



Stories for the Soul and the Benefits to People living with Dementia

Background and description

Stories for the Soul offers many benefits to older people in care settings, including being specifically significant for the well being of people who are living with dementia.

The method is centred on the pioneering educational work of Italy's first female physician Maria Montessori who, in the 1930's, worked in an asylum and in slums with children who were considered by most people at the time to be unteachable. She discovered that these children could be reached by engaging their hands and their senses. She found and followed the strengths, interests and passions of the children and created the right environment for them to flourish. Jerome Berryman ⁽¹⁾ developed Godly Play, basing it upon Montessori person-centred values, primarily for children, but it brings spiritual nurture for all people. When using it with adults we call it Stories for the Soul. It has been used over the past twelve years in both the USA ⁽²⁾ and the UK ⁽³⁾

Each Stories for the Soul session has these elements:

- (1) Welcome: each person is individually welcomed as they join the circle. The community is built and people are helped to get ready with a song or prayer;
- (3) Story: a story is presented using sensorial and kinaesthetic materials;
- (4) Wondering: in which the story is reflected upon as a group;
- (5) Response: a time to express meaning e.g. by drawing, making, painting, reading, writing, playing, resting, praying, talking;
- (6) Feast: food and drink is enjoyed together - with prayers and perhaps songs - before a final blessing.

Well Being for people living with Dementia

In Stories for the Soul an environment is created that belongs to the circle of elders - we are coming into the care setting as guests. It is apparent that many needs are being addressed within a session that enables mutuality and empowerment: the valuing of individuals and the building of community; reminiscence; mental and spiritual health support; maintaining self and purpose.

What follows are some narratives - with fictitious names - arising from reflective practice:

The valuing of individuals and building of community

The community - which includes residents, care staff, relatives and sometimes children - is built up and individuals are respected:

Setting 1

The care staff and the residents of a care setting for independent living, were having difficulty with the way Arthur, who has dementia, was responding to them. The chaplain observed that the Godly Play sessions allowed Arthur to work well in community.

washing of feet and the cross. A visiting sister had joined us and, whilst holding the hand of her brother who has dementia, wondered with the group about grace, love and forgiveness in family relationships.

Setting 6

During the Response Time people were given the choice as to what object they wanted to hold. Dora held a compact mirror and chatted to a member of the team about how at 80 years old she had written an article for a newspaper on fashion for older women. The conversation and mood then shifted, as it often does with Dora, when she began to focus on the mistakes she had made in life. The team member suggested that they both look into the mirror and say to themselves, and to each other - 'You are a beautiful person.' They laughed great big belly laughs, as they did this.

Setting 7

Barbara, laid out the ten commandments and a large shell on a coffee table and spent half an hour drawing the shell and writing some commandments inside and around a big heart. She was pleased with her finished picture 'Do not covet what others have' was written out three times along with a new commandment 'Honour yourself.' She explained that she no longer has parents and so had written a new commandment.



Maintaining self and purpose

The strengths, passions and abilities of the elders are followed, and they are enabled to bless one another in liturgy which is fully participatory:

Setting 8

During the Response Time a lady was telling the storyteller how she used to sing in her church choir but felt increasingly excluded from the congregation. Together they quietly practised singing 'Praise God from whom all blessings flow' and the lady was surprised at how the tune just came to her (though she struggled to recall the words). At the final blessing this lady beautifully led the group in the singing.

Setting 9

After the story of the ten commandments Alice (who has very poor hearing and sight) arranged the tree blocks to mirror the way the story had been set out. Alice showed off her creation with a beaming smile, thinking back to the time when her teacher had told her that she was 'no good at art.'



Alice with her arrangements of the tree blocks as the ten commandments

Setting 10

During the Response Time Edna chose to write out John 3:16 'For God so loved the world...' and was pleased to read these words out to everyone during the Feast.

Setting 11

Performing an act of loving service to the group by always volunteering to wash up after the Feast was very important to Sheila who was the wife of a retired minister.

The project has made presentations at the Research Symposium on Ageing and Spirituality. We are collaborating with others interested in this field of work: writing articles for the Christian Council on Ageing; working together with trainers for Playlist for Life; joining forces with Livability to organise a conference on Creative approaches to dementia; and have presented workshops at Care Home Roadshows and at Diocesan dementia friendly worship days in the UK.

References

- (1) Berryman, J.W. (2009). Teaching Godly Play: How to Mentor the Spiritual Development of children. Denver: Morehouse Education Resources.
- (2) Howard, L. W. (2015). Using Godly Play with Alzheimers and Dementia patients. Denver: Morehouse Education Resource Available at: <https://www.churchpublishing.org/products/usinggodlyplaywithalzheimersanddementiapatients>
- (3) "Godly Play – European Perspectives on Practice and Research" Martin Steinhauser and Rune Oystese (Eds), Waxmann, 2018 Munster, New York