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Flyboy: Using the Arts and Theater to Assist Suicidal Adolescents

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... the sun shone

As it had to on the white legs disappearing into the green
Water; and the expensive delicate ship that must have seen
Something amazing, a boy falling out of the sky,
Had somewhere to get to and sailed calmly on.

(“Musee des Beaux Arts,” W. H. Auden, 1979, p. 79)

Abstract

This article integrates story and the form of qualitative methodology known as arts-based inquiry. The authors use this approach to provide a case study of Kal, a 15-year-old boy who had unsuccessfully attempted to end his life by “flying” off his apartment balcony. The paper begins with orientation to the background of this case and to arts-based inquiry and case history and then proceeds with an imaginative re-creation of the involvement of Margie, Kal’s caregiver, in this case in the form of a letter written in role by her as Kal to his mother. Finally, the

authors discuss how arts-based representations can be used to positively affect mental health and to generate creative healing energy. In this presentation Kal is the leading character, and Margie, Kal's real-life teacher in a hospital-based mental health unit in Ontario, Canada, is the supporting actress. Through dramatic fictionalization of her work with Kal Margie found that "human learning can be renewed when teacher researchers use arts-based textual strategies to reflect on experience and invite others to respond to these inquiries" (Diamond & Mullen, 1999, p. 18).

Conceptual Framework

The Canadian Pediatric Society (1997) lists suicide as the second leading cause of injury-related death among Canadian teenagers: 13 suicides per 100,000 adolescents, the highest incidence occurring among young males. Every two hours, a young person in the United States commits suicide (American Association of Suicidology, 2004). It is not surprising, then, that the American Academy of Pediatrics has urged schools to develop curriculum addressing depression and suicide prevention (Kirchner, Yoder, Kramer, Lindsey, & Thrush, 2000). Moreover, a former U.S. surgeon general, David Satcher, has declared suicide a serious national health problem. "We blame the victim and stigmatize the surviving family," a reaction that serves only to "shroud suicide in secrecy," Satcher has said (U.S. Public Health Service, 1999, p. 4). As a society we need, then, he argues, to "develop and implement strategies to reduce the stigma associated with mental illness, substance abuse, and suicidal behavior and with seeking help for such problems" (p. 6). This stance toward the public health problem of suicide encourages a proactive move from shame and stigma to support.

Adolescents are the only age group among whom suicide, often an adverse effect of longstanding psychiatric illness, is on the rise (Martin, 2000; Rishel, in press). The prevalence of psychiatric disorders (e.g., mood swings, conduct disorders, severe anxiety, and psychosis) in cases of suicide is 80% or higher (Sakinofsky, Dyck, Kral, & Bland, 1998). Youth suicide rates have been more extreme in Canada than the United States; however, little research has addressed possible explanations for this trend (Leenaars & Lester, 1995; Sakinofsky & Leenaars, 1997).

Rishel (in press) has produced a nontraditional educational study of the suicide of a 14-year-old, Dalton. The researcher's narrative inquires into the impact of suicide on Dalton's teachers, administrators, and school community. Situated around the powerful and tragic story of this young person's suicide, Rishel's research specifically addresses the role of mentoring relationships and consciousness-raising about suicide as ways of improving the school experience for many adolescents.

Similarly, we use case study methodology to examine adolescent mental illness and the attempted suicide of the youth we call Kal. We use an arts-based strategy that van Manen (as cited in Barone, 2001, p. 136) refers to as *co-orientational grasping*, a process that promotes the empathetic adoption of another's perspectives through such literary and dramatic means as storytelling, monologue, and letter writing. Margie's images of Kal and the other young people whom she encountered in her hospital classroom from 2001 to 2003 also inform the research represented in this paper. These young people's lives were often clouded by suicidal ideation (having attempted to end one's life).

Cole (2001) and Barone (2001) are among those who argue for the use of such researcher-created, fictionalized accounts of self and other as a strategy of arts-based representation. Cole (2001) asserts that "the responsibilities associated with insider privilege must be felt and honored.

More than names must be changed to protect the innocent” (p. 169). Finley and Finley (1999) advocate the use of “fictionalized research stories” wherein the imagination helps to promote an understanding of “the lives of people whom [readers] might otherwise never meet” (p. 319). In addition to evoking empathy, vicarious experience can benefit both the researched and the researcher in other ways.

While a detailed elaboration of constructivism is beyond the scope of this article, reference to this perspective is necessary as orientation to the paper that follows here. Adherents to the constructivist paradigm posit that all knowledge is constructed from previous knowledge and that the structure of the language and constructs that people habitually use always influences the ways in which they perceive the surrounding world, including their place in it. Constructivist claims thus run contrary to positivist assumptions that “facts” making up the world are just “out there” awaiting their study. Constructivists further contend that “contrary to common-sense, there is no unique ‘real world’ that preexists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language” (Bruner, 1986, p. 95). Even adolescents do not just experience the world but have a hand in its construction. (See Schwandt [1994] for a thorough discussion of constructivism that includes different constructivist paradigms.)

Underscoring the vital role of constructivism in art and creativity, Bruner (1986) asserts, “Blake, Kafka, Wittgenstein, and Picasso did not find the worlds they produced. They invented them” (p. 97). Likewise, we here view constructivism as foundational to arts-based inquiry and personal development. When considered broadly as an epistemology, constructivism offers liberating ways of looking at the world by privileging multiple and marginal perspectives that, in turn, support alternative ways of sense-making even of attempted suicide.

To construct this portrait of Kal’s life, Margie had to listen carefully. Extending the process of imaginative co-construction, Margie then invited Carol and Patrick into the picture so that as coauthors they could hear Kal’s voice and respond to his confronting life and death issues. In *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, Shakespeare provides two of the most celebrated and artful evocations of suicide. The playwright represented these painful moments of self-doubt as self-overhearings. Through the use of such soliloquies or dramatic monologues, researcher-caregivers can allow real life characters to speak their thoughts out loud, presenting their conditions of mind and searching into their motives. Even as the soliloquies of such tragic heroes construct each self as a work of art, arts-based researchers can imagine their client-students in similar acts of self-representation. Toward this end, the narrative portrait we offer of Kal treats his experiences as loans by Kal of his consciousness to the authors’ vicarious experience and to that of the readers of this paper. We offer this set of stories, then, as the “literary constructions” that were drawn from Margie’s documented chronology of Kal’s life history, the “raw materials” for this research (Barone, 2001, p. 35). We accept responsibility for any liberties assumed in our effort to protect Kal’s right to confidentiality.

Part 1

Flyboy: The Background

Kal lived an isolated existence with his mentally ill mother and grandmother. He talked of how his maternal grandfather had been a real-life pilot and of how he wanted to be one, too. Kal was fascinated by the idea of flight and was even convinced that he could fly through the air. Voices issuing from the television set and his computer flight simulator told Kal that he could and must fly and that now was the time, tempting him to become a king of infinite space by “flying” from the balcony of his 11th story apartment late one winter night. Tempting Kal to break with the world.

But in the end Kal did not jump and plummet to his death like so many other suicidal teenagers or like Icarus in the poem that is the epigraph for this paper. Kal survived the ordeal, made a soft landing in a hospital-based mental health unit for children and adolescents, where he rested for three months. Margie, a teacher working in the mental health unit to provide him with refuge and care, met Kal during this hospitalization.

Over time, Kal learned to confide in Margie about his inner drive for flight—about his need to embrace weightlessness and to just let go. With her support and that of others, he grappled with the significance of these emotions and slowly learned to verbally express his fears, doubts, and dreams. In all likelihood, if his mother, the police, and hospital mental health professionals had not intervened, Kal would now be just another sad statistic. Kal's experiences are restoried here as those of rebirth, acceptance of mental illness, and willingness to reconstruct a life: as stories of no longer seeking to walk or write on air.

Arts-Based Inquiry

The literary, visual, and dramatic arts provide conceptual tools for understanding experience, inquiry, and co-constructed representation. Some examples of arts-based inquiries using fiction and performance/theatre/drama include Barone, 2001; Diamond and Mullen, 1999; Garoian, 1999; Mienczakowski, 1996; Mirochnik and Sherman, 2002; Mullen equals (=) Diamond, 2000; Mullen and Diamond, 2001; Rolfe, Mienczakowski, and Morgan, 1995; and Saldaña, 2003.

We conceptualize this present experiment in arts-based inquiry in three interrelated ways: (1) as morally preoccupied with imaginative experience and the liberating and uniting power of art that proceeds from it (Barone, 2001; Diamond & Mullen, 1999); (2) as a border-crossing “form of theoretical research [that applies] concepts from the arts, humanities, and social sciences to curriculum” (Pinar, Reynolds, Slattery, & Taubman, 1995/1996, p. 62); and, strategically, (3) as a means for rescripting critical social issues such as teenage suicide through aesthetic and dramatic approaches (Rishel, in press).

Theatrical and arts-based works sited in community-based public spaces, such as hospitals (Gray, 2003), prisons (Diamond & Mullen, 1999), and even the streets (Finley & Finley, 1999) can cut through the busy rhythm of daily life (always “somewhere to get to”) to dramatically affect the development of the players. For example, Gray's (2003) experimental work is in the form of performance taking place in hospitals: live bodies perform before audiences of doctors, nurses, and patients. He adds another layer of textured artistry through the interviews that he gives in the form of radio “performances.” Gray designs these performances to further his political and educational advocacy. Like Barone (2001), Gray illustrates how the interview can be treated as a performance. Through theatrical works Gray aims to encourage other researcher-artists to engage the broader public in dramatic scripts devoted to issues of social importance, such as illness.

Voice shifts to Margie: I was encouraged to use an interpretive case history form by reading Oliver Sacks' *Awakenings* (1990/1973) and Sigmund Freud's *Case Histories 11* (1990/1979), particularly those of the Rat Man (pp. 36-116) and the Wolf Man (pp. 233-345). From Sacks and Freud, I learned to write about my professional experiences involving, as in this case, working with young people with “suicidal ideation,” the medical classification for those who have tried to end their lives. In the writing I seek to protect the identifiable features of those whose lives have touched me. To collaboratively compose the fictionalized case history that we present here, we used informational pieces shared by Kal with me during the five-month period when we worked together. I have selected incidents that set the tone for his suicide attempt and have organized them in such a way as to encourage deep understanding of Kal's story.

This account stitches together fragments I gathered from my experiences and conversations with Kal. As Talburt (1999) writes, the very portrayal of such moments carries the powerful message that a “whole experience” is often beyond our reach and that parts will not always fit neatly together. With my constructedness or “sewedness” left showing as work in progress, then, I have altered some details. I do not claim to have achieved total historical accuracy or ultimate truth. Readers are encouraged to come to their own conclusions after reading Kal’s fictionalized case history, creating their own meanings and developing them further.

Constructivist Pedagogy through Dramatic Experience

Arts-based researchers engage with human dilemmas to gain richer, more complex understanding of particular phenomena. They can co-create dramatic scripts based on feedback from others, as Margie did first with Kal and then with her co-authors. We sought to write and play in and out of role, drawing on our imaginative capacities as sufferers and caregivers, imagining the suicidal adolescent as other to enable a further expansion of empathy.

As Dewey (1934/1980) wrote, the arts are for everyone, and art is consequently not exclusive to art galleries—or in this case theaters. We acknowledge that most people, including many arts-based researchers, do not have professional training in theater or even in the arts. Nevertheless, those who have not had formal arts training can perceive artistry and can think in the ways Dewey described as characterizing art-making. Like Booth (1994), we recognize and promote dramatic re-creation as a method of learning. Drama involves much more than a clumsy skit based on slapstick humor and self-consciously loud voices—and it also involves much more than memorizing (and being expected to act at the same time) long speeches written by others. Rather, drama provides us all with a process through which we can interpret our behavior or that of others and endow it with symbolic meaning so as to better experience the shared human condition.

We promote story drama here as a constructivist approach to collaborative script creation, dramatization, and professional development. Booth (1994) defines *story drama* as “improvised role-play based on a story . . . [It] allows [participants] to at once become the co-constructors of a story, the story itself and the characters living within the story” (p. 12). In story drama, the roles of “actors” and “spectators” are fluid, interactive, and interchangeable. People work collaboratively to co-create both individual and group understandings.

The story drama approach stands in opposition to strict dramatic conventions, which clearly define and separate the roles of actors and audience (Mullen = Diamond, 2000). A willingness to take a constructivist (story drama) approach to script development and dramatic performance can help us all “forefront the necessity of continuing to do our [arts-based] work even while making visible the many ways such work is (un)graspable, (im)possible, (un)intelligible, (un)knowable, and provisional” (Pillow, 2000, p. 22).

Richardson (1992), whose work provides an innovative example of fictionalized arts-based research text and self-study of the effects of such an approach, inspired us to explore fields of play. Richardson transformed the interview transcript of a single mother from the American South into a poem, reshaping the words this participant in the research had spoken. As a researcher-poet Richardson chose Louisa May as a test case among her interviewees precisely because the transcript of Louisa May’s words posed such a difficult and limiting problem: It was almost devoid of image, metaphor, and the other expressive features of poetry, while Louisa May the person was just the opposite. Similarly, while Kal had difficulties meeting the traditional demands of literacy, Margie felt that he had considerable reserves of creative imagination.

Richardson used the form of a dramatic monologue, a hybrid genre in which a lead character does all the talking, as in a one-person show. The power of such a monologue resides in the unfolding of the whole drama that proceeds in small but accumulating steps. Richardson's poem is thus a representation of a speech, a speaker (Louisa May), a listener (Richardson), and a specific setting (the American South). In this particular instance, while Louisa May is able to speak she cannot make things happen. The final portrait of Louisa May evokes her powerlessness (in person and situation) in ways that statistics, scientific classifications, and expository statements could not.

In addition, in a postmodern move or by way of formal innovation, Richardson (1992) then embedded the poem within her own first-person account of her experience of writing the poem—as Margie seeks to do here. Richardson reports having felt transformed and more integrated when her overactive researcher and suppressed poet selves found and reconciled with each other. Representing her inquiry as poetry allowed Richardson to decenter her unreflexive self and to create a space for her experiencing self. Richardson was left feeling both exhilarated and more cautiously contemplative about what “doing research” meant. To carry out research no longer seemed sterile, ritualized, and too narrowly conceived. In the end Margie felt encouraged but also exhausted and overwhelmed. Constructing an artful literary text that challenges and extends the ways in which people can respond to life and so deepening thought about the human condition is no easy task. Art is no easy default option.

Flyboy: The Case History (in Margie's Voice)

During their stay at the hospital-based mental health unit, I offer an educational program to the children and youth whom I meet. The setting is for acute care, the average length of stay is seven days, and the maximum caseload is 12 students. Some clients with more serious mental health concerns stay longer. Most bring their own schoolwork and course materials to avoid falling behind in their academics during hospitalization.

But what of falling behind in their lives? Like much progressive school practice, our educational program tries to support the goals of the mental health unit by enabling satisfaction for our students through creative, arts-based work rather than through competition with others to complete rote academic tasks. Within the hospital classroom we teachers work as caregivers who are ready to adapt our offerings to the needs of the individual student, substituting imaginative and personally relevant experiences for the more rigid demands of the traditional classroom. We challenge the notion that all students should be acculturated into a single way of knowing or behaving. Provision must be made for all to succeed in school and in life.

After being hospitalized for approximately three months, Kal became a “day patient” who participated in the school program from Monday to Friday. Born in Central America, he had migrated to the United States at 13 years of age. His mother's departure catapulted him into living with the extended family for two years. She had moved to Ontario to start a new life. This presented Kal with one of the most difficult times of his life. Although Kal admitted that he has a younger brother who still lives with relatives in his native country, not much more is known about his family. Kal proved not to be a careful chronicler of events and, owing to her own mental illness, neither did his mother. Whenever this topic of family life was raised, Kal, feeling pressured, would cleverly change the topic and leave me to wonder if he and his mother did not want others to know their story.

Instead Kal constantly fantasized about flying. He confessed that wings and flight had always entranced him. He was greatly attracted to the life of a commercial airline pilot, which his maternal grandfather apparently had been. Although Kal had not known his deceased grandfather in

person, he held onto the memories of this Daedalus figure (who is also missing from the Auden poem on the painting of Icarus in the Musee de Beaux Arts). These memories were sustained through Kal's mother's constant retelling of stories about her father. Kal desperately wanted to take flight himself, but mental illness may have prevented him from distinguishing between this dream as metaphor or symbol and its actual enactment or realization.

During the daytime in the hospital classroom with me, students worked on individual assignments. One of them who was there at the same time as Kal read and was enthralled by Golding's (1959) *Lord of the Flies*. We decided to all watch the black-and-white movie version about this group of British schoolboys stranded on a deserted island. Kal then talked about its every detail for days. He even helped a classmate with her dramatic presentation of her response to *Lord of the Flies* by making her a sharpened wooden spear and a fearsome, red and black "Jack" mask from plaster bandaging. (Jack is the "bad boy" or villain-tyrant who usurps the character Ralph's role as leader.) The other student used Kal's props, along with loud drumming music, to evoke Jack's dark leadership style. Kal seemed to fancy himself in the role of the brutal youth leader, Jack. However, because of what I perceived as Kal's mystical bent and his previous near-death experience, I pictured him as more like the fair, Christ-like Simon, who was scripted by Golding to be eventually martyred by the other boys.

One day, Ron, a hospital youth worker who assisted in our classroom, presented us with a book on the Concorde, the supersonic airliner. Always interested in wings, Kal flipped through its pages and shared a story with us, loudly declaring, "I flew on the Concorde when I came from my country to Canada." We did not respond because most of us knew that the Concorde flies only across the Atlantic. Once again, Kal may have been confusing his dreams with reality.

Kal went on to spend hours analyzing the flight diagrams in "his" Concorde book and drawing pictures of the Concorde's wings and air currents. "The Concorde reminds me of a giant white sea bird," he announced one day, and so he began constructing paper-bird Concordes that would later glide around the room. We mounted some of the Concorde models on the computers, while others sat on my desk. As I began the first draft of this paper, I recently found one of those paper planes lodged in a nosedive behind one of my storage cabinets. This struck me as perhaps an evocative symbol of Kal's being trapped, much of his potential left unrealized.

Following our responses to Golding's fable and after my encountering Kal's paper constructions, I encouraged him on to try a novel study of his own. It was difficult to find him one that was appropriate. "I have my own books to read," Kal would insist as he carried various texts to and from school without opening them. I suspected that he had never read a book. However, after some searching I located a high interest book on the Wright Brothers written in accessible vocabulary and aimed at teenagers. Kal was astonished to discover that the first Wright Brothers' airplanes were made of fabric stretched over wooden frames. Studying the pictures accompanying the text, he was also entranced to learn that the Wright Brothers had known many failures before finally getting their plane airworthy. Perhaps, I now realize, Kal would have benefited from the knowledge that failing is a fundamental part of building wings to fly (and of learning and life).

Since his arrival in Canada, Kal had not succeeded in school. His grade 8 year had been marred with absence. The school, I found, had little of his educational history on record and his Ontario Student Record file was nearly empty. Grade 9 was no different. Kal would not attend classes; instead, he wandered about the buildings and was often found hiding in the cafeteria or library. In January of grade 9, Kal stopped going to school altogether. No one, including a counselor, was ever able to coax him back. I once asked Kal to tell me about his early school days. All that he was able to share with me was that in the school that he attended the children all wore a uniform. Oh, and that he liked uniforms! I doubt that he ever attended much school and wondered

if even the school uniform was invented as part of his fantasized life as a pilot. Or as a tribute to Jack's tribe in Golding's novel.

Kal tried to hide that he could not read fluently. But one day the hospital psychiatrist requested that I test the level at which he was actually reading. I was reluctant, not wanting to embarrass Kal or possibly provoke a confrontation. But Kal, I once again found, was a smooth talker, always able to find ways to avoid doing things he did not want to. Although Kal had shown no interest in our classroom library, I reasoned that my knowing his reading level could help Kal to not only accomplish academic work but also to reduce his level of frustration. (I even identified a credit-earning course for him called "Essential English.")

At 15 years of age, Kal tested at a grade 2 reading level on the North American instrument that I administered. According to this normative account, Kal had poor decoding skills and no attack strategy for breaking down polysyllabic words. Because Kal's spelling was not conventional, this difficulty reading compounded his frustration when others could not understand what he had written. Sometimes he could not even read his own words. And yet I felt that, like Golding's Simon, he had a deep intuitive connection with more complex realms, eagerly digesting knowledge about airplanes and flight, recreating such stories and constructing model planes from them.

Kal also had a strong sense of story structure. Perhaps he had developed this ability from watching television. One day he presented me with a computer disk that contained adventure stories and romantic poems that he had composed, saying, "I thought that you would like these. I copied them from my home computer." Again, Kal surprisingly showed that he had some connection with the arts, far beyond mere achievement in literacy.

Kal's adventure stories reminded me of the plots of Bruce Willis' *Die Hard* films and of old movies about mummies. Like boys younger than Kal's age, Kal loved writing about swords lopping off heads, warrior kings, desert sandstorms, and recipes for magic potions written in black books. His poems reminded me of those written by e.e. cummings, not so much because of unconventional mechanical details as because of Kal's power to convey emotion very simply. Kal's poems were usually about love and longing and included someone named Maria.

Sometimes Kal would not come to school, calling in with the excuse that he was ill. But after some pressing he would admit to having been up late watching adventure movies. He had mistaken imagination as only a means of playful escapism rather than of development. The hospital staff were concerned that he was again becoming delusional.

During his time on the mental health unit, Kal decided that because he was feeling better he could stop taking his medication. Patients who begin feeling better following a period of psychosis often privately discontinue their prescribed medications only to have the psychosis return, and with all its original power. Kal's delusional, grandiose thinking and confusion returned in full force. And once again he was drawn toward taking flight from his apartment balcony, unable to distinguish between flying to attain his dreams and falling to end his life. Rerunning the original scenario, his mother again called 911.

This time Kal was hospitalized for a week. Eyes downcast, he looked embarrassed when I later asked him what had happened. Stumbling, he muttered, "The police brought me back to the hospital. I don't want to sleep here." Kal seemed worried about his mother being alone. (We never learned what had happened to the grandmother.) Kal also shared with me that during his initial hospitalization he had been preoccupied with how to secure a screwdriver so as to remove the window in his room and thus escape into the air. He could grasp how that the entire mental health unit had been purposefully designed to ensure the safety of high-risk children and adolescents like him. The windows were permanently sealed, and tools and other sharp objects were prohibited. If found, they were confiscated.

At the end of June, just as the school year was ending, Kal became very agitated. During the previous weeks, the youth worker and I had planned for Kal's entry into a high school in September. Kal even visited the new school and seemed to like it. All of the other teens in the mental health unit at that time were counting the minutes until our school year would be over. In the company of his peers, Kal seemed to share their impatience and excitement. However, I felt that Kal was holding something back. Although it seemed that he always wanted to be like others his age, I think that he really felt quite different. Perhaps for this reason Kal had difficulty leaving our school environment (even though it was in a hospital), where he had made friends and experienced some success as well as belonging. Not unlike a prisoner he was perhaps feeling apprehensive at the prospect of reentering the real world (Diamond & Mullen, 1999).

I knew that any change was difficult for Kal, even if it was a healthy one. The projected move from the hospital caused Kal great distress, and he missed part of the final week of school, again claiming to be ill. The youth worker telephoned Kal at home and reaffirmed the value of finishing things, saying goodbye, and accomplishing transition, but Kal continued to resist.

One day at midmorning I took a break from the hospital classroom and upon my return found a large red gift bag plopped against my locked door. Curious, I opened the classroom, placing the bag on a desk just as Kal appeared. He insisted that he was feeling better and gestured, "Oh, and I bought this for you." Fumbling in the bag I found a monumental opalescent plaster sculpture of some tropical birds with gold tipped wings. Taking a deep breath, he swallowed and added, "I know you like birds, and these are like the ones from my country. Margie, please remember me."

After Kal left, I read back over my notes (they later served as the basis for the dramatic monologue that follows) and saw that I had depicted Kal in a particular way—as worried about his prospects for the future; taking refuge in wishful thinking; reducing tension through cigarette smoking, drinking coffee, and diverting himself with television programs; tending to ignore his problems; and keeping to and blaming himself. He needs help, I had written, with learning how to deal with his problems, working hard and achieving, investing in friends his own age, belonging to a group beyond his immediate family, enlisting support for those sharing his plight, focusing on the positive, and engaging in physical activity. I was also aware that despite my empathy for Kal my account had been spun out of an abstract notion of "productive coping." Every representation, including what I had written about Kal and his own works, tells the story of its creator.

Part 2: Flyboy Script

With continued writing collaboration with her co-authors, Margie next extended what she has learned about Kal into a dramatic, fictionalized research text. Writing as if she were Kal composing a letter in which he contemplates taking his life, Margie transformed his case history into "A Letter to Mom," a form adapted from Ackroyd and Supple's (1998) "A Letter to Momma." The aim of this fictional letter from Kal to his mother was twofold: (1) to be used as a starter to assist other caregivers in creating scripts involving other adolescent suicide attempts and (2) to foster an aesthetic experience for us all that might lead to deepened understandings of and empathy toward adolescent suicide.

Dear Mom,

I am worried about my business. We are losing money. The stock exchange numbers on the television show that my business is crashing. Those numbers are on every channel. I write down the numbers as fast as I can, but I just

cannot keep up with them. They are always there, and they come so fast. How can I build the casino complex in South Beach? If I only had enough money to build it, then we would be rich.

Tell that lady not to come here anymore. She looks at us and she asks me a lot of questions. I will not let her in the next time.

Mom, do you still have money to loan to me? If I can just get these business numbers to work out, then everything will be all right. I need to call my broker. He said that everything would be okay. I just need to invest a small amount, and I will make billions.

I pace the floor. I am so worried. How can I support you in the future? What will we do? I am so frightened. How can I take care of you? I hated it when you left me for two years. Why did you want to come to Ontario? Will I ever see my brother again?

I hear you snoring. I do not want to wake you. You have such trouble falling asleep. Did you take your medication today?

I cannot stay still. My legs are always moving.

I need some cigarettes. How can I get them? It is too late to go to the store. I am going to search for some butts on the balcony. It's freezing cold outside. The sliding door is frozen shut. But I must get out there. I need a cigarette. I know that I can shake it open
. . . . I've done it before.

I hate my life. I am lonely. I cannot sleep, either, and my head aches. I will make myself another black coffee and then go into my flight simulator. I love flying low over the islands. I fly so low that I can see the tops of the trees and the flocks of birds.

I am going to call my father. What time is it in Los Angeles? I don't have his phone number. I can't do anything. Maybe my father has some money to save my business.

Who am I? Who am I? Who am I? I don't know who I am. I want to be a pilot like your father. I know that I can do it. I just need to finish high school. But I am not going to school. I am going to stay at home and run my business. I don't need to get up in the morning.

I don't want to take my medication. I did not take any tonight. I am worried that if I take medication, I will become like you. Then I won't be able to take care of you. Who will take care of you? Who will take care of me? I have to go now. I really need a smoke.

I wish I were a giant sea bird. — Kal

Part 3: Conclusion and Implications

Finley and Finley (e.g., 1999) offer a picture of homeless youth: a “research story” of feeling lonely, hating oneself and one's life, and self-medicating with addictive substances to ease emotional pain. Whether Kal is actually homeless or whether homeless youth are disproportionately suicidal may not be the point. What is clear is that as researcher-educator-caregivers we have a responsibility to compassionately and respectfully imagine the often difficult and at-risk lives of others.

Margie still keeps in touch with Kal and his new teachers. She has visited him at his new school, and he in turn has visited her at the mental health unit. Kal's teachers report that he is attending a special education program at a regular high school. He still misses days occasionally, but his teachers are watching for any self-destructive patterns and seem willing to extend emotional support when necessary. Kal has become better at expressing his fears and other emotions that may help others to help him. While his mental health appears stable, a community psychiatrist continues to monitor him closely.

Currently, Kal is taking courses for high school credit and completing homework assignments. One of his stories has even been published in the school's newspaper. Proud of his accomplishments, Kal claims to be continuously learning. Of course, he still talks about flying and becoming a pilot. During his last hospital visit, Kal announced that he had even spoken with the school guidance counselor about joining the Canadian Air Cadets. Perhaps he did learn something important from the Wright Brothers' early attempts at flight, and especially from his own.

We close by highlighting the usefulness of the arts—in this case, theater—to assist researchers and caregivers in learning about teenage mental illness, particularly suicide attempts. We propose that when artistic forms are exploited meanings can be constructed and empathy enlisted that might otherwise prove elusive. Our understandings and identification are influenced not only by *what* (the content) we think and feel about but also by *how* (in what form, whether report, poem, play, novel, or film) we choose to represent it. Margie had originally written about Kal using a case study approach but then came to realize that what was needed was a more imaginative dramatic monologue. Unlike a case study, where the writer retains control of the work and orients the reader throughout the reader's experience of the text, a dramatist invites multiple realizations of what the dramatist has written. A play text first reaches a director, then a cast and producer together with the director, and finally the reader-audience, evoking different reactions at each stage of the play's production (see, e.g., Mirochnik & Sherman, 2002).

Margie's dramatic monologue made it possible for her co-authors to share in the intensity of Kal's dilemmas as Margie had experienced and recreated them. This boy desperately wanted to please his mother but without falling victim to the family history of mental illness. Too much had already been asked of this young caregiver of others—attending regular school and religiously taking his medication are two such examples. If Kal could not be a pilot, he perhaps concluded that he would amount to nothing. No more than a discarded cigarette butt.

The arts-based inquiry we have presented here exemplifies that a motive underlying much education research is (inter)personal: We express our shared need for promoting self- and other-development and for supporting internal change while encouraging external social reform. We commit to inquiries like this one by representing a set of experiences (Kal's attempted suicide and Margie's seeking to help and understand him); by interpreting the individual and shared voices; and by learning from others, including the subject (Kal) or student-client.

By representing self and others as characters in stories, arts-based inquirers seek to help researcher-caregivers to engage more productively with their clients. Arts-based forms, such as self-narratives and depictions of others like Kal, can include written and performed monologues that

provoke the client's, as well as the caregiver's, development. They may even allow the bonds of previous paradigmatic and treatment-related constraints to be burst.

Arts-based inquiry provides one key to studying the development of disturbed youth, their caregivers, and even researchers into their condition (McCammon & Smigiel, 2004). Forms such as dramatic monologue, fiction and nonfiction, drawings, models, and poems may challenge and thus extend our current understandings of youth, including of the most severe test of all, death by suicide. The more we can dwell within others and ourselves and can "articulate reasons why we are what we are, do what we do, and are headed where we have chosen, the more meaningful our life will be" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988, p. 11)—and that of others.

In Guare's (1990) novel (and film) *Six Degrees of Separation*, Ouisa, the art dealer's wife, describes herself as a work of art, color without structure, "a collage of unaccountable brushstrokes" (p. 62). She asks, "How much of your life can you account for? How would each of us describe and account for our own life?" After this attempt to account for some of Kal's life, we wonder how we might each describe and account for our own. What sources might usefully be drawn upon to help this ongoing process? What might we wish not to confront or share? As McCammon and Smigiel (2004) observe, sensitive issues may arise when "real life narratives" (p. 23) are being used. Among these considerations, we may find "power, respect, truthfulness, representation of another, and managing multiple interpretations of one narrative"—all of which need to be "managed very carefully, and with sensitivity" (p. 23).

All of us on occasion may feel tempted to turn away from the harshness of human suffering. After all, such events serve to remind us all too vividly that suicide, for example, is within reach of those whom we cherish most. But our willingness to "get closer" to "something amazing [like] a boy falling out of the sky" may take us on our own flights of transformative thought and action. Becoming our own flyboys and girls.

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