



ONE CUPPA: A THOUSAND STORIES The ritual of sharing life experiences over a cuppa

Julie Tipene-O'Toole
Storyteller and visual artist

Abstract: *In this workshop I presented a creative and simple introduction to storytelling for participants. I will share some of the stories I've collected (one thousand) through my art installation titled 'from the teacup' and related community art projects. I explained how the installation works and talked about the response it receives when placed in public spaces such as libraries, community centres and community gardens. I demonstrated how I use the teacups to engage people and how this results in the exchange of human connection and experience through the sharing of stories. It's not just stories that get left with my work. Teacups, tea cosies, teapots, teaspoons and books have also been added by people who have seen my work. What inspires people to do this? Why do they do this?*

Keywords: *storytelling, community art, visual art, global issues, local issues, connecting communities, social rituals, collaboration*

Introduction

We are all familiar with the phrase 'everyone has a story to tell'. Well here are a couple of stories I've gathered through my work titled '*from the teacup*'.

"A warm cup of tea and a good chat". Anonymous

"The perfect tea party hosted by Nelson Mandela, John Howard, Saddam Hussein and a few WWII vets for that touch of sanity. Music by Angelique Kudjo". Paz

"Dear son
I fear
Not seeing you marry
Not sharing your birthday
Courage deserting you
I wish for
Some better luck
No more fear
Ultimate victory".

Love Dad

“A story that must be told never forgives silence”. Dr Mbuelo Mzamane

I've lost count of the number of stories people have shared with me, about a time they remembered sharing a cup of tea with a loved one, a friend or a neighbour. Many of the stories were entertaining, they made me laugh, they made me cry but most of all they touched me physically, spiritually and emotionally. Many of the people who shared their story were complete strangers, young, old, married, single, widowed and such. Some I never got to meet, but they still entrusted me with their personal story knowing that it would be shared with others.

The stories I read are just a small sample of the one thousand stories I've gathered over the past six years from people in Melbourne and regional Victoria. The fact that I've never met or will meet many of those who have left the stories doesn't matter. What matters is that they have been inspired to add their story to others and to give voice to something that they felt inspired to share.

Background

With me I have a small part of my work titled '[from the teacup](#)'; about 30 teacups, a few knitted tea cosies and a book. The teacups are different shapes, sizes and colours; they are old and new and are made of glass, china and plastic. Inside the teacups are a selection of messages relating to memories of sharing a cuppa with a loved one. Many of the objects have been donated by people who have viewed the installation. The stories relating to these objects often accompany these when I receive them. They are added to the work and in a sense help it evolve.

Since March 2003 I have gathered more than 1,000 stories about tea and life experiences. My experience from working with my art installation '*from the teacup*' is that people and communities want to reach out to others to share their thoughts, their feelings, their human story, but sometimes don't know how to do this. The act of sharing a story generates different responses for different people, but in every instance it unites people through the exchange of life experiences.

'from the teacup' is an art work that features numerous teacups, old and new, big and small with messages written on paper tags by everyday people and left in the cups to be shared with others. It is an interactive art work which invites the viewer to respond by adding their own story or they can simply enjoy the ones that have been left in the tea cups. I also encourage people 'to touch the art' as opposed to 'don't touch the art', for this is how it works.

The messages are handwritten and provide a provoking visual experience, especially when displayed en masse. Over 1000 stories have been placed in the teacups since March 2003 and it continues to grow. '*from the teacup*' continues to evolve as more and more people interact with it. More recently, people are beginning to add other items to the installation, such as their stories written on A4 paper instead of the tags, ribbons with tributes to loved ones and teacups, teapots and tea cosies from personal collections have also been donated.

The work draws a tremendous response wherever it is placed. The feedback I get from those who have seen or added to the work is overwhelming. For me, it confirms my belief that everyday people are looking for ways to express their thoughts, fears and emotions. '*from the teacup*' provides a safe, accessible and anonymous way in which to do this.

Storytelling Workshop

This workshop relates to the conference theme 'addressing global issues locally through collaborations between artists, communities and local government'. The global issue it relates to is social inclusion and participation and how various communities of interest can be included and engaged in creative ways by providing a safe and accessible mechanism that they can relate to. Today we'll explore the age old ritual of sharing stories over a cuppa.

For the exercise, each person selects a teacup from the table, and inside the teacup is a handwritten message. I would usually invite people to make a cup of tea in the cup they've chosen but when we are unable to do so we imagine we're having a cup of tea. I start the exercise by talking about the tea cup I chose and why I chose it. I then read the message that's in the cup and then ask each participant to do the same. Inside the cup is a blank message tag for each person to add their own message later on.

The reason I chose this white china cup with a gold rim is because I bought this cup shortly after my Dad passed away. I was in New Zealand at the time and happened to pass a car boot sale. The market was held in the car park of the local supermarket near where my Dad had lived. When I saw this cup I decided to buy it and that was the beginning of my own teacup collection. Little did I know that down the track this very cup would become part of 'from the teacup'. Whenever I drink tea from this cup I always think of my Dad.

Not long before my Dad passed away he started to wear his hair long in a ponytail. He dyed it red, took to smoking dope and to shoplifting, not sure what was going on in his life at the time. He was caught a number of times at the local supermarket and was eventually banned. The car boot sale took place on the same site as 'that supermarket'. I used to feel embarrassed telling that story but over time it's become a lot easier.

The same exercise is then repeated with the rest of the group.

Key Learnings

Three key things I have learnt through storytelling and engaging local communities:

1. Provide a simple way for people to engage and they will;
2. Make your work accessible. By that I mean make it easy for people to access, eg public spaces such as libraries, community centres or neighbourhood centres, make it part of the local landscape; and
3. Create a safe space. In my work, I leave an invitation with the teacups explaining people can choose to leave a message. This can be anonymous or include their name. It's best to give them a choice but in most cases they add their name.

Human connection can be achieved without having to meet a person. This is demonstrated in my work where people talk to each other over the teacups through the messages, stories and objects they leave. The stories, anecdotes and objects in the work are very rich and many are tributes and dedications to mothers, grandmothers, dads and friends. There are also many that capture the rituals we perform when making tea; messages that capture history or moments in time, messages relating to death, illness, grief, loneliness, birth, celebration and so on.

The most exciting outcome for me has been the exchange of human experience amongst strangers and the realisation that these experiences have connected people who have never met or ever will. I continue to share this work wherever I can in recognition of those who have contributed to this collaborative piece, for surely this is what it has become. It is my way of acknowledging those who have and continue to make the teacups relevant. As the artist I feel humbled and honoured to have been gifted these very special stories and objects, this is what drives me to share these with as many people as possible.

Future directions

In the future I'd like to tour the teacups and stories to more parts of regional Victoria, to find out if the stories are the same or different to those in the city. Bushfire affected communities are another area that I would like to make my work available in, as well as New Zealand. Somewhere down the track, I'd also like to explore a book version of the stories, something I've been asked for on many occasions.

Closing Statement

In closing I'd like to share one last story with you. This story has been hand written on to a beautiful blue silk ribbon. The ribbon appears to have a number of colours in it but it is predominantly blue. The text has been written in gold ink and you need to hold it up to the light in order to read it clearly. Unfortunately I never got to meet Gail who wrote this but I do know that she drove down from Bright to Mooroolbark to place this in the teacups after hearing an interview I did with Lynn Haultein on ABC Radio. The teacups were on display at the Mooroolbark Community Centre at the time. Gail placed this message in a blue ceramic cup and saucer which is scalloped around the edges and matches the colour of the ribbon very well. I always try to remember to place this ribbon with this cup and saucer whenever I exhibit the work in recognition of Gail and her story. This is what Gail wrote.

Tea for Two

*I have my favorite cup; it sits quietly on the shelf
I boil the billy and prepare the pot and let it sit a while
I close my eyes and take a sip - the aroma takes me to days gone by
We' sit for hours with our cups and talk of the things we'd done
Of sunny days and rainy skies and things that were just for fun
I open my eyes & you're not there
But my memories are very clear
I wash my cup and put it away, ready for a brand new day.
In memory of
Gail - my very best friend
Annette, Oct 2003*

Biography: *Julie is a woman of Māori and Dalmation heritage and was born and raised in New Zealand. In 1980 she migrated to Australia and currently lives and works in Eltham, Melbourne. Her work is intuitive and is driven by her passion for storytelling. Connecting communities through storytelling and art is what she loves most. Social rituals, the natural environment and the retention of cultural stories are what influence the creation of new works.* Julie@tipene.com www.tipene.com