

Some Thoughts on **Doing Biography Work One on One**

From an Interview with Kathleen Bowen conducted by Joseph Rubano

For some time now I have been aware of Kathleen working one on one with individuals. We have talked a little here and there and each time we talked I became more interested in getting a clearer picture of how she works. I was especially interested in that Kathleen is not, and doesn't want to be, a therapist or counselor - she doesn't have the training, nor is that how she sees herself. She is a biography worker, helper, friend, companion on the path of wonder and discovery; 'a servant of holy things'.

As many of you know, Kathleen is a fiber artist. She creates with fiber and fabric. And like some artists she doesn't always know what is going to happen when she is involved in creating - she is able to be spontaneous, see what is happening in her hands and follow it to a further creation. We could call her an intuitive artist. She knows her materials and trusts her hands and her inner sensing. I am seeing that this is how she works with individuals.

She has a box of material and a bag of tools at her side and she uses them spontaneously, intuitively as she senses what is needed. (Anyone who has gone through the Biography and Social Art Program will recognize what is in her bag of tricks.) She might not always know 'why' she does something, but she trusts the connection with the other, her own connection to the spiritual world, the materials and tools she has and the unexplainable way the ideas and images come to her. I decided to 'interview' her to get more of an idea how she works and to write it up to give others a sense and maybe even inspiration.

Somehow it happens that someone asks to work with Kathleen. After a short phone conversation they set a time to meet and Kathleen asks the person to bring a list of questions that they are working on or living with now in their life. Kathleen usually works for 1 ½ hours but has a very special client that she works with for 4 hours at a time. The night before they are to meet Kathleen will think about the person and hold them in her consciousness as she enters into sleep.

Before the person comes, Kathleen prepares herself and prepares the space (she works in the living room of her house). And knowing Kathleen as I know her, I am sure she makes a very welcoming and beautiful space to enter into. Part of her preparation is to say a verse that puts her in the right internal space to meet another. It is a Celtic verse that has been used by the early childhood teachers at Hartsbrook:

***May wisdom shine through me,
May love glow in me,
May strength penetrate me,
That in me may arise
A helper of mankind,
A servant of holy things,
Selfless and true.***

Verse or a Poem

When the person comes, Kathleen will open with a verse or a poem. Kathleen has a notebook filled with poems and many books of poetry that she will open to - she usually has no idea what poem she will select or which poems will come forth to be read, but she trusts the right one will appear and is curious: Hmm why am I saying this one? It usually reveals itself.

Rice on a Wooden Plate

The first thing that Kathleen wants to accomplish is to have the person be planted, to land here, in this room at this time. Sometimes she will place a wooden plate with rice on it in front of them and instruct them to make a spiral starting on the periphery and going into the center. You know - do something concrete with their hands. (For a moment get out of their heads and internal space.) If she uses the rice spiral first thing, often she will also end with the rice spiral, but this time she would have the person either follow the same spiral but this time from the center out or make a new spiral from the center to the periphery.

Now of course, Kathleen, doesn't always do any one particular thing. So sometimes she will start with a postcard. Or do the postcards after the rice spiral.

3 Circle I AM exercise

There is another exercise that she sometimes uses at the beginning in place of the rice spiral. It is an exercise we learned from Rinke and that Leah brought to the training program when we worked with the Planets and Phases (summer 2014). The purpose is the same - to allow the person to land in the here and now.

It is the 3 Circles I AM exercise. You draw 3 circles - positioned like an equilateral triangle - one on the base to the left, one on the base to the right, and one above between the two. First she asks the person to close their eyes, relax into the body, scan the body and inner state, and contemplate the question "How am I right now?" "What is it like here and now for me?" - allow a word or phrase or image or color to arise. Write it down. Then with one's attention move up the body from feet, to heart, throat, head, through the Crown and place your attention in the space above the head. From this space (which is beyond space and time, beyond here and now, the Eternal) what does the Higher Eternal Self have to say to you - allow a word, or phrase or color to arise. Then bring your attention down through and in the body again. "How am I here and now?" Allow a word or phrase, image or color to arise. It is about the feeling awareness in the different realms - touch into that.

The first is written in the circle at the base to the left, the second in the circle above and in the middle, the third at the base and to the right.

If she uses this exercise she may return to it at the end of the session to close.

Postcards

She has tons of postcards and a table in her dining room. She lays out 20,30,40 postcards on the table and asks the person to choose a card or a couple of cards, either choose or have the cards choose you. The person might be instructed to choose a card(s) they are attracted to or a card(s) that somehow speaks to where the person is right now in their life. What's up for you now?

With the simple prompting: "Tell me about that card," something that is on fire will show itself.

Sometimes she will use Doorway cards - and she will prompt by asking: "What stands behind the door?" or "Where are you in relation to the door (in front, behind?)" "What does it say about this moment in your life?" "What is coming toward you" "Do you want to open the door?"

The postcards are a good way to get things going and once things are moving Kathleen will keep them moving by offering another exercise. No rules and no plan here!

Kathleen has a simple goal for her work - **"To have the person leave recognizing how capable and wonderful they are."**

Of course sometimes something will get triggered and a person will go into a dark place, but Kathleen is very clear that her work is not to explore and heal dark places - **she is not doing therapy**. If someone enters a dark place she makes sure that the person doesn't stay there. She is not interested in leading a person down a rabbit hole that they have a hard time coming out of.

If someone is inclined to wallow in an old familiar story - she will direct the person to create a picture (using pastels or crayon or clay) or pick a postcard and let the image speak. How can we see something from a slightly different angle, get another view, keep it moving, not fall into an old familiar groove or rut? Kathleen is always attentive to that and masterful at keeping things in movement.

Listening

The key to this work is listening. Listening to key things that someone says, picking up on that and following that. In listening you get a sense for what has energy. For instance one person said something like "Welcoming would be good." Kathleen picked up on that and invited her to do a pastel drawing of: "A time in her life that she felt welcomed." Create a picture and enter into the picture.

It is all about listening and bringing into movement, bringing to life - stirring the pot, stirring the pot now this way, now that way; watching and listening - hmmm what is needed/wanted here, now. She is in it with the person using all her senses and her intuition to see what wants to be revealed.

Fairy Tales or Story

Another tool in her bag of tools is Story. After meeting and working with someone she might get the sense that it could really serve this person to work with a FT or story in the way we learned to do. She has a favorite story called *Gwinna* (by Barbara Helen Berger) that she has used a number of times. She has also used the *Donkey and The Ugly Duckling*. She will read out loud to the person the Fairy Tale or a chapter from *Gwinna*. Maybe she will have them pick a moment in the story that speaks to them, or knowing the person and their situation she will ask for an image or event in the story: "Draw yourself as a tree" - and then ask: "What gifts do you have to offer to the world?" or "Find a time in your life when there were voices that you had to quiet." Or "A time in your life that you closed your wings and leapt into the darkness." Draw these moments.

Pastel Drawing or working with Clay

Sometimes Kathleen gets a sense that maybe the person is needing color or to ground their story. Then she will invite the person to make a pastel drawing: "Draw a time when you were feeling the same as you are feeling now." She will allow the person to take as much time as is needed to 'complete' their picture. Fast or slow, does not matter, whatever the person needs. Kathleen invites and then follows. Same thing with working with clay: if someone is too up in the air, too abstract, thinking too much, trying to make sense of something in an abstract way, so that whatever they are working on is not quite real yet, Kathleen wants to help them to bring it down, make it real - she wants them to work with their fingers to make it concrete. Clay works well for this. Even if they don't work with a concrete situation but she simply asks the person to show in clay what something feels like to them, this will bring the person into their body and they are able to own and embody the experience more fully. They are then face to face with it.

Triptycohn

When the story of situation starts to come out one can notice a place that has some fire or where there is a question. Here she might use the Triptychon format and have the person draw that situation in the center panel. If the person is old enough then Kathleen might use mirroring and have the person journey back to when they were at one mirrored age and see what rises and draw it; and then journey back to another mirrored age, see what rises and draw that - placing the two drawings one to the left, one to the right of the center drawing. Look and see what you can see; connections, insights, threads that connect.

Or maybe there is a Question and Kathleen has the person pick a postcard that has an image that somehow the Question lives in. Place that card in the middle and allow two memories to arise drawing one to the left of center, one to the right. And maybe it seems that another image could help to bring a new movement to it (She might have the sense that the whole thing is hanging in the air, it hasn't landed yet.) and then she will have the person select another postcard or one of Vera's cards. "Let's turn this picture a little to the left and now look at it."

Kathleen is looking for that moment when something clicks for the person. It might be that Kathleen 'sees' something, maybe even something 'obvious', but she holds the question: "I Wonder?" and will hold back any statement of what she sees (this is work!). She wants the person to get it on their own, from the inside, and she does what she can to help them look at it in a different way. "I hold the pictures and watch for the thread of pearls to appear." She says that she is not looking for understanding, she doesn't need to understand - she stands in wonder and let's appear what appears and doesn't fix them with the stamp "I understand!" Rinke in one of his workshops with us said something like: "There is no final meaning; meanings keep opening endlessly." There is no final understanding. Aha!

And the truth is "I don't have a clue! I am just in awe about the diversity of human lives."

Writing

Another tool that she might pull out is asking the person to do a 5-minute writing on where they are or what they see (or whatever else might appear as a possibility served by writing). Then have them circle a number of words that are key words for them - from these they are invited to write a poem-like piece. We are looking for the essence and it is hoped that paring the words down like this helps to get at the essence.

One such writing exercise she has used that came out of the moment was: Write for 4 or 5 minutes to the question: Who do you think you are? She then folded what came out of that into a previous working with post cards. One exercise adds to another, it is all movement and discovery; for the person and for Kathleen.

Dyad Communication Format

Occasionally Kathleen has made use of the Dyad Communication Format where she is always the listening partner and she gives an instruction to the person over and over again until something deepens or shifts, until a new level of seeing arises or until it simply feels done.

One such working was using two instructions: 'Tell something that is true', and 'Tell me something that you want me to know'. She gave those instructions over and over again for about 5 to 7 minutes. Another time working with something a person was wondering about, instead of drawing a picture of a moment, she used: 'Tell me a time you ____'. And then

another, 'Tell me a time when (something different)'. She repeated these until it deepened and then lost its charge. She found this a good way to open things up and to see what lives behind the wondering.

What do **you** have in your bag of tricks?

And do you have the courage and playfulness to bring them out in the open and invite another to play with you?

Ending

It is always an art to do a proper ending and easy not to. Good endings are a work in progress here. You want the ending to help with the process of digestion.

Some good endings:

- Look at the postcard chosen at in the beginning - What lives in there now?
- Put all the work done in the session in front of the person (postcard, pastel, writing, tryptic, etc.) -- work it into your own collage - move things around until they find their ground. Enter into it and hold it all. Has anything moved? Has anything changed? Is there a message? Take stock of what has been done together.
- End with the verse or poem.
- Make sure person is grounded and in their feet - What are they looking forward to? What are they doing next?
- Rice spiral from inside to outside.
- Set up the next meeting or establish that you will be in contact to set up the next meeting.

It has been fun asking Kathleen a bunch of questions and writing this up. I hope you find this useful and an inspiration in your own working.

After I wrote this up and showed it to Kathleen she said:

"This is all true! Sometimes it does happen this way. And sometimes it is different."