

Independent Scholars

Pam Blamey and Lena Volkova

Thresholds of change

Abstract:

Preparation for and recovery from breast cancer surgery can be a layered process, involving intra- and inter-personal activities and reflection. There is evidence of the efficacy of these processes for recovery and survival. This research looks at how, on an intra-personal level, journaling, poetry writing and self-prescribed bibliotherapy boded well for recovery. On an inter-personal level, ritual with friends and digital story-making also assisted recovery. Indeed, these experiences may be helpfully shared with others in the same predicament.

Biographical notes:

Pam Blamey is a creative arts therapist with 28 years' experience in the counselling field. She holds a Master of Mental Health, Art Therapy (UQ) and a Graduate Diploma and Bachelor of Social Science (QUT) and is a Professional Member of the Australian Counselling Association (ACA). Pam specialises in using fairy tales, mythology and oral storytelling to examine personal and social issues, and to foster meaning-making, problem-solving and wellbeing.

Lena Volkova is a transmedia storytelling facilitator and producer. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Literary Studies (Moscow State University), a Graduate Diploma in Museum Studies (Deakin University), and a Master's Degree (Research) in Creative Industries (QUT). Her artistic practice includes digital storytelling, creative life writing and oral history, exploring their therapeutic capacity.

Keywords:

Cancer – unconventional wisdom – shift – mythology – digital story

Introduction

The paper is co-authored by two creatives, arts therapist Pam Blamey and transmedia storytelling producer Elena Volkova. It documents the tangential journey of writing about a film, seen in the peripheral vision of imagination through words.

In April 2018, Pam was diagnosed with early breast cancer and reflected on her experience in a prose piece called ‘My breast cancer story’. She had a mastectomy in May. In the days between the diagnosis and seeing the surgeon again, she had the idea of making a plaster cast of her breast in a farewell ritual with some friends, which she called her Sacred Women’s Business Boob Ritual. Because her daughter lives overseas and therefore could not be present, she also decided to ask Elena, a transmedia producer, to film the ceremony. But as they thought about it more, the idea of a tangible record and its potential for others going through similar experience prompted them to create a digital story of the event that, apart from cast-making, included tea and cake, singing, intentions, affirmations, and poetry-writing and sharing. From this moment on they became co-authors of what later evolved into a digital film [*Thresholds of change*](#) (2018).

Surgery for breast cancer is a private journey: it takes time to unveil the story, layer by layer, as it is revealed to more and more people. As an art therapist specialising in fairy tales and myth, Pam found parallels between her story and the ancient Sumerian story of Inanna’s descent to the Underworld. Although she has returned to the ‘Upper World’ with ideas for working with women in the community who are going through similar experiences, it took six months to feel confident and comfortable enough to present a paper at the 2018 AAWP Conference, and another few months to share her experiences with a wider audience in both this article and the upload of a digital film to an unlisted YouTube channel. An important aspect of this journey was articulated by the producer of the film, Elena Volkova. She said: ‘It’s not your story only! You can’t keep it to yourself. When you invite others, it becomes part of the community’. As a result of this statement, Pam Blamey and Elena Volkova co-wrote this paper, which reflects on their experiences of crossing thresholds of change.

Research methods and process

The digital story co-created by Pam and Elena reflects their ongoing exploration of ways that lived experience can be shared in the form of stories, which sometime draw on parallels with mythology. When preparing for surgery, Pam considered that creation of a ceremony – a Sacred Women’s Ritual in the company of friends – would augur well for her recovery through garnering social support. As stated by Shelley Taylor, ‘The solace provided by the tending of others disengages stress systems, an effect that benefits almost every biological system we have’ (2002: 80). This is further corroborated by Kroenke, who says,

Women with larger personal social networks, defined as the web of social relationships that surround an individual, have often been shown to have better breast cancer survival and larger social networks have been associated with lower mortality generally. (2018: 629)

There is also evidence suggesting the intra- and inter-personal benefits of journaling and digital storytelling and of supportive relationships for successful recovery from major life upheavals (Kalshed 2013; Taylor 2002).

Digital storytelling is a community arts practice. One of the founders, Daniel Meadows, described it as ‘an elegant and economic means of self-representation based on personal collections of still photographs coupled with a voice-over narration’ (Meadows & Kidd 2009: 95). Digital storytelling can be a generative process, a story circle that links tellers (Hartley 2009: 32) in an interactive process of co-creation. It results in the creation of digital stories that commonly use historical, aspirational and recuperative themes (McWilliam 2009: 53). Democratic by nature, digital storytelling potentially addresses social issues and enables previously untrained and ‘unheard’ people to produce personal stories spoken in their own voice. This experience is empowering, appears to have therapeutic value, and allows the participants to renegotiate their notion of self (Meadows & Kidd 2009: 105-106).

According to Dr Catherine Laing, an Assistant Professor in the Faculty of Nursing at the University of Calgary Canada who investigated the effects of digital storytelling on cancer patients, it was not the cancer that survivors were struggling with so much as the emotional fallout of their cancer – be it damaged relationships, a shattered body image or impaired physical or cognitive function. After completion of the digital stories, the patients reflected on their experience. One said, ‘I think my digital story can influence people that are going through cancer or any chronic illness or difficult problem.’ Another participant described an experience in which someone had reached out to her from another country because she had seen her digital story on the Internet: ‘She saw it in Italy and contacted me if I wanted to be her friend and she has a sister with the same illness.’ Many storytellers mentioned that creating the stories had emotional benefits or a therapeutic effect, as the digital storytelling process gave them an opportunity to reflect on an experience in a way that they had not done before (Laing 2017).

Elena witnessed the ceremony through the lens of her camera and, at the same time, remained an active participant in the story circle, sharing the stories and writing the poetry and affirmations. She made a tangible record in the form of a video film. Using hindsight to reflect on her experience, she created the digital story *Thresholds of change*. It created an interesting dynamic in which both Pam and Elena were the (auto)biographers and the ethnographers in this project, Pam as a survivor and Elena as a witness and a record keeper (biographer and ethnographer) of a transformative process. Autobiographers may write about the moments and events perceived to have significantly influenced the trajectory of their life, after which life does not seem quite the same (Bochner & Ellis 1992; Couser 1997; Denzin 1989). Likewise, in the ceremony, Pam and Elena were learning and sharing stories, writing poetry and scrutinising the significance of their lives in the light of a potentially terminal illness.

The short form of the digital story condenses what is being experienced to its very core and leads to insights and sometimes to a healing catharsis. The art of storytelling reflects the authors’ desire to ‘explain things’ and create meaning. It potentially establishes the significance of a life that becomes validated through telling a story and

having it accepted by an audience. It is a vehicle for sharing wisdom gained by experiences. The project is based on an assumption that meaning is socially constructed by individuals. The world, or reality, is not a fixed, single, agreed upon, or measurable phenomenon. Instead, multiple constructions and interpretations of reality are in flux and change over time (Merriam 2002: 3-4).

Our respective practices in art therapy and transmedia storytelling suggest that telling one's story to an interested and compassionate 'other' who is not a friend or a family member, facilitates the processes of interpretation and coming to terms with reality, while also creating a safe distance between storytellers and the traumatic events they may disclose. The process of *telling* life stories encourages a focus on what is important, filters out insignificancies and sometimes charts a road to recovery. Storytellers may become able to look at their story from the outside and examine it as an 'artefact'. At this point, the destructive power of a traumatic event may start to decrease, so that it becomes a biographical fact, a memory. Therefore, the aim of the Sacred Women's Boob Ritual itself, the filming of it, and subsequent creation of a digital story was to understand interpretations made at particular points in time and in a particular context. Through her research and artistic practice, Elena, the producer of *Thresholds of change*, collected a significant amount of data that supports the premise of the transformative power of storytelling. She uses the term 'transmedia' and its 'tools' to help storytellers unpack complex phenomena.

'Sharing' is a key aspect of digital storytelling. The success of YouTube shows that the Internet has matured as an audio-visual medium, and that of Facebook and Instagram indicate a broad hunger for human contact in the digital age. Arguably, we live in a confessional society where many are capable of and willing to tell their story and share it with their immediate family or the whole world. A distinctive attribute of transmedia storytelling is the delivery of a single story over multiple channels that only makes sense when all elements across the channels work together. It creates a rich multi-layered environment, a story world that can be experienced in a variety of ways (Dena 2004). It is also about what is happening in between the forms: in conversations, in interactions, in diary entries. Postdoctoral research scholar at Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Xiaochang Li, claims in 'Transmedia as intertext and multiplicity' that 'transmedia isn't just about multiple stories or versions, but about creating a rich in-between space, an archive of shared meaning in-between different parts of the story. In short, a universe' (2010).

A universe is a beautiful metaphor for a human life that the authors attempted to explore and re-create by means of ritual and digital storytelling. The ritual created a fertile in-between space, generating poetry writing and reciting, the making of the mould, filming and photographing, singing, and reflecting. Being fully present in what was happening was a creative act in its own right. Working on the digital story was a process of meaning-making where still images captured the quiet moment of reflection and writing, and video captured the multiple creative processes involved in the ritual itself.

When working together on the digital story, Pam and Elena engaged in the process of meaning-making through what Burgess and Klæbe (2009) would term a multi-modal, co-creative and collaborative work. It was important for the film to be made because

Pam's daughter lives overseas; this was a way for her to be included when the film was uploaded to an unlisted YouTube channel. The authors' decision to publish the story online, even in a limited way, is backed by research suggesting the social and therapeutic value of storytelling that uses digital medium. For example, Pennebaker (2007) argues that self-disclosure through online resources can increase perceived social support and subjective indicators of well-being. Disclosure leads to cognitive changes and can enable people to come to a different understanding of their circumstances and devise supportive social strategies.

Sharing the project with a wider audience also has significance for those women recently diagnosed with breast cancer and contemplating surgery. As evident from the research, making digital stories creates significant outcomes that are not always tangible. Participants report a change in attitudes in their immediate family and larger community resulting from the viewing of their digital stories. People in their community become more engaged and interested, thus creating a sense of self-worth for the makers of the stories (Burges & Klæbe 2009).

For Pam, the process brought validation of womanhood and sisterhood. She became aware of her gratitude for the nurturing female friendship she had experienced. Working on the digital story after the surgery helped her to sum up the experience, allowing her to move on. The processes of piecing together facts and emotions, reflecting on what was experienced during the ceremony, choosing still images of participants and generic images from open sources on the Internet – of seeing again and re-living the experience of the ceremony – enabled her to find the courage to live and continue her journey back to the 'Upper World', after experiencing the 'underworld' of surgery and sacrifice. When Pam saw the completed digital story for the first time, she felt that it allowed her to examine her experiences as if through a magnifying glass. It created a sense of agency and ownership of her story. For Elena, witnessing the ceremony and creating a tangible record of it brought a better understanding of her own journey as a creative practitioner and as a woman. Through filming, the potential trauma of impending surgery became a work of art. It also created a safe distance for Pam to reflect on crossing the threshold of change and discovering her courage. She found that her experience could be beautiful and empowering for her as well as for others who witness the ceremony, potentially across the globe.

When the digital story was finally uploaded to an unlisted YouTube channel, Pam sent the link to all the participants, asking for their permission to use the piece more widely, and for comments and feedback. She also sent the link to her daughter and some friends who did not participate in the ceremony; the ones in her peripheral vision, so to speak. Everyone gave their permission and some of the comments were:

- Wow Mum, just wow! Thank you so, so much for sharing this with me. I did need a few tissues, so thanks for the warning, but on the whole, I found this incredibly inspiring and lifting and hopeful. I am so glad that you had amazing women around you to support you through this. I have learnt a lot over the past 2 years; one of the biggest being that shared experiences bond, shared pain lessens and shared successes inspire.
- This is a spectacularly well-made and realistic expression of the vagaries of life and the heartfelt progression through change to something more.

- This is a wonderful video, record and document, Pam. Amazing. I especially was moved by the part where you say how it felt to be ‘indulged’ and seen. I also found the way you wove the Inanna myth with the getting ready for surgery - being completely stripped and having an identity bracelet, in case you forgot who you were! I think there will be a lot of people who will benefit and be supported by your sharing of your story.
- What a beautiful and deeply moving sharing. What beautiful stories and gestures rose within this moment on your path. Thanks for sharing your humanity and inviting ours to the table with you.
- What a gentle video and caring. The Amazon warrior mythology is an obvious one but instead I see this other woman, steady and competent, earthed, ensouled with tribe and joy. On the ground not on a horse. Carrying a cloth not a spear.
- This film is SO beautiful. It gave me faith in the humble yet enduringly powerful ways of women. Our creativity, our caring, our sharing, our rituals and wisdom. The honesty and power of how you tell your story. Your voice is beautiful and clear. Your face so genuine, and open and willing to meet the experience. Share this video, touch women’s hearts, let us see you. Let your work keep unfolding from the depth of your journey and from the ways you know to be creative, connected and steeped in mythology.
- I have just viewed your lovely/insightful/moving film. It is a wondrous piece of art and has moved a potentially harsh and cold medical procedure to a life experience that is inspiring. I am not suggesting that all women must cross this threshold, but if she MUST, then this is a film to behold and embrace. I wish that someone had showed it to me before I underwent my life altering procedure.
- What a beautiful film. I loved the combination of stills and film and your narration. It was such an honour to be invited to your ritual. I think it is a compassionate offering to others experiencing cancer and a wonderful educational tool for health workers.

Thresholds of change (script)

The digital story *Thresholds of change* combines video footage and still images with voiceover narration by the cancer survivor and author of an essay that provided a foundation for the script (Pam). The videorecording by Elena took place in a private house in Brisbane.

The voiceover narration muffles the ambient sounds of a suburban garden. The titles are followed by a selection of the photographs from Pam’s archive and the photographs of the participants taken on the day of the event.

In April 2018 I was diagnosed with early breast cancer.

The diagnosis was a jolt that caught me totally off guard. My life was forging ahead in what I love to do. I didn’t ask why me, but why now?

Hello. My name is Pam Blamey. I am officially a crone, and following my bliss I indulge my passion for sharing my knowledge of the depth and therapeutic value of fairy tales, having been introduced to Joseph Campbell and Carl Gustav Jung as a mature aged student aspiring to do my bit for the world.

Along the way I have built up a collection of books on myth and fairy tales.

I turned my attention to thinking about and planning what I called my Sacred Women's Business Boob Ritual. 'Limitations can evoke creativity'; I felt this: the limitations of the impersonality of the hospital and its systems somehow prompted the memory that my friend Denise had a papier-maché torso in her house, and the situation of my daughter living on the other side of the world evoked the idea of a tangible farewell to my breast witnessed by a circle of friends.

In contrast to *submitting* to the public hospital system, to strangers in a multi-disciplinary team who will take care of me as part of their job, my Sacred Women's Business Boob Ritual is an *action* that I have complete control of, by asking my friend Denise to host it and make the mould for me, by inviting my special friends, chosen others, to accompany me on this journey, by allowing others to witness the mould-making, by acknowledging with my friends my sacrifice of my breast, my descent to the underworld of anaesthesia and cutting.

Unsurprisingly, I thought of the epic of Gilgamesh, the descent of Inanna into the Underworld where Inanna, Queen of Heaven decides to visit her sister Ereshkigal, Goddess of the Underworld, to attend the funeral of Ereshkigal's husband Gugalanna.

What will *I* learn in the underworld, what will *I* return with to the world, to my consciousness? What am I being initiated into? What is the Self asking of me? There is always a need for sacrifice in the service of growth, culling and pruning, not as a propitiation for sin, but as a natural cycle of transformation.

This story resonated strongly with my Sacred Women's Business ritual.

As I wrote to a far-away Canadian friend:

I have had the best afternoon with eight of my best Australian girlfriends! When all those coming had arrived and had a cup of tea we sat around the dining table and introduced ourselves, saying how they had met me. After that I led the singing of a little ditty.

Video starts here. Women are singing, then the voiceover narration muffles all other sounds.

Then we moved to the lounge where tea candles were set up on the coffee table and everyone lit a candle and stated their intention – for themselves, for me or for a loved one going through a similar ordeal. The intentions were so beautiful, they went straight to my heart.

The women state their intentions on camera; the video of cast-making follows.

The next thing was for me to get ready for the cast-making. This took place on the semi-enclosed veranda, where I leaned my breast into a bowl of dental alginate.

My boob came out of the mould very easily and then the plaster of Paris was poured in and left to dry. While all that was happening, the women ate and chatted and laughed, and then some of them settled down to writing a poem – 'Ode to my breasts', or some such. Once more gathered round the dining table, they read out their poems, or some poems they had brought with them and again, they were so moving or funny and lovely.

I had taken some nice papers along, so now I have tangible memories of what they said – and more.

Three of the participants recite their letters and odes.

One of them was prompted by the blue colour of the plaster, it was a poem of Paris and Aphrodite.

A participant recites her poem.

I felt so indulged, so seen, valued and loved.

A selection of images replaces the video. They are sourced from the Internet to illustrate the process of transition that Pam was going through. The first two photographs of the Royal Brisbane Women's Hospital where Pam had her operation are followed by the images of the ancient stone carvings depicting the story of Inanna's descent.

Operation day.

In the Gilgamesh myth, 'The gate-keeper takes Inanna's jewellery and clothes as she passes each of the seven gates to the underworld as preparation.'

I felt this in my process too, in the undressing and dressing for the ritual of the operating theatre; the removal of rings, earrings and watch and leaving them at home, the changing into hospital gown and putting on sexless paper panties, hairnet, pressure stockings and paper theatre shoes, and finally an identity bracelet on wrist and ankle.

How will *I* return? What will I do with my energy and how will my 'return' affect my relationships? How will I 'assume my full identity'?

'There one stands naked before the all-seeing eyes of the dark goddess ... We have been seen and thus can exist. But we must unveil and exhibit ourselves naked.' How will I balance the upper world with the underworld? With as much awareness and equanimity as I can muster, hopefully, by embracing change and not clinging to stasis and permanence and certainty. By embracing the play of opposites in a creative, relative and flexible way and surrendering to the process of earth's organic rhythm.

The last image of all the participants of the ritual congregated on the veranda in a friendly embrace-circle.

I am reminded of a song I learned many years ago: 'She changes everything she touches, and everything she touches changes.'

We hear the recording of the group singing of a little ditty they sang earlier. This singing encircles the story of the ritual and creates a visual and auditory closure.

The logic behind the shift between the photographs and the video is to emphasize the difference between the gradual step-by-step and somewhat forced process of preparation for the operation with its methodical, clinical approach to life events represented by the chain of changing images – versus the free flow of life with its creativity and unpredictability captured by video.

Conclusion

The digital story co-produced by Pam Blamey and Elena Volkova reflects their desire to share lived experience in the form of stories, sometimes drawing parallels with the world of mythology. This ritual ceremony created by Pam and filmed by Elena is deeply rooted in a narrative of feminine spirituality, mythology and the work of C. G. Jung, as well as the collegial synergy of social support. This article supports other research indicating intra- and inter-personal benefits of storytelling, and also of supportive relationships for successful recovery from major life upheavals. It demonstrates that the short form of digital storytelling can lead to insights through engagement in the process of meaning-making through a multi-modal and collaborative work. When published, such a work also potentially benefits others, including women recently diagnosed with breast cancer and contemplating surgery.

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