

Gasp. Struggle. Let Go

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Article abstract

This writing explores what continues to arise after my cancer diagnosis. A cancer diagnosis enlivens the question of what it means to live well with the Earth and its multi-dimensional beings and provides a necessary push to step out from the confines of a self and toward and into the wild fray of this life. I interpret my lived experiences through life writing. Readers and listeners might be drawn into recognition of their inescapable ecological interdependence. The necessity of cultivating an ability to listen and interpret the world and the human and other-than-human kinships becomes undeniable as I engage in life-writing and photography. Listening to words that arise in my writing and reviewing the photos I take continues to be my way of taking a journey toward learning to be open to the fullness of life, how life is lived, how life can be remembered and suffered and let go. Through this study, I am learning the necessary steps to unforget what I need and what the Earth might need of me. Cancer offers an opening for the practice of life-writing and of making sense of being in the world and of understanding the offerings that arrive when I nurture a commitment to care for the world and myself.

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GASP. STRUGGLE. LET GO.

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Kate McCabe's research interests in Education at SFU began with a commitment to nurturing a more complex understanding of what it means to be in relationship to others, to herself, and to the forest and ocean that she walks daily in Vancouver, British Columbia. When cancer arrived, many things loosened, and openings showed themselves. Fear, surprise, laughter, and sighs continue to create new pathways. Along the journey she takes photos, writes, gathers light and shadow and words, and, in the process, new openings are inspired, and she finds she has become a more compassionate teacher, partner, friend, and lover of the earth.

Abstract: This writing explores what continues to arise after my cancer diagnosis. A cancer diagnosis enlivens the question of what it means to live well with the Earth and its multi-dimensional beings and provides a necessary push to step out from the confines of a self and toward and into the wild fray of this life. I interpret my lived experiences through life writing. Readers and listeners might be drawn into recognition of their inescapable ecological interdependence. The necessity of cultivating an ability to listen and interpret the world and the human and other-than-human kinships becomes undeniable as I engage in life-writing and photography. Listening to words that arise in my writing and reviewing the photos I take continues to be my way of taking a journey toward learning to be open to the fullness of life, how life is lived, how life can be remembered and suffered and let go. Through this study, I am learning the necessary steps to unforget what I need and what the Earth might need of me. Cancer offers an opening for the practice of life-writing and of making sense of being in the

world and of understanding the offerings that arrive when I nurture a commitment to care for the world and myself.

Keywords: cancer; poetry; life writing; unforgetting; photography

Figure 1.

Unforgetting (all photography by Kate McCabe)

**Gasp. Struggle. Let go**

Regard. I spoke this word years ago at the beginning of my doctoral journey; a word that found its way to me as my classmates and I prepared to give our presentations before Winter break. Pulsing anticipation, expectation, projection, and yearning thrummed inside the classroom walls (and our hearts) during those early days of inquiry into why we were studying and what we hoped to gain (or offer) in the process. In those early days I found I needed a place to rest when my heartbeat and breath became shallow. The word *regard* held a quiet place for me to consider, contemplate, and think about the community of learners that was forming in my midst, that was shaping me and that I was shaping in return. It gave me a place to rest.

The word meant more to me than careful observation. In my witnessing, I began to practice a form of care for myself and for the things I regarded. The more I regarded the world around me, the more I came to believe the words of Beth Brant (1994) when she wrote, “we have always known that acts of love are the very reason we are here” (p. 47). By attending to this word and letting it guide me, I awoken to the patterns of dark and light in the world and to my obligations to the Earth and to myself.

Over the last six years of study, I have begun to cultivate an ability to be still. I do so, in part, through writing simple poetic expressions, which I often place along the right margin, to remind myself of the need to create spaces for contemplation, inquiry, and interpretation of life experiences.

The task of our human life

is to find free spaces

and learn to move therein (Gadamer, 1986, p.59).

Balanced against my thigh,
the rod does not wait for the fish
but for my breathing
to let go.

My recognition of *regard*, as a form of witness, for and of my life and its relationships to people, places, and things has been brought into focus through life writing (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). I share stories to model my vulnerability and commitment to being open where I had once been closed. I am learning that cancer is an emotional and physical wound that has created an opening for life events to spill out and onto the page. There is more than one story to tell and each story changes, re-stories itself, with or without my help (Raspberry, 2012), and does not care if I am unsettled in the process. Writing has helped that which was roiling to work its way out. Memories of these events are part of me, and life writing has helped me be mindful of the experience of cancer, and its connections that spring to mind, often when they are most unwanted. Life writing requires me to step back into a place of not knowing and of forgetting; that my words are openings that help me move toward making sense of my experiences without determining or imposing final meanings.

Life writing has become an invitation.

Unravelling my experiences through writing frees me from the stories others have bound me to. Unravelling also frees me from those stories I tell about myself. My writing expresses what happens when I put myself into question and how I might live on this Earth with a generous heart. As an Early Childhood Educator (ECE), I practice life writing and photography in the hope to learn and to share the importance of attending to multiple ways of communicating (Gardner, 2000) that lend a welcoming eye to those I teach and learn alongside. Moreso, life writing and photography help me work with emotions that have often overwhelmed me, and yet, they offer me a chance to consider how my emotions might be brought to life as the “basis for teaching with caring and sensory awareness [and] bring vitality, aliveness and feelings to the fore” (Sinner, 2021, p. 301).

“Life writing is about hope and seeking health” (Leggo, 2000, p. 1). That does not mean that words and photographs represent the clean facts of an experience. I do not perceive the world as something merely objective—I am motivated to understand life through the personal commitments and concerns that show up in my words and photos. Every act of seeing and re-seeing, of coming to understand an event as *meaning something*, without always determining that meaning, is embedded in my history. Life writing conceals while it reveals. It dismantles memories while offering opportunities for interpretation that help free me from staying stuck in any one moment.

Life writing is not only

recording and reporting and repeating

the lived story as known,

as written by the subject;

life writing is

recoding and restorying and restoring

the lived story as unknown,

as unwritten by the subject (Leggo, 2000, p. 3).

Writing and photography help me practice moving into the possibilities that I have often walked past; deaf and blind to the offerings. My body helps me practice listening to what the world calls me to do, and how to be with myself with children and with what the adult early childhood education students need of me as they prepare to work with preschoolers. Through regard for the Earth, and my experiences within it, I am learning to be less taken up by the noise or enchantments. When I let go, especially when I let go of my forgetfulness, I realize the Earth has been holding me gently all along, despite the often ugly, misguided, and unhealthy self-hating coils within me.

I stand, at the water's edge, waves licking my toes. I am made steady by the sand on what is commonly known as Third Beach, not far from the crashing surf of Long Beach in Tofino, British Columbia, the land of the three First Nations cohabiting Clayoquot Sound: **aaḥuusʔath** (Ahousaht), **hišqwiʔath** (Hesquiaht) and **ḷaʔuukwiʔath** (Tla-o-qui-aht). The Pacific Ocean and its waves have been my lifeblood since, at the age of three, I first stepped into the ocean on Kitsilano Beach not far from my childhood home. I almost feel the soles of my feet made tender from the barefoot walk as I remember sand, water, and wind. Log-strewn beaches and salty tides call me. I return to Tofino year after year, an unbroken promise since receiving my cancer diagnosis more than six years ago. And just like the waves, upon hearing the words, "you have cancer," my body is pulled out to sea and thrown back at me in rhythmic resilience. Since that diagnosis I have immersed myself in what it means to unforget that I breathe; that I breathe like the waves breathe; maybe *because* of the waves and their ebb and flow of call and release.

*Gifts exist in the realm of humidity and mystery—
As with random acts of kindness,
We do not know their source* (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 23-24)

The study of what cancer has been teaching me began being shaped long before the lump in my right breast was detected. A study like this is not separate from all the other heartbeats and breaths before it. Life writing requires special attention to Breath (Maracle, 2002) that helps untangle the jumbled and knotted mass of memories like seaweed that rise and fall inside me. It has been challenging to step into the vulnerability that cancer brings. I tripped over the edge of the yawning pit the diagnosis opened and memories were revealed that were often much more than I could bear. It took a long time before I dared open myself to my own screams and even longer to learn to quiet myself and slow down so that I might find my way out.

Figure 2.
Personal photo by author



Limpet tongues
lick rough words clean—
eyes trace tears and fears
wedded to the crash of waves.

Life writing and photography, particularly the kind of repetitions I share here, have helped me explore and release myself from being dragged down by suffocating notions of what it means to be a woman and a teacher. There were times I felt as though I was drowning in numbers and dates and practices of diagnostic language that dragged with it waves of childhood images plunging my heart and lungs into despair. The images and words I have shared (McCabe, 2018, 2020) express the grip and pull these forces have had upon my body. Thus, when my written words use the strength of line spaces, fonts, colours, alternative grammars, and locations, and when I photograph the bust of my breasts I made the night before surgery, I engage with new ways of understanding myself and the Earth. Photography and life writing helps me fill my lungs and helps me withstand the downward pull of death, both figurative and literal. Photography and life writing give me stamina to imagine the possibilities of a liveable world (Greene, 1995). “Once I can get some distance from the doorstep of my own exhaustion, a glimpse is possible” (Jardine, 2017, p. 17).

Gasp.

“Seeing the frailty of your life through seeing the breath is a meditation on the recollection of death.

Just realizing that fact

*that if the breath goes in and does not go out again,
or goes out but does not come in again,*

your life is over.

It will startle you into being aware” (Chah, 2005, p. 44).

The technician requested that I hold my breath, stay still, as beams of radiation entered my body. I imagined clusters of light breaking up hidden and stubborn knots of cancer. Soon after my biopsy I began dotting my writing with poetic word clusters. As these words arrive, I try to see them as gifts, so I lay them out and give them space to wander and breathe. The words flutter down the sides of pages, stand stock still in the centre of paragraphs or stutter-step backward and forward across pages. Sometimes I trip and fall over words that come unbidden, no longer content to wait in shadows. Words surprise me. Words whisper softly or push forward even when I sleep. Or they wait. These words and phrases call me to return to quiet, sometimes hidden understandings of the Earth and my experiences in it. Words ask me to regard them; they hold important considerations.

Sometimes I describe my writing as littering the pages with poems. The word *littering* tells me I have yet to understand their gravity and speaks to my insecurity and vulnerability in their presence. I fight some of them, turn my back on others or hum softly so as not to hear the messages words might bring. Yet, I am drawn to them still. I know full well that the words live not for me or me alone. Reading a word as it appears, “I become caught in its light” (Jardine, 2016, p. 142). Naked, I

struggle

I hide my heart
lock it away
in sand-worn sea glass

Lately, my writing has been run ragged. Reports and emails are COVID-flung. I write in urgency. I write to mitigate risk. I am often closed to the words that call me to attend to what I wish to resist. Until now. Until another possible diagnosis.

cancer
opens
more than

flesh

Not yet finished with me, cancer opens my life, all at once and puts everything yet again into play. Cancer opens a way of learning to know what must be tested and what I may have forgotten. Cancer encourages me to act with insight. Poetry gives all this—the impossibility and more—a place to land. I hear a whisper. *Do you?*

I once wrote, as the opening
lines of a poem:

**Yielding, I
give way to the river.**

When I read these words, I am caught in their light. Again.
River is River.

Long ago I had experienced the river of diagnoses and memories evoked as obstacles; things to be feared. When I wrote the unpublished poem about yielding to the river two years ago, I felt I had gained some understanding of its strength and beauty and was developing regard for the river beyond its obvious complexity and power. I began to see

its wisdom and its generosity and, in yielding to these new understandings, my self-awareness began growing too. The six words of the poem open up something of myself to myself.

Reading these words now, I hear more—

I hear a *want of freedom from suffering*.

I consider the Sumallow River near where I live. The river bears the weight of new snow and ice melts. The river gushes. Water flows tumbling over boulders pushing smaller rocks and branches along the route in complex rhythms and relationships. The river buoys paired Harlequin ducks as they ready to teach their young how to move with the current. Giving way to the river does not have to mean getting out of its way or standing on the banks. Yielding might also mean learning to swim *with* the river, learning which rocks to avoid, and the rocks that offer rest. *It can mean all of this or none of it.*

To take my research journey into words and their relationships is an aesthetic, beautiful place of refuge. “The word for perception or sensation in Greek, was aesthesis, which means at root, a breathing in or taking in of the world, the gasp, ‘aha’, the ‘uh’ of the breath in wonder, shock, amazement, and aesthetic response” (Hillman, 2006, p. 36). Yielding, like breathing, gives way *and* generates. Yielding offers a way of seeing moments of possibility that have *already* arrived. Yielding allows me to look for clues and to make connections to what I know might be fitting for my inquiries. Yielding

Figure 3.
 Personal photo by author



offers a possibility for *improvisational movement*. To yield supports a step backward to create the possibility for renewal.

*“Being still in the presence of things,
 letting them speak” (Bugbee, 1976, p. 155).*

gives me time to listen.

Return with me now to the sand on Third Beach. I stand by the water’s edge, waves licking my toes, holding a paper and plaster bust I made in 2015, the night before my surgery. I locate a place for the quiet release of the bust. Charts tell me the tide will retreat at 12:50 p.m. I roll up my jeans and, with a deep breath, set the bust in the water. I stand wistful, pensive, and release it and my breath—5, 4, 3, 2, 1. It sinks. Just like that. But I am still in my deep, contemplative breath and try again to help it find its way out to sea. It sinks again. Now I begin to feel a little bit of an experiment is blooming, an interrogation of floating and sinking, releasing and returning. I flip it over like a boat. I hope the empty cavities where breasts had once been, will keep the bust

afloat. I look up to my partner, quietly filming upon a high rock. What to do? “In our moment of awakening, what response becomes possible?” (Fels, 2010, p. 2). At that moment, I question the water and the moon when I should be questioning myself. I’m littering. Literally. I leave the bust in its sunken state and run to the rock and look questioningly at Renata. She whispers, “Are we littering?” I take hold of the camera and she wades out into the ocean to retrieve the bust. It is heavy with saltwater now. She places it upon the rocks, and we turn the camera off. We sit in silence in our own hesitations

Figure 4.
Personal photo by author



The wild pace
of my body
longs for
a place called
home

Let go.

I am
always, already, here.

Weaving my photographs, as moments of expansion, with life writing, as lines of emotion, I gather and express some of the mood of my life experiences. I am thrown forward and backward by a cancer diagnosis and its impact on my body. The land,

water, and air awaken me and have called into question the teaching I do with older and younger learners. *Mary Oliver's (2004) call to*

Teach the children.

Show them daisies.

Teach them the taste of wintergreen.

The lives of blueberries.

Give them the fields and the woods and the possibility of the world.

Head them upstream ... (pp. 55–56)

is the push I need to get me out of the crevice a cancer diagnosis forces. Oliver's declarations inspire fortitude to reflect and adapt when my best intentions are left floundering. It took courage for me to send the bust out to sea. I had held onto this embodied artifact for five years thinking *what if* I need it? Its release symbolizes the release of worn-out memories and worries. I let go of some uneasiness with myself when I put the bust in the water, but my intentions were outplayed. The power of the ocean and the weight of plaster offered another opportunity to learn about myself and that I needed to practice letting go of *a want of control*. I had underestimated the relationships of moon and water and plaster when I centred my own wants. The misgivings I felt at littering the ocean were visceral and helped me to recognize and understand my frailties and misunderstandings without being defeated by them. In the forming and reforming, life is renewed.

I am open to renewal. Renewal depends on taking time to understand my own twitches and knee-jerk actions, sleep-deprived state, my wrong-headedness that arises from a sense that boundaries, binaries, and constraints really do exist. I create poems as stopping places to wander, renew, and to "find the places where critical analysis cannot go, and to push my own boundaries of engagement and understanding (O'Connor, 2001, p. 84). This practice is a movement toward a kind of poetry that "... does not fly above and surmount the earth to escape it and hover over it. Poetry is what first brings man [sic] onto the earth, making him [sic] belong to it, and thus brings him [sic] into dwelling" (Heidegger, 1971, p. 218).

I have since realized that letting go of impositions, stories, and ways of being are not completely in my control. Trying to release these from my life as though they are objects made of clay and cotton are misguided. The nature of the bust brought me back to the complexity of life and my own frailty and misconceptions and the need to linger with them until they make their own retreat. Meanwhile, I can release myself from being *taken away* by the complexity and weight of a lived experience of cancer. I can learn to wait and be open to what is not yet (Greene, 1995).

I end this exploration with my poem, “Gasp. Struggle. Let Go.” I am learning to welcome the challenges and to know that events, that were once viewed as obstacles, are part of me. To ignore them, to try to root them out or to fight them is to view them as a knot of cancer.

Even cancer can be a teacher. When I model understanding for the adult ECE students I teach, I hope that I give them a space to reflect on their own lives and how they want to be educators of young children. I hope they will see that children tell us their own ideas and hopes through the block towers they build, the rainbows and butterflies they draw, and the splashes they make in the puddles that grace the forest floor. These too are expressions, like my life writing and photographs, and the beginnings of the refinement of their theories. As Elliot Eisner (1991) notes, creating space for artistic expression teaches us that *everything interacts*. Learning how to regard those interactions, as places for dwelling in inquiry, helps us learn when to slow down and attend to the nuances. *Attention to nuances gives teaching its grace*.

GASP

Heart opens
at this gathering place
despite the impossible shining sorrows.
Worn lines and gullies along Red Cedar’s body
throb in such attention

Generosity.

Sumallo River buffs Precambrian rocks
stories glisten
reverberate
echo wellbeing through the ages.

Hush.
Listen.

STRUGGLE

Thorny winds sting my eyes
Palms press against bloody cheekbones
Sticky with time

I slap at burdensome mosquitoes

Woozy from memory, worship, and veils
unprotected, I grab and swat, try to beat them into voicelessness.
A courtship of violence
A junkie to my own words and their shapes.
Talking to paper
the yellow-blue bruised edges of life can be hidden.

Re/write, re/cycle, re/mythologize, re/member, re/cast, re/sist,
re/linquish,
re/cover,
re/claim.

Hunter and hunted.
Deaf to my own screams—
a silence so large it tears flesh from bones.
Glass shatters on the bed
ordinary moments now unrecognizable

I wait for suffering to soften and smooth
as I walk in my grandmother's brogues?

Nothing is rubble.

LET GO

Trust cellular knowing
Death remembers nothing.

What gestures will I learn from
forget-me-nots hiding in plain sight—
trembling in the wind, faces to the sun?

Unforget
and whisper scary, shadowy, powerful, healing, simple
spider's webs of stories.
Unearth screams
carry them to the water's edge
step to the side,
let them slide over one another,

already the writhing has lessened
like the trout's easy back and forth flicker in a shallow river
they begin to dance—
drenched and
committed beyond expectation
to what is not yet known.

I am unforgetting
I am maple seed
I am mischief lighter than air.

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ENDNOTES

1. The quotes in italics are found poems. The authors are my teachers and, as I read and reread their ideas, some of the words rise off the page. I regard them and the new arrangement, or offspring, becomes a teacher too.