

# RELATIONAL ENCOUNTERS

**Negotiating Communication Barriers during the COVID-19 Pandemic**

by

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# Abstract

This thesis aims to explore and honor how people are trying to connect with each other during the isolation required by COVID-19. I embarked on a personal journey to understand how people were experiencing the barriers of communication when social distancing became necessary. The relational encounters among family, friends, and strangers have changed drastically. The care and connection that was once expressed through physical contact like hugs, pats on the shoulder, or wrapping one's arms around each other, is now reduced to a restricted point of contact, such as through a window or across a distance. These small moments of interactions have proven to be jewels of connections under challenging times. Experiencing this firsthand myself further validated the trajectory of my research.

Through a process of journaling, auto-ethnography, storytelling, story gathering, and story listening, I researched new characteristics of human relationships and connections formed among families and communities. The unconventional interactions that I saw taking place through windows and across other thresholds have deeply resonated with me. I asked myself, as a designer, how can I use storytelling as a method to aid social innovation to create a space of engagement within a community? Can design support the generation of new narratives where the families, friends, and fellow community members feel included and connected to each other?

I have been observing interactions happening through windows outside of care homes. It inspired me to search for ways to support interactions and channels of communication in these constrained and challenging times. The design-driven outcome, *Khirki*, has proposed a narrative environment where the audience can physically, emotionally, and intellectually participate that will help to bring people together safely across barriers and appreciate precious moments of shared time.

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## Keywords

COVID-19 Pandemic.

Relational Encounter.

Social Distancing.

Communication Barriers.

Care & Concern.

Narrative Environment.

Social Innovation.

Kamishabai.

Storytelling.

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I thank all my friends for countless video calls to keep me motivated, for the fruitful discussions, and for the sleepless nights I made them work with me before deadlines. I am blessed to have these people assist me with their knowledge and grant me their precious time.

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## Land Acknowledgment

I would like to begin by respectfully acknowledging that this thesis was researched and written in Vancouver and Coquitlam, which are situated on the unceded territory of Coast Salish Peoples, including the territories of the xʷməθkwə́yəm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Səlíl̓wətaʔ/Selilwitulh (Tsleil-Waututh), s̓qə́ciyaʔtəməxʷ (Katzie), qiqéyt (Qayqayt), and 'stə:ləw (Sto:lo) First Nations.

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## Glossary of Terms

<b>Behavior Change</b>	<p>It is any modification in behavior (mainly human) in public health. The change may happen spontaneously and involuntarily without any intervention, or it may be systematic and motivated as prompted by conditioning or by design interventions. Whatever the transformation, it affects one's overall function as an individual.</p> <p>"In altering the way you act and react, behavior change also affects how you function as a whole" (N., 2015).</p>
<b>COVID-19 Pandemic</b>	<p>Also known as the coronavirus pandemic, is an infectious disease caused by the transmission of severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2). To avoid it from spreading, it is important to practice respiratory etiquette and maintain a distance (WHO, n.d.).</p>
<b>Design of Social Innovation (DESIS)</b>	<p>It is designed initiatives that "tend to (re)connect people,(re) connect people with the places where they live, and regenerate mutual trust and ability to dialogue – and by so doing they create new communities" (Manzini 2019, p. 9)</p>
<b>Humanist Notion of Care</b>	<p>In this thesis, it means care, empathy and compassion are human characteristics and should not be primarily associated with the female gender.</p>
<b>Kamishibai</b>	<p>It literally means "paper drama". It is a form of storytelling originated from Japan in 12th century (Enjelvin, 2021)</p>
<b>Narrative Environment/ Spatial Narrative</b>	<p>It is an immersive storytelling experience where audience can also physically, emotionally, and intellectually participate in the storytelling world in contrast to reading a book or watching a screen which always keeps one outside the story (Ponticelli, 2014).</p>

**Pandemic**

It is an outbreak of a disease that occurs over a wide geographic area (such as multiple countries or continents) and typically affects a significant proportion of the population (Merriam-Webster dictionary, n.d.).

**Relational Encounter**

It is an interaction in which people stand face to face with one another and establish a deep relationship, which requires trust and implies intimacy. During COVID-19, relational encounters have changed and been delimited by social distancing measures.

**Storytelling**

In this thesis, the act of storytelling and story listening has been used to illuminate different experiences of people navigating communication barriers during covid-19 and how it can facilitate social innovation.

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## A Note to the Reader

The writing of this thesis is a juxtaposition of my lived experience and gathered human experiences during a long period of social distancing due to the COVID-19 virus. It offers a personal commentary of my own knowledge and understanding of navigating life through unprecedented times. The use of the first person perspective in my writing embeds me in my arguments, rendering them more immediate, embodied, and (hopefully) compelling (Duke University n.d.). So, it is written in a personal writing style, and I include my own stories and reflections throughout.

Throughout the course of this thesis, my journey was like a roller coaster ride. Every turn and corner contained self-doubt and new learning experience about the value of the care, communications, and relational encounters.

As a design student, this is the first time I have let my own emotions and circumstances carve the path of my research. It was an opportunity to question the role of a designer in emerging events implicitly and explicitly. The exploration of the unknown territory even let me pick up my pen and write poems and stories about my own dealings and circumstances.

Living a secluded routine within a new country has influenced me to embark on a self-reflective lived experience of the covid-19 pandemic. I explored how care and concern can create ways to communicate and pave ways for creating more spaces of engagement for people who are experiencing a restricted connection with their loved ones.

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## Background

# Coronavirus: A Novel Disease

A novel strain of Coronavirus, Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SAR-CoV-2), was detected in December 2019 in Wuhan, a city in China (Stewart, Connelly, & Robinson, 2020). The World Health Organization (WHO) declared it a pandemic on March 11, 2020 when the COVID-19 outbreak did not “respect the borders” (Ottenhoff, 2020) and spread in more than 200 countries. By the time of writing this thesis, the disease has infected more than 122 million people around the globe and continues to increase with each passing day. The cumulative number of deaths has surpassed the 2.5 million mark (WHO, March 18, 2021).

The proliferation of coronavirus caught everyone’s attention. Few could have imagined that in a few months, the spread of disease would change entire societies. The Coronavirus pandemic is unprecedented. Never in recent decades has the threat of a disease consumed so much of mankind’s time, resources, and attention (Mair, 2020). Not a day goes by when the media, newspapers, radio, social media does not report the terrifying and alarming facts and figures about covid-19.

The novel virus has brought uncertainty about the future of our health, jobs, habits, society, and economy. The tiny yet deadly virus forced societies to drastically alter ways of living.

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# The Notion of Care and Connection in Emerging Practices of Social Innovation during COVID-19 Pandemic

Manfred Max-Neef (1986), in his model of Human Scale Development, states that basic human needs are finite and remain the same over time and across cultures. Human interaction and collective actions/attributes are key to achieving a level of satisfaction in life (Khandelwal, 2018).

Human interaction, mostly referred to as *Relational Encounter* throughout this writing, remains at the core of most of the needs. In my understanding, a *Relational Encounter* is an encounter in which people stand face to face with one another, in presence with one another, and establish the foundation for a deep relationship. This requires trust and implies intimacy (Manzini, 2015). Design anthropologist Arturo Escobar (2018, as cited in Morris, 2018) also advocates a “Relational Ontology” to reconstitute the ways in which people communicate with one another and the world in a multi-directional axis instead of a solitary straight line. A look at Max Neef’s model (Figure 1) shows that the settings for leisure, participation, affection all require interactions in a physical state. In most contemporary societies, most of our activities and routines involve interaction with others in family gatherings, workplaces, schools, shopping, entertainment, and so on. The conventional concept of contact, connection, and human care takes place in the physicality of the engagement. Human contact and care are essential for physical and emotional wellbeing. Humans crave attention from fellow beings. We thrive on affection, trust, emotions, and care (Rhodes, 2017). However, what changes over time and across cultures is how these needs are met and satisfied (Khandelwal, 2018). As I describe in this thesis, the conditions of covid-19 have radically changed how we are able to meet our needs for attention and human contact.

Most of us first gain attention and human contact in our families. The notion of care is inculcated in everyone early on through the family. In my culture, parents look after their children; older siblings nurture the baby brothers or sisters; later, these children grow up and



Image retrieved from <http://sds.parsons.edu/inclusion/2020/05/29/max-neefs-fundamental-human-needs-2/>

*Figure 1. Max Neef's model of Human Scale Development, 1986*

take care of their old parents. In other words, care is omnipresent, and caring is passed along in our relationships. Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017), a contemporary researcher about care, explains that “reciprocity of care is rarely bilateral, the living web of care is not maintained by individuals giving and receiving back again but by a collective disseminated force” (p.20).

This is congruent with the work of philosopher Nel Noddings (1984; 2002). In 2002, Noddings clarified that caring relationships are asymmetric in nature. She terms one party A as “Carer” and the other B as “Cared-for”. She explains that it is not mandatory for B to turn into a carer for A. If B recognizes A’s caring, then it will be a caring relation; the key is in the recognition. She further clarifies, “Caring will always depend on the connection between the carer and cared-for” (p. 20). This understanding is validated by Gandovetter’s (1973) theory of strength of ties. He said that the strength (and weakness) of the interpersonal ties was a result of the “combination of the amount of time, the affective intensity, the intimacy (mutual confiding), and the reciprocal services that characterize the tie” (as cited in Manzini, 2015, p. 101). The relationships we build, define and shape us to become who we are. It gives humans a cause to live and connect with other members of the community.

For me, this explains how the family is not the only bond we rely on. We make friends and develop genuine and trustworthy bonds with our neighbors and other members of the community. This can bring us warmth, care, and affection. These interactions have a certain level of personal engagement and empathy (Manzini, 2015). Ezio Manzini’s research (2015;

2018) expresses how relationships and bonds are foundational to building community. He describes how collaboration among people builds the kind of strong ties that are needed for resilient communities. Yoko Akama (2017), a design researcher, also advocates inter-relatedness, respect, and reciprocity to situate ourselves in social and cultural encounters. Manzini, in his conversation with Hillary Cottam in Nurturing Communities of Care webinar (2020), expanded on this to say that care and nurturing among the communities would result in greater social welfare and resilient cities. Relational bonds are essential for many reasons.

Manzini (2015) says for Buber, the relational encounter is deep, demanding, and risky. The persons involved become vulnerable by opening up and depending on each other. The relational encounter represents humanity. These encounters encourage compassion and care for others. This is related to characteristics of empathy, interconnectedness, and a feeling of inclusion in the community.

Moving forward in the context of the covid-19 pandemic, relational encounters have changed significantly. How we meet and collaborate in public is changing, especially when we are constantly being reminded to undertake social distancing to keep ourselves and others safe. To limit the dispersion of virus, governments have had to implement curfew and lockdown. Many borders have had to be sealed. Places where people once met casually, like recreational centers, cafes, malls, have been closed. Staying indoors had to become part of the new normal, the changed behaviors that are becoming habitual. Unnecessary travel, recreational, and outdoor activities came to a halt. The coronavirus pandemic has led to a major decrease in contact between people.

This is a serious constraint on our physical engagement. We rarely get to have intimate contact with our families and friends. What we are left with are the brief and limited moments of connection across distance and through barriers. In my thesis, I have been exploring how the care and connection that we once expressed through physical contact, such as hugs, a reassuring pat on the shoulder, or wrapping one's arms around each other, is now reduced to the restricted point of contact, such as through a window, or across a threshold. I speculate that these precious moments of shared time are deeply appreciated. Are they jewels of connections in difficult times?



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## ***Excerpt from my Journal***

### ***Once upon a Time, Life in the Coronavirus Era***

*It is 9 pm, and I need a distraction. I grabbed my jacket and umbrella to go out for a walk. Darkness prevailed over the calm, peaceful night as the clouds thickened, covering the moonlight and stars. The wind slammed the rain into my face. It always cheered me up but not today. The blasting music in my ears is not helping either. Usually, I find people out on the street with their kids or dogs. It lets me be a part of a community where I can pat a dog or smile at others to feel less lonely, but COVID-19 has taken it away from all of us.*

*Walking around the neighborhood has kept me sane. Sometimes, I am bestowed with the rare glimpses of families happily eating or watching tv when the curtains are drawn open. It makes me hopeful, and I always murmur a silent prayer for their safety and bliss. Tonight, bleakness has enveloped the entire neighborhood.*

*So, I walk back to my apartment to wallow in my despair. I am grateful to have a vivid imagination. It allows me to envision myself among my loved ones, which is exactly what I am going to do right now.*

*You ask, why? It is because, back in Pakistan, my family is preparing a barbecue brunch for my sister's birthday. And here I am, missing out on another family gathering. I am invited to join via Zoom, but it is not the same. It does not allow me to blow those candles for her, as I have done countless times. It will not let me sip water from my sister's glass when she is not looking or guzzle all the peppers from my brother's pizza or peck at my mum's plate when I am too lazy to get my own food. Is it even safe to do it anymore in these circumstances? It is better to stick to one's own plate and utensils so that it does not jeopardize anyone's health, especially my parents.*

*It aches my heart to be unable to share such moments with my family. Hence, these trivial moments have become my most cherished memories. (A.Tahir Journal, November 25, 2020)*

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# Introduction

## Limited Physical Connection

This thesis project aims to understand how people are trying to relate to each other during the COVID-19 crisis when social distancing has become necessary. The relational encounters, which involved hugs, pats on the shoulder, and handshakes, have been replaced by nods of recognition. Doors are being pushed open with elbows or feet; actions which might once have been considered rude or ill-mannered are now socially acceptable.

During the pandemic, some people have been fortunate to spend time with their families locked in their houses doing a variety of indoor activities. At the same time, many people have been struggling to spend time with their loved ones or connect with other members of the community. Sadly, I belong to the latter. Due to the travel ban to limit the spread of coronavirus, I was alone in Vancouver for almost a year. It was a difficult time, being so far away from my home and family in Pakistan. Living in total isolation, I missed small moments spent with my family, such as sharing meals, especially pecking at my mum's plate, carpools with my brother when I am broke, movie nights with my sister, spa days with my friends. The list is endless. I know that many people had worse experiences. People confined within the four walls due to weak immune systems, or age, have been feeling most disconnected from the outside world.

I started collecting narratives, personally, in print journalism and digital media, which revealed the emotions and struggles of many people trying to adapt to the constraints of distance. They told of a variety of innovative ways to interact and connect with others. Sam Monckonton is one of the many examples.

Sam Monckonton is a resident of Vancouver who loves her father and cannot meet him in person, because at the time, her father was battling COVID-19 at Haro Park Center (Care Home), in Vancouver, BC (Vermes, 2020). As is now well-understood, patients at the care home were not allowed visitors. Seeking connection, Sam took her trumpet and went to the care home where she played a tune outside his window (Figure 2). It was her way to relate to her father, who had been away for several weeks now. The performance was a source of joy for her father including several other residents who enjoyed her music.

Image retrieved from <https://www.cbc.ca/radio/thecurrent/the-current-for-april-1-2020-1.5517314/trumpets-window-visits-and-virtual-cards-how-families-are-connecting-with-loved-ones-in-nursing-homes-1.5517425>

*Figure 2. Trumpeter Sam Monckton played for her father, a resident at Haro Park Centre, Vancouver, BC, Canada.*

I noticed many more such examples, personally and via digital media, where people have been overcoming hurdles to be with their families, even briefly and at a distance. I asked myself, as a designer, how might I use storytelling as a method to research and to create a space of engagement within a community?

The act of storytelling and story listening illuminated different experiences of people navigating the barriers of communication. The small moments of interaction in these stories are beautiful yet equally powerful and evocative. The unconventional interactions through windows and other thresholds have deeply resonated with me. These interactions could be appreciated and facilitated in these difficult times to help deal with isolation, sense of loss and detachment. My own personal journey and these narratives have validated the need to create an opportunity and space where these moments are experienced and appreciated. Even after the pandemic is over, this practice can continue and evolve to serve the community. It expresses optimism and care – something that this world can never get enough of.

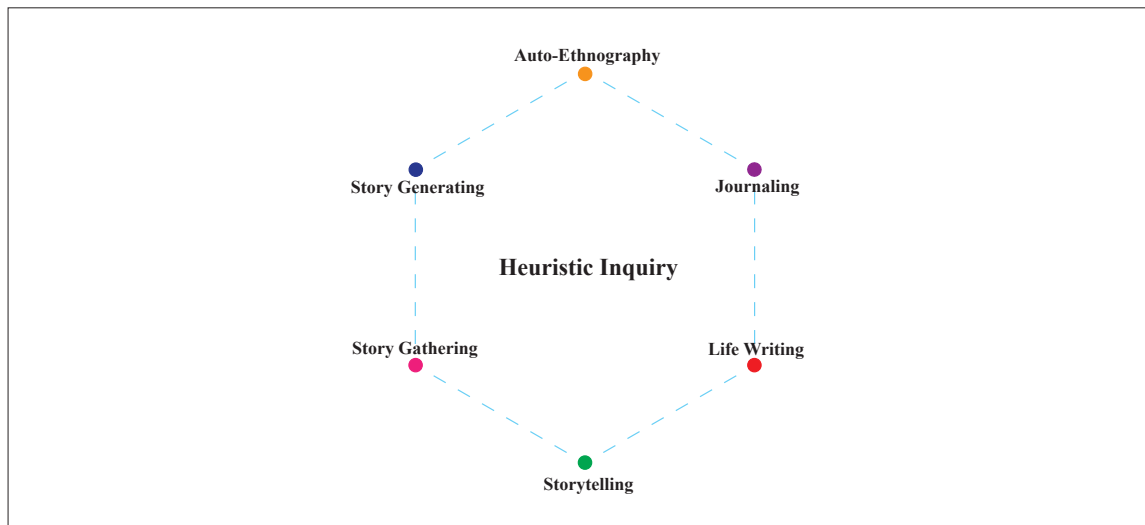
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## Research Methods

In my former work as a furniture designer, my experience was based in material practice. The research trajectory in every furniture project comprised of the same linear pattern—ideate, sketch, draft, prototype, user-testing, final product— it left no room for drifting. Krogh and Koshinen (2020) explain that “drifting opens doors to inquiries into many important yet overlooked aspects of design” (p. 8). Drifting invited me into an uncharted territory that challenged my conservative beliefs that the designer’s role is narrowed to solving a problem. It allowed me the freedom to move away from preplanned practices to more self-reflective exploratory practices.

My self-reflective practices about my own isolation and lack of connection with other members of a community influenced me to embark on an exploratory and experimental journey to inquire about the barriers of communication experienced by people when social distancing became necessary. It was not easy to observe everything from a distance, and frustrating that I could not go up to someone and ask about the problems they were encountering at the moment. It is one of the reasons why I had to constantly reevaluate my trajectory as I progressed through my journey. This was a heuristic approach. Moustakas (as cited in Given, 2008) describes heuristics inquiry as a process of inner search of knowledge that focuses on discovering the nature and significance of the experience. The researcher’s self-search and self-dialogue deeply invest him in the process that the researcher’s lived experience becomes the focus of the research. I engaged with myself and my emotions as a way of understanding and empathizing with others who are also on this journey. This heuristic inquiry was supported by specific methods like auto-ethnography, journaling, life writing, storytelling, story gathering, and story-generating (Figure 3).

In the summer of 2020, I was writing and drawing my observations in my journal about how people were trying to make sense of and adjust to the new routine. This offered tremendous insights. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) state, “Heuristics encourages the researcher to go wide open and to pursue an original path that has its origins within the self, and that discovers its direction and meaning within the self” (p. 53). Summer started with vague and uncertain



*Figure 3. Research Methods.*

wanderings, but with time it gained momentum and a sense of meaning and direction as I grasped the parameters of the situation. Douglass and Moustakas (1985) describe this as “passionate and discerning personal involvement in problem-solving, an effort to know the essence of some aspect of life through internal pathways of the self” (p. 39). This, combined with auto-ethnographical narratives and life writing, led to new discoveries and new experiences.

This ‘self-disclosure’ left me feeling somewhat vulnerable (Etherington, 2007 as cited in Preez, 2008), yet I saw that this situated me with others in a similar social context. I think vulnerability has been the common denominator in these stressed times. The life writing, which included observations, embodied experience, and narratives, informed my curiosity and steered my journey to engage design in “initiating social conversations” (Meroni et al., 2013, p. 3) about the connections – or lack of in some cases – between individuals and communities, in private and in public.

These methods have fueled my curiosity, encouraged me to explore and expand my imagination. These instigated conversations that led to the act of listening to stories and telling stories which steered me from “an abstract towards a concrete, experienced-based knowledge of reality” (Bertolotti et al., 2016, p. 21). It helped to inquire how storytelling can aid social innovation. “Storytelling itself is also a process of discovery for the teller” (Parrish, 2006, p. 73). The storyteller is, first and foremost, a story-listener (Bertolotti et al., 2016), someone who can

look at things other people disregard as being too small or insignificant. My experience taught me to look beyond the surface of human behavior to find deeper clues to help cultivate the creation of more meaningful experiences.

Cynthia Chambers (2009) suggests to “write with your ears— hear and write the silences between the words” (p. 85). For me, interpreting the silence into words was a challenge. After all, how can one transcribe silence into words? Once I listened deeply, the words automatically poured out of my pen. While I wrote, I also gathered. As I detail later, I gathered stories from the digital media and informally asked a network of friends to provide their stories about life in covid-19. The act of collecting and generating stories has generated compassion in me.

According to Bell (2002), narrative inquiry entails moving beyond using narrative as a rhetorical structure, that is, actually telling stories, to an analytic study of the story’s underlying ideas and assumptions. This inspired me to review and analyze every story from different angles. There is always more than one perspective to the story. I have tried to be sure that my one story does not become the only story. It became necessary to weave different narratives together to involve, engage, and initiate dialogues. These stories weaved contrasting elements together into an organic, integral whole, offering new meanings (Bertolotti et al., 2016).

The next chapter describes how I applied these methods in my project explorations.

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## Part One

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## Project Explorations

In this chapter, I describe three different ways of storytelling. I gathered different stories and experiences about how people were navigating their lives during covid-19. It was fascinating to witness how people were inventing new ways to connect with each other through a distance or across the barriers. The next step in the process was to generate narratives that used windows as a main source of interaction. I aimed to emphasize the optimistic approach by people to continue to care about the loved ones and fellow community members. It is said that a picture is worth a thousand words. So, the last step in the explorations was making visuals to convey and preserve some of the meaningful interactions that took place during covid-19 when people were trying to interact while maintaining a safe distance to protect each other.



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## Story Collection

During the summer 2020, I was observing and recording every minute detail of the things happening around me. My observations and stories were not only restricted to my journal. I also shared these stories with my friends. Many of the stories were about how people were struggling to connect during these difficult times. One of my friends, Maria, shared a story about her friend who was also finding her life very difficult. I asked if she could write this in a letter. Maria informally spoke to her friends, residing in Pakistan, England, and Canada, and requested they write me letters about their experiences in covid-19. They were all kind enough to send me the letters. Some even went to the trouble of sending these letters to me in postal mail. I was not expecting such a tremendous turnover of responses from people I had never met before. In the collection of the stories, some are depressing, others uplifting, and some hold factual data. The stories revealed that despite the workload and the strain covid-19 was putting on everyone, people were wanting to share their fears, frustrations, and anxieties to unburden themselves. Unconsciously I formed a bond with all these people, and every night before going to bed I make sure to remember them in my prayers. I informally gathered these stories through a network of friends, but because I did not have the approval from the Research Ethics Board (REB), I could not share them here. But these stories moved me to continue my research in this direction.

I belong to a culture that still promotes the joint family system. Joint family is an extended family arrangement popular in Pakistan and India where many generations (grandparents, parents, uncles, aunts, and grandkids) live under the same roof. It strengthens the bonds and connections among the members of the families, and inculcates values such as respect, kindness, and care. Even as mature, self-earning adults, my siblings and I still prefer to live with our parents. So, I live with a belief that family is the strongest foundational pillar in everyone's life. Their encouragement and motivation will help one through all the challenging times. The pandemic has highlighted the importance of immediate and extended family. Earlier, it used to be easy to take a raincheck on having dinner with your parents or relatives, due to an urgent important meeting. Now, people are trying their best to connect with their families as much as

COVID-19 rules allow.

Inspired by the stories that were mailed to me, I continued to search for stories in print journalism and digital media. It is evident from stories published in *Confessions of Coronavirus* (2020) that, now more than ever, people are cherishing all those moments spent with their families, moments that might have been taken for granted before. For example, A daughter who is a teacher by profession lives with her elderly mother. She is her caretaker and is afraid of exposing her to covid-19. There is a son who lives 5 minutes from his parents' house and hasn't seen them because his father has cancer and only converses through a video call. A grandmother who has not seen her kids or grandkids because she is high risk. It breaks her heart that she cannot hug her babies. A father, who is a front-line nurse, is away from his pregnant wife and 2-year-old kid and is concerned that to keep them all safe, he would miss the birth of his child. Grandkids who make banners for their grandparents and hold it outside their living room window to know how much they miss them. A lonely friend who wants to hang out with his friends. Stefano Bozzini, an 81year old husband, was unable to visit his wife in the hospital due to COVID-19 restrictions (Giuffrida, 2020). He serenaded his wife by playing tunes on his accordion, from beneath the hospital window to show his love.

There are hundreds of similar stories that highlight the beauty of different relationships. I once had a notion that care, and nurturing is only in women's nature. But these stories have changed my perspective. These stories reveal that nurturing is a part of every human being's nature. It is not defined by gender or even relationship – otherwise all the nurses, doctors and care givers would not have endangered themselves and their families to look after patients and vulnerable people. That is why, as I mentioned earlier in section *Emerging Practices*, family is not the only bond we rely on. We develop bonds with our neighbors and community for the warmth, care, affection, and relational connection. It is further proven by the local residents across the province of British Columbia, Canada, who adopted a phenomenon of banging the pots as loudly as they could every night at 7pm as a way to thank the health care workers (Crawford, 2020). During a time of fear and loneliness, this was an exceptional and unforgettable few minutes where people felt connected and hopeful.

The pain and the loss of connection among family, friends and community members was profound in these stories. These stories showed me that I am not the only one facing difficulties in my life. It has encouraged me to face my challenges with perseverance. These narratives

reveal so many different emotions and struggles that I am sure many of us would find resonance with our own lives. There is a possibility that, like me, other people would also find solace in reading these stories.

The gathering of the stories gave me a perspective about which stories are being shared. And how these narratives can help bring communities together.

There is a care home, Lakeshore Care Center, at the end of the block where I lived in the summer of 2020. During my routine walks, I always had mixed feelings walking past it. Sometimes I would see old people sitting by the window looking out. A few would happily wave back at me or respond with a smile. Overall, there was a melancholic aura to the entire building.

The window (Figure 4) became a pivotal and integral part of my research. The severe harsh gray surfaces would instantly transform and speak volumes when people come to this space to connect with their families.



*Figure 4. Window at Lakeshore Care Home, Coquitlam, BC, Canada.*



*Figure 5. A man sitting outside the window reading a book at Lakeshore Care Center, Coquitlam, BC, Canada.*

One day, I was taking a stroll in the street when I saw a man sitting outside the care home (Figure 5). He was reading a book. I managed to capture the shot but not the audio. It was obvious from the tone that he was reading a book to someone he cared about.

Another day, I saw a pair of mother and daughter standing in front of the window waving to someone inside, perhaps a grandmother. I could hear the little girl saying that she missed her and will visit her inside once the pandemic is over. I could not take a picture, but I sketched it. (Shared later in the chapter)

Being away from my own family, I could totally understand their feelings. The distance has kept me away from my family, but for them to be just a wall apart and still unable to hug or touch. A 3–5-minute interaction may seem trivial, but they have brightened someone's whole day, as well as given meaning to their own day. The unconventional interactions through the windows deeply resonated with me. The windows play a significant role in promoting the new relational encounters without compromising on the safety and health of the loved ones.



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## A Lonely Tree

*A lonely tree is standing in the middle of the sidewalk. I am glad that the tree has not been cut down because of the hindrance it causes to the pedestrians. Even on a bright sunny day, the tree has a serene melancholy. I can see the gloominess of the past few months of my own life reflected from the tree. I am alone, stranded in another continent, but still striving to live my life. It feels relatable. Whenever I am feeling low, I walk to the tree and marvel at its magnificence. It gives me strength and lifts my spirit. (A.Tahir Journal, June 5, 2020)*

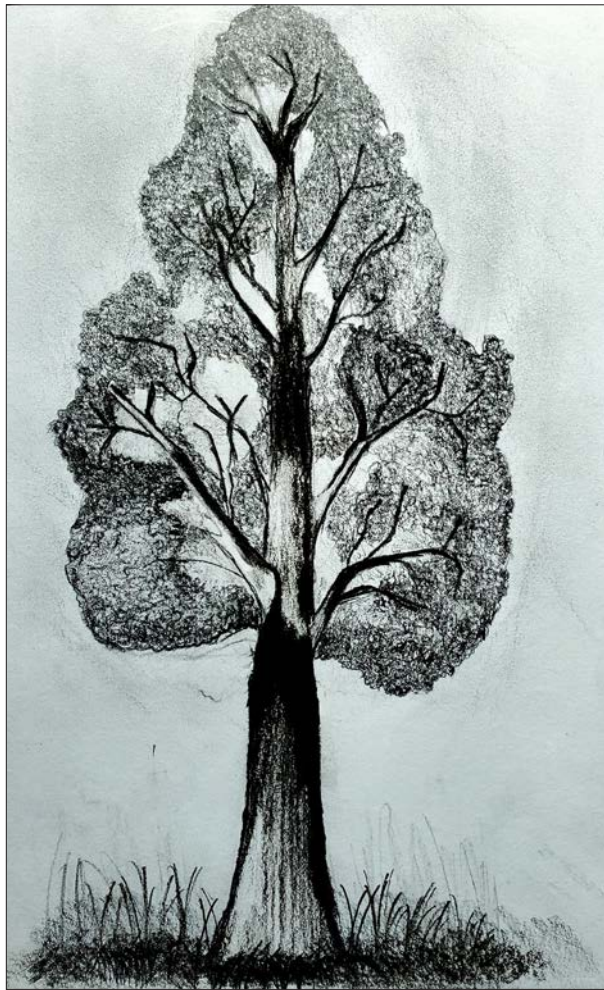


Figure 6. Sketch of a tree near Gatensbury Street, Coquitlam, BC, Canada.

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## Story Generation

I belong to the land of rich literature and storytelling traditions. Dastangoi, which comes from “Dastan” in Persian, meaning ‘story,’ and ‘goi,’ meaning ‘to tell.’ Colonialism, together with its radically different standards of western poetry and literature, resulted in the death of the popular art of Dastangoi (Welle, 2019). It is no longer a strong part of my cultural heritage, but it is never too late to try my own skills of Dastangoi. I wanted to use the window and its context as an opportunity to generate different narratives about the interactions happening through the windows. Humans are not built for solitude. The windows have become a threshold for greeting, grieving, singing, reading, and celebrating (Hine, 2020).

The following stories use the windows as a symbolized gesture of kindness, care, and compassion. Story one is about a covid-19 positive patient trying to reconnect to his family through a window. Story two is about an elderly married couple who is still trying to connect with each other following the protocols of covid-19 restrictions. Story three is about two people who are not related but still have formed a bond over the years. Story four is about the bond shared between two sisters.

### Story One

*I have been in a lot of pain for the last two weeks. I cannot breathe, I cannot talk, I cannot even go to the restroom on my own. My bones are aching as if I had fallen from the sky and smashed into the ground. I don't know when would my agony end.*

*I keep hearing people coughing all around me. I am only half-conscious, but I can hear the nurses screaming for oxygen cylinders and emergency injections. I can feel them running from one bed to the other. It's total chaos here. It feels like the walls are closing onto you, and the roof would fall any minute. The heavy doses of medicines leave you so numb and confused.*

*There are new people coming in every day, and old dead bodies being removed every hour.*

*I hope I am not one of those. I wish I had listened to my wife and been more careful. I wish I had stayed indoors and not been to all those bars and partied with my friends.*

*My wife has been coming to see me every day. Today, my five-year-old daughter has also come along. She's been waving at me from the window, and I am so weak I cannot even wave back. It is crushing me from the inside. I know she would go back home and make a million "get well soon" cards for me, thinking that's the only cure I need. Little does she know this is the last time she is waving at her Da-Da. I wish I could just hug her once before the remaining 20% of my lungs stop functioning.*

## Story Two

*Living at an old age home, if I ever did believe in true love, I had long forgotten it. The same will happen to anyone if they would live with neglected mothers, forgotten fathers, dumped aunts, and unremembered uncles. I had been living there for 11 years when something changed.*

*A woman with advanced dementia was admitted. One morning, she was just there. After breakfast, she quietly sat down on a chair near the window. I went and sat near her, my back towards the glorious sunshine outside. I asked her name, and she looked blankly at me. A wave of empathy covered my heart. It could happen to me. If it did, I hope someone in the home will still talk to me. With this thought, I started talking about the book I was reading.*

*At first, she did not seem to be listening, and then her eyes slowly became animated. I even got her to nod. Hardly 3-4 minutes passed when she suddenly grabbed my sleeve and eagerly pointed outside. With a huge and radiant smile covering her face, she suddenly looked years younger. The sunshine illuminated her lined face, and I was dumbstruck. In that instant, I knew I was witnessing something extraordinary. My arms were covered in goosebumps. I slowly turned around to see a smiling old man pulling up a chair and sitting right outside the window. His eyes were fixed on the woman inside as he sat down and then motioned for me to open the window. I automatically looked for the nurse. The nurse came, asked the man to keep wearing the mask, and then opened the window halfway. The man immediately started talking to his 'darling Mary'. He did not say anything important, but he didn't have to. His smile and gestures had said it all. He loved her.*

## Story Three

*The old man came every day. He would come, politely talk to Sasha, who would then call the nurse on duty, usually me, and I would then take him to talk to Mr. Smith, who had not spoken a word since the last 26 years. He was a classic case of clinical depression treated with wrong and probably too much medication.*

*I was fascinated by the old man and Mr. Smith. When we went on lockdown because of COVID-19, I was sure he would be unable to visit again, but the day we relaxed the restrictions, there he was, sitting outside Mr. Smith's window. I was still on probation, with no access to patient files. I could not openly listen to conversations in the lounge where everything was visible-but today was my chance.*

*There was a cupboard right next to Mr. Smith near the window. I silently crept behind it. The old man was talking in an extremely low voice, but I was close enough to hear. As he continued talking and I continued listening, my body slowly became frozen with horror, my heart was beating like a drum, but I could not move. The old man was recounting in great detail how he had killed an 11-year-old girl more than 40 years ago. The story was so smooth that I was sure he had recounted it a thousand times before. When he got to the part about how he disposed of the body, I instinctively covered my ears, which is when I must have made some sound because when I opened my eyes again, he was gone. Mr. Smith sat as impassive and still as always. In an instant, I knew the cause of his deep depression and silence. I never saw the old man again.*

## Story Four

*Angela and Christina looked in through the window. The woman with the red scarf looked sadder than usual. She was looking morosely at the album in her hands, clearly not seeing anything. Christina turned to her sister, 'Whose picture do you think she's looking at?'*

*'Maybe her sister?' Angela replied.*

*'Yeah...that makes sense. I know I will be sad if I am away from you.'*

*'Really?'*



*'Of course. I will have no one to play with.'* Christina said matter-of-factly, unaware of the huge smile which spread on Angela's face.

*The care home was down the street from their home, and they regularly peered in through the window on the street. They both had one particular person they always looked for when they peered in. Sometimes they found them, sometimes not, but it was fun to imagine their life. Christina liked to look for the woman who always wore the red scarf, and Angela looked for the old man who liked to wear a bow-tie.*

*Mr. Bow-tie was nowhere to be seen, so they both concentrated on the red scarfed woman.*

*'Why do you think she always wears the red scarf?' Angela asked. They had talked about this before, but this was a central question they kept coming back to.*

*'Maybe it was given to her by her sister, who she misses.'* Christina replied.

*'That makes sense. If I make you something, will you always wear it like her?' Angela asked.*

*'Of course, I will.'* Christina said. *'And when I miss you this much when I am old, I will always wear it.'*

*'If you miss me, then I will come myself. You will not need the bracelet.'* Angela replied with a bright smile, putting her hand in Christina's. *They skipped back home, hand in hand, full of sibling camaraderie.*

I explored the diverse context in which the window has been used to connect or emphasize the beauty of associations among the community members. Writing simple narratives established different ways to reflect on multi-faceted relationships. The narratives reflected on the strength of the connection within the family and community members so that even in difficult times, the affectionate and caring bond with one another did not wither.

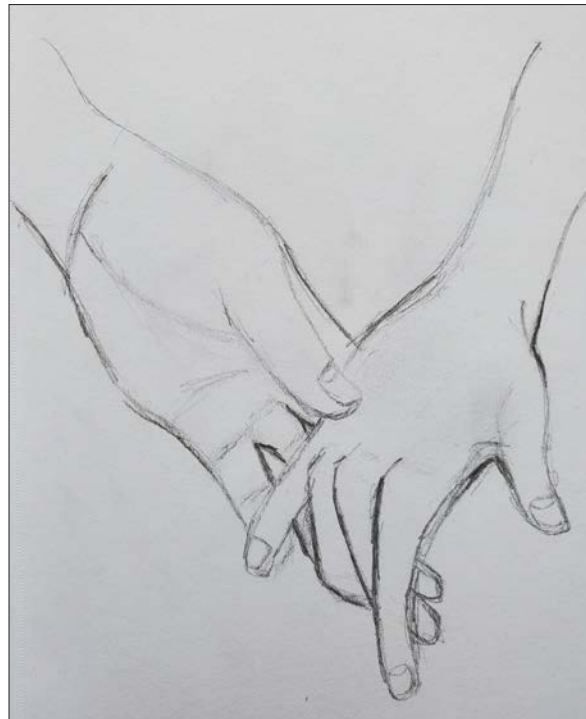
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## Illustrations

All the experiences and stories gathered and written so far were in words. Storytelling is not limited to verbal or written words. It can also consist of visuals. Visuals are a strong medium of storytelling. They overcome the barrier of understanding different or foreign languages. I captured photographs as another medium to capture these stories (already documented in the previous chapter). I illustrated some of the interactions to preserve the precious moments.



*Figure 7. Sketch of intimate hand gestures done in my journal.*



*Figure 8. Sketch of intimate hand gestures done in my journal.*



*Figure 9. Mother hugging her infant son.*

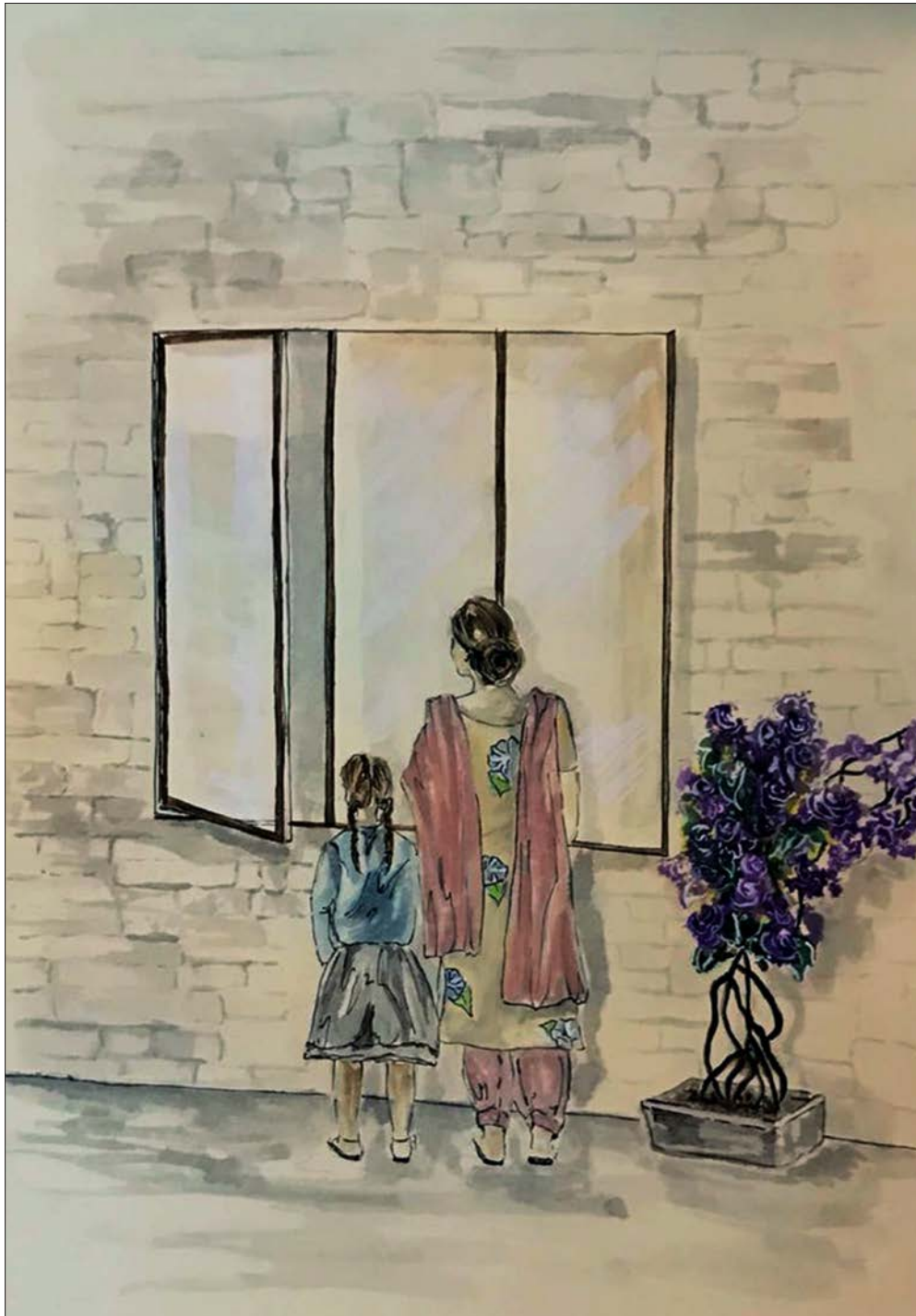
My first illustration (Figure 9) was about the idealized vision of care and nurture that involves enveloping and close body contact. Personally, I think the bond between a mother and a child perfectly depicts the essence of care and concern. It is a 20" by 25" dry pastel on paper. I think that the beauty of this medium is the ability to illuminate and express the poetic soul of the moment.

I contrast this intense contact with the many moments of separation that are part of covid-19. In particular, as I mentioned earlier, there were many moments of people trying to speak or read to each other through windows. The following illustrations depict such interactions. They are done in watercolors on paper.



*Figure 10. Children standing outside the window talking to their grandparents.*





*Figure 11. A pair of mother and daughter standing outside the care home talking to someone.*

These illustrations let me use my imagination to conceive how a deserted window outside a house or care home, hospital is transformed when loved ones stand outside to meet their parents, siblings or grandparents. For me, the photograph captures a moment, and it becomes a finite, a memory etched in the past, with no possibility for alteration. But when one sketches, one's imagination can visualize the reality in different ways. It does not become a memory of the past. Instead, it can represent the past, present or the future. In other words, it is timeless.

With each passing day, windows are becoming a metaphor for the relational encounters in the challenging times of covid-19. The aim of the illustrations was to honor the relational encounters. I wanted these illustrations to epitomize optimism and hope.

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## Part Two

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## Narrative Environments

I assumed that collecting and writing all the stories eventually leads to a book containing all the narratives. But the physical act of reading a book elucidated the lack of engagement between the reader, speaker, and space. The important questions raised were, “How can I create a space for the kind of engagement I want to support? How can stories be part of this space where the families, friends, and fellow community members feel included and connected to each other? And how can I do this within the constraints of Covid-19 restrictions?”

As a quick experiment (Figure 12), I tried to create a space where people would also participate in the act of storytelling through a public prompt. I printed images of a man sitting in front of a window and two girls standing in front of a window on colorful pages with a prompt that asked, “What story does this photo tell?” Some other prompts did not include an image, only a few words to start the story. I attached these prompts on a notice board and left them on benches at different parks around Rupert street. I placed at least ten copies of each prompt over the course of two weeks.

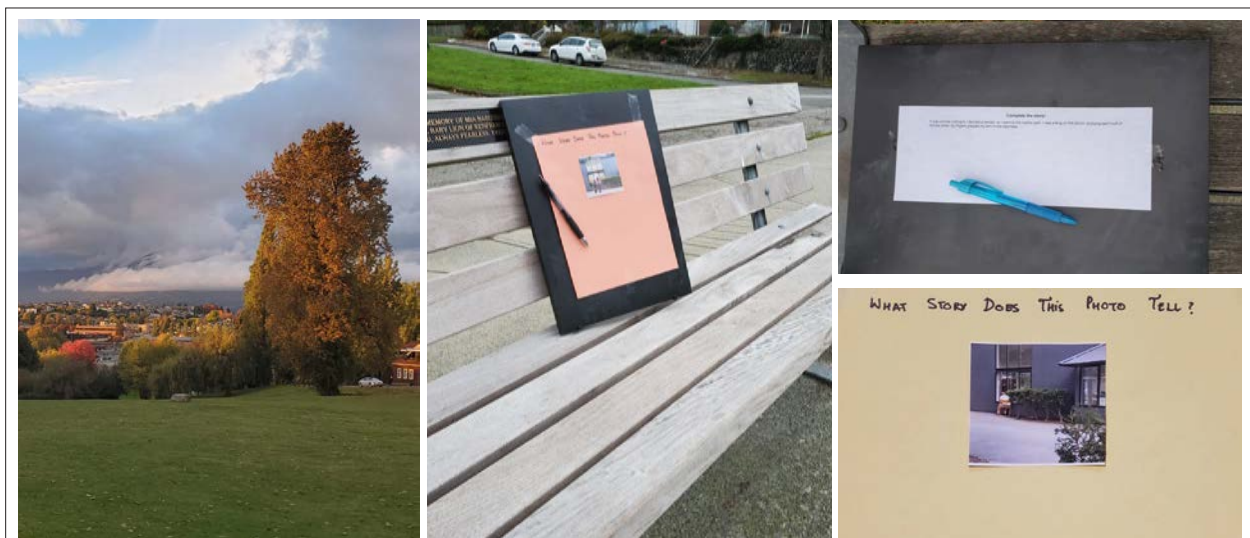


Figure 12. Probe for stories gathered through public prompts.





Many people participated and it was interesting to read their narratives about the interactions happening through windows. Many people saw the window as a symbol, that something desirable was happening on the other side. I had begun to see the window as a gateway to inclusion, as a symbol, and as an opportunity because it told of care and the need to connect with other human beings. These narratives (Figures 13-14) once again emphasized the importance of kindness in relational encounters. Caring about others, treating others with respect and warmth, and considering others' feelings are the small acts of kindness that strengthen the relational encounters.

I looked into the ancient Japanese storytelling that is gradually being revived and used in many schools and nursing homes. This is called Kamisbhai, from kami, meaning paper and

shibai, meaning play or theatre (Enjelvin, 2021). Kamishibai is a group activity – a shared experience. Storytellers engage their audience, eliciting reactions and answers from the community. Kamishibai was known as an easy way to educate children and grown-ups who could not read or write.

I further delved into the *narrative environments*. Ponticelli (2014), in his project, explains spatial narratives as an immersive storytelling experience where the audience can physically, emotionally, and intellectually participate in the storytelling world. This is in contrast to reading a book or watching a screen which always keeps one outside the story.

Allan Parsons in *Narrative Environments: How Do They Matter?* (2009) explains, “‘Narrative’ and ‘environment’ could be seen as two ends of a single spectrum” (p. 1). At the narrative end, the world is overwhelmed by culture, with order formed through material cultural artifacts. At the environment end, the world remains in its presumed innocent, normal, and/or wild state beyond cultural order.

Design for narrative environments is also a social innovation strategy in that it can highlight social issues and bring communities together (DESI: Our Vision, n.d.). This project can contribute towards bringing the community together through social innovation and storytelling. Ezio Manzini (2014) in *Making Things Happen: Social Innovation and Design* defines Social innovation as a “process of change emerging from the creative recombination of existing assets (from social capital to historical heritage, from traditional craftsmanship to accessible advanced technology), [where] the aim is to achieve socially recognized goals in a new way”. (p.1) A shared storytelling experience can generate new narratives where the families, friends, and fellow community members feel included and connected to each other. Narrative environments are no longer confined to the museums. As I describe below, designers are using these mobile exhibition spaces and installations in order to shed light on the socio-ecological issues and start a dialogue among people.

Apart from talking about social issues, a narrative environment creates an opportunity for people to weave their own stories, leaving behind good narratives and taking with them the memories they would cherish for many more years to come. The important aspect of a narrative environment is the creation of a comfort zone for people to immerse in and freely engage with others.

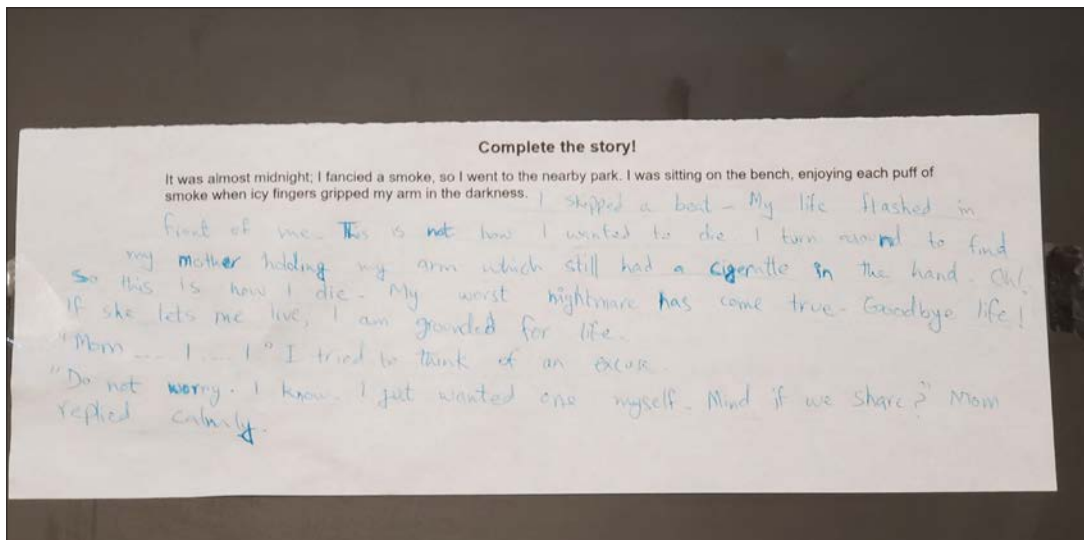


Figure 14. Stories gathered through public prompts.

I selected the examples below as inspiring representations of narrative environments. These diverse environments illuminate how the environment and space provide an immersive experience for weaving new stories and unconsciously (or consciously) making new bonds with fellow beings. The first example is Ocean Confessional, which demonstrates how a defined space within the site is used as a non-judgmental place for openly talking about ecological issues. The second example is the Vietnam War Memorial in New York, a narrative environment that is kept alive not just by loved ones but by a wide variety of visitors. The third example is a holy place to offer prayers for the fulfillment of wishes and to spread kindness. Many people are brought together by faith and leave with new bonds formed by their mutual wishes and prayers. The last example in the group is puppetry, a form of storytelling that is similar to kamishabai. Like Kamishabi, puppetry brings an audience together, ranging from kids to adults, to participate in the stories. These examples show the diverse potential of narrative environments for an immersive storytelling experience.

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## Ocean Confessional

“Ocean Confessional is a public ceremony where passersby are invited to reconsider their relationship with the ocean. With the ocean acting as confessor, participants can express and seek forgiveness of past and present environmental transgressions” (Fung, Shamsher, Kristiansen, 2016, as cited Bongino, 2019).

In the spring of 2016, design students from Emily Carr University, Pete Fung, Samein Shamsher, and Hjalmar Kristiansen, in collaboration with Living Oceans Society, and the False Creek Harbor Authority, were asked to examine how the conceptual tools and processes of design for narrative environments could be used to explore issues around local fisheries, industrial practices, and sustainability (Fung et al., 2016). The designers used probes to research different ways to generate conversations among the public about ecological sustainability and the implications of their personal actions on the ocean. They developed a non-judgmental ritual of writing confessions to the ocean on dissolvable paper (Figures. 15-16). The details of the defined space like the signage, painted ground plane, and water-soluble paper invited the public to come, explore and engage. Observers became part of the story while witnessing the paper dissolving when dropped in the ocean.



Images retrieved from <https://www.behance.net/gallery/89759505/Ocean-Confessional>

*Figure 15. The Site of Ocean Confessional.*

*Figure 16. Two men writing their confessions for the ocean.*

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## Vietnam War Memorial

Vietnam War Memorial honors the US army men and women who served, died, and went missing in the controversial Vietnam War from 1955 to 1975. It consists of The Three Soldiers statue, The Vietnam Women's Memorial, and the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Wall (Figures 17-18), which is by far the most popular attraction. Design by the architect Maya Lin in 1982, the wall is made of black granite that is approximately 247 feet long and features 58000 names. The names are listed in chronological order based on the date of the casualty, and within each day, names are shown in alphabetical order (Vietnam Veterans Memorial, 2017). Using chronological order instead of alphabetical order unfolds the events of history gives more meaning and respect to the fallen heroes. They are not mere names listed in a dictionary alphabetically; they are known in time.

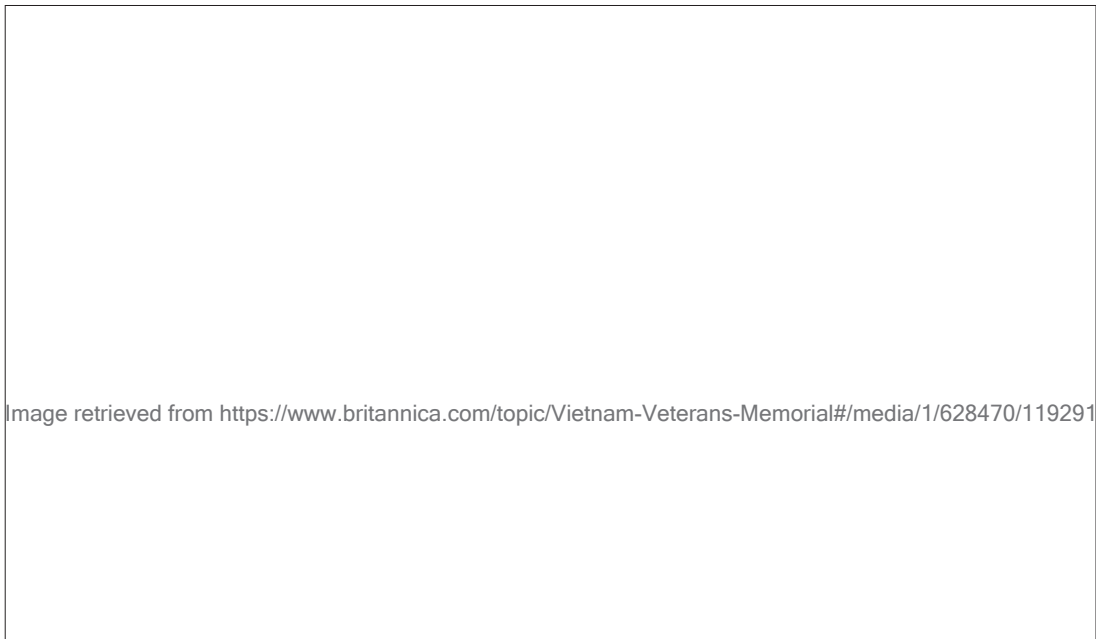


Image retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vietnam-Veterans-Memorial#/media/1/628470/119291>

*Figure 17. Maya Lin: Vietnam Veterans Memorial*



Image retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Vietnam-Veterans-Memorial#/media/1/628470/227226>

*Figure 18. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.*

One of the most defining characteristics of the wall is the ability of a visitor to see his or her reflection at the same time as the engraved names, connecting the past and the present. (Visiting the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, n.d.). I have never been to this memorial, but I think it would be an immersive experience to place your hands or fingers across the names on the wall regardless of if you know these heroes or not. These heroes have been kept alive and remembered after five decades by their families, fellow countrymen, and tourists.

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## Shrines of Pakistan

Pakistan is home to a number of celebrated shrines dating back to the 10th century. Shah Rukhne Alam, Data Ganj Baksh (Ali Hajvery), and Bibi Pak Daman (Chaste Lady) are only a few of these. Every day at a shrine is celebrated like a festival. On the death anniversary of Sufi saints, locally called Urs, the festivities are quadrupled and celebrated with zeal and zest. The shrines are decorated with lights and people visit from all over Pakistan.

People light candles, incense, and *diyas*- oil lamps made from clay. Food is donated for the poor; Sufi dance and music are played for hours. Several people with wishes tie threads around the grave guard and sacred tree trunk for the fulfillment of their wishes (Figures 19-22). As love padlocks are famous in Pont des Arts in Paris, many devotees put wish locks around the railings and grave guards in the shrine (Tariq, 2018). Once their wish is fulfilled, they come back to unlock it and donate money or food to the poor people.

Once, I was at Bibi Pak Daman's Shrine, where another girl had come to pray. She had been trying to have a baby for a long time. She loudly requested that everyone present make a mutual prayer for her. And I saw all the women and men raising their hands and praying together for her. It was an extraordinary moment, seeing everyone leaving their own worries behind and praying, some tying the thread on the grave guard, with a full conviction for a total stranger. It is a supreme gesture of goodwill among the people. Moments like these keep reminding me the world is full of kind-hearted and caring people, and I should never forget to follow in their footsteps.

Image retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/11506322>

*Figure 19. Man pours oil in clay lamps at the shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh, which is decorated with lights.*



*Figure 20. Mannat Dhaaga- Wish Threads at Shah Rukhne Alam, Multan, Pakistan.*

Image retrieved from <https://www.charcoalgravel.com/bibi-pak-daman/amp/>

*Figure 22. Wish Locks, Bibi Pak Daman, Lahore, Pakistan.*

Image retrieved from <https://www.dawn.com/news/11506322>

*Figure 21. Devotee whirls as he beats drums while another hangs from his back to balance their weight, at the shrine of Sufi Saint Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore.*



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## Puppetry

Puppetry is a form of storytelling that involves puppets, which are animated or manipulated by the human puppeteer. It is similar to Kamishabai, except instead of paper printed with images, puppets, stick puppets, marionettes are used to perform the stories. It is used for entertainment as well as to educate about social and moral issues. It is equally popular among children and adults.

In Pakistan, this is called *Kathputli*. Katha means “story,” and putli means Puppet or *Putli-tamasha*, and Tamasha means show. It dates back to the Indus Valley Civilization around 3000bc. (Mahmood, 2018) It is a dying art, but Rafi Peer Cultural Center has built a puppet theater and museum to promote and revive the art.



Image retrieved from <http://www.rafipeer.com/rafipeer-theatre-workshop/festivals/folk-puppet-festivals/>

*Figure 23. Puppets displayed at Rafi Peer Cultural Center, Lahore, Pakistan*

Images retrieved from <http://www.rafipeer.com/rafipeer-theatre-workshop/festivals/folk-puppet-festivals>

*Figure 24. Folk Puppet Festival, Pakistan.*

Image retrieved from <https://tokyobling.wordpress.com/2014/08/15/kamishibai-and-the-first-superhero-street-storytelling/>

*Figure 25. Kamishibai and the first Superhero – Street Storytelling.*

It is also performed as kamishibai on the streets by many puppeteers. This becomes an informal theater on wheels where the audience can also use their vivid imaginations to participate to enhance the story. An inspiring aspect of this form is that it can be performed anywhere, out in the streets, in the parking lots, or in the subway station. A few minutes of performance creates memories. This kind of shared storytelling experience among people is something I was looking forward to creating.

As Gatt and Ingold (2013) state, design does not transform the world rather it is part of the world transforming itself. “Due to varieties of story, narrative environments impel, pervade and mediate our understandings of our everyday, experiential worlds” (Parsons, 2009). These examples of narrative environments entwine narratives and experiences so that people become part of the stories. They inspire me to create environments where people can come to create their own stories with their families and friends and leave with many more precious stories.

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## *Khirki* Theater Design

This project has been focused on the context of restricted physical engagement due to covid-19. The limited engagement among people and loved ones has been challenging for many. At times like these, I noticed how small moments of interactions through the windows of loved one's homes, care homes, and hospitals offered relief to people who were struggling to connect with family and other members of the community. I observed, witnessed, and gathered many different stories where people were singing, playing an instrument, or reading a book to their loved ones using the window as a channel for communication. As I mentioned earlier, windows have become a metaphor for these precious interactions.

My final design outcome started out as a portable theater box (appendix 1) which later evolved into an experimental piece of design called *Khirki*. It means Window in Urdu. The outcome plays with the image of the window and invites a theatrical experience where everyone can come and tell their stories, have conversations and perhaps sing a song. *Khirki* is a representation of an emotional time. It is an invitation to come, sit and tell your stories.



Figure 26. *Khirki* Theater Renderings.



Figure 27. Inside & Outside of Khirki.

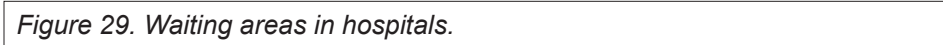
The concept takes inspiration from the relationship of the speaker to the audience in times of covid-19 restrictions. The window is opening the interior to the outside. It is inviting the outside to look inside. This project flips the typical positioning of speaker and audience. The person on the outside is the speaker, implying that anyone can speak. The speaker's position or chair, is there for anyone who feels impelled to tell their story to those who are "inside".

I believe the renegotiation of relational encounters that was needed during covid-19, lead to windows becoming an emotionally charged symbol. I didn't want a window to only serve as a symbol. I decontextualized the window so that it carries both old meanings and acquire new meanings as we progress by accepting new stories, visits and performances from anybody making it 'every person's theater.'



Figure 28. Interactions happening through Khirk.

The transient environment created by this theater can convert ordinary places into active and lively spaces for a limited period at a time and leave behind memories and stories. It can spread kindness, bring a smile to someone's face and provide a meaningful new environment for relational encounters, especially in the challenging times of covid-19.



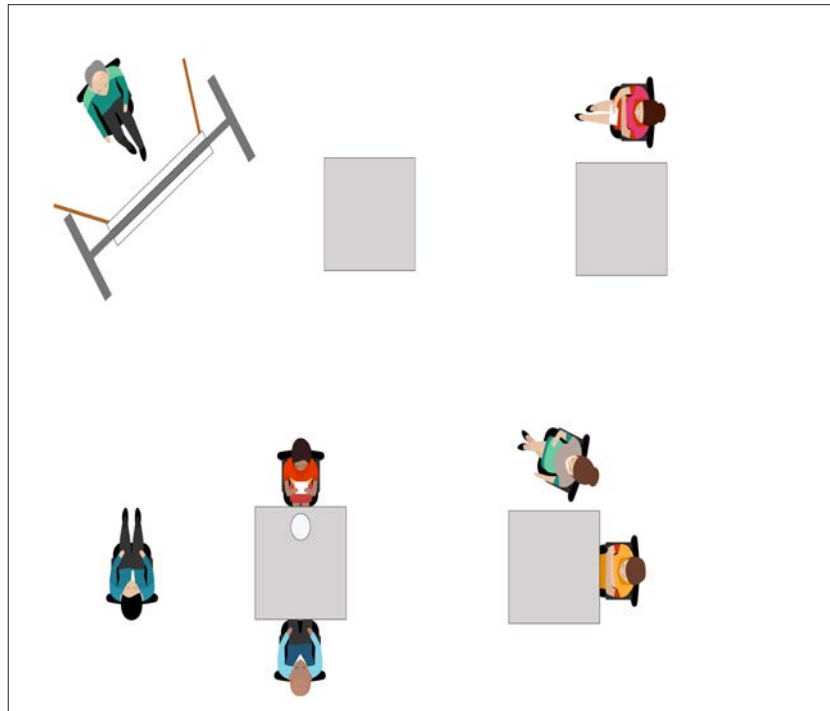


Figure 30. Common room of care homes.

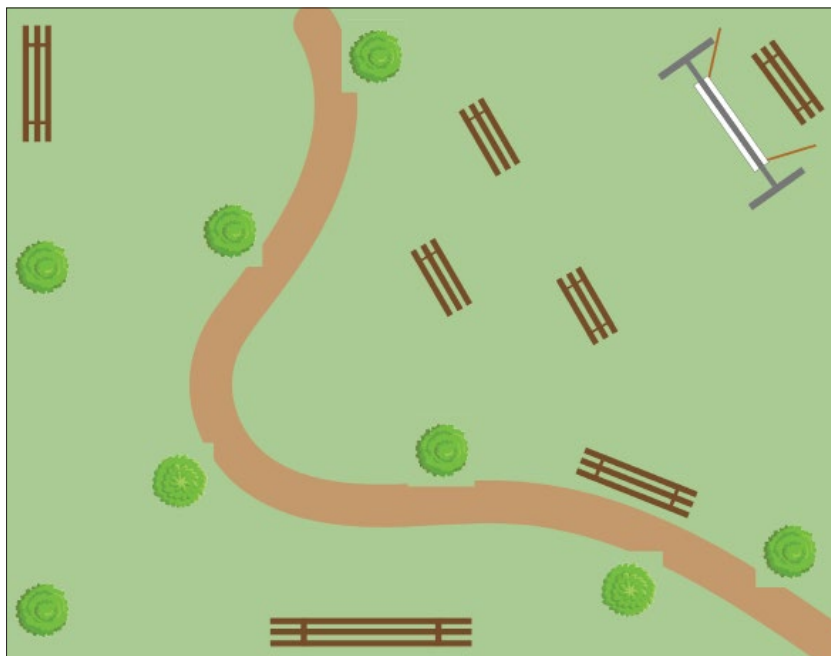


Figure 31. Occasional Event outside in a park

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## The Designer's Role

This thesis provided me with an opportunity to explore and reflect on the role a designer plays in creating and supporting an interrelated community. It began as an exploration in the socially distanced context of the covid-19 pandemic. I observed the powerful need for connection and storytelling and understood that this need could be alleviated through brief relational encounters. The art of story collecting, storytelling, and story-generating is central to the collaborative creative environment I have designed. It is a small initiative within a local community. As the DESIS Network (2019) explains, if a small initiative meets favorable conditions, these small and local inventions can be scaled out, and the working models can be replicated. This proposed narrative environment is easy to make, and can be replicated in different places such as parking lots, parks, hospitals and care homes.

Space and storytelling can potentially allow diverse interpretations and perspectives to influence how the proposed environment at different locations is approached. The narrative environment gives people the freedom to engage with space as they deem suitable. The active participation in the spatial narratives can illuminate the care and concern that is embedded in a community.



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## Reflection

I joined Emily Carr University with the conviction that I would not use my former linear, methodical practices; instead, I would embrace a diverse range of methods design has to offer. My ambition came with its own sets of challenges, ambiguities, and chaos. Now that I am almost finished with my thesis, I can more easily reflect and voice the fears and concerns I had during the course of my degree. Initially, I had planned on working on sustainable food packaging, but due to the coronavirus pandemic, the direction of my research shifted altogether.

At the time of deciding the new thesis trajectory, we were already a month in the lockdown. Everything was changing. There was uncertainty in routines, culture, and social behaviors. It seemed timely and worthwhile to observe the changing dynamics of relationships among families, friends, and fellow community members. The journey of my thesis has been an eventful ride. Most of the time, the drifting and uncertainty were liberating; other times, I was afraid to question the validity of my thesis out loud, even to myself. I was conflicted, morally and ethically, about questioning the duration of this pandemic. What if it was not as severe as the media was portraying it to be? What would happen if it disappeared within two or four or six months? Would my thesis still be relevant?

The journey helped me to grow as a designer. I was able to discover the complicated relationship between the designer and the community. I am no longer afraid to understand my own limits as a designer or the parameters of this project (or a project in the future). From my discussions with peers and faculty members, and my learning in the span of two years, I realized that design does not necessarily need to lead to a solution. It can prompt dialogues, debates, and conversations about issues. The project does not necessarily come with an expiration date once it reaches its last stage, mostly termed as 'Final Product'. The work continues.

It took me time to realize that my aim was not to offer a solution to a global pandemic, but to offer a step towards initiating a dialogue about evolving relational encounters in this new context. I attempted to generate design for an easy-to-make narrative environment where families, friends, and fellow community members can come together and weave new stories

together. It was about appreciating and acknowledging these small yet equally precious moments spent with loved ones.

The journey taught me that care and nurture should not be primarily regarded as feminine or woman centered. There is a common misunderstanding that women are more empathetic, compassionate, and caring in comparison to men. Rose Marie Tong (2009), a feminist philosopher, argues that establishing that women are “naturally caring” devalues the whole essence of care. It should be considered a human trait, developed and nurtured in both men and women. The fathers concerned for their kid’s health, husbands looking after their wives, and the man sitting outside the care home reading are examples that prove men, like women, also have empathy, compassion, and care. Care, empathy, compassion, and kindness are human characteristics and are not defined by a specific gender. This project has taught me the humanist notion of care.

My own insights about how I care have changed. It does not revolve around looking after a loved one only. I realized that care includes respecting other people, listening to them, and reaching out to those who are too shy to ask for help. It is about praying for everyone’s safety before going to bed at night. In covid-19, it is about protecting vulnerable community members by maintaining safe distance from others. Sometimes, care is disguised as responsibility.

As time progresses, relational encounters will continue to evolve, as dictated by the requirements of the pandemic and post-pandemic world. I hope my work contributes to bringing communities together.

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## Epilogue

After a year, I was finally able to go back to my family in Pakistan during the Christmas break of 2020. Spending time with my family was therapeutic. It offered me a well-deserved break from the depressing isolation I was experiencing in Canada. It validated my speculations about the importance of relational encounters with family, friends, and other members of the community. I appreciated and cherished every moment spent with my family. I returned to Canada happy and content because I had spent three amazing weeks with my family. It was not the same, though. We maintained a distance; I did not hug until I got tested for covid-19, and the result came back negative; we did not share food from each other's plates as my siblings were still going to their respective offices. But it was enough that we were in proximity. I was so happy being under the same roof.

The way my mum greeted me at the entrance door of my home is etched in my mind (Figure 30). I painted it to preserve the moment. Every day, I look at it and count the days until I go back, and she greets me again in the same way.



Figure 32. My Mum.

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## Appendix 1

### Initial Design Proposal of Portable Theater Design

My final design outcome is like a portable theater box called *Khirki*, which means window in Urdu. It is inspired by kamishabai and puppetry, where the storyteller and the audience can use different props such as stick puppets, marionettes, and shadow puppetry to create an intertwined new story. The size of the box is approximately 20" by 15". The back is detachable so that the person performing can stand behind it. It also creates a safety barrier and resembles the interactions through the windows. This is one of the reasons why it is called *Khirki* and resembles one too.

There will be different levels of engagement between the storyteller and the audience. In level one, due to necessary social distancing, people from the audience can call out the ideas, and the storyteller can perform them. In level two, as social distancing eases, people can take turns to narrate or perform a story. In level three, when it is safe to sit together in close proximity among strangers, people can also create their own props and puppets according to their stories and perform them.

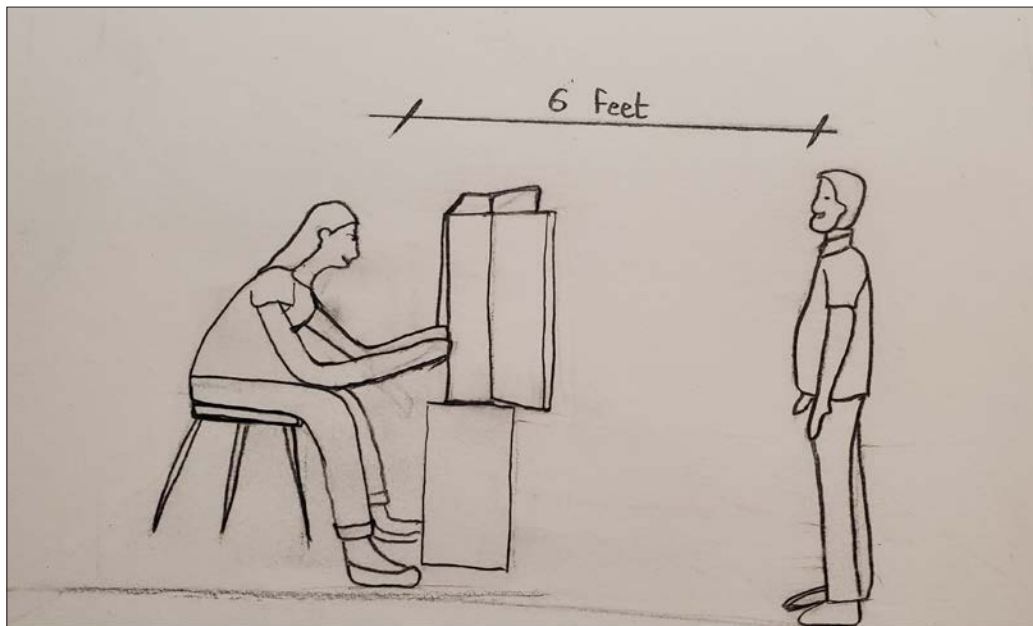


Figure 33. *Khirki*, maintaining six feet distance.

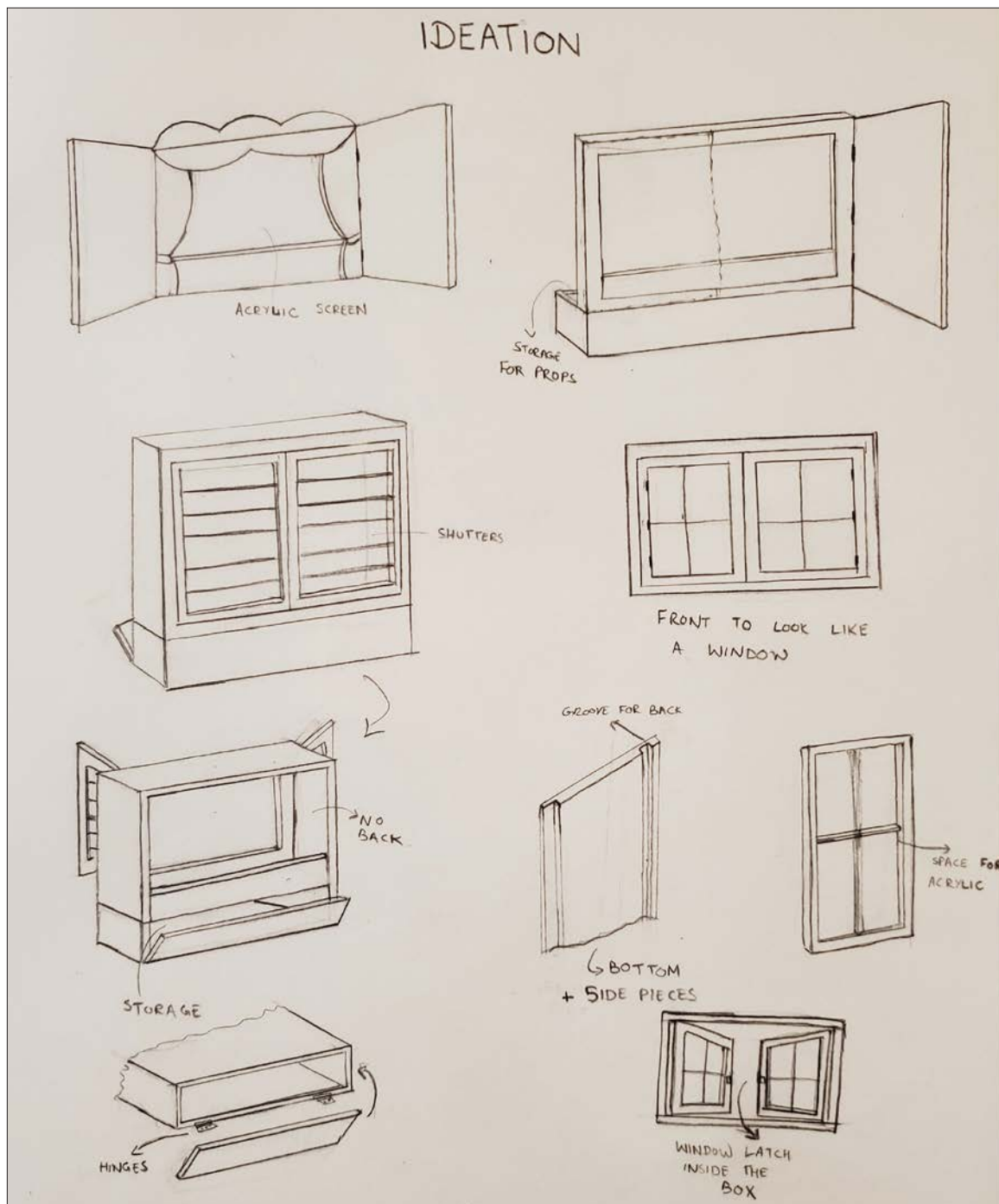


Figure 34. Khirki, sketches.

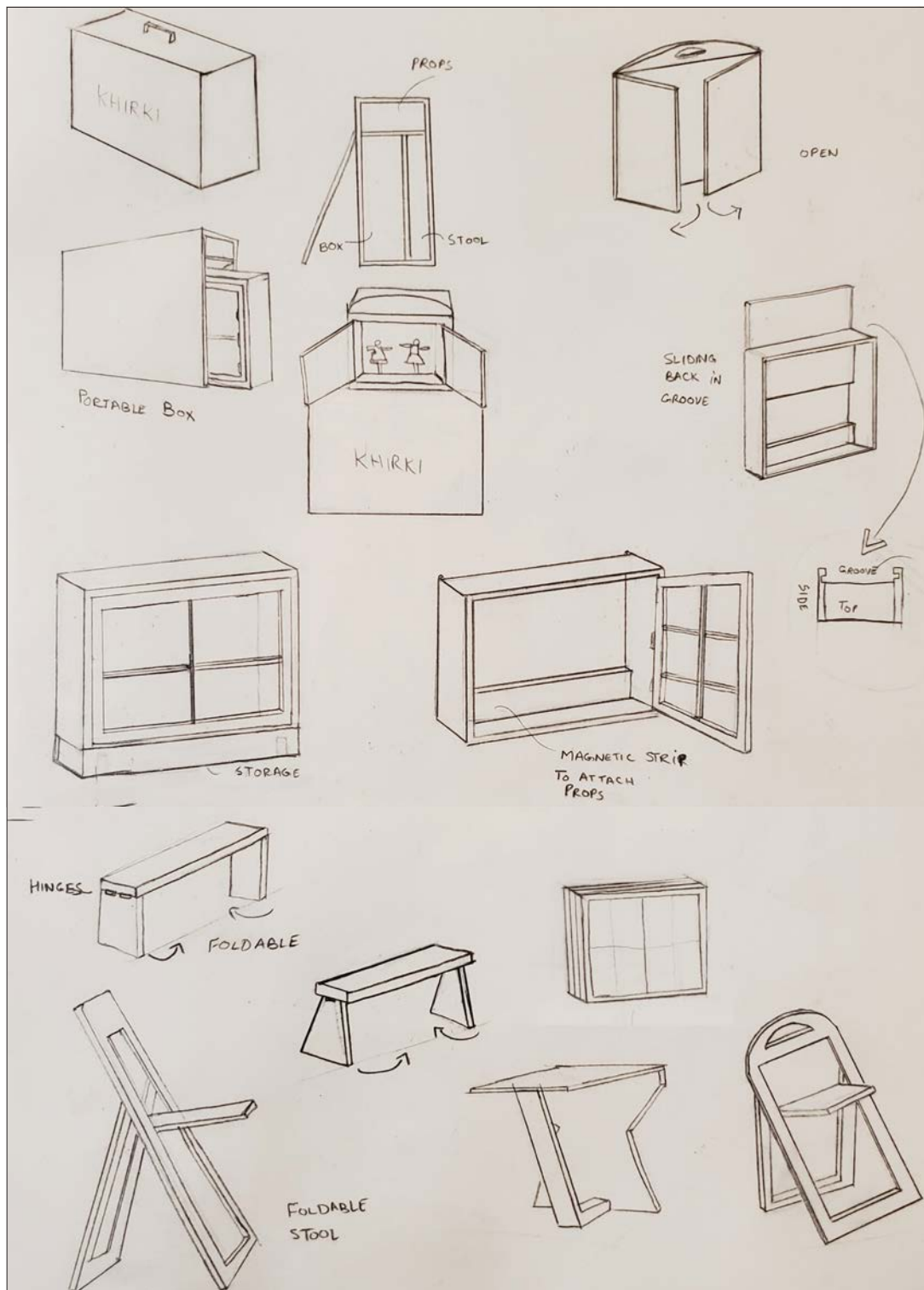


Figure 35. Khirki, sketches.

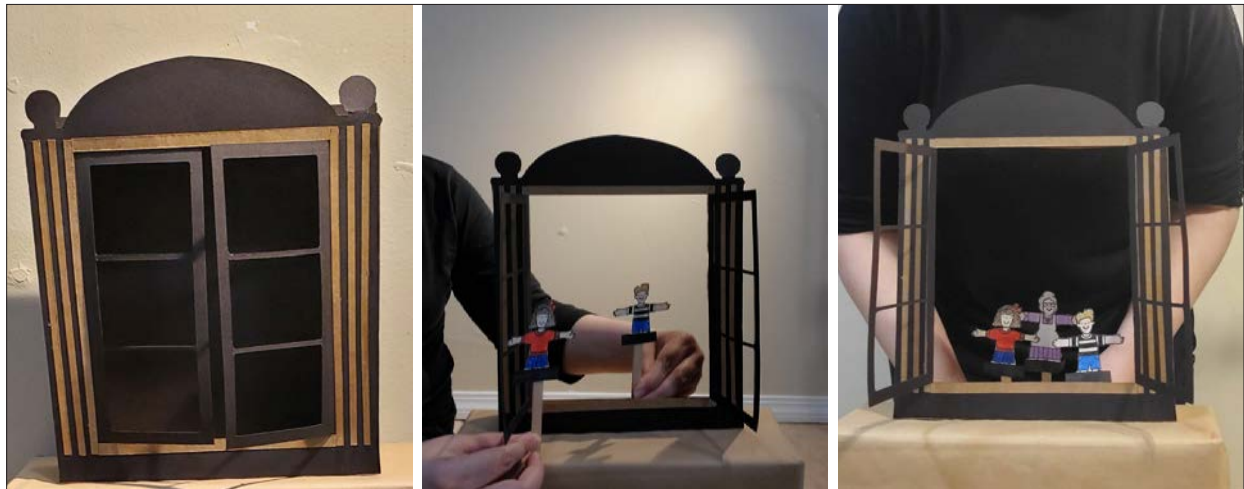


Figure 36 . Storytelling in Khirki with different props.



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## Appendix 2

### Stills from Video 1



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## Appendix 2

### Stills from Video 2



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## Appendix 2

### Stills from Video 3





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**Thank You.**