

From the **NEGATIVE** to the **POSITIVE**

Ian Beesley
Ian McMillan
Tony Husband

From the negative to the positive

As part of the 'Improving the Experience of Dementia and Enhancing Active Life' (IDEAL) research project led by the University of Exeter, Gallery Oldham has been working with "The ragamuffins" a group of local people with dementia.

Workshops have been led by the artists:

Ian Beesley – photographer

Tony Husband - cartoonist

Ian McMillan – poet

Together they have all created this publication of photography, cartoons, and poems that express their thoughts, hopes and experiences.





One of the highlights of my monthly cycle of life is the meeting of the 'Ragamuffins' group.

The group comprises of those of us with 'memory problems' (which of course covers a wide variety of issues) and our nearest and dearest who carry the coveted title of 'carers'.

The group meets at the Central Library in Oldham and the first thing to strike one is the light hearted yet positive atmosphere which prevails.

In no time at all we are treated to friendly, humorous and often thought provoking chats on subjects such as local history and customs, all ably led by the skilful guidance of Ian McMillan, Ian Beesley and Tony Husband.

These chats in themselves stimulate participation throughout the group with members often feeling delighted that their medium or long term memory is being given a boost! It must also be said that such a 'boost' is both encouraged and managed by the aforementioned three gentlemen!

There is also the collective benefit to the group as a whole of memories being rejuvenated on times and issues perhaps long forgotten! Such recollections are both therapeutic and stimulating and it is interesting to see the frequent change in demeanour that often manifests itself among so many of those attending within a short period of time.

As is the case with many forms of group activity, the acid test lies in a blind assessment as to value and benefit and in the case of the 'Ragamuffins' there can be absolutely no doubt that the benefit factor may be summed up as OSMM (organised stimulation of mind and mood).

Terry

Founder member of the Ragamuffins

FROM THE NEGATIVE TO THE POSITIVE

From the diagnosis to the changing
From the losing to the finding

From the denying to the accepting
From the crying to the laughing

From the caterpillar
To the butterfly.

From the pinching shoes to the comfy slippers
From the bony fish to the filleted kippers

From the dirty washing to the flapping line
From a wheelbarrow to a limousine

From the horse-drawn wagon
To the Jaguar.

From drowning to swimming
From frowning to grinning
From a steep fall to a gentle glide
From the outside
To the inside.





MONDAY MEMORIES

Here, in this room,
With flipcharts and coffee
And tea and chocolate cake
And cameras and cheese tart
We sat around the tables
And made room for our memories
To sit down beside us.

THE MEMORY OWL

*Feathers this close:
You could touch them.*

Owl, low
Over Oldham's
Streets.
Wings sing
Across Oldham's
Air.
Low owl
By wash day
Sheets.
Eyes bright
In memory's
Glare.

*A life this close;
Let me touch it.*



THE QUESTIONS, THE ANSWERS

How does Memory walk?

Like this:

Holds on to the handrail

Appears to move

Both ways at once

Ending up somewhere

And nowhere

What does Memory say?

It says:

Each word is shaped like yesterday

Or the day before.

Each sentence is shorter

Than you thought it would be

When you started it today.





This is not a reminiscence project. Re-remembering practices, within narrative therapy, are not about reminiscing but about relationships and witnessing the effects of those relationships and connections. It is a special form of re-collecting.

Here, each month, Ian, Tony and Ian have collected an amazing aural and visual smorgasbord. They have provided a safe fun context for people labelled with a dementia and their carers to come together. They have gathered to re-collect their memories, to laugh and to create and in doing so relationships and connections have been built. Profound issues and themes have been addressed with a lightness of touch.

In creating and witnessing each other all are members and re-remembered into the fabric of the community. When we hear and see this work we too cannot help but be changed. It has been a journey from negative stereotypes to the positive relationships. I am honoured, along with DEEP (Dementia Engagement Empowerment Project) to have helped this to happen and get brief glimpses of its evolution.

Community psychology at its best.

Polly Kaiser

Consultant Clinical psychologist
Pennine Care Oldham





PHOTOGRAPHS

In this hand,
A black and white past

To help you remember



A colourful life





And how it developed



MEMORIES

Oldham tight
Or they blow away
Like smoke from a mill chimney.

Who are the carers and who are the cared for?

It isn't clear when you meet the Ragamuffins. Workshops focus on memory, so everyone is an authority, has their own repository of journeys and images to share. Some people communicate best in images, others can write, some can recite poetry on demand, and everyone – those with dementia and those without – is hilariously bad at something. But there's always someone who can help out with the skill or phrase eluding another member of the group. Memory can be about the past, but here it is about the present and the future – communicating shared and distinct pasts strengthens those new relationships formed at this group, building bridges between the 'before' and 'after' of diagnosis. Life goes on – and everyone has a right to be treated as a person with a history that is both unique to them and a bond with the rest of the human race.

Who is talking sense?

Not easy to tell, for the Ragamuffins meet in the borderlands of Lancashire and Yorkshire and they and their tutors travel from both sides of the great divide. The bloody-mindedness of these two counties explains why dialects and customs more often collide than combine. A discussion about how to start the day – a time when routines can be helpful if you're forgetful or worried – stalls when we realise there are as many words for 'elevenses', 'snap' or 'snack' as there are people in the room. Opinions on what this repast should consist of are at least as varied, and everyone resolves to bring in some samples next time.

Who is normal and who is not?

Gallery Oldham, where the group meets, is just off a busy street, where snatches of overheard conversation offer glimpses into so-called 'normal' life: phrases like 'zero hours' and 'universal credit delayed' abound. Once in the Ragamuffins' workshop, you're struck by the warmth and humour, as images, poems and prose are created. Dementia is ever-present; but it is treated as a painful fact of life rather than the entirety of life.

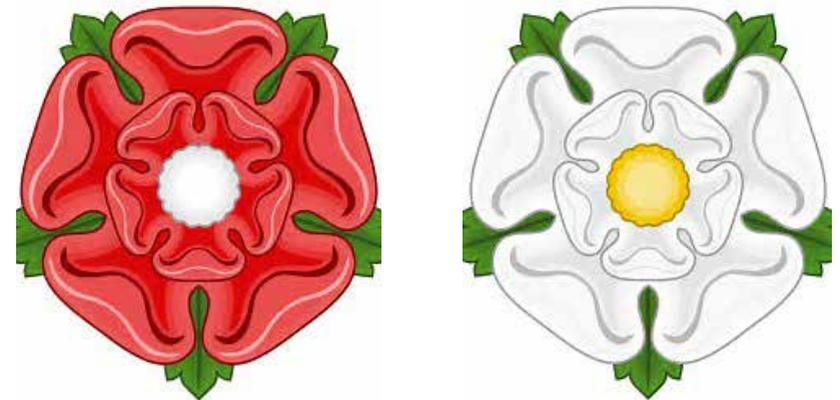
Sixty years ago, Shelagh Delaney, the Salford playwright who wrote *A Taste of Honey* just a few miles from Oldham, said:

'No one in my play despairs. Like the majority of people they take in their stride whatever happens to them and remain cheerful.'

Out of such experiences come art.

Professor Selina Todd,

Professor of Modern History, University of Oxford.



THE HOUSE OF MEMORY

Remembering is a window:
You have to clean it, then you can see.

Remembering is a front door:
You have to knock hard before you enter.

Remembering is a freezer:
You can take things out to defrost them.

Remembering is a settee:
You can sink in and you can doze off.

Remembering is a cupboard:
Full of things you haven't used yet.

Remembering is a bedroom:
The dreams are sweet and fragrant.





THAT RINGS A BELL

That rings a bell.
That takes me back
Before last week
Fell down a crack,
Before last year
Just walked away
I'm who I am
So let me say
Don't fade to black
In this deep well
That takes me back
That rings a bell.

To remember my mobile phone number

I rise and shine each morning
I think of good times that have been.
I don't need to rise at **06**
But can sleep till **814**.
And **24** hours make up the day.
38 is the house next door
And **14** is where I used to live
But I don't live there no more

06

814

24

38

14



SEEING CLEARLY

It's a line of sight
That helps you see clearly;
Same time every night
Or almost, or nearly

You walk your old faithful
Across to the park;
She barks and you're grateful
She's here in the dark

And time is a pattern
Of songs on repeat
Till your walking is over
The routine's complete.

THE FRAMEWORK

Each day has its meaning
Monday is for washing
Tuesday is for ironing
Wednesday half-day closing
And each day has its meaning
And Thursday is for payday
Friday is for dancing
Saturday's for football
And Sunday is for praying
That each day keeps its meaning
And each day stops me thinking
Of my own half-day closing.





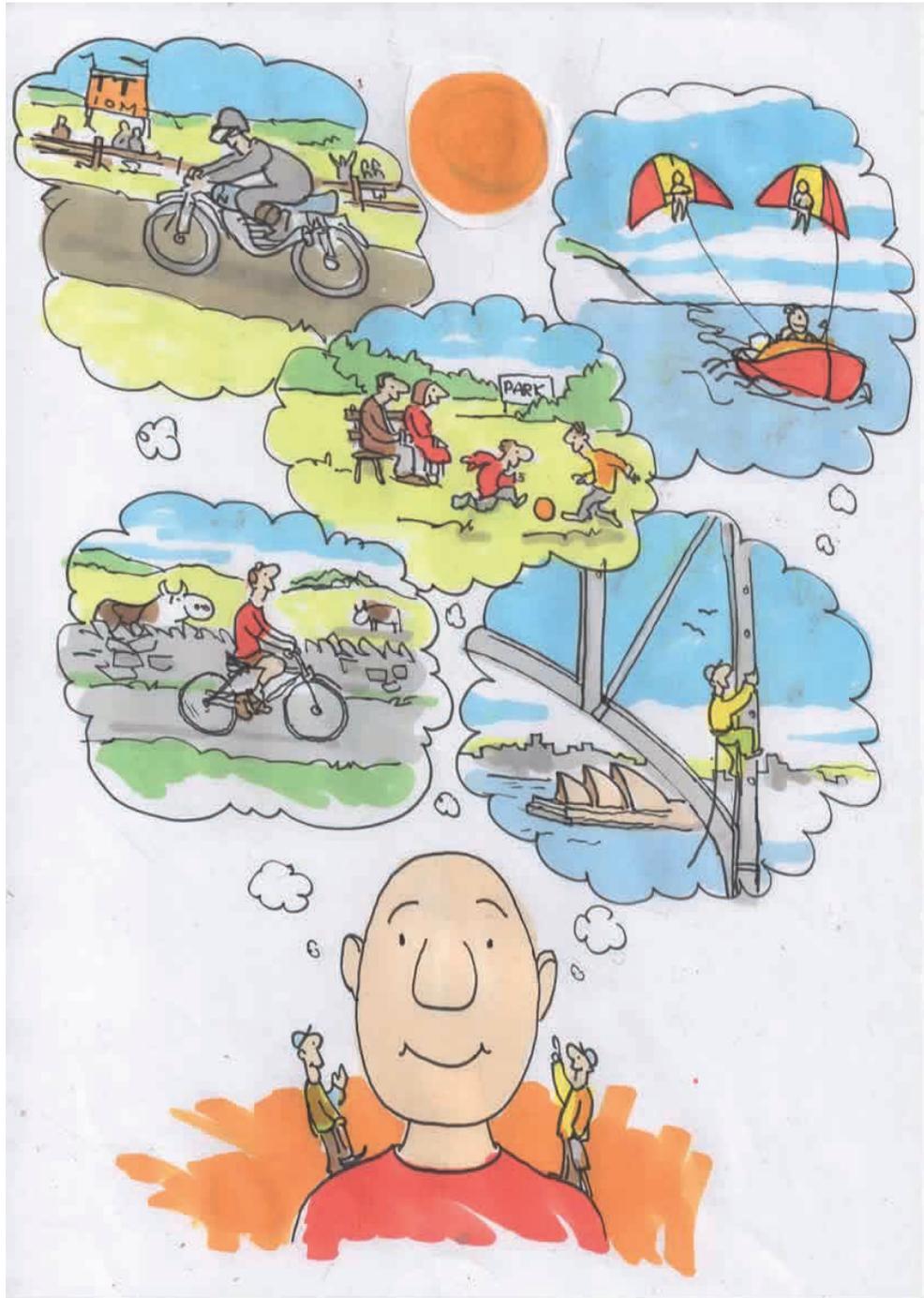
GET INTO A ROUTINE

Get into a routine, slowly,
Like you might get into a new suit.
A route through your life,
A beaten path

From morning to evening.
From first cuppa
To last kettle on,
From 8 o'clock news

To late-night weather,
From kids off to school
To last bus passing
Off to the depot

Like it does every night
In its own routine
That's just like yours.



THE ANSWERS, THE QUESTIONS

How does memory dance
Like this
Across a sunny morning
Where everything is waltzing
To vibrant welcome music
That teaches you to fly

How does memory sing
It sings
Of all the happy times
I've had along the way
These echoes of my past
They're with me everyday

A Life More Ordinary

This chapbook was produced as part of the 'A Life More Ordinary' project. Through collaboration with people who have dementia, carers, relatives and other supporters, the project aims to create a series of arts-based activities and outputs which provide a positive but realistic look at the experiences of those living with dementia and the individuals behind the diagnosis.

For this second chapbook in the series, Ian Beesley (photographer), Tony Husband (cartoonist) and Ian McMillan (poet) held a series of workshops in 2016/17 with the Ragamuffins. The artists spent time with the group - including those with dementia, their partners and volunteers - in Gallery Oldham. Members of the group shared their images and stories, both from the past and in the present, and joined in activities with the artists. The chapbook presents some of the images and poems produced during the workshops on the theme of "From the negative to positive". We thank the group for their willingness to be involved, for their openness and honesty, and for the non-stop laughter during each session.

'A life More Ordinary' is led by Professor Linda Clare at the University of Exeter and is funded by the ESRC (ES/M50046X/1). It is linked with the 'Improving the Experience of Dementia and Enhancing Active Life' (IDEAL) study which examines what aspects of the social situation or the psychological resources that people with dementia and their families have help or hinder their ability to live well.

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For more information please see: www.idealproject.org.uk

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