bad, I can do this; I am kind of surprised at myself, I thought it would be worse. (*Research journal*, March 2020)

In early March, I began to re-submit research ethics applications to move my research interviews, from face-to-face and in-relation, to an online format. This was new, uncomfortable, and at times daunting. Through this I reflected on the loss of narrative, relationship, and the joy of meeting an individual or family willing to share their story. Finlay (2002) reminds me that when “examining one’s own experience and personal meaning for their own sake, insights can emerge from personal introspection which then form the basis of a more generalized understanding and interpretations” (2002, p. 214). These reflections are especially relevant during pandemic times.

During these times of caution and change, I daily journaled and created. I am reminded of the murkiness and uncertainty of our present educative and research practices. I wondered, how will I teach online and talk with research participants, when I cannot be face-to-face? What about relationships in education, learning and research?

I had time now, a different type of time; as I am not commuting an hour each way to and from the university. I sat, read, and in time realize this is a ‘sort-of- gift’ from Covid. I began to work my way through the stack of books calling to me. (*Research journal*, March 2020)

Sitting quietly, I returned to the colourful art and writings of Emily Carr. As a child, I developed an appreciation for Carrs’ art; her colourful images surrounded me on postcards, old

library books, and more recently books gifted to me by my sister. Like Carr in times of change, distress, and uncertainty, I sought links between Covid-times and her descriptions of Nature, God, and her art created (Shadbolt, 1990). In her adult life, Carr described how through her artistic efforts she sought “passage [by] adjusting tonal contour of her forms so as to weave then into a cohesive spatial matrix” or colour and meaning (p. 47). I related to the yearning for colour, the known, and to see passage through Covid-times. I reflected in my journal:

It is early days in the pandemic. I feel exhausted being visible online to my peers. Day-after-day the electronic meeting schedule demand my resources, on a new and heightened level. Faces of persons not known, and faces of persons known, now appear and resound in the safe, sanctity of my home office space. I was not prepared for the tensions I felt. (*Research journal*, March 2020)

In response, I moved my energies outward, creating, performing (Fels, 2012). I became focused on creating a safe space outside my office where I could have coffee and restfully read. I pressed my shovel hard against the frozen earth, urging it to open its cavities to show the soft planting soil beneath. When I spoke my voice aloud in the cold air, it came back to me as if in a mirror (Carr, 1942). I moved pink granite stones into place around garden edges and planted Sweet William seedlings. “The name William – is of my Dad, his only name” (*Research journal*, March 2020).

I slowly created a wide-open space that included recycled wooden and metal benches, on which I came to rest (see Figure 1). Bright pink and red outdoor paints hosted the benches brightening the garden edges. This new space drew me in, just five minutes from the house, away from the growing tensions in my office, to the smell of the earth. Colours were dominant, they resisted the negativity and death described in the news – Covid-times, deaths are rising.



Figure 1: My emerging garden of quietness

In April, the emerging space flourished. Fragrant roses, pale-white, pink, red and hues of purple arose from darkened branches worn by heavy winter snows. Willow trees hosted bright yellow hues in the early morning sun. The purple plum tree leaves opened slowly against the cold spring rains. I imagined these too, to be 'a push back' against the virus.

I found peace, quietness, and restfulness in my new garden space. The foxgloves created a circle of care, a place where softness prevailed. Hummingbirds arrived demanding syrup and chickadees dominated the choir. Here I reflected and wondered, why do I feel so quietly peaceful, yet, alone? I answer in the following:

I miss the casual hellos in the university hallway. I miss the smell of early coffee. I miss the research conversations and talking about collaborative approaches, strategies, and funding opportunities. I miss commuting with my friend, eating popcorn on the way home, and drinking too much coffee. I miss laughing and singing a new song. Covid-times are here did you know! (*Research journal*, April 2020)

April Chimes: Can you Hear Gentle Sounds?

Further into the pandemic, I found the silence beautiful and deafening. The silence "was so profound that ...[my] ears could scarcely comprehend it" (Carr, 1942, p. 81). I love the quietness, but I needed to hear some sound; though Covid demanded silence as it worked its way through human contact.

The road nearby my home is deathly quiet, few cars or trucks pass and neighbors have stopped dropping by for tea. It was too quiet, I needed to hear sound. So, in response I created quiet, gentle sounds in the form of chimes. I wrote "Can you hear the garden chimes, I wish you could, they are quite lovely" (*Research journal*, April 2020).

The chimes pushed back in Covid-times (see Figure 2). They emerged as I suspended and repurposed old bicycle bells and hung copper and metal rings from fine wire, each dug from the warming earth. These treasures have found new meaning, gently swinging in tandem amongst the yellow and white honeysuckle, colours heightened with light mauve and purple paints.



Figure 2: Mauve chimes emerge from the earth

This was a 'sort-of-gift' while living during Covid-times. When I listen, the sound is gentle, faint, only present when the chimes move in the spring breezes (see Figure 3). The sound dimly resonates among the stately foxgloves and roses, richly covered in bees. As I rest in my garden space, the spring birds and early hummingbirds dance across the flourishing array of colours. I reflected in my journal:

I am relieved, Mother Earth is alive. The garden gives me some sense of order. The hummingbirds dart above my head as I sit and meditate. The early male and female goldfinch feed nearby; I count five pairs this year. Flower nectar is present, and the bees work diligently. Mother Earth is in her cycle, far from the death of Covid. (*Research journal*, April 2020)



Figure 3: Golden chimes faintly push back against the world

A Purposeful ‘Stop’

In April, I pondered through *The Stop* (Applebaum, 1995), and wondered if Covid-times could be ‘a stop’ in life? I reflected in my journal the following:

I am silently grateful for having to cancel work trips and limit spring conference attendance. I wonder if I am trying too hard to live and prove myself? I would say, yes. In recent months I have felt incredible pressure to ‘produce’ as a tenure-track hire in the challenging culture of the academy (Berg & Seeber, 2016). During these times I often experience a deep sense of distress and failure. So, part of me is scared, and yet relieved as Covid demands I stop, be home, present, and slow down. What will this new living be like, I wonder? (*Research journal*, April 28, 2020)

Applebaum (1995), reminds us that ‘stops’ in life are purposeful. Stops, allow us to explore life and life’s events. They allow us time to look at our lives, responses, reactions, beliefs, values, and attitudes in renewed ways and through thinking of possibilities (Greene, 1995). Thereby asking us to examine and ask, how am I living? Can I heed deeply to this wondering during Covid-times? Can I attend to possible change and endure the experience? Do I deeply and purposefully understand what is important in life?

Again, I returned to the autobiography of Emily Carr, who experienced many stops in her life (Shadbolt, 1990). Her growing pains, worldwide travels, ill-health, rejections and celebrations in her art created remind us of the cycles of living (Carr, 1946). During times of uncertainty Carr returned to the predictability of Nature, God, and earths’ seasons (Shadbolt, 1990). In relation to her art, Carr, often described her works hanging in art galleries as “alone” (1946, p. 45). She described her art as being from a different time, place, world, and way of knowing. She saw her art as paused in time, far away from the wild northwest coasts where her art was conceived. In turn, she asked deep questions about her faith and questioned and progressed in her use of colour within her art. She stated:

My forests are too monotonous. I must pep them up with higher contrasts. But what is it all without soul? It’s dead. It’s the hole you put the thing into, the space that wraps it round, and the God in the thing that counts above everything. (1946, p. 50)

Mutations: More Uncertainty

Toward the end of April, the language of Covid was familiar, enduring, and ever-changing. Viral mutations were being discussed, leaving me feeling uncomfortable. I was highly cognizant and studied the daily alerts from the World Health Organization (2020) and the Public Health Agency of Canada (PHAC, 2020). I developed, news overload. I wrote the following in response:

Death
Early death
Ventilators
Breath or lack thereof
Proning
Patient cases
High and low risk exposure
Mutations
Vaccines
Masks
Social distancing
Handwashing – singing happy birthday twice
Virus shedding periods – 14 days is agreed upon
(*Research journal*, April 2020).

In response, I journaled:

I am limiting my television time to five minutes, and no more! It is too much! Seeing images of caskets leaving the back of hospitals and long-term care buildings in cities near me is heart-breaking. It is overwhelming. Where is the virus I ask? Where is God? I stay home and never leave. I talk more to my family. Dad is missing face-to-face visits as he hears people voices easier, and he welcomes my phone calls. My work continues to rapidly move online. Phone calls increase and include discussion of job loss, employment changes, working from home, and result in shifting tensions. (*Research journal*, April 2020)

Creating art outside was my outlet (Finlay, 2011). The fresh air relieved the tension from viewing the large image of the coronavirus that dominates the news. Art emerged (Fels, 2012), deeply influenced by the growing conversation of viral mutations (PHAC, 2020). Dad and I regularly talked on the phone, we joked about my Covid art. He too, as a collector of old bottles and glass, appreciated my journey to the dumps and digging metal from the earth.

In time, old steel plowshares and iron teeth from an old hay mower, were painted red and bolted together to become the legs of my next art form. I call it 'mutation'. In my need to not be at the laptop, present on e-conference calls and phone calls, I sought comfort in the sacred stillness of the bush (Carr, 1942). Here I scoured the earth. I walked the hills and valleys near the streams for strewn iron, copper, and glass. As I came upon an old dump area, I found art treasures that could push back, just as Covid pushed forward.

Old glass, broken soda pop bottles and insulators were sorted. The steel tread of a 1940's truck came forth from the earth, heavy, intact - a possibility for a future work of art. Then it emerged, a 1947 truck chassis, firm, unspoiled and ready for use; as if it was waiting for its chance to rise again.

For some days, I moved the chassis and plowshares into various positions, trying different bolting and securement systems. I also walked away many times wondering why this creation was so important. In early May, the chassis found its resting place atop four legs and a steel plate. I bolted it into a proud and foundational position. I was thoughtful about its shape and the time it took to form this work – *mutations* of the virus often on my mind; therefore, I painted it red.



Figure 4: Mutation

In my ongoing search for metal, a 1950's truck gear shift was uncovered from the earth. Painted with bright silver paint, it too returned to life. Arched and proudly bolted off-center on the truck chassis, it rested for some days. In my journal I reflected: "I added four circles of steel, each positioned and hung just off kilter; just enough for the wind to make it swing. This is how I envision the virus to be shifting, moving and mutating" (*Research journal*, April 2020). As well and in reflection, I leaned into Carrs' descriptions of the importance of "variation, abstract objects and simplification" in art (Shadbolt, 1990, p. 61). For me, 'Mutation' was my variation of Covid-times, raw, enduring, and recovered from a dump site (see Figure 4).

Death Arrives

In May, reflexive practice and art created were my mainstay. My new and growing garden space was my place to push-back against the harshness of Covid-times. It became my place of inspiration (Farrell, 2007), and my place of storytelling and growing (Greene, 1995). As well, I engaged in journaling with regularity. At work, I methodically prepared to teach and research using technology. At times it was overwhelming, yet possible. I had this sense that Covid-times would not prevail. Then I got the phone call.

Today, my Dad passed in intensive care. The new pacemaker could not keep him going. Alone for seven days. He died alone, no family by his side. Covid would not allow us to be with him. None of his children or wife of 66 years were called, until he died. In death, the health care team called. I am furious. I cannot fly to be with my siblings and Mom. Covid rules. I cannot go. Covid prevails, harsh, demanding and in control. Covid is in control of my grieving. My pen remains my friend. (*Research journal*, May 23, 2020)

In response I journaled, tears pouring. I wrote to my sister and friend "nothing in my 37 years of nursing prepared me for the loss of my Dad, nothing" (*Private communication*, May 2020). I hear myself repeating the same statement over and over in the next weeks; family, my Aunt, and close trusted friends call. To reflect, I walked and gardened. Building bean poles, planting early squash and climbing bean seeds brought some comfort. Dad was my trusted friend. He was a farmer, nurseryman, parent, builder and creator. He was a giant in my life, always there "through thick and thin". I journaled the following:

I sit in my office reading chair and hold an old hat he gave me years ago. I press it closely to my face yearning to smell *Old Spice* aftershave, I cannot (Research journal, May 27, 2020).

I weep during Covid-times. The virus does not care. I am not able to fly home to be with Mom. I cannot fly to be with my siblings. I am daunted and in pain. This is unreal! We would never have left my Dad alone in the hospital, never. He was our 'treasured and cherished' Dad. I wail to the earth, where is my comfort? (Research journal, May 28, 2020)

In time, my husband encourages me to plant a clematis and I create a trellis in honour of my Dad. Two lilacs now grace the driveway and the corner of my flower garden in Dad's memory.

I hike away from everyone seeking to offer me comfort. I hear the crashing stream; the sounds of the moving water overwhelm my pain. Where is God (Carr, 1942). The water washes over my tears and brings a calming, coolness and comfort. Solace is slow to arrive. I cry regularly. I try to paint, I cannot.

Conclusion and Ongoing Thoughts

Performative inquiry as a research methodology provided a broad, engaging, and rich framework in which to embed this study. Fels (2012), states performative inquiry is not restricted to one creative outlet, she states:

Performative inquiry may be engaged in any of the arts-dance, music, multimedia, visual and performing arts - and indeed, as a way to consider the stops in our everyday lives, in terms of how we perform and are performed by our environment, our roles, our contexts, our relationships with others and the scripts that we create, and what is revealed in those stop moments, the embodied data, that call us to attention. (2012, p. 51)

Reflexive practice is a powerful entity (Finlay, 2012). Contextual-discursive reflexivity, helped to explore tensions of living during a pandemic - Covid-times - while working as a nurse, researcher, academic, and experiencing life events (Finlay, 2017). In the beginning of the pandemic I immersed myself journaling and focused on what 'living during a pandemic' meant for my research and educative practice. Through journaling and the shift to working online, I recognized the need for space, where writing, creating, and reading would flourish (Greene, 1995).

Art created (Finley, 2011), as a medium, aided in expressing the deep and daunting silence that arrived with Covid-times, a silence that surprised and brought death. For me, the silence was broken with the creation of new garden space with colourful chairs and benches. Where chimes and the sounds of bees and early spring birds predictability arriving in a choir of song.

Carr who travelled extensively through the northwest coasts of Canada, reminds us to pay attention to the Earth's cycles and the seasons colours (Shadbolt, 1990). Carr leaned into the big trees and wide skies, to find hope and predictability (1967). The powerful act of digging from the earth objects to repurpose brought a deep and rich sense of order, during Covid-times.

Early into the pandemic, my 'stop' arrived (Applebaum, 1995). Applebaum (1995) reminds us that when we do not heed the 'stop' we are blinded by the veil, we are hiding. Thinking of Covid as a 'stop', brought bodily light to the pressures of striving for tenure in a university environment. The 'stop' brought light, so that I would "no longer sit invisibly gazing out, but, participate bodily in the act of seeing" (pp. 53-54). As well, I came to recognize the pace and demands of working in a pandemic, and in the academy require self-care and kindness. Berg and Seeber (2016) state:

Self-care is not an indulgence. It is an essential component of prevention of distress, burnout, and impairments. It should not be considered as something 'extra' or 'nice to do if you have time' but as an essential part of...[my] professional identities. (p. 71)

Tapping into my imagination (Greene, 1995) was possible by being immersed in the literature. This is important as we can move past one perspective and the sound of one voice. Greene states, "We see; we hear; we make connections. We participate in some dimensions that we could not know if imagination were not aroused" (1995, p. 186). Covid was the 'stop' to arouse growing and imagination. Having "accepted the un-reality [of Covid and pandemic living] we can turn back to the variegated social realities we share and, perhaps, find them enhanced, expanded, corrigible" (1995, p. 187).

In death, I turned to the descriptions of Carr (1967) who often storied her art in words first, before laying down oil paints on the palette. At present, I can story my experience of losing my Dad, and I know myself to be one to return to create oil paintings, in time. Emily Carr once told Ira Dilworth, her good friend, the following:

When she was working on the first stages of a painting, trying to put down in pictorial form a subject for which she had made field sketches, she found it of great value to “word” her experiences. In this way, she said, the circumstances and all the details of the incident of place would come back to her more vividly and she could reconstruct them more faithfully than was possible with paint and canvas alone. (1967, p. iii)

Strength these last months has come from my growing understanding of reflexivity with the context of a pandemic (Finlay, 2017). Engaging in reflexivity practice through journaling and in art created, grows one’s sense of being and knowing (Fels, 2012). Carr (1967), experienced the joy of journaling and eventually moving her words, through oil onto colourful palettes. Practicing reflexivity matters, it helps identify the linkages between reflexivity practice (Finlay, 2002; 2012), and art created and critically viewed (Finlay, 2011).

Reflexive practice has been a rich blessing in the beginning of Covid-times, and it continues to be a gift now. To study the art and science of reflexive practice in tandem with art created, as a medium to express my reflexive practice, is something I have come to rest within (Finlay, 2012). This is especially relevant during pandemic times and times of loss.

Finally, in my loss, there is comfort that in my gardens flourish many Sweet William, in full bloom (see Figures 5 and 6).



Figure 6: Sweet William pink



Figure 5: Sweet William purple

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About the Author

Janet L. Kuhnke is a tenure-track, assistant professor in the baccalaureate-nursing program, School of Professional Studies at Cape Breton University. Before coming to the academy, Janet lived and worked as a clinical nurse and educator in rural communities in British Columbia, alongside Aboriginal members and communities. Janet is active in Wounds Canada as a Nurse Specialist in Wound, Ostomy and continence care, and advocates for prevention of diabetes related foot ulcers and amputations. Janet completed her doctoral studies in psychology at California Southern University; Dr. Brandon Eggleston supervised her. The metasynthesis conducted focused on the quality of life—spiritual and mental health well-being while living with diabetic foot ulcers; Two-Eyed Seeing principles guided this work and reflexive practice was alongside. Janet continues to coach and mentor students in baccalaureate and masters qualitative research projects and thesis.