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T&D: COMBATING OLDER ADULTS' RISKS FROM SOCIAL ISOLATION

**Using a New Tea and Dialogue Mindfulness Practice (T&D) to
Combat Community Dwelling Older Adults' Risks from Social Isolation**

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May, 2020

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Acknowledgements

Many individuals encouraged and guided my attempts to create an accessible and adaptable tea and dialogue relational mindfulness practice. These include Giselle Maya, my Japanese tea ceremony teacher; Japanese tea ceremony practitioner and enthusiast, Eric Lane; Lidia Kenig-Scher who serves tea at the start of her intuitive painting classes; and Mariana Funes, who helped me develop parameters for combining elements of two very different practices with ties to two different Buddhist traditions - Zen in the case of Japanese tea ceremony, and Theravādan Buddhism in the case of Insight Dialogue. It is also important to acknowledge David Treleaven for insight into what it takes to offer trauma sensitive mindfulness practices; members of the Insight Dialogue Community; and participants in the tea and dialogue workshops I offered at the Arlington, Massachusetts, Council on Ageing. I am particularly indebted to my mentor and Insight Dialogue teacher, Janet Surrey, who continues to support my evolving appreciation of the depth and power of relational mindfulness practice.

Those who kindly agreed to appear in the videos created for this thesis include Anita Malone Clarke, Sally Fink, Jim Flavin, Lidia Kenig-Scher, Kikuko Mills, and Jan Surrey. Videographer, Jeff Klein, contributed his sensitive presence and artful editing to our team effort to capture examples of tea and dialogue practice that illustrate its benefits for older adults.

Abstract

Much sound research indicates that the significant negative health impacts associated with social isolation affect increasing numbers of older adults. Thus, addressing their social isolation could be an effective means to support older adults' wellbeing while reducing demands on limited healthcare resources. The relative effectiveness of various interventions to address older adults' social isolation is not clear. This thesis proposes using a new relational mindfulness practice, Tea and Dialogue (T&D), that combines elements of Japanese tea ceremony and Insight Dialogue developed by Gregory Kramer. Videos of older adults engaging in variations of T&D show trusting connection indicated by nonverbal social clues and statements of appreciation. This is consistent with what research suggests the practice's qualities of generosity, dignity, social connection, and creativity as well as its components (drinking tea, reminders of interdependence, and meditative dialogue) should support. Wisdom and sensitivity gained from life experience are assets for T&D and baby boomers who tend to be proactive in adopting practices that support good health might help to promote the practice's wider adoption while helping to fight ageism.

Keywords: elders, seniors, wellness, social isolation, social connection, communication, creative collaboration, tea rituals, relational mindfulness

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**Using a New Tea and Dialogue Mindfulness Practice (T&D) to
Combat Community Dwelling Older Adults' Risks from Social Isolation**

The relational mindfulness practice, Tea and Dialogue (T&D), makes clear how much we have to give and receive when we slow down and bring nonjudgmental caring awareness to heartfelt interaction. An object or image provides a reminder of our interdependence with nature. Gregory Kramer's (2007) guidelines for Insight Dialogue - Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth - are used for the entire practice. Participants pour tea from thermoses for each other and bow respectfully before drinking in silence while the facilitator provides a narrative drawing attention to the sensory aspects as well as all that nature and humans contributed to making sharing tea together in that moment possible. Then participants take turns listening attentively and speaking on a designated topic. An additional timed interval with no separate speaker or listener may be added. A session on the topic of "generosity" made clear that not only tea but speaking and listening can be generous gifts (Fink, 2018, March 25). It is worth noting that the dialogue used for this practice may take many creative forms including movement, art, music, and storytelling.

T&D provides an opportunity to attend to the felt experience of mindful social engagement (a) in the present moment, (b) sensitive to context and perspective, and (c) guided by but not governed by rules; conditions which Langer (2011) suggests make it possible to pay attention to novelty as it arises so we can recognize what we do not know.

The rationale section of this thesis reviews relevant literature on the scope of the need for supportive social connection for older adults and analyzes how videos of T&D illustrate the ways it provides that beneficial connection. It also considers other applications of the practice. The creative project section that follows includes blog posts that provide access to the thesis videos.

Rationale - Literature Review

This literature review considers the use of T&D to combat community dwelling older adults' risks from social isolation. It starts with the challenges that older adults face in our times and the considerable body of evidence that social isolation causes harm. It considers reviews of research on interventions designed to combat older adults' risks from social isolation. It then considers research related to Japanese tea ceremony and Insight Dialogue before turning to what is known about the benefits of qualities and components from these two relational practices that were intentionally preserved in T&D. It identifies appropriate precautions. It also includes evidence that introducing T&D with active community dwelling older adults might prove strategic in terms of promoting the practice.

Ageing in the Context of Our Times

With the numbers and proportion of older adults increasing in most countries and people living longer lives, greater demands are being placed on health care systems. The *2018 Profile of Older Americans* (Administration on Aging, 2018), mentioned that in the United States, the number of those aged 65 and older is expected to increase from 50.9 million as of 2017 to 94.7 million by 2060 (p 1). Chronic diseases that disproportionately affect older adults require more complex forms of care (HelpAge International, 2018, p. 14) and the need for personal care also increases with age. As of 2018, 20% of those over age 85 in the United States needed help with personal care (Administration on Aging, 2018, p. 15).

These demographic shifts are so significant that the Aegon Center for Longevity and Retirement (2018) suggested that globally there is a need not only for more affordable healthcare, but also working at older ages and increasing individual savings. In addition, Shen (2019) found that baby boomers born between 1946 and 1964 have higher rates of poor mental

health than previous generations at the same age. However, Baker et al. (2018) noted that stigma concerns may keep older adults from seeking help with mental health issues.

Older adults are affected by the general trends for urbanization and living alone. More people resided in urban than in rural areas as of 2018, and 82% of the noninstitutionalized North American older adults lived in urban areas (Population Division, 2019, p. 1). In the United States, 28% of older adults over 65 lived alone in 2018 (Administration on Aging, 2018, p. 4). Reher and Requena (2018) found living alone is on the rise for older adults globally and there is ample evidence to consider them a vulnerable subpopulation (pp. 448-449).

Our desire for connection affects how much time many of us spend online, however research is making clear that does not have the same benefits as time spent face-to-face (Turkle, 2015). Anderson and Thayer (2018) found that while technology may hold promise for connecting older adults in the United States, it is not a substitute for human interaction (p.vi).

Ageism limits older adults' access to even basic healthcare in many parts of the world, while even wealthy countries do not escape ageism's harmful effects. HelpAge International (2018) found ageism presents widespread barriers to older adults' inclusion in health care systems, particularly in moderate to low income nations (p. 7). With training in gerontology, Aronson (2019) expected to be prepared to help older adults in the United States, but instead discovered that the whole system is inadequate (p. 8) and that while they make up over 40% of the hospital population, older adults were also most likely to be harmed by medical care, (p. 5).

Beyond limiting access to quality healthcare, ageism affects how older adults are spoken to, how they are treated in work settings and the acceptance of abuse directed to this age group (Wisdom, 2010, p. 1). Despite its prevalence, Wisdom (2010) noted that ageism is taken less seriously than other forms of prejudice (p. 2). Wisdom's own research provided further support

for a “terror management theory” that proposes that young people protect themselves from fear regarding their own eventual loss of attractiveness, ill health and death by distancing themselves physically from older adults and by considering themselves to be different (Wisdom, 2010, p. 2). Pipher (1999) noted that despite this prejudice, compared to young people, older adults can be held to higher standards - they should not be a bother; they should be good natured and mild as well as generous with concern for others (p. 49). Those kinds of expectations further reduce an older adult’s chances of being fully seen and appreciated for who they are. Fortunately, Wisdom’s (2010) own research found exposure to older adults decreased ageism (p. 53).

The large numbers of older adults suffering from social isolation and its negative health impacts have significant economic implications. Anderson and Thayer (2018) estimated that Medicare spends about \$134 more per month for a socially isolated older adult (p. iv). Despite its significant costs to older individuals and to society as a whole, Anderson and Thayer (2018) found that in the United States, adults age 45 and older rarely spoke about social isolation with their healthcare providers (p. v). Anderson and Thayer (2018) also suggested that the relationship of social isolation to ill health may not be widely understood (p. v).

There is a positive side to aging. Ryan et al. (1992) found that compared to younger adults, older adults can be perceived as being more sincere when talking and more able to tell enjoyable stories. Pipher (1999) noted that older adults tend to value honesty (p. 48). In a TED talk on “The Neuroscience of Social Intelligence” (TEDxUQ, 2014, May 28), William von Hippel mentioned that older adults may not censor themselves about what might be considered socially inappropriate topics. While this might be considered a liability in some situations, it can be an asset for T&D where speaking the vulnerable truth provides access to our fundamental interconnection. The Committee on Future Directions for Cognitive Research on Aging,

mentioned that older adults appear to be particularly sensitive to emotional aspects of situations, including interpersonal ramifications of problems (Stern & Cartensen, 2000, p. 31).

In *Older and Wiser: Classical Buddhist Teachings on Aging, Sickness and Death*, Soeng et al. (2017) provided commentary on several Buddhist teachings related to equanimity noting that older adults may live more in the moment and may have learned the futility of wasting time and energy in overreacting. Intention can have a huge impact on experience and older people may have learned to let go (Soeng, et al., 2017, p. 127) and to choose to love rather than clinging to fear even when dying (Fink, 2020, February 18). Cozolino (2018) and Aronson (2019) found that contrary to what younger people might believe and fear, older adults can actually experience reduced anxiety and increased life satisfaction noting that older adults may no longer care what others think about them, bringing a new and most welcome sense of freedom.

Harm from Social Isolation

There is considerable evidence of social isolation's harm from studies that considered varied age ranges as well as different ways of characterizing social isolation including: (a) subjective social isolation or loneliness, (b) objective social isolation - the relative size and composition of an individual's social network and such factors as frequency of contact, and (c) living alone. These are not the same - it is quite possible to live alone and not feel lonely or to be surrounded by people and to feel quite lonely. But in all cases these studies found evidence of harm that T&D might combat by providing an opportunity for meaningful social connection.

Social isolation is not rare and its harmful effects on health are more significant than many realize. Lieberman (2013) noted that materialist values and priorities grew over time at a cost to the social connection that truly supports wellbeing (p. 250). Even as income increased in the United States, research showed subjective wellbeing was unrelated (Lieberman, 2013, p.

245). DiJulio, et al. (2018) found that for those 65 and older, 16% in the United States, 25% in the United Kingdom and 21% in Japan report significant loneliness (p. 4). Anderson and Thayer (2018) whose survey was designed to be representative of the entire United States aged 45 and older, found that 35% reported being lonely (p. iv). Miyawaki (2015) who used data from the National Social Life, Health and Aging project found evidence that in the United States, both perceived social isolation and social disconnectedness had a strong negative association with health regardless of whether the older adults were African Americans, Hispanic Americans or Caucasian Americans.

Rigorous large-scale studies that took into account a wide range of potentially compounding conditions found a relationship between human connection and death from all causes and the World Health Organization advocated for social support networks as vital for health (Trzeciak & Mazzarelli, 2019). Holt-Lunstad et al. (2015) considered the effects of perceived social isolation and living alone on mortality in their review of 70 independent prospective studies with over 3 million participants (p. 233). Regardless of a participant's age, socioeconomic status or length of follow-up, there was an increased likelihood of death: 26% for loneliness, 29% for social isolation and 32% for those living alone (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015, p. 233). They noted these risks are quite significant; greater than those associated with obesity (Holt-Lunstad et al., 2015, p. 236). In fact, space considerations preclude discussing all of the evidence of harm from social isolation that Emma Seppälä presented at a high level in her TED talk, *The Power & Science of Social Connection* (TEDxHayward, 2014, April 1).

Much is known about the associated neurobiological mechanisms. Cacioppo and Patrick (2008) explained that the experience of social connection has been found to regulate physiological and emotional equilibrium (p. 11). Porges (2017) noted that we communicate that

it is safe to approach through our facial expression and tone of voice which reflect the state of our autonomic nervous systems (p. xvi) and that our social behavior and bodies dampen defensive systems so we can form social bonds that in turn support wellbeing and health (p. 47). Lieberman (2013) explained that social and physical pain share the same neurocognitive processes (p. 75), and Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2014) described research that found loneliness impairs executive functions, sleep, and mental and physical well-being (p. 58).

There is also research that considered which factors most predict felt social isolation. Anderson and Thayer (2018) found that for those age 45 and older, a smaller and less diverse social network and being physically isolated were most predictive and that a lower frequency of contact with friends and siblings, a worse state of health, not spending time doing such activities as volunteering or attending religious services, and living in an urban environment also mattered (p.5). Nicholson (2010) conducted research on those ages 65 and older at baseline to determine the direction of independent variables and found that the strongest predictor of later social isolation was religious engagement; the risk of becoming socially isolated over time decreased dramatically depending on how many members of a congregation an older adult knew (p. 139).

A recent development in research is investigating whether wisdom can reduce loneliness. Lee et al. (2019) looked at loneliness across the lifespan for 340 community dwelling adults living in San Diego, CA and found that it was more common in the late-20's, mid-50's and late-80's and that even moderate loneliness was associated with worse mental and physical functioning. They found a strong negative association between scores on a wisdom scale and loneliness in this study which states it was the first to look at how wisdom relates to loneliness (Lee et al., 2019). The study has limitations, but its authors do address an important area for further investigation that is consistent with Buddhist teachings (Bodhi, 2016).

Social Isolation Interventions with Older Adults

Several meta-analyses reviewed interventions to address older adults' loneliness and social isolation (Gardiner et al., 2018; O'Rourke et al., 2018). These described inconsistent or low quality in research methods, and difficulty with making comparisons because of heterogeneity and, at times, inclusion of multiple components in the intervention. Interventions ranged from psychological therapies, and animal interventions, to personal skills courses and even radio broadcasts (Gardiner et al., 2018; O'Rourke et al., 2018).

Masi et al. (2011) focused on interventions to reduce loneliness understood to be the discrepancy between a person's actual and desired social relationships. Masi et al. (2011) noted that while interventions to reduce loneliness achieved only moderate success, interventions that addressed abnormal social cognition were more likely to be promising (p. 259). This is in keeping with their theory that the negative expectations of lonely people lead them to behave in ways that confirm those expectations (Masi et al., 2011, p. 259).

Given this dearth of theory and evidence regarding the relative benefits of various interventions designed to address older adults' risks from social isolation, this review considers evidence of the support provided by the qualities and components of T&D. Before considering this evidence, it is appropriate to look at what is known about Japanese tea ceremony and Insight Dialogue, the inspiration and sources for these qualities and components.

Japanese Tea Ceremony and Insight Dialogue – The Inspirations for T&D's Components

There is very little experimental research on the benefits of either Japanese tea ceremony or Insight Dialogue. Uno (2007) found that experience with Japanese tea ceremony improved nurses' relationships with patients. Zed Kramer (2015) found preliminary support for his hypothesis that Insight Dialogue increases well-being, mindfulness and self-compassion.

The continuing influence of Japanese tea ceremony on Japanese national identity (Surak, 2013) is consistent with the Japanese cultural emphasis on maintaining harmonious relationships (Rothbaum et al., 2000). Nakamura et al. (2008) used Japanese tea ceremony as an example for a model they developed to support appropriate evolution of services (as opposed to physical products). Their model recognizes that customers help to co-create the service experience (Nakamura et al., 2008).

According to Sen (1979), former head of Japan's largest tea school *Urasenke*, the only purpose of Japanese tea ceremony is to provide an experience of tranquil communal awareness (p. 9). The traditional Zen-related art form communicates much of its depth via non-verbal cues and respectful generous action (Fink, 2018, July 7). Hosts continually attend to supporting their guests' tranquility (Sen, 1979, p. 41). Source documents exhorted hosts to hold guests in high esteem and vice versa (Hirota, 1995, pp. 205-206). Keenan (1996) noted that besides reduced stress during tea events, advanced practitioners learned to experience irritating aspects of daily life as opportunities for tranquility and purposeful meaning (p. 30).

Gregory Kramer (2007) realized that meditative dialogue could open the way to Buddhist wisdom as well as providing practice in implementing that wisdom in the interpersonal realm. Surrey and Kramer (2013) noted that the Insight Dialogue guidelines sustain not just nuanced perception but all of the factors of awakening - mindfulness, investigation, energy, joy, tranquility, concentration and equanimity - while also loosening personal boundaries.

Ucok-Sayrak and Kramer (2015) proposed that Insight Dialogue can help relieve suffering from persistent feelings of social isolation that those in their teens and young people expressed despite being more connected than ever via social media. Older adults use social

media as well and although that may feel like connecting, a lack of social clues precludes true empathic connection (Baym, 2010), nor does it enhance social skills (Turkle, 2015, p. 3).

Qualities and Components of T&D that Combat Social Isolation

Experience with T&D suggested that its qualities of generosity, dignity, social connection, and creativity help combat harm from social isolation. This section provides evidence of the benefits of these qualities before turning to benefits of T&D's key components: (a) drinking tea with embodied awareness; (b) reminders of our interdependence with nature and each other; and (c) meditative dialogue using the Insight Dialogue guidelines.

Qualities – Generosity

T&D provides a variety of forms of support for aware and inclusive giving and receiving. Its guidelines serve as *norms* and the facilitator serves as a *role model* – both factors found to influence generosity (Allen, 2018). Sharing tea is clearly an act of generosity. But so is listening with kindness (Brach, 2012, p. 36; Hanh, 2013, p. 6; Kramer, 2007, p. 150; Singh, 2003, p. 196) and speaking honestly taking care that what is said is beneficial (Hanh, 2013, p. 6; Kramer, 2007, p. 163). Allen (2018) noted contact with nature can also influence generosity (p. 63).

Research on generosity indicates that it operates in complex ways. Park et al. (2017) found a neural link between generosity and happiness where the increase in happiness was independent of the increase in generosity. This provides hope that T&D's lower investment as compared to Japanese tea ceremony still provides substantial happiness benefits. Inagaki (2018) found giving support to others not only benefits the receivers' health, but also the health of the individual providing support, especially when it is possible to observe how recipients benefit. In a review of research on generosity, Allen (2018) found generosity is socially contagious and benefits relationships, but testosterone and oxytocin can limit it in a variety of ways. Allen

(2018) found that we tend to be more generous with those we consider to be in our 'ingroup' (p. 47), which fortunately is subject to change (p. 49).

Qualities – Dignity

Dignity deeply honored provides a vivid contrast to the invisibility older adults have been found to complain of due to ageism (Cozolino, 2018; Wisdom, 2010) and to the increasingly common use of dehumanizing language and behavior (Brown, 2017). Bowing after participants pour tea for each other incorporates an element of the formal embodied dignity of Japanese tea ceremony, while the Insight Dialogue guidelines provide support for dignified communication. As with generosity, the T&D facilitator provides a role model and the Insight Dialogue guidelines act as social norms that honor inherent human dignity.

Dignity researcher, Donna Hicks (2018), described dignity as encompassing the following elements: (a) approaching others as neither superior nor inferior; (b) validating others' talents and contributions; (c) giving others full attention by listening to their concerns and responding; (d) making others feel like they belong; (e) putting others at ease regarding their physical and psychological safety so they are not worried about being humiliated; (f) treating others fairly and as equals; (g) empowering others to act on their own behalf so they can feel in control; (h) believing that what others think matters and allowing them to explain their perspective; (i) giving others the benefit of the doubt; start by assuming they have good motivations and integrity; and (j) taking accountability for unskillful actions and apologizing if you have violated another's dignity, as well as making a commitment to avoid hurtful behavior in the future (pp. 16-17). Hicks (2018) noted that honoring dignity is necessary to ensure the safety needed for trust (p. 9). The dignity supported by the guidelines and structure used for T&D is consistent with these elements and how they provide a foundation for evolving trust.

Zak (2017) found that oxytocin reduces fear of trusting someone you have never met while stress is a potent oxytocin inhibitor. Zak's (2017) research helped him identify eight management behaviors that foster trust: recognizing excellence, assigning challenging but attainable work, providing discretion as to how people do their work, enabling employees to choose which projects they do, sharing information broadly which reduces stress related to not knowing, intentionally building relationships, facilitating whole person growth, and showing vulnerability. These behaviors seem consistent with Hicks' (2018) elements of dignity as well as those exhibited during T&D.

Qualities – Social Connection

T&D fosters social connection by the hospitable act of sharing tea and by dialogue following guidelines that support the safety needed to truly show up, attend, and share honestly. Oyserman et al. (2002) did an extensive review of literature and research on individualism versus collectivism and found that in the United States, a higher value is placed on individual achievement than in other countries where group harmony is more highly valued. Regardless of whether a culture is more individualistic or collective in orientation, feelings of vulnerability to others' judgments serve an important motivational purpose since humans need others' support in order to survive (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008, p. 7). During T&D with everyone listening respectfully without commenting, concern about judgments tends to fall away. That helps sustain openness useful for perceiving nuanced nonverbal social clues as well as one's own responses. Loneliness researchers, Cacioppo and Patrick (2008), proposed that full availability to whatever interaction is appropriate in the moment is the best antidote to loneliness (p. 229).

Lieberman (2013) noted that we do not intuitively grasp the importance of cultivating social connection (p. 96), yet there is evidence that it can be a cost-effective means to achieve

wellbeing (p. 247). Surrey and Kramer (2013) proposed that skill at moment by moment attuning to self, other and the relationship may be cultivated through relational mindfulness practice, and that this attentive attuning is important to all therapeutic relationships. Operant conditioning researchers observed that both the person providing a timely reward and the one being rewarded for approximating a desired behavior can find the process captivating; they are *actively learning in responsive relation to each other* and learning, itself, becomes rewarding (Pierson, 2015, p. 119). Similarly, T&D rewards attentive interaction which supports cultivation of presence.

A number of brain scan studies found evidence of cross-brain coherence during effective verbal communication. Hasson et al. (2012) and Hirsch et al. (2018) found that areas of a listener's brain come into coherence on a time-delayed basis. Stephens et al. (2010) found evidence that with good comprehension, certain areas in the listener's brain can actually anticipate the same changes in the speaker's brain. Given T&D's support for sustained inward- and outward-directed awareness during communication, it might be reasonable to expect that cross-brain coherence would be operating. This would certainly be consistent with what Buddhist depth psychology has been saying for over 2,000 years regarding our fundamental interconnection (Surrey & Jordan, 2012, p. 164).

Björkstrand et al. (2019) found that mindfulness training facilitates extinction of conditioned fear responses producing lasting reduction in arousal to what used to trigger fear. If additional research supports this finding, that might suggest T&D could help combat an unfortunate side effect of loneliness where lasting fears of social rejection lead to off-putting behavior so that social isolation continues (Masi et al., 2011). With appropriate facilitator training, mindful caring interaction during T&D would hopefully help to extinguish conditioned fear of social rejection, particularly if brain coherence is enabling greater empathic connection.

Qualities – Creativity

T&D provides many opportunities for creativity. Attuning to emergence can be used in creatively arranging the setting for a particular session (as is true for Japanese tea ceremony). Statements derived from attending in the moment can have the expressive quality and freshness of poetry. As previously mentioned, the dialogue may assume a variety of creative forms. In a storytelling variation of T&D on “compassion” that was part of a six-week workshop, older adults played the role of various animal friends of a protagonist who had lost everything in a storm. Each introduced their animal and the gift they offered while playing a tongue drum and then they went around again to explain the unexpected ways their friend used the gifts (Fink, 2019, February 18). Wenckus (1994) noted that improvised collaborative storytelling supports engaged social interaction, imagination and creativity all at the same time (p. 31).

Creative collaboration can support transformative social connection. Mitchell Kossak (2015) found participants cycle through phases of seeking safety and taking greater risks (p. 63) when they engage together in creative expression. Kossak (2015) noted that in the final stages, participants can enter a state of flow which can lead to a sense of the universal (p. 64). Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (1993) who invented the term “flow” found that not only do people lose a sense of self in their deep engagement, but flow is associated with performing at peak capacity which in turn supports subjective wellbeing and has potential for positive social consequences.

Unlike art therapy, T&D does not make use of clinically trained facilitators during creative engagement, but its benefits seem similar. Of the 10 art therapists Pappas (2014) interviewed, 8 mentioned that the expressive arts helped create positive connection not only with the therapist but with other older clients (p. 124). The therapists observed reduced stress, improved awareness, processing of feelings and cognition, energy and insight, and their clients

making meaning despite existential challenges (Pappas, 2014). The therapists felt that their empathy, presence and respect for their clients were factors in these outcomes (Pappas, 2014).

Components – Drinking Tea

As participants drink tea during a T&D session, the facilitator provides a narrative that supports bringing attention to the rich and diverse sensory experience in real time. Hopefully that supports greater embodied awareness for the dialogue that follows. Brendel and Bennett (2016) reviewed research on embodied mindfulness and concluded that embodied mindfulness builds resilience and resourcefulness as well as improving relationships (p. 409). Unno et al. (2018) found that drinking *matcha*, the powdered green tea used for Japanese tea ceremony, reduces stress. That stress reduction should, in theory, support maintaining higher oxytocin levels which Zak (2017) found makes it possible for us to trust strangers.

Studies also found tea drinking benefits mood (Dodd et al., 2015; Shen et al., 2019), and creativity (Huang et al., 2018), and that it supports elders' brain structure as well as functional connectivity of the default network which is associated with social functioning (Li et al., 2019). T&D provides a good excuse to educate older adults about tea's benefits for fighting chronic diseases (Kahn & Mukhtar, 2013).

Components – Reminders of Interdependence

An important component of T&D derived from Japanese tea ceremony is inclusion of reminders of our interdependence with nature and each other (Sen & Sen, 2004). T&D makes use of physical reminders of nature to create a sense of welcome (Fink, 2019, April 26). Few have access to all the benefits of a symbiotic relationship with a tea garden (Fink, September 8, 2018), but Han and Ruan (2019) noted that plants can serve as beneficial symbols of nature, and indeed, they found evidence that indoor plants boost positive, and reduce negative emotions.

During Japanese tea ceremony, participants pause to think of all that went into the tea. During T&D, the facilitator's body language and tone of voice communicate tea ceremony's inclusive peace as a narrative is used to direct attention to the energy of the sun captured by the tea leaves, the sustaining waters flowing through the tea plant and through the participants, and the effort of all those who planted, tended, processed, packaged and transported the tea.

Lun et al. (2008) investigated whether we feel happier and healthier when we feel more understood in social relationships. Participants reported in their diaries feeling greater life satisfaction and healthier on days when they felt more understood by others. In T&D, with all participants listening deeply and sharing immediate subjective experience during the dialogue portion of the practice, both our common vulnerability and our power to deeply support each other become more apparent.

Components – Meditative Dialogue

Kok and Singer (2017) found that contemplative dialogue can provide training for emotional empathy, empathic perspective taking and increased feelings of closeness to others. During their study, dialogue partners took turns listening and speaking for a period of time each day in a format similar to that used for T&D before moving on to a new partner for the next week. Participants used two circular sliders to indicate by the degree of slider overlap or lack of it how close they felt to their dialogue partner before and after each session. Sessions continued once a day with the same partner for seven days before moving on to a new partner. Over multiple weeks, participants began to feel closer to their partner before a dialogue session started even before their first dialogue session with a new partner (Garrison Institute., 2017, June 21).

Cormack et al. (2018) conducted qualitative research that looked at the group process involved in mindfulness-based interventions. Their interviews identified specific facilitator skills

that were considered to be important including (a) embodiment of mindfulness; (b) establishing safety, including by projecting confidence; (c) facilitating a culture supportive of connections; (d) maintaining equality among participants; (e) balancing needs of individuals with those of the group as a whole; and (f) ensuring all participants had an equal right to talk (Cormack et al., 2018). The guidelines used for T&D help greatly with this. The Insight Dialogue Community (n.d.) provides opportunities to practice Insight Dialogue as well as support for those wishing to learn how to facilitate use of the Insight Dialogue guidelines.

Precautions to Ensure T&D's Safety

Precautions are necessary to ensure comfort, safety, and privacy. This includes checking upfront whether planned seating will accommodate each participant's needs and whether decaffeinated tea is preferable. Using private secure space or online video conference technology and obtaining agreement to protect confidentiality creates safety for open sharing. Instruction to speak only what is beneficial provides a basis to ask those with dark personality traits who do not care about maintaining good relations with others (Moshagen et al., 2018) to leave if they exhibit hurtful behavior.

Although T&D provides healing support, it also invites vulnerable investigation. For that reason, participation should always be voluntary. As is true for all forms of mindfulness practice, memories and emotions may emerge leading to serious adverse reactions for those who have experienced trauma (Treleaven, 2018). At a Cambridge Health Alliance Center for Mindfulness and Compassion symposium on November 18, 2017, Willoughby Britton spoke of her research on effects of contemplative practices. When asked about Insight Dialogue, W. Britton (personal communication, November, 18, 2017) mentioned being face-to-face can trigger worse reactions than solo practices. David Treleaven's *Trauma-Sensitive Mindfulness: Practices for Safe and*

Transformative Healing (2018) provides coaching on recognizing and responding to adverse reactions, including working with trained professionals for appropriate support if necessary.

Strategic Considerations

The large baby boomer cohort born between 1946 and 1964 may provide a unique opportunity to promote engagement with T&D. This group benefited from economic prosperity, with improved access to education and steady jobs so they could plan for retirement (Frey, 2010). Kahana and Kahana (2014) found this cohort to be more assertive and health-conscious consumers of healthcare information than previous generations, more engaged in their own care, as well as more likely to speak up to their health care providers. Kahana and Kahana (2014) also noted they have a track record for pursuing social engagement and healthy lifestyles along with high expectations for remaining independent into their later years.

An ongoing T&D group that discusses “spiritual but not religious” topics might provide benefits that Nicholson (2010) found for those who knew more members of their religious congregations as well as potentially providing a sense of purpose in supporting each other. Shen (2019) noted religious practice has health benefits while many in the baby boomer cohort left formal religion, and 42% of baby boomers never returned. Musich et al. (2018) investigated how a purpose in life affects health outcomes for older adults using a sample representative of the entire United States and found a medium or strong sense of a purpose in life was associated with social support, resilience, reliance on faith, health literacy, and good mental and physical health as well as lower expenditures for health services.

Papanicolas et al. (2018) found many nations were concerned about their growing populations of older adults, and Besharov and Call (2010) noted that the United States was slow on the uptake regarding the implications of this dramatic demographic shift. The World Health

Organization initiated a program designed for those aged 60 and older who live in urban environments called “Age-friendly cities” (Noordzij et al., 2019). This program, supported by the American Association of Retired Persons in the United States, recognized the need for cities to provide opportunities for social interaction (Noordzij et al., 2019). T&D might be seen as a welcome addition, especially as widely accessible video conference technology can be used to offer T&D to those unable to travel to meet face-to-face (Fink, June 11, 2018).

Despite rampant ageism and the many other challenges that older adults face, evidence indicates they can bring perspective, appreciation, equanimity and compassion to their lives (Aronson, 2019; Cozolino, 2018; Hoblitzelle, 2017; Pipher, 1999; Soeng et al., 2017). Hopefully, some wise older adults would be motivated to promote T&D once they understand its benefits; we all face serious existential threats in these times of widespread disruption (Scharmer & Kaufer, 2013) and can certainly make better use of our considerable ability to support each other.

Evidence Supporting Use of Video to Convey T&D's Benefits for Older Adults

This section presents evidence for using video to convey what T&D has to offer. T&D uses multiple means to communicate. Like Japanese tea ceremony, how the environment is arranged, generous actions and how they are performed, tone of voice and body language all convey important values as well as subtle social nuances.

According to Karph (2006), the human voice conveys a great deal of information about biological, social and psychological status as well as intention and as she noted, tone of voice can completely change the meaning of a sentence. She makes the case that the human voice is central to helping us make secure emotional ties, and to developing empathy and other social skills (Karph, 2006).

Moore et al. (2014) noted that nonverbal communication comprises a significant portion of face-to-face communication. For example, fleeting micro-expressions may give away a dissembler's true feelings without the speaker realizing it (Moore et al., 2014, p. 214). By the clever use of robots, DeSteno et al. (2012) manipulated cues they identified that affect perceptions of trustworthiness. Their research found that accuracy in judging the trustworthiness of a novel partner increased with exposure to nonverbal signals (DeSteno et al., 2012). Richoz et al. (2018) conducted a large study to ascertain whether it is easier to decode emotions when viewing dynamic facial expressions as compared to static "snap shots" of faces. They found evidence that all ages find it easier to decode dynamic facial expressions, but older adults were significantly less accurate with static images (Richoz et al., 2018).

A video of an Insight Dialogue session facilitated by expert teacher, Phyllis Hicks, has the sound turned down during dyad interaction (Fink, 2019, October 26). The encouraging body language during that interval appeared consistent with Porges' (2017) theory that we use body language to signal that it is safe to come closer.

As with Japanese tea ceremony, actions convey important information during T&D. Pezzulo et al. (2019) examined sensorimotor communication; the often-subtle communication signals that are embedded in pragmatic action. The authors note that continuous and flexible exchange of bodily signals is involved in coordinated action and that we are able to produce and read such signals quite well, and to extract information from them about others' intentions, emotions, and attitudes (Pezzulo et al., 2019). During T&D, participants pour tea for and then bow to each other. Video can portray this generous action, hopefully along with the non-verbal signals it carries, something that is not possible with written or spoken descriptions alone.

In her coaching, Beth Kempton (2018) makes use of *wabi sabi*, a subtle and hard-to-define aesthetic philosophy that is associated with Japanese tea ceremony. *Wabi sabi* is not just about external stimuli but also our responses to them – to being able to discern deep beauty in the humble, incomplete, irregular and unpretentious. Kempton (2018) explained that *wabi sabi* acknowledges the passage of time and that since everything is always changing, perfection is impossible except in perfect moments. She noted that aging is to be embraced since wisdom and beauty ripen with age (Kempton, p. 179). Video can show examples of the imperfect beauty that is common in nature and in us (Fink, 2019, December 26) as well as the deep beauty of the ordinary/extraordinary moments we are capable of sharing with each other.

Rationale - Connecting the Dots; Analysis and Discussion

Videos produced for this creative thesis provide examples of older adults engaging in (a) creative T&D with painting, music and spoken reactions; (b) basic T&D with spoken dialogue; and (c) T&D offered in an older adult's home. The medium of video was chosen because the social clues it captures can provide a better sense for the practice's open sharing, caring attention, wellbeing, and mutual appreciation that support connection. It is appropriate to briefly discuss the process used in creating the videos before considering how they illustrate what academic discourse has to say about the benefits of T&D's qualities and components.

At the start of the project, a videographer, an artist and a musician who kindly agreed to participate met in my tea hut. I reviewed the Insight Dialogue guidelines (Kramer, 2007) – Pause, Relax, Open, Trust Emergence (since changed to “Attune to Emergence”), Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth - and requested that we use them for the whole project. We then practiced using them in discussing “new beginnings.” I explained that the plan was for a painting produced during creative T&D to be displayed for a later basic T&D session using spoken dialogue. All of

these sessions would explore the Japanese tea ceremony scroll saying, “the unending sea of blessings” (Wilson, 2012, p. 135). I hoped that investigating “the unending sea of blessings” might suggest perspectives useful for combating harm from social isolation. An additional session on “nature as artist” was held with my mother in her home as a means to show T&D’s adaptability. The contemplation topic for this session was a passion we had in common that might suggest the important T&D element of our interdependent relationship with nature.

As it turned out, T&D’s quality of *generosity* pervaded all of the videos. Participants generously offered personal stories and objects such as blueberries (see Fink, 2019 October 22). They liberally shared skills, caring words and nonverbal indications of support. The powerful gift of attentive listening was well captured by the skilled videography. During the basic T&D session, it became clear that all of the Insight Dialogue guidelines are generous gifts when offered with appropriate facilitation as they provide access to what might be called the sea of unending blessings that is all around and within us. Multiple statements of appreciation bear witness to this generosity producing happiness (Park et al, 2017) as well as supporting relationships consistent with findings from the research on generosity.

The quality of *dignity* was manifest in facial expressions, taking turns, bowing, and pausing to take in what was said. During basic T&D, a statement acknowledged the participants’ respect and kindness. All these behaviors indicate that Donna Hicks’ (2018) elements of dignity were being honored. The creative T&D video shows cultivation of dignity by acknowledging doubt is a universal human experience while also providing encouragement to continue painting. Dignity was protected from the outset by providing each participant veto power over what would appear in the edited videos. Even so, the degree of open sharing is notable. That trust was supported by how the guidelines were facilitated as well as elements retained from the dignified

art of Japanese tea ceremony. The closeness that naturally arises when dignity supports trust was well represented by the hug towards the end of the creative T&D video.

Social connection which directly combats social isolation is aided by the slower pace evident in the videos. Pausing provides time to take in the smiles, supportive glances, nods and caring tones of voice. Statements directly referenced connection. For example, the musician remarked on the connection he felt to the painter as they engaged in their arts in different rooms. During T&D in my mother's home, the joyful connection created by sharing meaningful memories is clear. Deeply seeing each other and knowing we were seen provided a stark contrast to the invisibility that older adults often complain of due to ageism (Cozolino, 2018; Wisdom, 2010). Although direct evidence of brain synchronization is not available, hopefully viewers can gain some sense for the connection portrayed by attending to their own responses while watching these videos.

The quality of *creativity* was particularly evident during the creative T&D sessions. The video shows a vivid example of Kossak's (2015) stages of risk raking, seeking safety, renewed risk taking, and in the end, achieving a sense of the universal. The multiple channels in play lent depth, aliveness, and joy to the process of getting to know each other. I hope that some of that wonder is conveyed by nonverbal aspects of the video. As can happen with Japanese tea ceremony, bringing sustained caring awareness to intentional coordinated action supported opening to a nondual perspective. In this case, new understanding of the unending sea of blessings was aided by losing the sense of a separate self in creative flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1993). The video also captured our common belief that creativity is part of everyday life. We just need to believe in our own capacity rather than fearing how others might judge us. Creative T&D is certainly not just for professional artists (see Fink, 2019, February 18).

Although video cannot provide full sensory access to *drinking tea with embodied awareness*, many can draw upon their memories. At my mother's home, her joyful "It's a party!" acknowledged the positive associations that sharing tea has in many cultures. She appreciated the warmth of the cup in her hands while the slow-motion footage of her drinking the beverage ends with a lovely smile. During creative T&D, the artist mentioned finding drinking tea grounding and like waking in the morning to a fresh beginning. The care and connection involved with pouring tea is clear in the basic T&D video. Many of the aesthetic elements in Japanese tea ceremony teach lessons. Even with T&D's simple process for sharing tea, these videos show the round shape of the teacups, the round bell, and for that matter, the round granite water basin briefly glimpsed beyond the tea hut door. These are all subtle reminders of the wholeness that is accessible by bringing caring in-the-moment attention to the simple act of drinking tea.

Many reminders of our *interdependence with nature and each other* are shown in the videos. The first few irises bloomed on the day of the basic T&D session. An iris was displayed in an arrangement and used as a simile in explaining the Insight Dialogue guidelines. Presumably that contributed to the positive mood that is clear in the video consistent with Han and Ruan's (2019) research on indoor plants. Participants stated their appreciation for the reminder of the many natural and human contributions that made sharing tea possible. In our delusion of isolation, it is all too easy to take for granted all the care, energy and effort that goes into making the things we depend upon. The sounds of birds and children playing during the basic T&D session were also lovely reminders of the unending sea of blessings. During the T&D session in her home, my mother's story of her natural mindfulness during a walk along a dirt road delighted us both. As the research by Lun et al., (2008) suggests, recognizing our shared understanding that noticing natural details matters contributed to our happiness.

The videos also include examples of how *meditative dialogue* supports emotional empathy, empathic perspective taking, and increased feelings of closeness. This was clear at the culmination of the creative dialogue when those present simultaneously recognized that the painting was complete. The lingering closeness my mother and I felt after our mindful exchange about our appreciation of nature was also consistent with findings from the research that Kok and Singer (2017) conducted on contemplative dialogue.

Research by Cormack et al. (2018) suggests that facilitator skills are important to positive outcomes for group mindfulness practice and while the Insight Dialogue guidelines may appear straight forward, facilitating them well is not trivial. There are many balls to keep in the air while being vulnerably open and responsive. That takes courage, but the rewards are great including significant new insights, enhanced interpersonal skills, and, with luck, deep spiritual friendships and a sense of purpose. Practicing as a participant and as a facilitator with guidance from experienced practitioners in a context of warm group support is ideal. When I realized how important facilitator development is to achieving T&D's benefits and to avoiding potential harm, I began taking advantage of the resources offered by the Insight Dialogue Community (at insightdialogue.org) and David Treleaven (at davidtreleaven.com). Like Lesley University's Mindfulness Studies program, they are actively working to increase our human capacity for wise and compassionate interaction at a time when so much depends upon that.

It is worth noting that these videos also show examples of the strengths that older adults can bring to T&D including candid openness, emotional sensitivity, storytelling ability, and appreciation for the value of letting go so as to be present for each precious moment. Far from being dismal or boring as ageism might have us predict, these videos show older adults' wisdom and compassion. Generous sharing, attentive listening, and joyful creativity support their evident

wellbeing. Much research indicates humans thrive with meaningful connection to their kind (Cacioppo & Patrick, 2008; Lieberman 2013; Porges, 2017). Older adults can have strengths that help support that vital connection. While T&D can support older adults' health in the face of great need for cost-effective means given significant demographic shifts, it also shows promise to combat ageism, potentially restoring the traditional reverence offered to wise elders. We can access endless information online, but caring wisdom still benefits from greater life experience.

Rationale - Conclusions

From long engagement with the traditional Zen art of Japanese tea ceremony, I learned that the communal awareness of the practice consistently supports centering peace. Experience with Insight Dialogue (Kramer, 2007) taught me how to cultivate supportive connection that is useful for real life interaction. When I realized I could bring the caring energy of both practices to any conversation, even stressful ones, it transformed my life. I began to experiment with T&D in the hopes of combining aspects of both practices in an adaptable and accessible practice. I also considered which groups might benefit most from it for their own needs. Stressed teens and older adults at risk of social isolation immediately came to mind. My experience offering T&D workshops to older adults during an internship confirmed I was on the right track with that age group. Older adults often have gifts that are useful for the practice. Their direct openness, really wanting to listen, interpersonal sensitivity, creativity, compassion and appreciation of what they had to offer each other made that experience highly rewarding for them and for me.

As the literature review in this thesis indicates, there is abundant evidence that supports using T&D to combat older adults' risks from social isolation. The seriousness of social isolation's impacts on health and wellbeing, the impacts of rampant ageism, and the rapidly growing numbers of vulnerable older adults paint a picture of great need. Much of the research

on the harm of social isolation was actually conducted with older adults. There is also sound research evidence that T&D's qualities and components support wellbeing and meaningful social connection. The mechanisms involved with social connection's support for health are being elucidated with the help of research from a number of fields. There is also research support for using video to convey the important nonverbal social clues involved with trusting connection.

My hope is that introducing T&D with older adults would have a multiplier effect while also reducing ageism. Older adults can have gifts and perspective useful for the practice. In addition, there is evidence that some baby boomers might have time and interest in engaging with a practice that supports health and wellbeing. T&D could reduce demands on limited healthcare resources. It could also provide greater exposure to and appreciation for older adults' strengths. Now that we all face existential threats, the wisdom of older adults who face such threats with equanimity and gratitude for each day might be more highly valued.

While research evidence can be used to make a strong case for this application of T&D, motivation to adopt it depends on an emotional connection to its benefits. Unfortunately, we do not intuitively grasp how important social connection is for our social species (Lieberman, 2013) and we can easily take nature's generosity for granted. By assessing their own reactions to videos of T&D, hopefully viewers will gain a better felt sense for what the practice has to offer. Our stressful times make it all too easy to cycle in fearful reactivity. That can amplify feelings of being unsupported and alone. Although we are all vulnerable, we also swim in the unending sea of blessings. T&D can help with appreciating how much nature and others provide for us. It can help us cultivate our great capacity for compassionate interaction. We can use the great power inherent in our fundamental interconnection to support each other in ways that truly matter.

During face-to-face Insight Dialogue dyad dialogue, I spoke with a young woman who works as a college counselor. There were tears in her voice as she shared her deep sadness regarding her cynicism about the future as well as the cynicism that students express during counseling sessions. I responded that retreating into video games is certainly understandable. I told her that humans do not seem to understand time very well and that relational mindfulness practice had given me a new perspective on how much each moment matters. I found myself saying that I believe that helping each person appreciate their own beauty matters in a fundamental way that transcends time. She smiled and told me that she agrees. Even if we are only providing hospice care in these times when we may have surpassed the capacity of our planet to support us, we have it in our power to provide ourselves and each other a great deal of meaningful support. I took that exchange as a sign that I should not wait too long before investigating how T&D can be used to support stressed teens, and perhaps even better, to look into intergenerational practice. A contact at my local high school has expressed interest.

I speak about my passion for T&D with many different people to assess whether there might be interest in the practice. At a bus stop, a man asked me whether it could be used to help those with autism. An acquaintance who had just lost a son, asked if it could help those mourning the loss of a family member. I have discussed how it might work for those who experience memory issues since the connection it supports is so much in the moment, and how it might be used to support a learning community and greater creativity for those working for badly needed social change. Several people have asked me where they can sign up, or where their child can try it. In times of pandemics and physical distancing to avoid contagion, the ability of T&D to support meaningful connection via video conference takes on new importance.

Perhaps this interest indicates that the time is right for relational mindfulness practices to gain the higher levels of participation they deserve, and I hope T&D can contribute to that. We certainly can benefit by learning how to cultivate the powerful support we can provide each other. Given the differences that tend to divide us, cultivating a greater capacity for trusting open interaction seems critical. We must work together if we are to resolve the complex widespread issues that threaten all of us and all life on our planet. Even if it is too late for that, there is good reason to make better use of our significant capacity for mutual support.

Creative Project - Videos of T&D Practice with Older Adults

Blog posts at the hyperlinks below provide access to the videos produced for this thesis. These posts provide context and highlight examples of beneficial connection as well as providing information about the participants. The posts as they appeared at the time this thesis was submitted are reproduced at the end of this section.

- Creative Tea and Dialogue with Art, Music, and Spoken Reactions
(<https://radiantrefuge.blog/2020/03/29/creative-tea-and-dialogue-with-art-music-and-spoken-reactions/>)
- Basic Tea and Dialogue with Spoken Dialogue
(<https://radiantrefuge.blog/2020/03/29/basic-tea-and-dialogue-with-spoken-dialogue/>)
- Tea and Dialogue in an Older Adult's Home
(<https://radiantrefuge.blog/2020/03/29/tea-and-dialogue-in-an-older-adults-home/>)

Although the participants were asked to sign video release forms, as previously noted, they knew requests for exclusions would be honored. I sought and received approval for this “veto power” approach to protecting confidentiality from Insight Dialogue developer, Gregory Kramer before the project started (personal communication, November 2, 2018). As I had hoped, that approach proved effective in providing the safety needed to speak candidly in the moment even though the plan was to make the videos accessible to the public via blog posts.

Practicing psychologist, Jan Surrey, who facilitates Insight Dialogue sessions internationally kindly agreed to be a consultant to the project as well as a participant. Her introduction to the Insight Dialogue guidelines was made into a separate video with the understanding that it could be used in a variety of educational contexts. Although we used upbeat

contemplation topics, Surrey had the ideal combination of experience and training to respond to any adverse reactions, which fortunately did not occur.

T&D was used to support the whole project in a manner consistent with the principles of servant leadership. Lowder (2009) who reviewed literature on servant leadership found that it involves mutual power, collaborative participation, non-judgment, a focus on believing in and empowering people, providing opportunities to learn, and valuing differences. He notes that servant leadership creates a context for learning that enables deeper levels of insight and that this style of leadership overcomes fear through creating shared meaning (Lowder (2009)).

Creative Tea and Dialogue with Art, Music, and Spoken Reactions



Lidia Kenig-Scher painted while Jim Flavin played various instruments. Here, Jim improvises on the [didgeridoo](#) while below it singing bowls respond sympathetically.

In April and May of 2019, four of us worked on a project to capture footage of a creative variation of tea and dialogue while a painting emerged in response to ["the unending sea of blessings,"](#) (a Japanese scroll saying). Besides our contemplation topic we were also supported by Gregory Kramer's [Insight Dialogue guidelines](#) - Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence (previously Trust Emergence), Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth. The video at the link below provides an idea of what occurred over three sessions including spoken reactions and discussion:

[Creative tea and dialogue video](#)

After we shared tea in her living room, Lidia Kenig-Scher worked on the painting in her studio as Jim Flavin played a variety of instruments in the next room and videographer, Jeff Klein, captured the action. The materials, tools, and effort involved lent a grounded, down to earth quality to this multimedia dialogue. The video shows how the rhythms and the feeling of the music influenced Lidia's brush strokes. Jim mentioned feeling a connection even though he could not see the painting.

The tea we drank at the start of the second session had four ingredients. Since there were also four of us, that seemed a great metaphor for our communal awareness that retained what we each contributed to the blend.

We experienced a particularly vivid example of the stages described by Mitchell Kossak in [Attunement in Expressive Arts Therapy: Toward an Understanding of Embodied Empathy](#) where periods of seeking safety and risk taking ultimately result in an experience of the universal. Lidia had put up a quote about the wisdom of trusting emergence rather than forcing things on her studio wall some time ago. Jeff trained his camera on that quote and his comment about how well that quote expressed what happened the previous day is included in the video soundtrack.

After the doubt, empathic support, and effortless expansive creative [flow](#), the completion of the painting recognized by a hug, felt particularly powerful. That hug also symbolized the closeness the practice supported. I could not help but be grateful that we were capturing all that on video.

The plan was to display the painting in my tea hut for [a later tea and spoken dialogue session](#) (see below):



I am glad we discussed our common belief that creativity is not just for professional artists. Nor is it just for the young. Contrary to what younger people might believe, older adults can actually experience reduced anxiety and increased life satisfaction; they may no longer care as much about what others think about them, bringing a new and most welcome sense of freedom that supports creativity. In fact older adults bring a [number of gifts](#) to tea and dialogue practice. Creative tea and dialogue is certainly not just for professionals as [this joyful example](#) shows.

I am most grateful for the generosity of these talented artists:

Jim Flavin is a musician and certified practitioner and teacher of Jikiden Reiki. He collects percussion instruments from all over the world and shares them with others in the drum circles he leads. His work as a contractor provides many opportunities for the practical application of mindfulness. He believes in spreading unconditional love through expressing respect, kindness and honesty in all relationships.

Lidia Kenig-Scher is an award-winning mixed media artist and transformational catalyst. Her intuitively conceived works are installed in the interiors of successful homeowners and entrepreneurs, many of whom claim that the art emits a vibration capable of positively affecting their lives and the spaces where the art is installed. This highly decorated interior designer and Feng Shui master also teaches people to “paint from the heart,” a meditation-based technique grounded in more than 40 years of Buddhist practices and intense spiritual work. Lidia notes that her artworks invite personal growth because she too starts by opening her heart and trusting her brush to paint the truth.

Jeffrey Klein is a bilingual videographer with a 25-year career in multi-media production in Japan and the United States including podcasts and videos intended for retail, business, entertainment and educational contexts. Samples of his work are available at his [website](#).

Basic Tea and Dialogue with Spoken Dialogue



Jan Surrey opened the session by striking a bell. Its round shape, like the pale water basin in the garden to the right and our round teacups might suggest wholeness or perhaps the Zen [enso](#).

On June 2nd, 2019, five older adults (see their bios at the end of this post) joined me in my tea hut for a tea and dialogue session. Expert [Insight Dialogue](#) teacher, Jan Surrey, provided an introduction to the Insight Dialogue guidelines that are used for tea and dialogue practice. The introduction was kept separate so that the video of that overview can be used in a variety of contexts. Together the videos at the hyperlinks below show how the practice supports meaningful connection that is capable of combating harm from social isolation. The significant negative health impacts of social isolation can be particularly dangerous for older adults.

[Video 1 Introduction to the Insight Dialogue Guidelines](#)

[Video 2 Sharing tea and dialogue](#)

A painting of our contemplation topic, [“the unending sea of blessings”](#), was displayed:



Jim Flavin, the musician who had improvised on a variety of instruments as the painting evolved during [creative tea and dialogue](#), and Lidia Kenig-Scher, the artist who made the painting both agreed to attend. Anita Malone Clarke who contributed [blueberries and a wonderful story to go with them](#) sat between Jim and Lidia while videographer, Jeff Klein, captured what took place.

Iris had just started blooming in my garden that morning. Jan Surrey said, “like iris unfolding” in explaining the guideline “Open”. This artful simile hinted at what we can miss when we fail to open and attend to the beauty of such transient moments. Jan’s facial expressions, gestures and tone of voice reinforced her words, providing a sense for the deeper perception she was modeling as she invited us to make use of the [powerful guidelines](#) developed by Gregory Kramer – Pause, Relax, Open, Attune to Emergence, Listen Deeply and Speak the Truth.

The second video shows respectful tea sharing, reminders of our interdependence with nature and each other, and meditative dialogue. Generosity is seen in all the contributions and the attentive listening. Dignity is seen in taking turns, bowing, respectful facial expressions, and pausing to take in what each person says. Both generosity and dignity support trust. Without trust, meaningful connection doesn’t happen. We need to feel safe enough to truly show up so we can be seen and appreciated just as we are. This video shows the nonverbal music of trusting openness met with respect and acceptance as well as explicit statements of appreciation.

Video is able to provide a felt sense for tea and dialogue where a great deal is conveyed via such nonverbal social clues as nodding, supportive glances, smiles, and tones of voice. The caring connection of tea and dialogue seems perfect to support older adults who are at risk from social isolation which has been found to be as [bad for health as smoking or obesity](#). The highly adaptable practice can be [offered in older adults’ homes](#). Tea and dialogue supports meaningful connection even when offered [remotely via video conference](#), making it of particular interest at times when distances are an issue or physical isolation is necessary.

I am deeply grateful to all those who agreed to participate in production of these videos:

Anita Malone Clarke came to the United States from Honduras Central America. Many years as a nurse practitioner taught Anita how important healthy choices and supportive relationships are for wellbeing. She deeply appreciates and believes in eating the wonderful whole foods that nature provides in abundance.

Jim Flavin is a musician and certified practitioner and teacher of Jikiden Reiki. He collects percussion instruments from all over the world and shares them with others in the drum circles he leads. His work as a contractor provides many opportunities for the practical application of mindfulness. He believes in spreading unconditional love through expressing respect, kindness and honesty in all relationships.

Lidia Kenig-Scher is an award-winning mixed media artist and transformational catalyst. Her intuitively conceived works are installed in the interiors of successful homeowners and entrepreneurs, many of whom claim that the art emits a vibration capable of positively affecting their lives and the spaces where the art is installed. This highly decorated interior designer and Feng Shui master also teaches people to “paint from the heart,” a meditation-based technique grounded in more than 40 years of Buddhist practices and intense spiritual work. Lidia notes that her artworks invite personal growth because she too starts by opening her heart and trusting her brush to paint the truth.

Jeffrey Klein is a bilingual videographer with a 25-year career in multi-media production in Japan and the United States including podcasts and videos intended for retail, business, entertainment and educational contexts. Samples of his work are available at his [website](#).

Dr. Janet Surrey teaches Insight Dialogue retreats worldwide as well as leading a monthly practice group in the Boston area. She serves on the Teachers Council for the Insight Dialogue Community. Starting in 2007, she has been working with Gregory Kramer, founding teacher of Insight Dialogue meditation, a relational meditation practice within the Theravādan Buddhist tradition. She is a practicing clinical psychologist and a founding scholar of the Jean Baker Miller Training Institute at Wellesley College. She is also on the board of the Institute for Meditation and Psychology.

With a cameo appearance from my long-time Japanese tea ceremony practice partner, *Kikuko Mills*.

Tea and Dialogue in an Older Adult's Home



The simple Chinese restaurant teacups and thermal carafe we used are visible as Sally shares her story about all that she noticed during a walk in the woods along a dirt road.

On June 21, 2019, I made decaffeinated green tea in a thermal carafe, checked that the temperature was between 160- and 165-degrees Fahrenheit, and packed it along with teacups and a singing bowl. Jeff Klein gathered his video equipment and we went together to visit my 97-year-old mother. We hoped to capture the adaptability of tea and dialogue practice while also showing how well it works to bring it to older adults who may find it difficult to travel. A few still photos were added to help viewers relate to the memories we shared:

[Video of tea and dialogue in an older adult's home](#)

At first Sally was concerned that she might not know what to say, but when I explained we would be sharing about “Nature as Artist,” that seemed to put her at ease.

I chose the topic knowing that the beauty of nature is a passion for us both. I also planned to adapt tea and dialogue to what seemed most beneficial at the time. [Videos of a full version of the basic practice](#) were captured of a session that took place in my tea hut.

Sally's comment "It's a party!" acknowledged the positive cultural connotations of sharing tea. Drinking tea as a focus for mindful awareness seems to work for most people. This was noted by artist Lidia Kenig-Scher in a [video made of a creative variation of tea and dialogue](#). Jeff used a slow-motion camera to capture Sally drinking tea. That footage highlights the embodied awareness that presumably flows into and supports the dialogue that follows.

Although I did not anticipate it, the dialogue focused on sharing cherished memories. I spoke of memories of taking photos of leaves and Sally described what she experienced during a walk along a dirt road. Her detailed narrative of all that she noticed was a testimony to her natural mindfulness. There is research evidence that [older adults may be better at telling stories](#) than younger people.

What a contrast our interaction was to the [invisibility](#) that older women can complain of due to ageism. There was a lingering sense of closeness from the experience, and satisfaction from the understanding that both of us felt understood - that our appreciation for nature mattered. Jeff told me the video required little editing. He described it as "low hanging fruit."

I am most grateful to Sally and Jeff for helping with this video.

Sally Fink started camping in the New Hampshire woods as a child. She and I have shared countless walks in the woods in many settings. After the session, Sally told me she regrets she can no longer take such walks. I said we can go there by talking about it and she agreed.

Jeffrey Klein is a bilingual videographer with a 25-year career in multi-media production in Japan and the United States including podcasts and videos intended for retail, business, entertainment and educational contexts. Samples of his work are available at his [website](#).

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