

**Tea with an Angel: An Epistolary/Narrative Examination of  
Helen Marie Paquet's Diaries**

**A Thesis**

Submitted to the Faculty of Education  
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for the Degree of  
Master of Education  
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## DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this work to my beautiful daughter, Anna, whose namesake is from Aunt Helen's mother. You spent many hours in the jolly jumper, the exersaucer and my lap watching me type. Your laughter and spit up were the most delightful of distractions. This work is for you and your future siblings. It will be a piece of your heritage.

My mother, Stephanie, has worked as hard as I on this thesis. She was the chief babysitter, cook, cleaner, editor and cheerleader. I can honestly say that without your investment and encouragement, I may not have been able to complete this work. For your and dad's steadfast love, I am forever grateful.

To my brother-in-law, Robert and my incredibly supportive husband, John, I express my love and admiration. No one will ever know the pain and hardship you both have experienced. These pages are a mere glimpse into the life of one woman who cared deeply about your happiness and success. I can say with certainty that she would be proud of your remarkable achievements.

Aunt Helen, you have given me the greatest of gifts, perspective. Your life is an inspiration to me and continues to ground me in countless ways.

### ***The Rose Beyond the Wall***

*A rose once grew where all could see,  
Sheltered beside a garden wall,  
And, as the days passed swiftly by,  
it spread its branches, straight and tall . . .*

*One day, a beam of light shone through  
A crevice that had opened wide ~  
The rose bent gently toward its warmth  
Then passed beyond to the other side . . .*

*Now, you who deeply feel its loss,  
Be comforted ~ the rose blooms there~  
Its beauty even greater now,  
Nurtured by God's own loving care.*

*~Author Unknown*

## ABSTRACT

Helen Marie Paquet, a Prince Edward Island woman and relative by marriage, wrote diaries for more than 23 years. In 2002, Helen Marie Paquet died and left behind 35 notebook-long diaries rich in stories and events. This thesis examines these diaries and highlights five themes that represent a life revealed. I respond to her revealed life through a series of creative letters and diary entries that themselves tell a story.

To study my own evolving relationship with Helen Marie Paquet, I use methods common to autoethnography. To respond to her diaries, I use an epistolary/narrative form. In using this form, my goal was to create an analysis as original and accessible as the diaries themselves. While I do not examine a difference in the cultures of Paquet and myself, I do create in the epistolary/narrative analysis and responses a fictive culture of its own. Through creating this culture in this form, I demonstrate an imaginative way to mediate between primary materials and research materials.

The thesis is organized into four parts. In the first part, I explain the five broad questions I designed to familiarize myself with the quality and substance of the diaries. I also discuss the ethics of reading and responding to the diaries themselves. In the second part, having coded the diaries for the five themes I had identified, I create a series of letters to Helen Marie Paquet discussing these themes. Using the coded diaries I then, in the third part, create diary entries that respond to Paquet's original diaries and at the same time, to my own letters of the second part. The second and third parts, both containing fictive responses to the themes that emerged from Paquet's diaries, are then themselves discussed in the fourth part through a long letter. In this final letter, I analyze the fictive diary entries in relation to the research literature concerned with diaries and narrative.

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## PART ONE FRAMEWORK

### The Science of North Side Tea:

- 1 stainless steel Paderno kettle
- 1 glass tea pot
- 4-5 cups of water
- handful of tea bags (not a careless handful but a measured handful)
- a touch of milk (just for colour)
- sugar (only if there are guests - sugar is for weak tea drinkers)
- any mug will do (we aren't picky about tea cups)

It was Aunt Helen who taught me the science of making a “good strong cup of tea.” You could walk into her beautiful old family home any time of day or evening and find a pot of “North Side Tea” brewing on the stove. North Side Tea is an acquired taste. The unaccustomed tea drinker would sputter on a mouthful. I grew to love that tea.

It’s a picturesque spring day. The sun warms me as it streams through the six large windows that line the south wall of Aunt Helen’s sunroom. The air I breathe is cool because the room relies solely on the sun for heat. I’m curled up on an old overstuffed upholstered recliner. I have a blanket over my legs and close my eyes to drink in the sunlight. My hands are wrapped around my second steaming cup of North Side Tea.

Aunt Helen’s cup is on the little wooden table between us. Her glasses sit beside the cup. There we sit, two women with 55 years between us. Sometimes we sit for half an hour without speaking. It’s a comfortable silence. We are content to be in each other’s company. We sit side-by-side staring out the large windows. Sometimes I nod off. But, most of the time, I just listen. A car driving by, a dog running through the yard, or the wind rustling in a tree is enough to spark one of Aunt Helen’s stories. There are so many memories to share. She talks until sunset and we are both cold.

The fact is, Helen Marie Paquet is not my aunt at all. She is my husband's great aunt. As marvellous as the English language is, it is not always possible to find the right word to describe a relationship. The label "great aunt" does not describe who she was to us. To my husband and his brother, she was a second mother. To me, she was somewhere between a grandmother and a friend. I don't pretend to be the only person Aunt Helen confided in. There have been many nieces, nephews, cousins, and friends who were closer to her and knew her much better than I. However, I met her in the autumn of her life. As a new friend with no history or subjectivity, I think she felt both compelled and relieved to set free the stories that made up her life.

Aunt Helen lived alone. She was never married and never bore a child. However, John, my husband, and his younger brother of five years, Robert, grew up as much in her house as their own. With a mother fighting a lifelong battle with mental illness and a father living in another province, John and Robert needed an angel.

In her collection of miraculous stories on children's encounters with angels, Joan Wester-Anderson (1994) says,

In the beginning, before He created us, God made angels. Angels are pure spirits-they do not have physical bodies. They adore God in heaven, and do whatever He asks them to do.

There are different kinds of angels. Some are more important and are called archangels, as is the case with Gabriel and Michael. Others are sent by God to earth to be our guardians and friends.

When God made you, He told his angels, "Take care of this child." And the angels obeyed. This means that at least one special angel is close to you all

the time, and others come when you need extra help and love. Angels go everywhere you go. (p. 7)

I agree with Wester-Anderson's (1994) faith in angels. It was Aunt Helen's guidance, love, and encouragement that helped John and Robert to meet the hardships they faced from an early age. In my opinion, with such incredible odds stacked against them, their paramount success in life is a divine blessing.

Aunt Helen was always an early riser. She rose between 4 and 5 o'clock every morning. So it was no surprise that she chose the early hours of June 28, 2002 to pass away. She had spent the last two weeks of her life in the hospital. She went to have a toe amputated because of complications from diabetes. She called John at work on the afternoon of the 27<sup>th</sup> asking him to visit her. We thought she was going to be fine or we never would have left that evening for a weekend retreat with friends. She died alone.

From her, John inherited jewellery, Wedgwood china and antique furniture. But, the most priceless treasure was a plastic storage tote full of old dog-eared diaries. Thirty-five diaries chronicle 23.5 years of her life. These diaries are the legacy of Helen Marie Paquet.

To me, the unread diaries invoke a combination of curiosity and duty. My inquisitive nature thinks of the collection of diaries as an unsolved mystery anxiously awaiting my investigation. Simultaneously, I want to read them simply out of respect and devotion.

### **Helen Marie Paquet**

Suddenly at the Souris Hospital on June 28, 2002 of Helen Marie Paquet of Souris aged 80 years.

Loving Great – Aunt to John (Trina) of Cove Head and Robert of Charlottetown. Also left to mourn are nieces and nephews Elmer, Regan, Dixon, Lynn, Rocky, Alana, Alice and Dean. Predeceased by brothers Reginald and John Elmer and special friend Joyce (Bubby) McLellen.

Resting at the Dingwell Funeral Home Souris for visiting Hours on Sunday 2-4 & 7-9 p.m. and Monday from 10 a.m. till time of funeral. Funeral to be held Monday morning from St Mary's Church Souris with funeral mass to be celebrated at 11 a.m. Internment in the church cemetery. If so desired donation to the Heart & Stroke Foundation would be appreciated. (Reynolds, 2002, p. 1)

So much of Aunt Helen's life was dedicated to journaling. As sure as the North Side Tea on the stove, her diary would be lying open on the kitchen table with a pen in it and a running account of the day's events. We, of course, never read it. But, it was always open for anyone to see. I can remember a visit in her last year when she said, "John! You make sure you take those diaries. You and your kids will read them someday."

John, Robert and I spent some time shortly after Aunt Helen's death reading passages from her diaries to each other. We laughed while reading many of the passages and were moved to tears while reading others. The memories the reading stirred gave birth to healing. For 2 years, the plastic storage tote sat untouched in my basement and the teapot empty.

## Purpose

Almost 2 years after Aunt Helen's death, I felt inspired to lift the lid of the storage tote, read Aunt Helen's diaries, and share how I understand her story. My aim in this research is to construct an interpretation of Aunt Helen's story based on my reading of her diaries in order to understand who she was and to explain why I feel compelled to write about it. Aunt Helen poured an endless supply of time, love and unwavering dedication into the written account of her life. In my opinion, it is an injustice not to share her story. Doing something constructive with the diaries feels intuitively right.

Aunt Helen's diaries will allow me and possibly her family, as well as other readers, to gain new insight into whom she was, what she felt, and what was important to her. This study will allow me to provide a picture of her for subsequent readers. Akeret and Klein offer explanation of the interest in our ancestors' stories. "Because we know intuitively that what shaped their lives has shaped our lives too. We know their stories are finally our own stories, and that hearing those stories can ultimately link us to the history of mankind," (1991, p. 11).

I was inspired to explore and share Aunt Helen's life story for a multitude of reasons. But, I can say with confidence that anyone who engages in her story may take something meaningful from it. Weiland (1995) stated,

All lives have meaning to the people living them. Finding or supplying meaning to lives so that others can observe, take pleasure in, and perhaps even learn from them is the aspiration of narrators. So it is also of scholars who find in narrative fresh perspectives on experience. (p. 59)

This is the aim of my research.

Tierney (2000) suggests, and I agree, that story is a powerful catalyst for change.

Aunt Helen's story has the ability to touch and potentially change anyone who reads it.

The significance of this research is as far reaching as each reader's own capacity to reflect. Tierney states that a life history "helps create, define, reinforce, or change reality," (p. 545). He goes on to say,

A life history also may represent a process whereby the researcher and reader come to understand the semiotic means by which someone else makes sense of the world. "Life story researchers examine the cultural scripts and narrative devices speakers use to make sense of their own life experiences" (Frank as cited in Tierney, 2000, p. 255). Through this use of the life history, the researcher and reader hopefully are able to reflect on their own lives. They achieve some understanding of one another and of the multiple realities involved in the creation of meaning. (p. 545)

From this perspective, the significance of narrative research may be a reflection of the writing abilities of the researcher. Tierney (2000) notes, "The power the author has is the ability to develop a reflexive text. Such a text enables readers to understand the author a bit better, to come to grips with the individual whose life is retold, and to reflect back on their own lives" (p. 551). Peter Clough (2002) places further emphasis on the competencies of the researcher when he writes,

In my observation the theory that comes out of empirical research in education rarely represents much of an advance on the theory that went into it – or, to personalize the point, it is the intellectually most richly endowed researchers who

seem to be able to provide the most stimulating and provocative analyses however modest the empirical research they engage in. (p. 85)

The significance of the study of diaries to the psychology of aging is apparent in Berman's (1994) words. "Once we acknowledge that descriptions of age-related experiences are part of the knowledge of aging, the value of personal journals as a source of such descriptions becomes readily apparent (p. 197). Berman explains this concept in greater detail when he writes,

The study of personal journals allows us to hold up for examination the ways that people have responded to the human situation in the later years-individuals who, while offering no answers to life's questions, have had the courage to articulate the situation of their lives in all honesty and directness and have grappled with the challenge of maintaining a sense of meaningfulness in the face of the inevitable losses of aging. As we take possession of these works in the field of gerontology, we have the opportunity to help older people live more enriched and fully potentiated lives. (p. 199-200)

Berman (1994) places emphasis on the significance of studying personal journals of the elderly to the field of gerontology. As a society, understanding the realities of aging through uninhibited accounts of loss and decline could lead to a greater acceptance and consideration of the issues older individuals are confronting.

This study is an attempt to understand the role of the diary in Aunt Helen's life and in women's lives in general. Is a diary a companion, an unfilled need, or an addiction? Van Daele's 1990 research on the meaning of the diary in women's lives concluded that, "The diary is as fundamental a life project as any that may be undertaken

... It soaks up the flavour, the tenor, the entire feeling of an individual life; it also pushes that life forward, helping to nourish its choices" (p. 243). VanDaele goes on to say, "Like most of the women interviewed, the sense of attachment to the writing borders on addiction. The possibility of not having the journal available in her life is perceived as terminating part of the self - - 'like chopping off a very important part of myself' (p. 243). Through this study, I hope to create an understanding of the significance of diary writing in women's lives.

Aunt Helen wrote about everyday activities and events in her diary. She described doing laundry, cooking for her family, letting the dog outside, and phone calls. When reading her diaries, I repeatedly asked myself, what can I learn from an account of everyday activities? Is there something interesting buried in the list of chores? Or, is the predictable a context for the unexpected? Gillikin (1985) comments on how the everyday diary demonstrates the oneness of events. "Drinking eight glasses of water each day is an ordinary event, and yet, without it, no life. Foundation of all that we do, these routine activities create the ambiences that sustain us as we move from them into the not-so-ordinary aspects of our lives" (p. 131). According to Gillikin, and I agree, there is much to learn from the everyday. Gillikin continues,

After the weather report in each day's entry comes the heart of the diary - people met, food eaten, places visited, health checked, things done. The details, though brief and objective, are nevertheless the snippets of plot that trigger memory, keeping it permanent and tangible. This major part of the narrative forms many narratives, several of which continue into other entries, providing the traditional "What then?" suspense that gathers momentum until there are enough events to

satisfy the reader's quest for a more complete sense of who the diarist was and what she did. (p. 132)

At first appearance, the everyday diary is monotonous and dull. However, as Gillikin points out, piecing together a string of events over several entries or several years can provide remarkable insight.

In my experience, it is often the unsaid in the diaries that is most fascinating and disturbing. The matter of fact nature of an everyday diary highlights silences. Writing objectively about something that has an overwhelming amount of emotion attached to it can be equally as revealing as a full-page description of thoughts, feelings, and experiences. There are many silences in Aunt Helen's diary. It is as though she wrote from behind a mask. This realization has allowed me to recognize what I can learn from reading her everyday experiences. In effect, I have worked to lift the mask from Aunt Helen's writing and to discover the unsaid.

Reading Aunt Helen's final diary entry sent shivers down my spine and left me with many unanswered questions. Did she know she would never return home? If so, what was she thinking about in her final days? What would she have written in her diary if she had it with her in the hospital? I will never know the answers to these and many other questions. However, this study is a unique opportunity to explore possible answers. According to Bochner and Ellis (2000), and I agree,

The narrative rises or falls on its capacity to provoke readers to broaden their horizons, reflect critically on their own experience, enter empathically into worlds of experience different from their own, and actively engage in dialogue regarding the social and moral implications of the different perspectives and standpoints

encountered. Invited to take the story in and use it for themselves, readers become co-performers, examining themselves through the evocative power of the narrative text. (p. 748)

As a research practitioner, this is how I have attempted to answer the unanswered and say the unsaid. I took Aunt Helen's story in and critically examined it from my own experiences and the perspectives of the various theorists I have studied.

### THE LAST ENTRY

June 11, 2002

It's a beautiful sunny day. The nurse, Mary, was here at 10 o'clock. She did a great job on my feet and toes. I'll wash my foot that's not sore and wash the other with a face cloth.

I called Betty this morning to ask her how she liked her cake. She said, "was it you that sent it?" "I didn't know," she said. "Beautiful sunny day and warm", then she thanked me. She got 15 cards for her birthday so far. Got a nice sweater from Paul and Maria she told Paul, "I told you I wanted rubber pants to wear in the rain. I sent you money. You can buy them in Souris". She is never satisfied with what she gets. I must have a piece of blueberry pie that I have out in porch and freeze it. I will cut it in pieces and freeze it.

I got a call from Cindy from Credit Union. When she goes down tomorrow morning for mail and when I get my \$4500 from Clarica, I will pay it back and put \$4500 in the Credit Union. I'll keep \$100 out in my house.

Sun is out. I think John and Trena are coming out. Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> I go to Q. E. Hospital. Robert or John will be out for me. Jan was here at five o'clock with a cheque for me from Clarica. I'll put it in Credit Union tomorrow. I will call Nancy.

John, Trena & I out to Newfrage Harbour June 11 and I treated them to dinner, whatever they wanted. John got seafood chowder and a scallop plate and Trena and I got clams. I had tea, John got milk, and Trena had water. No sweets. I would love to have had sweets. Drove around North Lake and home at 9 p.m. They left a few moments after. Max was glad to see us. They wanted to take Max when I am in hospital, but June will look after him and let him out and in. He would like to be home and be outside on a leash lying by the door. Lovely meal at Newfrage Harbour.

To The Guardian,  
I wish to extend a special thank you to all of the doctors and nurses of the Queen Elizabeth Hospital that cared for me while I was a patient. And, thank you to my grand nephew, John, Trena and Robert, who waited on me with drives in and out of Souris Hospital and the Q.E. Hospital. Thank you all. I appreciated your loving service.

Aunt Helen P.

## **Research Questions**

What can be learned from reading the diaries of another, and how might a researcher create a response to the diaries that makes the examination and discussion of the research materials as accessible as the diaries themselves?

To familiarize myself with the quality and substance of the diaries, I asked five broad questions. Each of these five questions is intended to invoke a deeper layer of questioning.

1. Based on my reading of Helen Marie Paquet's diaries, who do I think she is, and what do I assume is important to her?

- What did she write about?
- What didn't she write about?
- What were her feelings and aspirations?
- Was she lonely?
- Did she have regrets?
- What was she most proud of?
- How did she measure the value of her life?

2. Why did she keep a diary?

- What role did the practice of journaling play in her life?
- Was writing a way of filling in the empty moments?
- Does her journaling address silence?
- Is her journaling a way of creating a type of dialogue?
- Is there a dialogue in her entries that isn't present in her spoken word?
- Why did she feel compelled to record everyday details?

- Why did she begin writing in her fifties?
- Is her writing a testimony or a form of self-inquiry?

**3. What happened in the last week of her life?**

- Why didn't she take her diary with her to the hospital?
- Did she know she would never return home?
- What was she thinking about in her final days?
- What would she have written in her diary if she had it with her?
- When she was looking back on her life, what did she see?
- Was she at peace with her death?
- Was she afraid?
- How did it feel to die alone?

**4. How did I respond to Aunt Helen's story?**

- Why do I feel compelled to tell her story?
- What does her death mean to me?
- Can I forgive myself for not being at her deathbed?
- Is this a healing process for me?
- How have I constructed her?
- How have her stories affected my view of her?
- How does her work influence the woman I am today?
- How has saying the unsaid affected me?

5. What did I learn from writing this thesis in an epistolary/narrative form?
  - What have I learned from writing in this way?
  - What have I learned from the process of doing narrative research?
  - How is this kind of writing different from diary writing?
  - What can be gained from a research support group?
  - What do I know now about Aunt Helen and myself that I didn't know before?

## **Methodology**

One of the attributes of qualitative research is that I did not have to choose a theoretical framework and methodological approach and subsequently try to fit an area of research into one framework. Because of the emergent and flexible nature of qualitative research, I decided what I wanted my study to look like, and then decided to use a multi-layered theoretical framework to guide me through the process. From Patton's (2002) perspective, the researcher is viewed as the instrument. As a result, the foundation of the process is interpretation. According to Patton, and I agree,

The human element in qualitative inquiry is both its strength and weakness-its strength in allowing human insight and experience to blossom into new understandings, and ways of seeing the world, its potential weakness in being so heavily dependent on the inquirer's skills, training, intellect, discipline, and creativity. Because the researcher is the instrument in qualitative inquiry, the quality of the result depends heavily on the qualities of that human being.  
(p. 513)

Thus, like Patton (2002), I assume who I am as a researcher is integral to the process of how I examine Aunt Helen's diaries.

As a way of examining her diaries, I use a combination of theoretical perspectives. First, I selected an epistolary/narrative approach to introduce Aunt Helen's story. Additionally, I used techniques common to autoethnography to study my own evolving relationship with Helen Marie Paquet. This approach allowed me the opportunity to reveal how my story, as researcher, is connected to Aunt Helen's story as subject. I also employed the same approach to write the literature review and the conclusion of the study. From the perspective of Bochner and Ellis (2000), autoethnography is an autobiographical form of writing that allows the author to connect to the culture or phenomenon under study. It is both a personal and revealing form of writing exposing an introspective view of the culture or phenomenon. They note, "In personal narratives, social scientists take on the dual identities of academic and personal selves to tell autobiographical stories about some aspect of their experience in daily life" (p. 740). Bochner and Ellis go on to suggest, "In conversation with ourselves, we expose our vulnerabilities, conflicts, choices, and values. We take measure of our uncertainties, our mixed emotions and the multiple layers of our experience" (p. 748). An epistolary/narrative approach complemented by autoethnography allowed me the opportunity to use the research process as a vehicle to heighten my own self-awareness.

The second theoretical framework I use to organize this research is a narrative analysis approach. Narrative analysis provided the framework for how I studied and interpreted Aunt Helen's diaries. Patton (2002) contends that, narrative analysis "has focused specifically on how to interpret stories, life history narratives, historical memoirs,

and creative nonfiction . . . How to interpret stories, and more specifically, the texts that tell the stories is at the heart of narrative analysis" (p. 478).

As I see it, narrative, complemented by autoethnography, may yield a successful blend of theory, one that has enabled me to work in a creative way with one data. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) effectively depict the researcher's place in the researched's story when they write,

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding experience. It is collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus. An inquirer enters this matrix in the midst and progresses in this same spirit, concluding the inquiry still in the midst of living and telling, reliving and retelling, the stories of the experiences that make up people's lives, both individual and social. (p. 20)

Thus, through narrative inquiry, I critically examine Aunt Helen's story based on my own experiences, and from the perspectives of the various theorists I have studied. Inadvertently, I became part of Aunt Helen's story. Consequently, simultaneously employing an autobiographical form of writing was a complementary dimension of this study.

## **Methods**

To focus this research, I constructed five themes as a means for coding the diary entries. Because of my intimate knowledge of Aunt Helen, and because these themes are common to most people, I was able to chose these themes ahead of time. These include love and friendship, family, disease and death, career, and bereavement and loneliness.

In thinking about my conversations with Aunt Helen, these five themes exemplify how I understand her.

Silverman (2000) warns of some of the limitations of using a regiment coding process. He writes,

Of course, every way of seeing is also a way of not seeing . . . one of the disadvantages of the coding schemes used in both interview and text based analysis is that, because they are based upon given sets of categories, they furnish “a powerful conceptual grid” from which it is difficult to escape. Although this grid is very helpful for organizing the data analysis, it also deflects attention away from uncategorized activities. (p. 825)

In consideration of Silverman’s (2000) counsel, I inductively allowed other themes to emerge out of the details and patterns in the data. This allowed me to read and code the data from a broader perspective.

Inductive and deductive analysis strategies are significant to this study for differing reasons. The deductive analysis strategy of choosing themes prior to reading the diaries was a way to make the vast volume of data manageable. This strategy allowed me to easily categorize key entries during the first reading. The inductive analysis strategy of generating additional themes during the first reading was a self-imposed technique to ensure I read from an open mind and did not miss crucial story lines unrelated to the selected themes.

Following the coding and analysis of the data, I wrote fictional diary entries based on my assumptions about Aunt Helen’s point of view. These diary entries were inspired by Aunt Helen’s writing and related to the identified themes. Furthermore, to ground her

point of view, and to enhance my understanding of her perspectives on these topics, I critiqued a review of selected readings of literature concerned with each of these themes.

Creatively, and in keeping with the narrative approach, the literature review will be written as an autoethnography in the form of letters from me to Aunt Helen. My aim is to encompass the following themes, which I use to understand Aunt Helen's life and work. They are:

1. Theory - autoethnography, metaphorical analysis, and narrative analysis;
2. Journaling - the role of journaling in women's lives;
3. Disease and death - coping, acceptance, spirituality, and aging;
4. Bereavement - loneliness and surviving loss;
5. Love and friendship in old age - being single and importance of friendships;
6. Family - family conflict and childless in old age;
7. Career - fish processing plant work.

### **Data Collection / Management**

My primary source of data collection was narrative analysis. Narrative analysis, according to Marshall (1999), "assumes that people's realities are constructed through narrating their stories. The researcher explores a story told by a participant and records that story. Narrative analysis can be applied to any spoken or written account" (p. 122). Marshall goes on to write, "In the conduct of narrative inquiry, there is open recognition that the researcher is collaboratively constructing the narrator's reality, not just passively recording and reporting" (p. 123). In a similar way, I constructed, recorded, and reported Aunt Helen's story.

The secondary source of data collection I used was an analysis of my own personal experiences with Aunt Helen and oral accounts of stories she has shared with me. Baldwin (as cited in Patton, 2002) stated,

One writes out of one thing only - - one's own experience. Everything depends on how relentless one forces from this experience the last drop, sweet or bitter, it can possibly give. This is the only real concern of the artist, to recreate out of the disorder of life that order which is art. (p. 88)

During my first reading of the diaries, I flagged all entries relating to the five predetermined themes. A different colour flag was used to represent each theme. All other entries of interest were flagged with a sixth colour. The emergent themes were selected from these additional entries. Simultaneously, I compiled a comprehensive list of codes (see Appendix A) that were used during the second reading.

I made a second, working copy, of the 244 flagged entries. Because of the resulting volume of paper, I used a few simple data management strategies during the copy process. Each theme was photocopied onto a different colour of paper. And, the entries were separated by year during the copy process. Furthermore, I made multiple copies of entries relating to more than one theme. After I completed the photocopying process, the original diaries were returned to the plastic storage bin under the stairs in my home.

The second reading was of the flagged entries only. Under each of the themes, there were several categories encompassing activities, people, interactions, emotions, etc. I also recorded notes, comments, and my own thoughts and emotions in a journal.

At the end of this process, I had a document rich in content relating to the themes. This document laid the foundation for the fictional diary entries.

## **Limitations**

Aunt Helen's diaries cover the last 23.5 years of her life. It is important, I think, for readers to know that she was already in her fifties when she began writing these diaries. This study is limited to this period of her life. However, she has shared oral accounts of many stories with me, which I attempt to incorporate as best as I can to create a broader perspective. Furthermore, within the framework of the past 23.5 years it is virtually impossible to capture everything in the scope of this study. Instead, I aim to capture the spirit of whom I assume she was.

A thorough inventory of Aunt Helen's diaries reveals a gap in the dates. Her 35 diaries cover the time period between January 1, 1979 and June 11, 2002 with the exception of the year 1986 (see Appendix B). The compulsiveness of her writing and the immaculate maintenance of the diaries lead me to question the disappearance as premeditated. I will forever contemplate the fate of that diary and the secrets buried in those mislaid pages.

Interpretation is both the heart of this project, and its greatest challenge. Feldman (2003) argues that interpretation is at the very core of any narrative analysis. Although I was committed to telling Aunt Helen's story as truthfully as I could, it can only materialize through my interpretations. Feldman also writes about the dangers of bias in reflexive writing. He contends,

Issues of validity are important because when we engage in reflexive processes that focus on ourselves (as in the construction of autobiographical narratives), we cannot be sure of the accuracy of what we see. That is because when we reflect, we do not know if what we see in the mirror is accurate or the distorted view provided by a funhouse mirror. Our new knowledge, understanding, or insight may be flawed because it is based on a distortion of the world. (p. 27)

One of my main concerns is what other people who knew Aunt Helen will think of my work. What if the Aunt Helen I describe and portray is drastically different than their perceptions of her? Will they be crestfallen or angry? The reader must bear in mind that the story I told is simply my own interpretation of her writing. In keeping with Anne-Louise Brookes (1992) who wrote,

I do not assume that the stories I construct constitute any form of the truth, though they are for me a “kind” of truth. They do not constitute truth for two reasons. First, each writing produces differing and continuous theoretical understandings and analyses. Second, undoubtedly the people of whom I speak would tell another version of these stories. Because these stories are true only in so far as they reflect a perspective, I refer to them as fictional. (p. 4)

I, too, assume there are many versions of “truth” about Aunt Helen.

### **Ethical Issues**

Aunt Helen left her diaries to my husband, John. He has been both enthusiastic and encouraging about my interest in them. He also signed a letter of consent (see Appendix C) allowing me the privilege to use the diaries for research purposes.

What about Aunt Helen's consent? She was adamant that she wanted John to have her diaries to read with our children. But, would she have allowed me the opportunity to use them in a research project? I can speculate what she may have thought. And thus it is from this perspective that I decided to work with her documents.

John and Robert are among the many names mentioned repeatedly in Aunt Helen's diaries. Although they have both signed an informed consent to use their real names (see Appendix C), it would not be an efficient use of resources to approach every person mentioned in her diaries. As a result, I assigned pseudonyms to all other names as they appear in my findings. However, I recognize that pseudonyms cannot guarantee confidentiality or anonymity. Cole (2001) writes of the struggles researchers face in sharing researched's stories while protecting their safety and anonymity.

Telling safely and authentically-capturing the richness and complexity of lived experience as influenced by the potent forces of context-might require life history researchers to push beyond the bounds of academic convention to find more appropriate representational forms. The search for a safe, authentic way to tell the stories of teacher educator's lives in context has taken me to the realm of fiction. (p. 169)

The idea of using fictional writing as a way to understand Aunt Helen's diaries appealed to me. Cole and Knowles (2001) explore the issues surrounding researcher's interpretation and the use of varying degrees of fiction to share a life history. For example, they note,

All telling is an interpretation regardless of whose voice is heard; all interpretation is a fiction despite reliance on "facts." No matter what we do and how we do it,

we are not representing Truth (with a capital T). What do we want to represent and communicate? This is the important question. Perhaps it is one of the most important questions that can be asked once a study is under way. (p. 199)

Cole and Knowles (2001) probe researchers to contemplate the crucial question: What do I want to represent and communicate? In honour of Aunt Helen's memory, I aspired to tell her story as close to her reality as possible, while simultaneously protecting the identity of third party individuals. Consequently, I attempted to construct a sort of fictional truth. But, what about the exceptionally personal writing in Aunt Helen's diary? Would it be honourable to share it with everyone? Because the researcher is the instrument and interpretation is my tool, I decided if there was something that should be omitted to uphold Aunt Helen's privacy and character. With that said, I did not take the notion of omission lightly. Akeret (1991), founder of a ten-step program designed to help elders share their stories with their families, says, "disappointment, failure, heartbreak . . . no one can live a full life without his share of painful experiences. We often want to forget our low points, but they, too, provide stories that tell who we are" (p. 180).

I struggled at length with the concept of omission. Richardson (1997) suggests that, and I agree,

If we wish to understand the deepest and most universal of human experiences, if we wish our work to be faithful to the lived experiences of people, if we wish for union between poetics and science, or if we wish to use our privileges and skills to empower the people we study, then we should value the narrative. (p. 35)

Friedman (1993) writes of the dilemmas many writers face including revealing the secrets of living subjects. He compared a narrative of only “nice things” to a eulogy (p. 26), and shares some guidance on the subject.

The friend who shelved her worries so she could write her autobiographical novel told me, “I think it’s essential to set yourself outside that sphere of personal consequence for the space of writing, to free yourself, to forgive yourself, and write what’s most true-what’s so often both the ugliest is the most beautiful. (p. 40)

One of the key purposes of this research is to allow those who knew Aunt Helen to reconnect with her and gain a more thorough understanding of who she was. However, this may evoke emotions for readers. Reading the contents of the fictional diary entries may resurface feelings of mourning and grief. Readers, whether or not they knew Aunt Helen, may be resentful of reopening old wounds or discovering something they did not know.

### **Trustworthiness**

To ensure the integrity of the findings, I used theory, source, and analyst triangulation. Denzin (as cited in Patton, 2002), says this about triangulation.

No single method ever adequately solves the problem of rival causal factors. Because each method reveals different aspects of empirical reality, multiple methods of observations must be employed. This is termed triangulation. I now offer as a final methodological rule the principle that multiple methods should be used in every investigation. (p. 247)

Source triangulation: In addition to the narrative analysis of the diaries, I use my own experiences with Aunt Helen and the stories she shared with me as an additional source of data. Furthermore, the focus of my literature review is in each of the five predetermined themes. I gained additional perspectives in these areas to facilitate my understanding of her story. Triangulation of sources helped increase the validity of my research and ensured that Aunt Helen's stories are well portrayed.

Theory triangulation: My framework is comprised of two distinct but overlapping theoretical approaches: autoethnography and narrative analysis.

Analyst triangulation: John and Robert's stories are intimately embedded in Aunt Helen's. They know many aspects of her life better than I. They have both read all of my work and provided feedback, comments, suggestions, and analysis thereby improving the quality of my findings.

## **PART TWO** **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The aim of this research is to uncover my interpretation of who Aunt Helen was as told through the pages of her diaries. My goal in reading the literature was to acquire a better understanding of how to analyze her diary entries and share her story. As a result, I have read an array of theories on a several issues I speculate Aunt Helen was dealing with in her later years. Significantly, I draw from Bochner and Ellis (2000) and Patton (2002) on narrative inquiry and autoethnography; Bishop's (1988) experience in a fish processing plant; Deekan's (1986) descriptions of loneliness and aging; Keen and Valley-Fox's (1989) ideas on story telling; Callanan and Kelley (1992) and MacDonald's (2004) theories on death, dying and bereavement; and VanDaele's (1990) research on the meaning of diary writing in women's lives.

Creating a format to shape the literature review findings was a challenge. Because I have selected autoethnography as the investigative lens for this study, I felt that writing a "traditional" review of the literature may have been a creative disappointment for me personally. Therefore, the review that follows is in a style that I consider well-suited to a study of Aunt Helen's diaries. I have written five letters to Aunt Helen with each letter encompassing related subject areas. Letter one is concerned with aspects of career; two with being single; three with friendship, bereavement, and loneliness; four with the practice of journaling and life reviews; and five with death. Each letter attempts to connect theory and practice. Grouping themes together in the letters was not premeditated. As I started to write the letters, I often felt a strong connection between two or more themes. Ultimately, tying the threads of various themes together is how I was able to weave Aunt Helen's life story.

June 24, 2004

“Women are like tea bags. They don’t know how strong they are until they get into hot water.”

- Eleanor Roosevelt and Nancy Reagan  
(The Stash Tea Company, 2004)

Dear Aunt Helen,

Fish! What is it about fish and the Paquet family? You must be laughing at us from heaven<sup>1</sup>. John and Robert have both started working at a fish processing plant. Robert strips mussels, makes boxes, and counts oysters among many other things. He wears a second skin of mud several times a day and returns home aching all over.

John is working in management. He loves the change in environment from his work in public practice. He says he likes the variety in his job and the increase in interaction with people. I think for the Paquets, working with fish is like coming home.

So much of your life was dedicated to the fish plant. The long hours and back-aching work on concrete floors must have been gruelling. But, the women you worked with were like your family. And, having your best friend, Lilly as a supervisor must have brought many laughs. The stories you had from the plant were countless. Like the time your dog Sam ran through the plant grabbing lobster tails with all of the women jumping and screaming. Were there aspects of your work that caused you pain?

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<sup>1</sup> “The concept of heaven is interpreted in various ways in the different religions of the world.” Christians view heaven as, “the destination of the true believers and followers of Christ. Some of the more recent interpretations view heaven symbolically as a state of life with Christ” (Merriam-Webster, 2003).

Bishop (1988) writes of the conditions at Lismore Seafoods, a small, seasonal, fish processing plant on the north shore of Nova Scotia where she was hired to organize a union in 1980. She notes that,

Conditions in the plant were difficult. The women stood in rows at metal tables, the concrete under their feet running with cold water and slime, steam and noise surrounding them. The clattering and banging of machinery was loud enough that shouted conversations between women standing two feet apart were short lived. Injuries from the machinery and slippery floors were common. Many illnesses came also from the cold, the noise, the stress, and the long hours of standing in one spot. The hours were long – six days plus overtime two or three nights a week, a total of 50 to 56 hours a week. At \$3.50 an hour, however, it was only the long hours that made the pay cheque look like anything. The young men on the wharf, often teenaged sons of long-time plant workers, were paid a dollar an hour more than their mothers. Management in the plant could better be called bullying. However, the need of families in rural Nova Scotia, whether with one parent or two, is enough to send women back there year after year, and the isolation of winter on the rural roads, for women who read little and don't drive, made the opening of the plant in the spring a happy occasion. (p. 28-29)

There were many stories of you and Lilly working and travelling for the union. As elected union representatives, the conferences you went on were memorable. There were hundreds of women from across the country all deserving of an escape from their lives for a week. You never spoke of how union-management relations worked within the plant. But, Bishop (1988) shares some of the struggles in her experience.

Women were beaten by their husbands for signing union cards. The company claimed that everyone who ever worked there counted as an employee because they never formally resigned. The manager put the ballot box on his desk and glared at the women as they voted. The workers were required to put their names on the outside of the ballot envelope, which convinced most of them that the vote would not be secret. In spite of these obstacles the vote was won and the union was in. (p. 29)

The fish plant was your social network, your break from home, your independence and freedom. I cannot believe that you worked into your late sixties until a dislocated hip finally forced you to retire. Were you afraid to leave? Myers and Navin (1984) say that for the childless older woman, “the loss of social status and contact that were part of a job may be particularly difficult to replace, and there are for them fewer roles beyond the work roles of wife, mother, and homemaker to fill the functions supplied by a job” (p. 98).

The fish plant was a big part of your life. John and Robert grew up immersed in the intimate details of the work. They were unloading boats on the wharf as soon as they were strong enough. You would be proud of them Aunt Helen. John is accomplished in his career, and at home, he is an amazing father. And, Robert has matured. He is an honours student at UPEI, a responsible and dependable employee, a loving boyfriend to an incredible woman, a caring uncle, and an integral part of my and John’s life. Both of your boys are wonderful men, men who work in the fishing industry.

Love,

Trina Rose

## Unmarried and Childless: Moving Past Regret

June 25, 2004

Dear Aunt Helen,

I couldn't believe it when Nancy told me that you wanted me to have your diamond engagement ring. I have to admit I felt privileged when you first shared the story of your suitor of fifty years before. My heart brimmed with sorrow for you every time you shared your father's reaction to that marriage proposal. He seemed to assume that no one was good enough for you when he resisted marriage for you. How did you feel when you chose not to marry?

You had hidden the ring in so many different places that you often couldn't find it. So, I was relieved you had the foresight to tell Nancy where to find it. There it lay in the pocket of your red blazer.

I beamed with pride and confidence as I handed over my coveted treasure. It sparkled and winked at me under the intense lighting. I just knew the jeweller was going to tell me how priceless it was. Imagine, a three-carat diamond engagement ring from fifty years ago and never worn. I assumed it was going to need a hefty amount of insurance.

"What do you mean it's worthless," I gasped. "It can't be. It was her engagement ring and I know it is worth something." The poor appraiser, I don't think he realized that his words would leave a stinging slap on my cheek.

"There is no trouble so great or grave that cannot be much diminished by a nice cup of tea."

- Bernard-Paul Heroux, philosopher  
(The Stash Tea Company, 2004)

“I’m sorry,” he said. “But the diamonds are glass and the ring was only dipped in gold.”

I was seething. I thought, what does he know. He’s probably trying to cheat me! It took days for me to realize that I was angry because to me, the ring was invaluable. And for someone to discount that felt like a dishonour to the sacrifices you made in your life. It slowly dawned on me that I did not need a jeweller to validate the feelings and emotion I attached to this little treasure. Now, I wear it admiringly with the warm satisfaction that it is priceless. I now assume it is your loyalty and dedication to your family that continues to make it sparkle. You sacrificed an opportunity for marriage to safeguard the respect of your father. Would you still make the same decision if you could return to that time?

I’ve often wondered what it was that I sensed in your voice as you shared the story of the ring. Was it regret or defiance? Sixty-five childless women, over the age of 65 were interviewed on the relationship between social support and life satisfaction. “The never married group, while also having their regrets about things in the past seem to have come to terms with their life, and the choices they have made. They put their energy into the present, and attempted not to dwell on the things they had not gotten” (Rice, 1984, p. 8). Furthermore, “One gathers a sense of pride from the never-married group in having been able to succeed independently” (p. 9).

Outside marriage, you endlessly cared for others. You filled a gaping hole in the lives of many nieces and nephews. But, I did not realize until now that they may have been doing the same for you. In an analysis of interview data from older, unmarried (widowed, divorced, and never-married) men and women Keith (1986) “examined

isolation among the unmarried aged and assessed personal characteristics associated with isolation from family and friends" (p. 389). He suggests further,

There has been speculation about the consequences of social isolation of unmarried persons, especially in old age . . . the greatest need expressed by singles is for networks of social relationships that can facilitate sharing, intimacy, and continuity. The social integration, intimacy, and continuity presumably provided by the marital relationship are obviously unavailable to the unmarried.

Singles would have to meet these needs outside of marriage. (p. 390)

Ward (as cited in Keith, 1986) stated, "Ties with family, friends, and neighbours are important sources of well-being since stable networks provide continuity for the self" (p. 390). Beckman and Houser (1982) write that,

It can be argued that lack of children should have its greatest negative effect on persons when they are elderly. The crux of this contention is that grown children satisfy their elderly parents' objective and subjective needs and that the type of social support offered by children is not readily available from other sources. Therefore, older women without children will have lower life satisfaction and social-psychological well-being

Evidence from social gerontology, however, finds little support for the view that childless women are less satisfied or have lower well-being than others. (p. 243)

Age must have brought quiet resignation, because you always seemed content to be “Aunt Helen.” Harris, Durkie and Flores (as cited in Myers and Navin, 1984) on the mounting social pressures childless women face say,

Regardless of the reasons for childlessness, older women who are childless have faced and may continue to face extensive social pressure. The myth of the maternal instinct is deeply ingrained in our society, particularly among the age peers of older women. Pronatalism, the encouragement of parenthood, is often based on the belief that motherhood is a woman’s biological destiny. (p. 92)

Speculating on the motive to dive into the lives of your nieces and nephews is immaterial. The joy John and Robert brought to your life, was returned to them exponentially. Furthermore, the stability, devotion, and loyalty that you invested in their lives have been unparalleled. I suspect you did know parental love. Did you think of yourself as a parent?

Love,

Trina Rose

## Friendship, Bereavement and Loneliness: A Time of Loss

June 26, 2004

Dear Aunt Helen,

“Tea pot is on, the cups are waiting,  
Favourite chairs anticipating,  
No matter what I have to do,  
My friend there’s always time for you.”  
- Anonymous  
(The Stash Tea Company, 2004)

I was looking for lawn chairs last week under the stairs, and I found a box of your personal effects. Lying on top was the address book I bought for you at The Preserve Company. I thumbed through the pages and was overwhelmed with the number of people you kept in touch with. There was page after page of addresses, phone numbers, birth dates, anniversaries, and bits of personal information. If the size of your address book is any indication of the kind of friend you are, then you were admired by many.

However, there was only one person you called your best friend. And, she was so much more to you than a best friend. The two of you had matching souls. Your hearts and minds were like a jigsaw puzzle. You did everything together, travelled everywhere together, all of your friends were in common, all of your stories included her, and all of your secrets were shared with her. Your lives were as one.

The role of friendships in your life was paramount. In a study examining the meaning of friendships in old age, forty-one males and seventy-four females, sixty years of age or older were interviewed on the definition of friendships in later life. “The meaning of a close friend goes beyond the definition of friend, particularly for older women, and hence is unique in its qualities” (Kimboko & Roberto, 1989, p.16).

Approximately one-third of the older women felt that friends had become a more important part of their lives because they now had more time to invest in the

friendship. As one 63 year-old woman remarked, “as you grow older, they (friends) play a more important role when you decrease other activities.” (p. 17) Adams (1987) compiled a review of the literature on the changes that occur in friendships over the course of your life. Two streams of literature emerge on the subject of friendship in old age. One concept suggests that, “declining capacities may force people into a stage of retrenchment, in which one’s network shrinks to a few ‘good, old friends’” (p. 43). These findings are consistent with the widely held view of aging as a process of the loss of choice (Goldman, 1971) or of decreasing life space (Rowles, 1978, p. 222). The second school of thought contrasts the above view of aging with the “view of old age as an opportunity for new experiences.” Lowenthal (as cited in Adams, 1987) suggests that healthy individuals with adequate financial resources often find old age as a period during which they have time to reinvest in friendship” (p. 222).

These two concepts are not, I assume, mutually exclusive. They have both guided your friendships. When Lily passed away a few years before you, you opened your heart to Arnold. I remember how hard you and I laughed when Arnold decided he should lay the ground rules for a friendship at this point in his life. In a round about way, he made it clear that it would be strictly platonic. I think you were thrilled that he even felt the need to address the subject. Arnold made you feel alive again following your mourning for Lily.

Lily’s fight with cancer, and her death, took its toll on you. In fact, you took much of the burden of her health upon yourself. Callanan and Kelley (1992) have helped me to understand how it must have consumed you. Their description of the caregiver’s reality resonated with my perception of how your life changed.

Someone you care about may be very ill, perhaps dying. There's so much to do – tests, hospitalizations, visits to the doctors offices. Sometimes there are two or three physicians to deal with – a surgeon, oncologist, radiologist, other specialists.

The medicine chest is jammed with partially used medicines-some bottles nearly full, others almost empty-as new and different ones are tried. Medical equipment seems to occupy every corner of your house. All the furniture has been rearranged, whether to allow a wheelchair to pass or to permit a fast trip to the bathroom.

Coping with terminal illness is more than hard work-it's all consuming and creeps into every corner of your life. There are so many people to talk to, so many questions to ask, so much to do. The hopes and triumphs of new or different treatments can change quickly into fears and failures. It's an exhausting emotional roller coaster ride. It's like having an unwanted and uninvited stranger in your midst, who seems to take up more and more space.

A terminal illness doesn't belong only to the one who is sick-it affects family members, friends, neighbours, coworkers. Not unlike a still pond disturbed by a falling stone, an impending death sends ripples through all the relationships in the life of the dying. Each person involved has his or her own set of issues, fears and questions.

Beyond coming to terms with the loss of someone we care about, we find ourselves with a jumble of conflicting emotions shaken loose by confronting human limitations and mortality: How can this be happening? I feel powerless-what can I do to help? I don't want to face this-what's it like to die?" (p. 2)

Did Lily's death bring you closer to your own mortality? I don't think you ever seriously considered your own death as being near until you felt abandoned by Lily. You seemed invincible until then.

Roberto and Stanis (1994) conducted a study examining the responses of 38 older women to the loss their close friends. "For 45 percent of the deaths the women indicated that the death of their close friend had increased their own awareness of their own aging, increased their awareness of their own mortality, and given them a greater appreciation of their own lives, respectively" (p. 22). And, "When asked what they missed most about their close friendships, the most common responses of the women were "doing things and just being together" (43%) and "talking and sharing" (33%)" (p. 25).

If Lily's death was difficult, Arnold's was agony. Twenty years your junior, I'm sure you thought that he would survive you. It was hard after that to open your heart to someone else. The sense of loss was overwhelming and unmanageable. After Arnold's death, the long phone calls began. If we weren't home, you would talk to the answering machine for several minutes. At the time, we thought it was endearing. Now, I'm just sorry there wasn't someone to answer the phone every time. Deekan (1986) suggests that,

Numerous aging men and women confess that the suffering hardest to bear is this feeling of loneliness. Their old friends have died, one after the other. As one octogenarian put it: "There is nobody around anymore to call me Jack." The children have moved away and want to lead their own lives. The intervals between their visits become longer and longer . . . Do people still want me, do

they need me or do they just tolerate me? So he withdraws and spends many a night in bitter loneliness. (p. 39)

According to Bernstein, Clarke-Stewart, Penner and Roy (2003), as people become increasingly aware of their own mortality, “they value positive interactions and become selective about their social partners . . . As long as there are at least three close friends or relatives in their network, they tend to be content” (p. 481).

You persevered and looked for ways to assuage your loneliness and grief. You begged John to buy you a dog. Shortly after, I begged John to say yes. With your recent assortment of physical ailments to deal with, dropping off a new puppy was probably not the most sensible thing we could have done. But, your happiness was undeniable. Now, you had a friend who would not desert you. Max was a lucky dog. Not many dogs eat toast with butter and jam for breakfast every morning and shelled peanuts for “bed lunch.”

I often wondered what filled your long days on Centre Street. I know it was hard for you to get around town. Trips to the post office, the co-op, the bank and even church were scarce. But, you must have missed seeing all of your neighbours and friends. Church was always something you looked forward to. You would wonder out loud if Arnold would be dropping down after mass for tea. In a study examining the role of the church in older women’s social and spiritual supports, 21 middle-class, older white women, from the same Sunday school class in a Methodist church in Ohio were interviewed. Stuckey (1990) found that “church activities may provide elderly persons with a structure within which to maintain social contact and spiritual support into old age,” (p.1).

Did your faith grow stronger as you sensed your time was running out? Did you pray during the day? Who did you pray for? I never thought to ask you. Deekan's (1986) words on prayer touch me.

In the bitter hours of loneliness the only ray of hope and consolation might be the thought of God's presence. In spite of all appearances to the contrary, man is ultimately never alone since God is always there. Deepening one's self awareness of God's presence can be an extremely rewarding way to fill the lonely hours of old age . . . Our loneliness is often God's way of getting our undivided attention and of communicating with us on a new and deeper level. (p. 41-42)

Old age is brimming with loss: loss of roles, partners, friends, career, independence, and health. With this loss, loneliness struggles to creep in to the unfilled gaps. I am thankful that Max was able to bring you joy and shut out some of the loneliness. I pray that you turned to your faith to defeat the rest.

Love,

Trina Rose

## Journaling and Life Review: A Look Back

June 27, 2004

“Drink your tea slowly and reverently, as if it is the axis on which the world earth revolves – slowly, evenly, without rushing toward the future. Live the actual moment. Only this moment is life.” - Thich Nat Hahn  
(The Stash Tea Company, 2004)

Dear Aunt Helen,

A diary demands unwavering attention. I am awestruck by the constancy of your writing. How could you not miss a week? What did your diary mean to you? Was it an escape? Was it a means of self-discovery, self-affirmation? I ask these questions because I've never been able to keep a diary.

Last spring I decided to investigate how far back your diaries dated. The storage bin sagged with weight as I lifted it from under the stairs. I sat in the middle of the rec-room floor and carefully started making piles by year. Notebooks, calendars and notepads full of your thoughts surrounded me on the floor and still the bottom of the box was not in sight.

It was close to the bottom of the box that I discovered your father's writing. You saved many of his old logbooks. I pulled them out in fascination and began to thumb through them. His early logbooks recorded where he worked, how many hours, and who owed him money. As the years passed, he began recording the weather, and then suddenly a couple of lines were dedicated to the day's major events.

I continued making piles. With the placement of the last book, realization dawned. You took over the responsibility of diary-keeping from your father. Your first diary began shortly after he passed away. Your entries efficiently recorded the temperature, weather, and what you did that day. Over the next couple of years your

entries became longer, and more detailed. Somewhere in your writing, you forgot of the project as the fulfillment of a family tradition, and instead began to spread your wings and write about yourself.

But, why did you save all of your old diaries? What did they represent to you? What role did they play in your life? How did writing become an integral part of your daily routine? VanDaele (1990) conducted interviews with women of all ages who kept diaries over the course of their lifetimes. Participants were questioned on the meaning of the diary in their lives. Through these interviews, VanDaele found that, “in the lives of diary writers, there is also a stated need ‘just to have those experiences there,’ slices of life captured forever on the smooth pages of a notebook” (p. 157). VanDaele concluded that the diary “both reflects and accelerates a woman’s development and learning, anchoring her in her own past and present reality while allowing her to shape aspects of her future” (Executive Summary). Furthermore, VanDaele says,

the diary is an act of self-construction over a long period of time. In the diary, a self may be constructed, observed, and nurtured . . . In the safe place of the diary, the self is mirrored and listened to. The writer’s voice is heard. With the passage of time, such experiences lead to a satisfying feeling of intactness, a feeling that one resides in the diary and that one’s story is complete on the diary’s pages.

(Executive Summary)

Kazemek (2002) wrote a book designed to help Senior Adults start writing about their lives. In it he also addresses some of the many purposes of maintaining a diary or journal.

Because diaries are private, we can be often brutally honest in them. We might use them to vent our anger at, say, an overbearing or insensitive neighbour. We might express our sadness or disappointment over a child's failure in marriage. On the other hand, we might use the diary to capture the sheer magic we feel after stepping out on our front porch after the first snowfall. (p. 264)

The freedom of speech a diary provides can be a gift. Was this the motivation for your writing? VanDaele (1990) explains, "Discharge in the diary has to do with immediate gratification and relief . . . As a form of writing that is a natural overflow of human feeling, especially negative feeling, we may find it appears at times to dominate other forms of writing in the diary" (p. 126). In writing about your diaries, am I seeking freedom?

Over time, your diaries became a way of understanding life. This practice supports Hooker and McAdams (2003) view that, "Embedding one's life experience in a story is a way of making sense of life experiences, and this may indicate integration and optimal mental health" (p. 300). Hooker and McAdams also write,

One's life story is the internalized and evolving self-narrative a person works on over the course of life. In making sense of their lives in narrative terms, people selectively reconstruct the past and imagine the future in ways that provide their lives with meaning and purpose. Life stories function as narrative identities, explaining to the self and others how a person has come to be and what a person's life means over time. (p. 300)

Do your diaries tell your life story? Or, are they an account of the incidents that comprised your days? Is it possible that a life story is just a collection of incidents with some context?

After your father passed away, your big house was quiet. You had never lived alone. Was the telling of your life story a way to address the silence? Bell (1985) writes, If one has, on some kind of a regular basis, an opportunity to tell one's story orally to family, friends, and neighbours, is one then less apt to write it, either in letters or journals? Everyone who reads letters and journals becomes quickly aware of loneliness as a motive for writing. Do women in particular write journals primarily if and when we are lonely, estranged, cut off? If so, that implies a great deal about how we must read them. (p. 174)

Was your writing a way to understand the prospect of aging? Diabetes, arthritis, a triple bypass, and two hip replacements would force anyone into the ring with old age. Deekan (1986) describes what the realization of old age may look like for a woman.

Every woman will sooner or later become aware that her bloom is fading. She will be conscious that her physical presence no longer holds the same attraction. People may still value her abilities, her professional success and her good reputation, but this will appear to her as little more than a retirement pension. Certain physical ailments will make themselves felt: slight disturbances of her powers of concentration, curtailed and lighter sleep, rheumatic pains and stinging headaches. The aging woman will be subject to moodiness, irritability and unrest. The vigor of life slowly decreases and weariness takes over. The mornings are

losing the charm of newness, the noondays bring monotony, and the long evenings and nights are spent in loneliness. (p. 16-17)

Baile's (1978) review of adult life cycle theorists found that in the last stage of the life cycle or old age, theorists like Erikson, Peck, Gould, Vaillant, and Sheeby generally agree that there is a shift to a more introspective self (p. 9). More specifically, Erikson (1963) viewed the latter part of the life cycle as a crisis of integrity versus despair, a period when the individual reflects back on his/her life, adapts to its triumphs and disappointments, and incorporates memories and experiences into meaningful beliefs about self and the world". Hamachek (as cited in Glover, 1998, p. 325-326) Chinen (1989) says that the "spectre of decline, and the reality of multiple losses in later life" make the necessary room to face issues that were intolerable and unresolved (p. 146). "Age and experience provide new strength to face old fears, and the challenge of maturity is to choose those assets to grow" (p. 146).

Was your diary an accomplice in self -confrontation as you looked back on your life review? According to Butler (as cited in Cappeliez and Watt, 2001),

A life review follows the onset of a crisis, such as a significant loss or the realization of approaching death. The crisis prompts the resurgence of memories of past experiences, particularly unresolved conflicts. Through reconsideration of these experiences, a revised or expanded understanding of the self and the meaning of one's life may be achieved. (p. 221)

Sullivan (1993)designed a college course for older adults returning to college on sharing their personal stories. She delivered the course over a 20-year period during which she studied more than 1,500 life stories of older students. She observed that,

sharing stories has a profound healing effect, and “our personal stories ground us in the reality of our lives” (p.1-2). Keen and Valley-Fox (1989) suggest that the sharing of personal stories has always been and always will be about finding meaning in life.

So long as human beings change and make history, so long as children are born and old people die, there will be tales to explain why sorrow darkens that day and stars fill the night. We invent stories about the origin and conclusion of life because we are exiles in the middle of time. The void surrounds us. We live within a parenthesis surrounded by question marks. Our stories and myths don’t dispel ignorance, but they help us find our way, our place at the heart of the mystery. In the end, as in the beginning, there will be a vast silence, broken by the sound of one person telling a story to another. (p. 128)

As a child, I tried many times to keep a diary. Repeatedly, my mother encouraged me to write. She would buy me beautiful little notebooks and lock and key diaries. Initially, I would write detailed entries every day. After a couple of weeks my interest waned and I would stop writing. I always felt guilty when this happened. I was letting my diary down, and my mother. I remember writing the date at the top of each page for a week and writing on each page, “I’m sorry I didn’t write anything today.” The last book my mother gave me was a hard cover notebook. She wrote inside the front cover, “for all of your inspirational thoughts.” Ten years later, I finally felt inspired to christen the crisp pages with these thoughts of you. Why, I wonder, did I chose not to write in my diaries? Love,

Trina Rose

June 28, 2004

“Angel came down from heaven yesterday, she stayed with me just long enough for afternoon tea.”

- Jimi Hendrix

(The Stash Tea Company, 2004)

Dear Aunt Helen,

The scene looked oddly familiar. John and I were sleeping, and you were kneeling at my side praying. I was not surprised to see you there because somehow I knew you were there all along. My dream felt strangely comforting. As I woke, I smiled until I understood the familiarity. It is a scene I have replayed tirelessly in my imagination, except, in my version, I am praying over you at your deathbed.

The evening of June 27, 2002 is memorable. The air carried a promise of relentless summer heat. The back of the jeep was crowded with food, sleeping bags and beer. The dog was desperately trying to find a breeze from the window. It was one of those rare moments of being reabsorbed in the joys of careless youth. Our escape was a cottage in Mill River where John and I go every year with friends to drink beer, boat, dig clams, and eat burnt hot dogs for 4 days. A blanket of calm envelopes me just writing about this experience.

Now, I imagine that when John picked me up that evening, instead of going to Mill River for our weekend of leisure, he tells me that we should stay with you at the hospital. It later took a network of ten people, including strangers, to tell us that you were dead.

Why didn't you tell us that you were dying? Why did you deny us the gift of closure? I can't bear the thought of you dying alone. Did you assume you were doing the right thing? Did anyone hold your hand? Did you ask for anyone at the last

moment? According to Callanan and Kelly (1992), you may have tried to tell us earlier but we missed the subtleties of your knowledge.

Dying people often seem to know when their death will occur, sometimes right down to the day or hour. Surprisingly, they often face this knowledge not with fear or panic, but rather with quiet resignation. Their attempts to share information about the time of death may be very clear and direct. On the other hand, some may be so vague and subtle that others miss or ignore them, or label such messages “confused.” (p.113)

Driving home from Mill River, John told me about your phone call the day before. He said you were anxious and insistent on seeing him that day. But, when he arrived for a visit, you seemed calm and uncharacteristically quiet. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross says that a person facing death does not necessarily progress through the stages of death in an “orderly fashion” (Callanan & Kelly, 1992, p. 38).

Acceptance is a feeling of peaceful resignation that usually doesn’t come to stay until death is very close. It’s common for patients to experience interludes of acceptance and then, in one day, in one conversation, in one sentence, slip into another emotional stage. But eventually death nears, at which time permanent acceptance may arrive. When this occurs-provided a dying person is comfortable-she needs little except the presence of one or two important people.

If you are one of these people, you may experience mixed emotions. The peace of another’s acceptance of death can be comforting, but with acceptance comes detachment. (p. 51)

Did you die with regrets Aunt Helen? From my perspective, you lived a full life. I can only conclude that you must have been at peace with yourself as you faced death alone.

I hope, however, when you approached death you were thinking back on the good memories that comprised your life. I hope you were surrounded by people you loved, especially Lily, and your parents. I hope you were thinking about all of the nieces and nephews who knew you as a mother. Here, I quote from MacDonald (2004) who writes,

Dying People often spend far more of their time looking back rather than forward.

Death is an unknown, and to many people, depending on their religious or spiritual beliefs, there aren't a lot of specifics to think about (other than wondering about death). The life they have lived, however, does have many specifics, and this is what most people spend their time thinking about as they near the end of their life-the many details that comprised it. (p. 1)

Isn't it interesting, Aunt Helen, how working with your diaries in this way is helping me to move on. For two years, I have held on to grief and regret. Callanan and Kelly ('992) say, "spiritual discomfort is the result of mortality's impact on patient and family" (p. 27). Now I want to remember the love we shared for John and Robert and the long afternoons we spent together in the sunroom, sipping tea. I am thankful you were with us when John and I exchanged vows. And, I felt your presence this year when we named our first child after your mother.

Many say that children have the unique ability to see things in this world that adults cannot. There were a couple of moments this year in the middle of the night that I knew my new born daughter was looking at someone that was not there. It was

unmistakeable. She smiled, waved her arms and kicked her legs in recognition. Wester-Anderson (1994) offers this explanation. “Little ones do appear to have a special bond with heaven. Perhaps it’s because they haven’t yet experienced a clear vision between the two worlds and, for a little while, can be a part of each” (p. 5).

Thank you for continuing to bless our lives with the splendour of your memory. When we arrived home from your funeral, I paused with my key in the front door. My little wiry rose bush was exploding with dozens of brilliant fuchsia roses. I have no idea how you did it, because there has never been another on it since.

Love,

Trina Rose

## PART THREE A TRIBUTE

One of the intended purposes of this research was to honour Aunt Helen's life and writing for the appreciation of future generations who will not have the pleasure of knowing this remarkable woman. This section is intended to serve that purpose. The section is organized into four parts. They are fictional diary entries, letter to The Guardian, a collage of photos, and a response to the fictional diary entries by John and Robert. I invited John and Robert to share their reactions to my work because of the unique relationship they shared with Aunt Helen.

It is, I think, impossible to replace the nostalgia of a photograph with words. So, I selected a few of my favourite pictures of Aunt Helen to share with readers. In life, her face radiated warmth that I hope is visible in the collage I created.

The fictional diary entries are the end product of a narrative analysis of Aunt Helen's diaries. I selected 244 entries from her diaries and coded the text in those selected entries. Then, I assembled like pieces of coded text together. It was the resulting mosaic of text that laid the foundation for the 36 fictional diary entries. I cut and pasted coded text into the fictional entries, removed the majority of the references to everyday chores and activities, and supplemented the entries with narrative on my assumptions about the unspoken (Hoffman & Culley, 1985).

I call the entries fictional because they are a result of my interpretations and prioritization of Aunt Helen's writing. Thus, I encourage readers to read the text as a fictional piece of writing. I have been frugal with the concept of omission. In order to capture the essence of Aunt Helen's diaries, I did not exclude reference to unsettling

experiences. Thus said, my analysis is not intended to hurt or defame anyone, and I have worked hard to portray events in a fair way.

In creating the fictional diary entries, I found it hard to assure anonymity. I did however, assign pseudonyms to all characters and created some fictional characters, places, dates and events. Anyone who was close to Aunt Helen will, undoubtedly, be able to recognize himself or herself in her writing. While most research practitioners aim to avoid this, I came to recognize that this is a part of the healing process for her friends and family. In this sense, I am hopeful that individuals will find themselves in the writing and realize their own significant contributions in Aunt Helen's life.

The following fictional diary entries are in no way a comprehensive account of everything or everyone Aunt Helen wrote about. Instead, I attempted to represent the extent she wrote about someone or something in a corresponding number of fictional entries. In addition, there were many defining moments in her life that I was unable to incorporate such as her fond childhood memories of playing ice hockey on the pond or her spiritual retreat in Quebec.

The entries are organized in chronological order from 1979-2002. It is important to note that her last entry is the only entry that is purely fictional. In conversations with a nurse, I collected information to construct a possible scenario for Aunt Helen's last 24 hours, S. Smith (personal communications, November 2004).

The evolution of Aunt Helen's penmanship tells its own tale. I have shared a piece of Aunt Helen's handwriting so that readers might have the opportunity to understand how she wrote. In the June 11, 2002 entry, she talks about preparing a card of

thanks for the newspaper in case something happens to her. I have scanned this piece of writing and included it at the end of the fictional diary entries.

Readers may find the number of characters and relationships overwhelming. To address this, I developed a couple of strategies to aid readers. First, I included footnotes in the entries for the relationships of the main characters. Second, I created a diagram (Appendix D) of the main characters relationships to Aunt Helen. The diagram is not inclusive of every character mentioned nor is it representational of a family tree.

The grammar and colloquialism used in a personal narrative are not always conducive to easy reading. Nor are they close in proximity to an academic style of writing. I chose to change some of her grammar while still incorporating most of Aunt Helen's writing style and colloquialism.

I have purposefully allowed Aunt Helen's character to emerge in a way that readers can develop their own assumptions about who she was as opposed to me instilling my own ideas upon the reader.

On August 31, 1985, Aunt Helen started a new diary. On the inside front cover, she wrote a simple inscription that eloquently sums the journey readers are about to embark upon. It stated, "Helen Paquet's diary since August 31, 1985 ~ some good and bad times in it."

## Fictional Diary Entries

### April 24, 1979

*What a beautiful sunny day. Lily<sup>2</sup> and I were over at the plant at 7:30. We waited for Simon<sup>3</sup>, and he came and gave Lily a key. We did one tub of fish but they were too fresh to cut. So we turned to clams. We finished at 4:00. Simon gave us a platter of clams to take home. They were lovely. We watched a story on television. Great evening.*

### Nov 19, 1979

*I've been awake since 3:00 a.m. My hip was paining all night. It's 6:00 a.m., and there's no snow yet. We are supposed to get 15 centimetres before noon. The cod quota went up last night, but they already have lots of fish at the plants. I called Lily. Her and Patsy<sup>4</sup> are getting ready for work. She said Patsy stayed over last night because of the storm. I told her I tried to get her on the phone all evening and there was no answer. She said it must have been off the hook, we were just playing scrabble. I was some mad. I said some things about her and Patsy that she didn't like and she hung up.*

*Patsy and Lily will be glad to have the plant to themselves. I won't be going back to work this year. My hip is too sore. I'll miss the money but my UIC will be coming soon.*

*It's 4:00 p.m., and there's no answer at Lily's. They must still be working. The days are some long. There's no one around all day and my hip is too sore to walk anywhere. I wish I had a little car so I could drive somewhere. It's 4:45. I called Lily's a few more times. I'll keep ringing until she gets home. Lily came in at 5:00. I was some happy to see her. She looked tired. Standing for 10 hours at 65 years of age is hard work. She stayed for dinner and then we went up to her place for the night. Watched a movie and to bed at 10:30. Patsy called twice. Lily talked to her in a low voice so I couldn't hear what she said. Something is up.*

### May 1, 1980

*That Simon is some ungrateful and selfish! I will never forget this day. This is the day we were taken off being paid by the week and put on being paid by the day. We will get \$6.25 per hour and no over time for cutting fish. Babineau's is paying their girls \$7.25/hour plus overtime. I guess he thinks we were making too much money. How quickly he forgets who got him started in this business.*

---

<sup>2</sup> Lily - best friend of forty years

<sup>3</sup> Simon - boss

<sup>4</sup> Patsy - co-worker and friend of Lily

*Lily and I worked out of his basement for years cutting fish for next to nothing! I wish I could get another job. We worked 12 hours today. I didn't get home until 7:00 p.m.*

September 14, 1984

*I am so worried. I've been calling Matthew's<sup>5</sup> house for two days now and still no answer. Marie<sup>6</sup> told me the truck hasn't moved in a week. Lily asked for Linda<sup>7</sup> at the manor and they said she called in sick to work yesterday and today. I hope Matthew has stopped drinking. Why can't he do the right thing for his family and clean up? I wish I never got him that job with Jim shingling Elizabeth's roof anyway. Matthew should never have hit Jim. Jim would have paid him. Now the RCMP are involved and he has no job to go back to.*

*I still can't believe that Matthew can be such a good, responsible man some days and then drink for a week and lose everything. He is some lucky that Lily and I found him Wednesday night. Lily and I were at Simon's for supper, and on our way home, we saw Simon's truck on the wharf. I told Lily we should go check on it. Matthew was asleep in the truck and Robert and the dog were with him. I was furious. Something terrible could have happened. We took the keys and Robert and went to Linda's. I called Joe<sup>8</sup> to go pick up Matthew. What I don't understand is why Linda is always covering up for Matthew and making excuses for him. She, flat out, lied to me.*

*I just got a call from Linda. It's 10:00 p.m. Matthew is coming off the drink. Thank God he is feeling better. I spoke to him and told him to call Jim in the morning and get his job back, he will. He told me he finally got paid this morning. I knew he would. The kids were still up. The racket of them in the background! He said he'd come fix my frozen pipe tomorrow evening after dinner.*

March 30, 1985

*Linda is in the Queen Elizabeth Hospital for her nerves. She did so well the past few years, and now, she is back in. Matthew had to go to Charlottetown and tell the doctor all about Linda and what treatment she had before. She was only supposed to go to the Souris Hospital for a couple of days but it's been over two weeks. Please God let her get out soon, to get home with her children. I called the hospital but the nurse said Linda was sleeping and that she needed all the rest she could get. She said Linda is very mixed up.*

*I am so tired. I just got back from Linda's house. I didn't know where to start. I went upstairs and made the beds, picked up all the clothes, vacuumed*

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<sup>5</sup> Matthew – nephew, father to John and Robert

<sup>6</sup> Marie – Matthew's neighbour and friend of Aunt Helen

<sup>7</sup> Linda – wife of Matthew, mother to John and Robert

<sup>8</sup> Joe – friend of Matthew

*the living room, picked up the garbage. What a mess! The kitchen was full of clothes. I swept and mopped the kitchen floor and put clothes in the wash. I wrote a note for Matthew to put the clothes in the dryer and bring the boys down for supper. Please let Linda get home soon.*

*Matthew, Robert, John and I were sitting down to pork chops and mashed potatoes when Lily breezed in and said crossly, this is why you don't have time for me! She stormed out and said I'm going to the dump without you! Matthew was upset. She is always lecturing me about all that I do for Matthew and the children. She never asks about Linda.*

### July 3, 1985

*This is the first day I have no work to go to in 48 years. I was awake at 4:00 a.m. and called Lily at 6:30 a.m. She was just leaving for work. I washed up, had breakfast, and now am doing nothing. It's 7:30 a.m., and I have to get out of this rut I am in. What am I going to do all day?*

*I cleaned the woodwork in the kitchen and scrubbed the carpet in the living room and hallway. Everything is clean and its only 10:30 a.m. I am thinking about Lily and the girls. I hope Francine <sup>9</sup>is at work. She can't afford to quit. She has a family to look after. I have nobody.*

*Simon gave everyone a test yesterday on how much fish they could cut. He said someone was only cutting 73 lbs an hour. What an insult! Francine and I refused to take the test. I took the test 25 years ago, and now I could cut fish with my eyes shut. He told me to go back to the table. So, I left. Francine caught up to me walking on the beach. She drove me home and I told her to go back to work.*

*I need four more stamps for UIC. I called the gas station to see if I could get my stamps there. Lily called and said Simon feels bad and I should come back. Bull shit! I went to bed at 10:30. My cold is bad.*

### July 7, 1985

*I talked to Simon. He's glad I'm coming back. I'm starting Monday. I went to bed at 12:00.*

### Oct 31, 1985

*It's all over Souris that Lily, Pearl<sup>10</sup> and I won \$50,000. I feel terrible when people congratulate me. The three of us were taking the ferry from Borden to Cape Tormentine when we ran into Andrew and Gary MacQuillan and their wives. Andrew asked Lily where we were going, and she said we're going to pick*

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<sup>9</sup> Francine – co-worker and friend

<sup>10</sup> Pearl – friend of Lily and Aunt Helen

*up our fifty thousand. But, she never told him the difference. Now, it has gotten out of hand! When I tell people we won nothing, they don't believe me. Betty<sup>11</sup> and I got into an argument about it over the phone. She is calling me a liar. I just feel so bad that everyone will think I lied. How do I get myself into these situations?*

#### **December 1, 1985**

*I didn't sleep well last night. It's 10:30 a.m., and Lily hasn't called. She must be out at Patsy's. I guess our friendship is gone. I feel terrible for all the years we were together, and the things I've done for her. I didn't go to church. I am sick. This is all Patsy's fault, breaking us up. She's at Lily's every night until 10:00 or 11:00 asking her to go out to her place all the time. And, they don't want me because I'm a cripple.*

*I called Patsy, and told her to stay away from Lily so she will stop this drinking. We talked 20 minutes, and I told her I was disappointed in her.*

*I guess I'm out and she's in.*

#### **January 1, 1986**

*I'll never forget New Year's Eve alone. I am terrible lonesome. Lily and Patsy never called me or asked me to go out with them. I haven't talked to Lily in four days. We had words about Patsy. Lily blamed me for starting rumours about them. Lily was drinking and was nasty on the phone.*

*I called Patsy's house at 3:15 a.m. and Dale, Patsy's husband, answered the phone by saying Happy New Year. I wished him and Patsy well and asked for Lily. She was gone home.*

*I called Lily this morning. She said she felt terrible ashamed and guilty about not asking me out for New Year's. She was crying about it and asked if she could come down and talk. We had tea and toast and talked. But, she was still going out to Patsy's this afternoon. She said she would come to my place for pizzas and movies this evening. 40 years of friendship is hard to let go of.*

#### **December 26, 1986**

*Lily called at 11:30 p.m., and said she was lonely. I told her I am like that often. I asked her to come down for the night. She wished she could, but she had a few captains. We talked for about an hour, and she felt better. I know how she felt. I am like that when she is with Patsy.*

---

<sup>11</sup> Betty - friend

July 14, 1988

*Today was Matthew's trial day. Now his name will be in the paper and they may have a warrant out for him. Linda called; she is so worried. She said Matthew took the chain saw, some wrenches and the car, and said he was going to look for work in forestry. I think its bull. He'll just sell the saw. He told Linda he would call her, but that was over two weeks ago. She is lucky to have her mother here with her for now.*

*John was down for breakfast. He said the RCMP were at the house today asking Linda questions. John said to me, I wish Dad didn't lose his licence so he could come home and take us to ball games. Please God, let him get back on track for next year. He has always been such a good father to those boys. John said Robert isn't eating. He is lonesome for his father too. I can't understand Matthew leaving his little family with no word. He must be in New Brunswick or Nova Scotia.*

*I called Edward<sup>12</sup> to see if he had Matthew's number. I called Matthew and no answer. He is staying with an old friend in some small place in New Brunswick. I called again and Matthew answered. I told him it's not the end of the world because he lost his license, for the second time. He said he didn't feel like being in jail for the summer. I told him to ask if he could put it off until winter. I said clean up and paint your house. You still have lots of work to do at home. He hung up. So, that's the last time I will call him. I'll miss Matthew too. He looked after me well.*

August 31, 1989

*Lily just fell back to sleep. I am going to stay for a little while. I'll be here when she wakes up as a surprise. I went down stairs and ordered roses for her. And, I'll get two beef on a bun when she wakes up. I can't eat right now. I still have a lump in my throat.*

*The operation went well and her breast is off. She is relieved to have it over with. I was so worried I would lose Lily, my best friend. I love you Lily.*

April 6, 1991

*Lily was down and we had tea and biscuits. She still has no word from the doctor, and it has been two weeks since she had the CT Scan. She has an awful headache and sore neck all of the time. Today it is especially bad. I want her to call Dr. Sprague's office in Charlottetown. I went up to her place for a lovely dinner of ham, turnip, and potatoes. She gave me an Easter basket filled with chocolate bunnies and eggs and a nice card. I think Lily looks bad. Oh God, I am sick with worry.*

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<sup>12</sup> Edward – nephew, brother of Matthew

December 14, 1991

*Today is my 70th birthday. It's just another day older. I hate to think of getting older alone. John was down with the newspaper this morning and had breakfast. But, none of them ever know my birthday. Lily has been at Patsy's all day. The gang of nieces and nephews called yesterday and said they would be out for lunch. But, it's 3:00 now, and no one has called. I spent all day cooking potato salad, coleslaw, boiled eggs on salad, roast pork, potato hash, sweet and sour meatballs and gravy. I am so disappointed.*

*Patsy just called to wish me a Happy Birthday and to tell me that Lily will be down for supper. Lily came and had pork, hash and donuts. She didn't want to have salad or sweet and sour meatballs.*

*I went to church at 8:00. I almost didn't make it home my hip is so sore. I can hardly walk. Now, when I put weight on it, my knee buckles.*

*I saw my old friend, William<sup>13</sup> at mass. He looked smart in his red jacket and clean haircut. Mother told me not to marry him because he is a drinker. And, he is. But, he smiled at me during communion and my heart was heavy. He may have been lovely.*

*It's 11:30, and I'm watching television now. That's my enjoyment. I don't get to go anywhere now with my hip.*

January 21, 1992

*This is day number six of chemo treatment for Lily. I go with her and sit beside her once she is hooked up. It doesn't take much longer than ½ hour. There are usually five or six others there at the same time. They are friendly and talkative. We try to share a few laughs. Lily is still very short of breath and will have her lungs x-rayed to see if there is fluid built up again. Please God; I pray that she will stop this smoking.*

May 10, 1993

*I called Lily three times this morning and there is no answer. I called Ann across the street, and she said Lily's car is home and the light is on. I called two more times and she answered. She said she was asleep and just drank too much. I hope she is not drinking today. She told me she just had one beer. I wonder.*

February 15, 1994

*Today is John's birthday. I called him at 8 p.m. He must be lonely. He is home watching television and Robert is outside playing. He said he would get Robert home at 9:00 for bed. He is so young and has to be so grown up. He spoke to*

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<sup>13</sup> William – proposed marriage to Aunt Helen 50 years previous

his father the first of the week. John asked him to send some money to them. I hope he does.

John told me that Dr. MacKay called him today and asked him to give permission for his mother to have shock treatments again. He said no, thank God. She will be in longer because of it but will at least have her brain working. She has been in for a month so far this time. The boys don't want to stay down here. They will stay at their own house and come here for dinner. I have been going to the house every second day to help John clean up.

There is still no sign of Lily. She was supposed to drive me to the laundromat to pick up the boys cloths.

Robert is going out to the Murphy's<sup>14</sup> tomorrow and will stay for a while. I packed his bag this morning, but I will have to buy more sweatshirts and gloves for him. I am worried about Robert. There's a lot more wrong with him since their father left. It's terrible of Matthew to be doing this...to all of us.

Lily called and said how are your babies? I hung up on her. I don't know how much more of this I can take.

### February 22, 1996

This is terrible. I have to pay Linda's bills, and there will be no money left for food. I am giving Robert money I haven't got. And, I called John to send money home from Calgary. He will call his father too. This is terrible. Something has to be done.

I went to see Ellen MacDonald from Welfare this afternoon. She will pay off Linda's bills and give money to the Co-op for food for Robert.

Linda has been in the hospital for 27 days now. Robert stays at home. His friend, Ronnie Burge stays with him so he won't be alone. They get their own breakfast and come here for dinner. I hope the house is still clean. I asked them to keep it clean.

Robert won first trophy in high school for best in badminton, and he's only in grade 10. He is good in sports and good in school. Too bad his father isn't at home to see him play. He'll regret it some day when the boys are all grown up. He missed the best part of their lives.

John called back at 10:30 p.m. He was talking to his father, and he promised to send home \$80. John told him that Robert is playing in a badminton tournament in Chatham next month. He told him he should go see Robert.

### March 10, 1996

I can't find Robert! I am worried sick. Where is he! I can't believe he wouldn't call after school. It is storming outside with high winds of 80 kilometres per hour. Everything is closing and I've been calling around for him. It's now 7:30 p.m.,

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<sup>14</sup> The Murphy's – Robert's friend's family

*and John called. I told him I couldn't find Robert. He said to try his girlfriend's house. Robert was there. He went there after school.*

*John called back at 9:00 p.m. He is in a camp and had to talk on a satellite phone. He said it would cost about \$5 a minute. I told him I found Robert. I know John loves his work, but I had to tell him to come home. Robert needs him here. He said he would be out of camp in a week and would come home after that. Thank God. I told John that Matthew didn't send Robert the \$80 or go see his Badminton game in Chatham. He was quiet. He may not forgive Matthew for this.*

### March 6, 1997

*Lily just called me. She is short of breath again. Lorraine<sup>15</sup> is going to drive her to the Souris Hospital to have fluid drained off of her lung. I am going to church now to pray for Lily.*

### March 15, 1997

*Lily finally fell asleep at 12:00. I am so exhausted. Lorraine and I sat in the TV room, and she told me that Lily is not going to get better. She has cancer around her heart. I was stunned. I didn't want to leave after that. I asked if they would put a cot in Lily's room for me, but they wouldn't hear of that in case it would keep Lily awake. When she woke up, she told me to go home.*

*Charles<sup>16</sup> drove me home and I lay on the couch in the clothes I've had on for two days. I couldn't sleep. So, I prayed for Lily all night.*

*I called the hospital at 2 a.m. and 5 a.m. The nurse told me Lily was up at 4 a.m. and wondered why she was so mixed up.*

### April 13, 1997

*Lily had some kind of night. They had to give her morphine at 9:30 p.m. to settle her down. I stayed until 11:00 p.m. Father Brookes was around this evening and anointed her. I am so tired.*

### April 14, 1997

*My best friend Lily died at 11:10 last night. I had just left her side. Patsy had gone for a cup of tea and when she returned, Lily was gone. Patsy came over after, and we had tea. I will sure miss my best friend Lily. I loved Lily, and she*

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<sup>15</sup> Lorraine – Lily's cousin

<sup>16</sup> Charles – Lily's cousin

*loved me. For fifty years, we were friends and fisherwomen together. My life will be changed forever. What will I do alone and without you?*

**April 13, 1998**

*This is Lily's one year anniversary mass. I visited your grave today and mom and pop's. Arnold<sup>17</sup> called this evening. I know you would have liked him. He gets up at 2:30 a.m. for his work on the highways. We had a few laughs on the phone. He told me he was thinking of me, and I do the same about him.*

**June 19, 1998**

*Robert looked so lovely. He went to Charlottetown to get his haircut and a tuxedo. He had nice smelling lotion to put on his sunburnt nose. He was driving Trina's mother's car. I am proud of him. He is graduating from high school and is a handsome man now. I only wish his mother and father could see him. Linda is in the hospital with her nerves again. God love her.*

*John and Trina were here for dinner after seeing the graduates. Trina's parents are coming on Sunday for the ceremonies. I will have them all over for dinner. They are good to Robert and John.*

*John is going to university and Robert will probably go too. They are both smart like their father and grandfather. My father was a foreman for building houses, breakwaters, and wharfs from Tignish to North Lake. He was such a generous man. He and mother both gave to all of our neighbours. Mother was a seamstress for over twenty years making suits and coats for Leard's and Lily and I. What a sorrow they had when their oldest son, Luke was killed in World War II. He was a navigator bomber in the air force. On his solo flight over Germany, he was shot down over Belgium. I miss them all so much. I will get my cane and go up to church.*

**February 17, 1999**

*I came home from church last evening and there was water in my front porch. When I opened the kitchen door there was a ½ inch of water all over the floor. The pipe in the bathroom froze again and this time it burst! I had to call Clinton MacAulay's to turn off the water. They can't fix it until Monday. So, I have no water. I got the mess cleaned up but my carpet is still damp. What a mess of everything. This old house is such a burden to me. And, it will be my burden to carry until the day I die. The repairs, maintenance, cleaning and bills are hard for me now.*

*We moved in when I was eight. Mom and pop loved this house. Pop left it in his will to my brother Phillip and his five sons with the agreement that I could*

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<sup>17</sup> Arnold – best friend, met him in 1996

*live in it as long as I wanted. I guess he thought he was doing the right thing. But, it is terrible to live in a house that doesn't belong to you. Where else could I go? I can't move into a senior's apartment even if I wanted to, because I wouldn't have the money from the sale of the house. So, here I am stuck in this house until the day I die. I hope I can keep it up.*

*A few years ago, I got a lawyer to write a letter to the boys. I asked them to sign over their shares of the house to me so I could sell it. But, two of them refused to sign the letter. What a selfish thing to do after all I have done for them. They just don't understand how hard it is to own nothing.*

**July 20, 1999**

*He never gives me a hug or a kiss. I hear from Rose<sup>18</sup> that he is gay, but I like him. That's not going to make me feel any different. He is a great friend of mine and he makes me happy. I sat in the sun porch for the morning. Arnold came in at 12:00 p.m., and we had fried haddock and new potatoes. Then, he ate chocolate patties, Danish cookies and tea. Arnold likes his tea strong, and so do I. He stayed over an hour. Boy, was I glad to see him.*

**Dec 24, 1999**

*Snooky came and stayed only a few minutes. I told him that I call him that. He laughed. He stayed for tea, and I gave him a bag full of sweets and a couple of presents from Reader's Digest. I nearly dropped dead when he was leaving and pulled out a gift wrapped so nicely. Thank God I gave him a bag full of stuff. I can hardly wait to open it.*

*I can't wait any longer. It is a beautiful musical angel. I don't know where he would have found something so nice. I am going to show Rose when she comes. I feel so special.*

**January 30, 2000**

*I am shaking. I got a call from Arnold tonight saying he is going to Moncton for tests. He was leaving right away because a storm was coming. He wanted to call me before he left so I wouldn't be worried about him not being home for a few days. He said he'd call as soon as he gets home. Oh Arnold, I hope it's nothing serious. He said it is just a little operation nothing to worry about. He is so secretive. I pray it is not cancer again. I can't lose you to cancer too Arnold.*

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<sup>18</sup> Rose – friend and distant relative

March 5, 2001

*I am in the hospital with three other women. We are all back from lunch and resting now. I had my hip surgery, but I'm not sure what day it is. I just found my pen but am mixed up and forget what went on. I hope Steve<sup>19</sup> will bring me a nice juicy pear. Oh that would taste good.*

May 13, 2001

*What a lonely day. I am glad Steve thinks something of me. He's always calling every Sunday morning and gives me lots of nice things. He called twice this morning. The second time, he played a tape for me.*

*I called Arnold and talked to him. I had no visitors all day and not a phone call from John, Trina, or Robert. And I was so good to them when their father left and their mother was in the hospital. Today is Mother's Day.*

October 7, 2001

*What a weekend. It cost me plenty. I just got home from the Smith's<sup>20</sup>. They sure know how to treat us Paquets. John and Trina's wedding was lovely and Linda looked nice. Her sisters drove me to Trina and John's and back home. But, I had to pay for my lunch and theirs. Edward, Ella<sup>21</sup> and Steve were all there. And there were a lot of gifts. I wish Arnold had come.*

*Thank you God that I had my health to be there for John and Trina.*

October 17, 2001

*What a great lunch. I fried two smelts and now have a big apple pie in the oven. Arnold brought me a big bag of apples from Nova Scotia last evening. Boy was I glad to see him. And the apples are beautiful, big and juicy. He was going home to do paperwork for his boss. He works too hard.*

*I just got word from Joel<sup>22</sup> that Arnold passed away today. He had a heart attack. I can't believe you Arnold. You should have taken better care of yourself. You were way to young to die. And, I didn't know you long enough. I know you are in heaven and hope you will see my friend of fifty years, Lily. I loved her like I loved you.*

*I will freeze Arnold's apple pie.*

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<sup>19</sup> Steve – nephew, brother of Matthew

<sup>20</sup> The Smiths – Trina's family

<sup>21</sup> Ella – niece, sister of Matthew

<sup>22</sup> Joel – friend of Aunt Helen

### March 1, 2002

*My poor baby, I miss him so much. Max is at the vet for two days getting fixed up. I love him so much. He is such a good baby. I just called the vet for the second time and they still aren't in. They don't get in until 9:30 a.m. That's still another hour away. I may ask Nancy to take me up to see him today.*

*I am eating breakfast by myself now. Usually, Max and I have Special K and toast with butter and jam (sugarless jam). But today, I am eating alone. I wonder what Max is having. I hope they get in soon. Max likes to have his breakfast early.*

*I spoke to a girl at the vet. Max got along good yesterday, and he can come home in the morning. I can't wait. He is some good company for me.*

### June 11, 2002

*It's a beautiful sunny day. The nurse was here at 10:00 a.m. She did a great job on my foot and toes. I'll wash my foot that's not sore and wash the other with a face cloth.*

*I have my bag packed for the hospital. Robert will be out for me tomorrow. I'll get cleaned up in the morning and straighten the house. I will pack a pad and pen for the hospital and copy into my diary later.*

*I am trying to get things done today. Nancy<sup>23</sup> will look after Max<sup>24</sup> while I am gone. I got my cheque from Clarica today to pay my bills off, and I took John and Trina out for dinner. Trina and I had clams and John had scallops and chowder. It was lovely.*

*I am worried about having my toe off. How will I look after Max again? Will I be able to walk to church? It is such a worry being alone with no one to depend on.*

*I hope I will get along okay. But, if not, I have made preparations, and I wrote a card of thanks for the newspaper.*

*I will not sleep tonight. I made some tea and Max is sleeping under my chair. I am sitting at the kitchen table with my box of old diaries. I'll look back through some of them to help pass the night and visit with old friends.*

### June 27, 2002

*I am mixed up, and I'm not sure why. I am writing on an envelope someone found for me. My handwriting is bad. I have been in the hallway for a while. But, I'm not sure if it has been a day or two. Hundreds of people walk past me without even a glance. It is hard to talk. The ambulance ride was painful and long. My whole foot is gone and my leg doesn't look too good.*

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<sup>23</sup> Nancy - cousin

<sup>24</sup> Max- dog

*Someone just brought me a warm blanket. I can't stop the tears now. I was so cold. I asked her to make a phone call but I'm not sure she understood me. I can't eat from the lunch tray and I can't read what I just wrote.*

*I was moved to a room. I asked what time it is and it is the middle of the night.*

*A doctor was just here. He told me what I already know. I asked to make a phone call and he said he would send someone to help me. He gave me a notepad to write on.*

*It is lunchtime now. I had black tea and am feeling clearer. A beautiful woman washed my face and hands. It was so comforting. She reminded me of my mother. She helped me phone John.*

*John just left, and I am so tired. I am still thinking about you mom. I can still feel your loving hands on my face. They are so warm and inviting.*

**Letter to the Guardian**

**To the Guardian**

I wish to extend a special  
~~I want to say~~ thank you to Doctor  
Nurses of the Green Elizabeth  
Hospital, that cared for me  
while a patient. Many thanks  
to my grand nephews John  
& Robert who visited on me  
with their in & out of pocket  
of £2000 to the 27th Jan.  
Thank you all I appreciate  
your loving service

Aunt Helen

and to Jean & Karen who looked  
after my dog Max thank you  
all I appreciate it

**An Album of Memories**







### **John's Response**

When I read the fictional diary entries, it felt as if the first 25 years of my life passed before my eyes. It brought to life some of my fondest memories and many issues that I had chosen to forget.

The entries are a true depiction of some of the major events our family has gone through over the past 16 years. One of the biggest things that I took away from reading the entries is that my brother and I were lucky . . . no, blessed to have Aunt Helen in our lives. If we didn't have her support, things may have turned out very differently for us. We were a poor family. But, Aunt Helen always made sure we had the things we needed.

Some of the entries showed how emotional and stubborn she was. But, we knew that it was her way of caring. The most painful part of reading the entries was not reliving the hardship that our family endured, rather, it was realizing that I did not tell her often enough how grateful I truly am for everything she has done for me throughout my life.

In my opinion, the entries depicted in this paper could be improved upon by adding a few more positive memories. I think that for every bad day Aunt Helen had, there were probably two good days. I think that those who knew Aunt Helen may see the positive side as being misrepresented.

Some of the articles are hurtful but are true and need to be told. When times were tough, Aunt Helen was always the first one there to help deal with the issues even if she was scared and worried.

I know that if Aunt Helen was not a part of my life, I would not be where I am today with a great education, a wonderful family, and most importantly the virtues and values that comprise my belief system. I believe that everyone, rich or poor, is the fundamentally the same and should be treated equally.

## **Robert's Response**

Before I started to read the entries, I was sceptical due to the method of compilation, which was to be used. I was unsure if one could accurately analyze the thoughts of another and capture the author's original underlying meanings. One cannot penetrate another's existence. One can only try to describe it, while never being able to explain it. This made me realize that any weaknesses in these entries would be an error on the part of the person who is describing the events. I immediately posed a question that would guide my analysis of the work: Did Trina's own thoughts and feelings about Aunt Helen influence the task at hand, when trying to predict the thoughts and feelings of John and I and the other family members? It was by this criterion that I started to read the entries.

As I read the early entries, it felt as if a picture was being drawn for me. Although, the words and style of the writing is Aunt Helen's through and through, I couldn't help but feel there was something more behind the words, something that I was supposed to see. Whether it was a hard life of work and dedication or a meaningful life of friendship, these subtleties kept exposing themselves to me.

As I continued to read the passages, I started to realize what these subtleties were. They were an unfolding of numerous life stories, which hid beneath a veil for over 20 years. But, through these passages, there it was, it was there all the time, and it will be there in the future, it was the truth.

I reacted that same as anybody would when they are confronted with the truth. I laughed; I cried; I smiled; I was angry; I loved; I hated; and I had regrets. But most of all, I felt alive. I felt alive because I had regressed or hidden away so many of these

memories, that I could no longer feel the truth. I was comfortably numb in my own world of falsities. These entries shed light in parts of me that were dark.

The entries accurately depicted and held a constant truth about my family and I. In some way, it felt like I was reading the diary of everyone that I know. When I read the July 14<sup>th</sup>, 1988 entry, waves of distant memories resurfaced about the day my father left us. I remember being outside when he came up to me and started talking to me very seriously. He had told me that he was in trouble with the law, that they would take him away from me, and that he didn't want that to happen. He said that he would have to leave for a little while until this all blew over, and that he would be back home in no time. I believed him, why wouldn't I? He was my father. So, everyday that summer and part way through the school year, I waited for him outside. I thought he would show up, and I would be there to meet him. We would be back together again. Days, weeks, and months went by. There was still no sign of him. He had called a couple of times, but it was always the same false belief he instilled in me. In actuality, I never stopped believing that someday he would return, that he would drive down Church Street, and I would meet him at the front door. I never stopped believing until I was 16. I finally had enough. It was my birthday, and he hadn't called or even sent a card as he had done in the previous years. This was when I realized that he didn't care, and that I could never care for anybody like him. I called him. I knew his number. I will never forget it. I told him what I thought of him, and I had told him what I had become. I took hold of his heart and I ripped it out. I could feel it still beating, so I threw it on the ground and crushed it. That was the end, never would I wait for him to come driving down Church Street, never would I wait for him to call, never would I wait for him to write. This is

only one of the many memories that stand out for me as painful. I could go on but I cannot because tears cloud my eyes.

I believe that the entries were carefully selected and detailed as such, to portray Aunt Helen in her truest form. They give the reader the feel of who she was and what issues surrounded her life in the later years.

When Trina first mentioned to me that she was going to switch her thesis topic right in the middle of another and start a new one, I thought, "Are you crazy?" That was until she told me what she would be focusing on. I was amazed by her strength and will to provide her family with such a meaningful and detailed analysis of a loved one's diaries. Although she knew that this was going to be a great undertaking, she continued with determination. She knew that one day the completed product would stand on its own and transcend from generation to generation. I radiate nothing but pride and admiration for her courage to do something different in a literary sense for her thesis. Those feelings also hold true in that she gave her family the greatest gift of all. She gave us Aunt Helen back.

## PART FOUR CONCLUSION

Dear Aunt Helen,

I am filled with conflicting emotions as I write this final letter to you. I am euphoric about completing my graduate research. Yet, I am reluctant to write these final pages because it symbolizes the end of our afternoons sipping tea in your sun porch. To end, I must first return to the beginning. My aim in this research was two-fold: one, I wanted to familiarize myself with the substance and quality of your diaries. To do this, I selected five themes that emerged in my reading of the diaries. I selected these themes because I assumed they were important to you and I selected them because they were of interest to me. Two, the aim of my thesis was, as researcher and niece, to create a response to your body of work that would make the examination and discussion of the research materials as accessible as the diaries themselves. To do this, I chose to write the thesis in an epistolary/narrative form. This genre, I assumed, was one way that I could show respect for your incredible work. As well, to show further respect to your work, I chose to include two other responses. Specifically, once I had completed the first draft of my own work, I shared this writing with two other individuals who had been loved and cared for by you, John and Robert. In doing this, my aim was to provide an even broader context to the meaning of your life.

How, then, did I respond to your story? What did I learn from reading your diaries and how did writing a thesis about your work change me? In other words, what have I learned from this process and what can be said about an Island woman who lived a life somewhat different from my own? What surprised me most, what moved me, and

what do I assume was left unsaid in your diaries? How can I, as a married woman and mother, understand a life that is quite different from mine? Importantly, how did you, and how do I, understand friendship? These are but a few of the questions I raise and attempt to address in this thesis. In an attempt to address these questions, I will revisit some of the themes I chose to organize my work.

This study worked toward defining the role of the diary in your life and in women's lives in general. VanDaele (1990) found the diary to be a central part of diarists' lives. The diary is not just a hobby, but rather a place to nurture a life (p. 243). I believe that your diary served a dual purpose. First, your diary was a companion, a way to keep the loneliness at bay, and a conversation within yourself to break the deafening silence of an empty house. Numerous aging men and women admit that the suffering hardest to bear is loneliness (Deekan, 1986, p. 39). Second, it seemed as though you struggled with validating the meaning of your life as early as your first entries. Your diary was a way to find meaning even in the monotony of everyday routines (p. 99).

Diarists often are surprised that what starts out as a written account of their own personal journeys in life may end up as literature that others are interested in (VanDaele, 1990, p. 244). I doubt you ever truly understood the value your diary would hold for your family. For John and Robert, it gave them one final gift, an opportunity to heal. Reading your entries invoked a stirring of emotion and memories for them that was unparalleled in their lives. Your ability to give selflessly to your family has always amazed me. And now, even in death, you have given John and Robert something no one else could.

When I approached John and Robert to write responses to your diary entries, I never imagined the impact your words would have. Reading their responses helped me to further understand the significance of your craft - - diary writing. Wanting to read and understand our family's story is an innate curiosity, because we know that what has shaped their lives has also shaped ours (Akeret & Klein, 1991, p. 11). "We know their stories are finally our own stories, and that hearing those stories can ultimately link us to the history of mankind" (p. 11).

Enabling John and Robert to have a small piece of your memory and facilitating the healing of old wounds has been a gratifying part of this journey. But, your diary has helped me equally. You have taught me that I am a writer, and you have allowed me to see why I wasn't able to keep a diary when I was a child. By selecting an epistolary/narrative genre of writing, I wrote to an audience, you. This form of writing allows the writer to deeply connect to the object of the study (Bochner & Ellis, 2000, p. 740). Addressing the letters to you helped me to immerse myself in the story. It was during this time, when I lost myself in the writing, that the most profound ideas emerged. After years of seeing myself as a failed diarist, with your help, I now realize that I can write.

Your greatest gift to me is perspective. Your knowledge, wisdom, experiences, heartbreak, loneliness, joy, and triumphs shared in the pages of your diary have helped to ground me in the reality of my life (Sullivan, 1993, p. 1-2). Our lives, personalities, and goals are so diverse. I can name countless differences. I am a married woman, mother, well-educated, career-driven individual, who relies on my friends solely for social reasons. You were never married, never had children, trapped in a low-paying job, and

increasingly dependent on your friendships for a support network to fill basic needs (Kimboko & Roberto, 1989, p. 17). So, the most shocking revelation for me when reading your diaries was that we are in essence the same woman. We both have an intense desire to be loved and needed. This is how we validate our lives. How and who we engage in our lives to help us fill these needs is where our differences lie. Despite being separated by generations and dissimilar cultures, you and I share a life purpose centred around belonging.

Although studying your diaries is a natural fit for my thesis, a year ago, my research was headed in a different direction. I had completed partial literature reviews on two other topics. Both topics were safe, acceptable, and eventually boring. When I finally voiced my dissatisfaction with my research, I discovered I was not alone. There were others who were struggling to find a more meaningful research experience. It was in the safety of this group of eight that I allowed myself to contemplate the concept of creativity in academia. As our ideas grew, so did our confidence. We were soon a group of groundbreaking scholars proudly demanding the attention of our peers. I am thankful that I was encouraged to step outside of my comfort and find a topic close to my heart.

Being a part of the celebration of your spirit has been a life-changing experience for me. Sullivan (1993) says and I agree,

Stories reflect the repetitive patterns learned in childhood, the energy bound by old beliefs, the wounds that never healed, the dreams left unfilled, and the possibilities of releasing the human spirit. Stories celebrate lives of incredible determination and dreams fulfilled against all odds, a celebration of the dauntless power of the human spirit. (p. 4)

With the end of any journey comes relief, sentiment, regret, and pride. The completion of this work signifies much more than a graduate degree. The tears I shed while composing your last diary entry cannot be captured in any words I put to paper. I still deeply feel your loss. Your personal belongings and pictures are present in every room of my home. But, it was the diaries that both laid your memory to rest and brought sustainable life to your legacy.

It is difficult to verbalize the significant role you have played in my life. This work is a mere glimpse into the spirit of a woman who did everything in life passionately including loving her friends and family. For me, justifying my “disenfranchised grief” has been a two-year journey that ends today (MacDonald, 2004).

Love,

Trina Rose

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## **APPENDIXES**

### **APPENDIX A – Coding Categories**

#### **1. Career**

Q = Quitting  
P = Pay  
H = Hip  
T = Patsy  
TD = Typical day  
C = Conditions  
S = Starting out

#### **2. Family**

E = Matthew  
A = Andrea  
J = John  
R = Edward  
BJ = Lily jealous  
J&R = John and Robert  
HA = Jessica  
B = Brothers & parents  
D = Death  
HT = Linda's trip  
H = Linda  
RO = Robert  
HO = House

#### **3. Disease/Death/Bereavement/Loneliness**

H = Hip  
T = Patsy  
L = Lonely  
B = Lily  
HO = Hospital

#### **4. Friends**

M = Misunderstandings  
F = Arnold  
L = Lonely  
T = Patsy  
B = Lily  
T = William

#### **5. Emergent**

H = Hobbies  
L = Lonely  
D = Dog (Sam)  
P&H = Mark and Mike  
M = Max  
DI = Diary

## **APPENDIX B – Diary Inventory**

1. Feb 22/02-June 11/02
2. Sep 9/01-Feb 22/02
3. Jan 24/01-Sep 8/02
4. Aug 2/00-Jan 23/01
5. Feb 8/00-Aug 2/00
6. Oct 1/99-Feb 6/00
7. Apr 6/99-Sep 30/99
8. Feb 1/99-Apr 3/99
9. Nov 27/98-Jan 31/99
10. July 17/98-Nov 26/98
11. Mar 16/98-July 17/98
12. Sep 1/97-Mar 15/98
13. Jan 21/97-Aug 31/97
14. June 1/96-Jan 20/97
15. Nov 1/95-May 31/96
16. June 27/95-Nov 1/95
17. Jan 1/95-June 26/95
18. June 1/94-Dec 31/94
19. Oct 12/93-May 31/94
20. Jan 1/93-Oct 11/93
21. Sep 23/92-Dec 31/92
22. Feb 1/92-Sept 23/92
23. Sep 23/91-Jan 31/92
24. Jan 21/91-Sep 22/91
25. Jan 1/90-Dec 31/90
26. Jan 7/89-Dec 29/89
27. Jan 1/88-Dec 31/88
28. Jan 1/87-Dec 31/87
- \*\* missing Jan 19 /86 – Dec 31/86
29. Aug 31/85-Jan 18/86
30. Jan 1/ 85-Aug 15/85
31. Jan 1/84-Jan 1/85
32. Jan 83-Dec 83
33. Dec 81-Jan 1/83
34. Jan 1/81- Nov 2/81
35. Jan 1/79-Oct 80

#### **APPENDIX C – Letters of Consent**

January 9, 2005

To: The University of Prince Edward Island Research Ethics Board

I, [REDACTED], do hereby give permission to Trina Rose Paquet, graduate student in the Masters of Education degree at The University of Prince Edward Island, to use my real name in her thesis.

I have read Paquet's research proposal and ethics forms in full. Resulting, I am aware of the risks associated with giving said permission. I have been provided with the option of using a pseudonym and forgo this right.

I give this consent voluntarily, of my own free will, and without coercion from any party.

## **APPENDIX C – Letters of Consent**

January 5, 2005

To: The University of Prince Edward Island Research Ethics Board

I, [REDACTED], do hereby give permission to Trina Rose Paquet, graduate student in the Masters of Education degree at The University of Prince Edward Island, to use the diaries of Helen Marie Paquet (my great aunt) for research purposes. I declare that I am the owner of said diaries.

I have read Paquet's research proposal and ethics forms in full. Resulting, I am aware of the risks associated with giving said permission. Furthermore, I comprehend her research intentions and proposed methods.

I give further permission to Paquet to use my real name in her thesis. I have been provided with the option of using a pseudonym and forgo this right.

I give this consent voluntarily, of my own free will, and without coercion from any party.

## APPENDIX D – Character Map

**Aunt Helen**

### **Relatives**

Matthew	Nephew
Edward	Nephew
Steve	Nephew
Ella	Niece
Linda	Wife of Elmer
John	Grandnephew
Robert	Grandnephew
Nancy	Cousin

### **Friends**

Lily	Best friend
Arnold	Best friend
Rose	friend
Pearl	friend
Betty	friend
Joel	friend

### **Work**

Simon	Boss
Francine	Co-worker
Patsy	Co-worker