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A Wellness Curriculum from Santiago Baca's A Place to Stand

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A Wellness Curriculum from Santiago Baca's A Place to Stand

Cover Page Footnote

This article is dedicated to Sachiko-San. Many thanks to my mentor, Dr. Granville Ganter.

A Wellness Curriculum from Santiago Baca's *A Place to Stand*
by Peggy Suzuki

Introduction

Current wellness theory emphasizes the great importance of reducing toxicity, coupled with the yield of art and play to stimulate learning. Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir, *A Place to Stand*, illustrates both the negative consequences of toxic environs, as well as vivid illustrations of some pathways out. As artists like Beth Campbell have shown, Baca's memoir credits art as part of his educational opportunity, an insight often missed when the range of wellness is discussed, and this can foster the best education.

This article will demonstrate how to engage with art and wellness in its analysis of Jimmy Santiago Baca's memoir, *A Place to Stand*. I view Baca's memoir through the lens of Jamner and Stokols' work on preventative behavior and reducing toxicity in the life domains of home, social settings, commute, and education. Further, this article will connect the exploration of Beth Campbell's artwork, *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* as a model for generating conscious actions. Thus, the embodiment of positive holistic growth through art is a method for wellness to thrive.

Art as a Means of Communication

The act of creation/creating something is fundamental towards developing ownership and deepening one's ever-growing identity and sense of self. The neuroscience behind introducing and sustaining art practices shows how art physically creates highways in the brain. It is also an opportunity to envision more choices than was previously considered. Countless artistic connections could be made through music, dance, design, narrative, and other forms of arts-based research. Arts-Based Research is the embodiment of ideas that are expanded in non-traditional methods to "give voice to that which cannot be communicated or completely known through words or logic."¹ Art opens doors to healing and for thinking creatively about larger problems and solutions.

Situating the Problem

I have heard countless stories concerning anxiety issues from students. I discovered the pattern was largely complicated because students felt ill equipped to keep up with the demands placed on them in college. I wanted to know how and why the pressures of the world were escalating so much that people who were seemingly together were falling apart and what could be done about it. My students' continual struggles to juggle life and college forecasted deeper issues that needed uncovering and addressing. One of these students was shunned by his family for being blind because they viewed his blindness as an uncontrollable human flaw which meant that he was "less than." I had another student who narrowly escaped a drunken car ride with her alcoholic father. Many of

my students relayed living between borders and being treated as though they were dumb by their teachers and peers because they couldn't speak or write English and have since lived with that stigma. Additionally, students are now working longer hours while they attend school full-time and this has caused attendance issues, inability to hand in assignments on time, and possibly not completing a course. I found these outcomes problematic and wanted to know why.

One reason offered by Daniel Lerner and Dr. Alan Schlecter, the professors of NYU's most popular elective, "The Science of Happiness," is that one out of every two people faces mental issues in their lifetimes which peaks in college when students are learning to balance academic, financial, social, and health-related demands independently.² Lerner and Schlecter's findings show how the seeds for illness are caused from becoming overwhelmed at juggling life's newfound responsibilities and the pressures of academia all at once.

As Lerner and Schlecter explain in *UThrive*, "Happiness, friendship, and doing something you love" are part of what makes us thrive, so identifying and building in these areas develops "well-being."³ What is essential to note here is that by developing the whole student, such as with exploration of art and wellness classwork, not only do student retention rates go up, but whole communities are lifted. In *Doing Well and Doing Good by Doing Art: a 12-Year National Study of Education in the Visual and Performing Arts: Effects on the Achievements and Values of Young Adults*, James S. Catterall's definitive study proves how students benefit from experiencing the arts by providing data on their life and work after having graduated from college. As a result, the measures in this study show how these students are more motivated and engaged, have higher achievement levels, and have actively participated more as volunteers and in the political arena.⁴ If students feel undervalued, or the work is uninteresting, or they feel overwhelmed, they lose interest. By making readings, such as Baca's memoir, and other coursework more relevant to students' health and immediate interests, students will be more motivated and their identities will be validated in a positive way, which will make them healthier. Baca's work is a memoir about being inspired by art and is an inspiration in itself.

Health, Wellness, Life Domains, Prevention and Positive Thinking

Examining health is more than just the construction of social, behavioral, organ, cellular, and molecular formation. Health also refers to environmental influences.⁵ Moreover, health is a systemic race, class, and gender issue. Poorer communities have less access to quality health.⁶ In order to counter health related issues, it is important to consider what wellness means. Wellness consists of one's emotional, social, spiritual, physical, intellectual, vocational, and environmental health.⁷ Authors of *Promoting Human Wellness: New Frontiers for Research, Practice, and Policy*, editors, Jamner and Stokols demonstrate how targeting preventative care towards reshaping individual outlooks and actions pinpoints the root of health-related issues and well-being.⁸ The means towards their suggested

prevention is to “Reduce toxicity in physical settings” and build attention towards “Life domains” in order to change current conditions as they exist.⁹

Life domains refer to environmental places where people spend their time, the activities that take place, and the social circles involved, “such as family, education, spiritual settings, recreation, employment, and commuting.”¹⁰ A comprehensive look considers crucial life domains in specific time periods and one’s sociocultural relations, and resources for a clearer assessment of that person’s overall health and well-being.¹¹ Thus, it is crucial to analyze the varying specific factors in a person’s environment that contributes to his/her behavior for preventative measures to take place.¹²

Knowledge is now available for more people, but social class leads to poorer health.¹³ Companies specifically target low-income people for pushing unhealthy products like cigarettes and junk food.¹⁴ Lack of education, lack of affordability, lack of accessibility, and lack of accountability are ways of keeping people down rather than uplifting them, explain Jamner and Stokols.¹⁵ Moreover, they claim that, “We live in an era in which the dominant causes of morbidity and mortality are strongly linked to human behavior at the individual, community, and government levels.”¹⁶ Therefore, these researchers posit that “changing the social and cultural environments in which people live” can help influence “individual knowledge and attitudes” by addressing these problems.¹⁷

On the upside, there is a correlation between thinking positively, feeling good, and having good health. Ashmore and Contrada connect the relevance of psychological outlook in terms of how it impacts physiological results.¹⁸ A person’s outlook matches his or her response towards illness and healing. This means that if a person has a negative outlook, he or she is more prone towards greater illness.¹⁹ The premise of the studies in Ashmore and Contrada’s book, *Self, Social Identity, and Physical Health: Interdisciplinary Explorations* is focused on how the self can steer the course of health in saying, “We think self and identity related constructs can contribute to the understanding of causal processes that underlie physical disease as well as those instigated by its occurrence.”²⁰

How to Approach Self-Care through Literary Analysis of *A Place to Stand*

Thus, I was searching for a way for my students to explore their voices in a healthier, more authentically grounded way for developing themselves through their writing. Since there is a direct link between wellness and creativity, art is a viable means to redirect thinking outside the box for this overhaul. The projected outcome will result in preventative care, better overall health, higher mortality, better and more fulfilling jobs, increased positivity and happiness, higher student retention rates, stronger economy, and more racial equity.

I redesigned my classes as safe spaces to help students connect with their identities because it helps them to negotiate the challenges they are

faced with in relation to their health. In doing this, I found that students were more motivated to learn since the work was tapping into themselves for issues they were concerned about. The process was largely discovery based in nature through the analysis of the texts read in class and in the application of art and wellness practices. As a primary literary example, my students and I explored the riveting memoir, *A Place to Stand* by Jimmy Santiago-Baca as a soul building Launchpad. Baca was able to transcend impossible racial odds through his determination to learn and reshape his life in every aspect with intelligence, humor, and poetry. By viewing Baca's memoir in terms of positive reactivity in the face of extreme illness, what is revealed is how one can re-imagine art and hope through Baca's perspective and how, because identity and health are interconnected, one can connect on a deeper level with identity.

Baca's story is a surprising literacy narrative that shares raw emotions of a person who is marginalized, abandoned, and treated unjustly throughout his childhood. Despite his longing for community and being among friends he thought he could trust, he is set up and is wrongly accused in a drug deal. He serves five years in Florence, a maximum security prison in Arizona. Baca says, "Life in prison had killed a part of me."²¹ Throughout this ordeal, he has to choose alliances to survive and endures prejudice and unfair treatment. Because he can fight and does so while he is in jail, he spends much of his sentence in solitary confinement, where he relives his past memories and recreates his future through his determination to become literate in his rich imaginative artistic expression. Literacy, art, and connection to others who are positive literally rescues Baca. Baca says, "I can't describe how words electrified me. I could smell and taste and see their images vividly. I found myself waking up at 4 A.M. to reread a word or copy a definition."²² The pedagogical model for Baca examined through the framework of life domains can be correlated with Campbell's artwork as a means to accentuate the development of student identity and motivation and can bring student health and wellness into focus.

Overview: Analyzing Baca's Life Domains

Home Life Domain

One aspect of Baca's memoir is the importance of environmental wellness of life domains as seen in Jamner and Stokol's work, *Promoting Human Wellness: New Frontiers for Research, Practice, and Policy*. Life domains are described as environmental locations, such as home, social settings, recreation, commute, and education.²³ Baca's home domain, is completely unsafe and unstable. There are three strikes against Baca's home life which are poverty, addiction, and skin color. Towards the beginning of the memoir Baca explains how part of his disconnection developed in saying, "My father always wore a pained expression and kept his head down, as if he couldn't shake what was bothering him. He snapped irritably at the slightest infraction of his rules and argued continuously with Mother. He drank every day and she sank deeper into sadness and anger."²⁴ Although Baca had to carve out his identity alone,

he was influenced by the memories of his role model grandfather, witnessing addiction and experiencing neglect from his father, being unwanted and abandoned by his mother, and being separated from his siblings. Baca's final abandonment comes when "Little did I know that my mother had eloped to San Francisco with Richard, fleeing into a white world as 'Sheila,' where she could deny her past, hide her identity, and lie about her cultural heritage."²⁵ His identity was continually stripped from him. Baca says, "except for my immediate family, I had loved him [his grandfather] the most."²⁶

Baca was stamped with the message inferiority because of his non-white skin color translated to unworthiness. He was denied and abandoned because of this stigma. How could he possibly form a healthy self-image in the face of constant denial and neglect? Despite the odds against him, Baca says that, "Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me; it was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past, even to wring from it some compelling truths, and it opened the way toward a future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement and a belief that I belonged."²⁷ Seeing his father in prison at an early age foreshadowed his own ghostly apparition for his future solitary confined prison home would be in a few years' time. Home meant broken and separated. Home meant confusion. Home meant he had to figure things out alone. Home meant denial of parole and being cheated out of opportunities and being treated unfairly because there were no rights in prison. Home meant that his identity was flawed because of his skin color. Racist beliefs shaped the narrative of failure for his family and his community. Baca, however refused the denial his mother had about who she was and where she came from, in saying, "I'd rather live on the streets and keep my loyalty, my memories and stories, than take on the gringo's way of living, which tried to make me forget where I came from, and sometimes even put down my culture and ridiculed my grandparents as lazy foreigners."²⁸

His ties to family were thwarted. As a child, he was virtually powerless. He was shuffled to his grandparents' house until his grandfather passed away. Then he was shuffled to his alcoholic father's house and then into the juvenile system. His identity was strongly formed because he had to stand up to bullies at an early age. He was an outcast in school and did not understand much of what was being taught. He wanted to be with his brother, but they were separated. Baca says, "My brother and I were alone in the world. I was fifteen and he was sixteen and we were accountable to no one."²⁹ Later, when Baca saw a photograph of himself in prison, he says, "I hardly recognized myself. I was almost twenty-five years old, and the three-plus years I had done in prison showed on my features - I had an impenetrable indifference, an impudent disdain. My brown eyes were antagonistic, my stance confrontational. I couldn't send it to anyone - it was too disturbing. You could see the anger in my face. But it would serve as a reminder to me to fight against what prison was doing."³⁰ Baca lacked human relations. No one was there to

support or encourage him. Community was largely absent for Baca until it is reintroduced in prison.

To reduce home toxicity and loss, Baca fought for his rights physically, mentally, emotionally, and spiritually. He fought off bullies. He won friends by fighting. He attracted his girlfriend because he was admired for his fighting. He defended himself in prison by fighting. But he changed his physical fighting for mental fighting. He fought to earn his right to a GED in prison. This right was denied, and yet, Baca was still able to teach himself how to read. He made connections with others. He explored possibilities for his writing. He created his own new identity from his memories because he felt everything deeply. He sought peace from his family and with his father's death. He held onto his roots in saying, "I may have been a criminal in society's eyes, but privately, to honor my father's memory, I vowed never to let them break me to honor his memory, I would never let them take my pride from me, never give them the pleasure of seeing me beg for mercy."³¹ He came to recognize the multigenerational oppression that bound he and his ancestors together, but consciously chose to honor his cultural roots. He taught his children a different worldview than he was taught that signified being proud of their roots.

Throughout the memoir, Baca's identity transformed from physical expression through anger to his physical expression in writing and love for learning. He was no longer fighting others, but was inventively wrestling with pen, paper, and art. He adjusted from the negative toxicity of loss and home to the positive of the spirit within. Baca's connection to self, hence home, was in prison when realized how his identity and health were connected through writing. He says, "I too was flourishing, my body physically affected by my words."³² Baca goes on, "Language was opening me up in ways I couldn't explain and I assumed it was part of the apprenticeship of a poet."³³ After getting out of prison, Baca was able to reconnect and forgive his mother and he was also able to reconnect with his brother. However, he tragically loses both of them. His mother is murdered by her husband and his brother gets clean, but reverts back to drinking and was murdered. But at the end of the novel, Baca was able to see past his parents' wrongs and was able to "forgive them [his parents] for what they had done or had not done. I forgave myself for all my mistakes and for all I had done to hurt others. I forgave the world for how it had treated us."³⁴ His home domain, identity grew from love.

Baca provided a masterful look at positive psychology because he reversed virtually every negative situation he experienced with a positive choice. Baca says, "I thought about how my life had these blank spaces, as if I were blindfolded and spun around in the dark, led on by a need to discover something to anchor me. Each time the blindfold was drawn away I found myself in new circumstances, a new place, drawn there not so much by any plan or disciplined effort as by an unconscious faith that fate would place me where I belonged, where things would go right."³⁵ Martin Seligman, the "father of positive psychology" explains how Positive Psychology is made up of creating positive relationships,

developing meaning, engagement, experiencing positive emotions, and having accomplishments.³⁶ Solitary confinement gave Baca the time to finally value himself. He became a published poet and built community by buying his cellblock ice cream to celebrate his success. Once Baca achieved literacy and was validated through his correspondences and published successes, he was self-assured that things would turn around for him. These examples show how wellness is dependent on how a person perceives how he/she is feeling and that optimism is truly able to offset illness as shown in Barbara L. Fredrickson's Broaden-and-Build Theory.³⁷ Moreover, having a positive outlook/happy people tend to be more successful than unhappy people. What makes them successful are the characteristics, mental health, and resources valued by others.³⁸

Social Settings Life Domain

Jamner and Stokols include a person's social settings life as a distinct environmental life domain. This consists places where a person socializes and who he/she socializes with in his/her spare time.³⁹ In viewing Baca's social settings life domain, his social life crept between the paradigm of his feelings of isolation and his acceptance through his ability to demonstrate rage. This stemmed from his inability to use language to express his abandonment, anger, frustration, and loss. The message that his community was unwelcome was constant. It was as though there were two realities in America. Baca says, "I'd begun to feel early on that the state and society at large considered me a stain on their illusion of a perfect America. In the American dream there weren't supposed to be children going hungry or sleeping under bridges. In me, the state- and society by extension- had yet another mouth to feed, another body to clothe. I felt like a nuisance; I suspected that if basic human decency didn't warrant it, society would gladly dismiss. Yet there were people like Coach Tracy and his family who went against the grain. And while I didn't want to hurt them and was willing to go along for a while, there was no way I could let myself be adopted into a white family."⁴⁰ Baca understood how his identity was invalidated by his community and this affected his wellbeing. The paradox was that fighting gained Baca acceptance, but fighting also isolated him from others. Numerous times this physical ability earned him a reputation with friends, inmates, and nearly helped him get adopted by the football coach, Coach Tracy. But Baca was unable to make this transitional leap into the dominant culture and way of being, despite the Coach Tracy and his family wanting to adopt him. While Coach Tracy had a kind heart and wanted to mentor Baca in life, it was also Baca's understanding of what he perceived as Coach Tracy's failure to recognize the impact that marginality, lack of confidence, and loss of opportunity for valuation meant for Baca. Baca says, "I didn't know why, I just wanted to go back [to the detention home]" and "I wasn't strong enough to admit that I felt worthless and was nothing but a troublemaker. I quit school the next day."⁴¹ Although Baca was unable to verbalize these deprivations at the time, the crevice of differences between the coach's family and Baca's life experience up until

this point in the memoir demonstrate how the dominant culture often makes assumptions that marginalized people relate to mainstream thinking as the primary view. However, this lack of awareness mirrors the ignorance of race difference that is continually perpetuated in America and pinpoints why this book needs to be a continued conversation among students and teachers.

Baca countered the toxicity of loss in of his past socialization in the social life domain experiences through his attempts with connecting with his girlfriends, Theresa and then Lonnie, his newfound friends he makes in prison, with the people who wrote to him and to whom he wrote, and in his attempts to reconnect with his family. Baca says of his wistful longing for Theresa, "The fire, the waves, and the moon made me with Theresa were with me."⁴² But Baca acknowledged his inability to connect in his relationships. "I didn't know how to nurture a friendship, let alone love. We really didn't have much in common except violence and drinking."⁴³ Baca says about his older brother, "At heart, Miego and I were both decent men, famished for affection and eager to live in a decent manner. And while I was slowly rebuilding my life with books and writing, Miego, on the other hand, was casting himself out into deeper and deeper isolation, into a place where I could not help him as I once did as a kid brother."⁴⁴ Unfortunately, Baca was unable to save his brother from despair.

Despite Baca's loss of connection with his brother, he was finding his identity through the friends he made in prison. Baca quoted his friend in prison who took him under his wing, Macaron, as saying, "Keep your mind on the present, forget about the streets and freedom, and things will work out."⁴⁵ Another friend in prison, Chelo, said to Baca, "Don't be so serious. Smile once and awhile, let go and be happy."⁴⁶ Chelo was a central figure for connecting Baca closer to his cultural roots. Chelo taught Baca "Chicano slang, Mexican/Indian words originating from Mayans, Olmecs, Aztecs. When combined, these words created our own distinct Chicano Language, a language truer to expressing and describing my experience."⁴⁷ Of Chelo's guiding influence, Baca says, "Chelo's stories made me think a lot. I couldn't answer him when he asked if I knew the primary cause of death among our people. 'Broken heart,' he said. The more I thought about it, the more it made me wonder whether my grandfather hadn't died of a broken heart. Certainly my father drank because of a broken heart. When their dreams had been crushed, when their prayers seemed never to be answered, when life seemed to chat them out of every glimmer of happiness, their hearts broke. And then alcoholism and despair set in."⁴⁸ Baca articulates and embraces the broken heart syndrome poetically in writing, "Healing Earthquakes" by seeing who he was in a "new context, with a deeper sense of responsibility and love for my people."⁴⁹

Thus, Baca realized how important his service for others was. "My pen and heart chronicle their hopes, doubts, regrets, loves, despairs, and dreams. I do this partly out of selfishness, because it helps to heal my own impermanence, my own despair. My role as witness is to give voice to the

voiceless and hope to the hopeless, of which I am one.”⁵⁰ As Baca was leaving prison he says, “I looked in the cells at my friends, all asleep; I felt for each of them. I wanted to take them all with me. All they needed was a little help. I felt again as I had felt at the orphanage when I ran away – a despairing, horrible sense of leaving so many human beings like myself with no resources to make their life better.”⁵¹ This recognition demonstrates what Matthew Lieberman and other fellow researchers refer to as “social cognitive neuroscience.”⁵² By utilizing fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging), they have been able to learn how people connect differently to the world around them in terms of their social network.⁵³ The main point is reiterated in multiple sources that people are literally “wired to connect” and these connections mirror our ancient ancestors. Lieberman posits that the brain reacts to physical and social events similarly and this was demonstrated in Baca’s reactions to events related to performing because of social pressure.⁵⁴

The seeds for mentorship were planted but didn’t have a chance to take root in Baca’s memoir until he himself is mentored and eventually becomes a mentor for others including his children. He mentioned several helpful writing mentors that he had along the way and who later became his friends, including Norman Moser, Deise Levertov, Joseph Bruchac, Richard Shelton, and says of Rex Veeder, who, “helped me to improve by inspiring me with the confidence that I really could write poetry.”⁵⁵ The importance of mentorship is crucial to a person’s success and can shift that person’s ability to navigate upward mobility as shown in Deborah Brandt’s signature work, “Sponsors of Literacy.”⁵⁶ Additionally, mentoring has been shown to develop self-mastery, achievement, and belonging, which are all essential elements for motivation.⁵⁷ It is shown how first generation students need more involved mentorship.⁵⁸ However, despite the difficulties first generation students face, they identified themselves as being confident and maintained a strong sense of responsibility while recognizing that they needed to work harder than their peers to get ahead.⁵⁹ This point is clearly demonstrated in Baca’s memoir. Even though he had no familial connections, other mentors were present on the outskirts of his life during his time in prison and he was able to push himself to succeed.

Commute Life Domain

Commute, in addition to the domains home, social settings, recreation, and education, is considered another environmental life domain, according to Jamner and Stokols.⁶⁰ The commute life domain is the space entered between designated locations, when a person is transported from one place to another. It is the movement found between the other life domains, but it is also a point at which toxicity or healing can occur. When Baca experienced the commute life domain in his childhood, he was a recipient of the action taking place. His commute did not occur by choice, but because a grownup took him to go somewhere. His vivid recollection of riding in the car with his mother to meet her fiancé’s parents was a commute filled with anxiety and dread. Baca knew that

something bad would happen, but he was not prepared for his mother to abandon her children. Other rides against his will in his early life posed risk to his well-being, but Baca learned to reduce the toxicity that occurred through his imagination. Ironically, Baca discovered hints of his own blossoming of wonder and artistic vision when he first encountered the stars, despite the horror of riding in the car with his drunken father when he saw it. Baca says, "He would toss me into the car and drive away. I never knew where we were going. We usually drove for hours on country roads. I looked at the stars, I listened to the Mexican music on the radio, I glanced at him swigging from his whiskey bottle, and I tried to pretend that none of this was happening."⁶¹

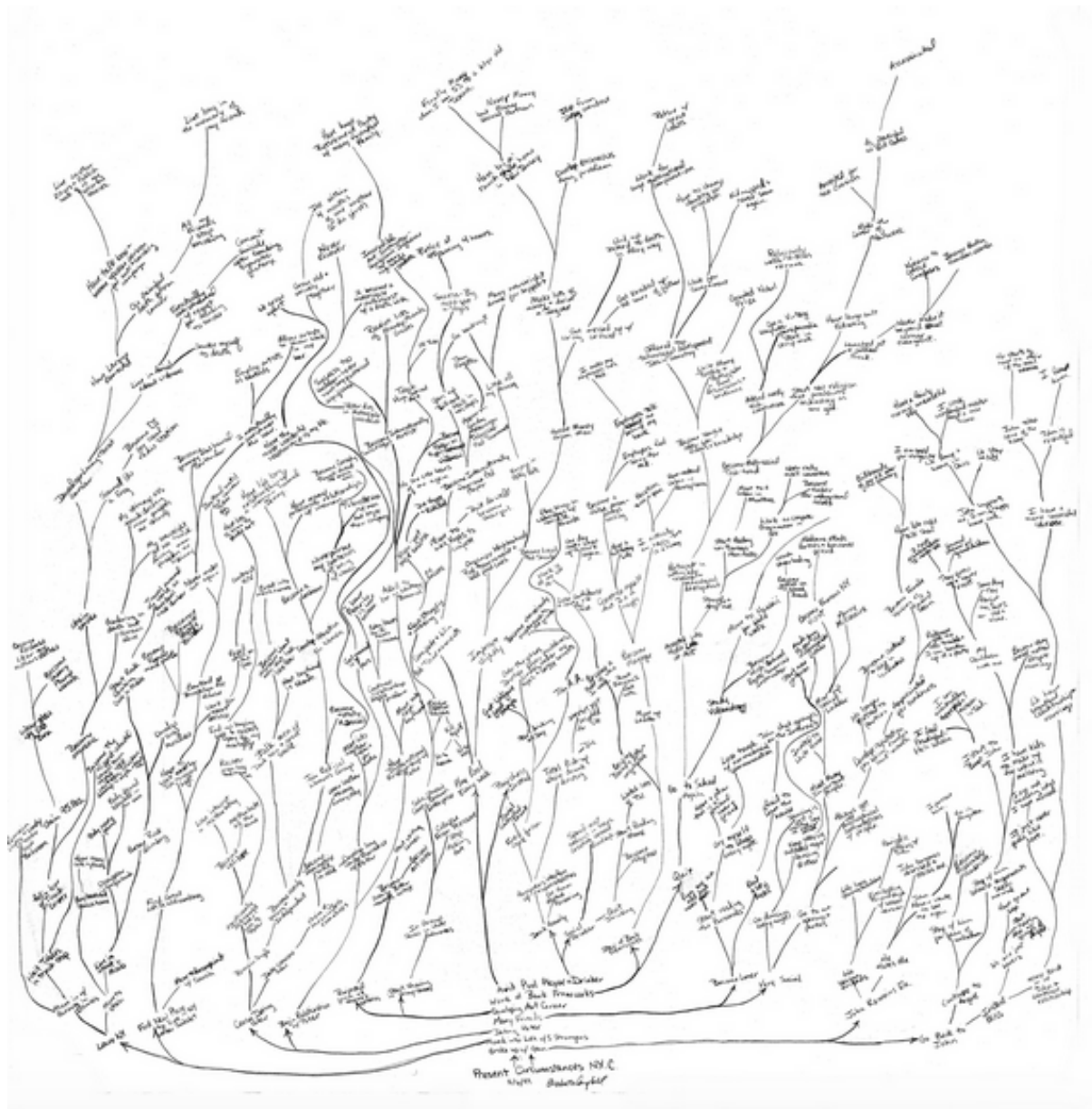
Travel is also a part of the commute life domain. Driving opened Baca's exploration of freedom for new possibilities and demonstrate his ability to find positivity in the commute domain. Baca says, "When I wasn't in Santa Fe I'd be on the road, traveling all over northern New Mexico, servicing vending machines in the small one-cantina towns that clung to the dry hills or perched on the banks of the brown rivers that flowed through the high desert. Those long stretches between stops gave me my first opportunities to truly relax."⁶² Before Baca was arrested, he says, "I hotwired a '63 Impala from the downtown municipal parking lot and drove northeast out of Albuquerque to the Sandia Mountain. I was petrified with fear and needed some time to drive and think. Being in the mountains gave me the illusion that everything was going to turn out all right."⁶³ He described his spiritual wellness here when he contemplated how he "awkwardly pleaded with him [God] to set things straight."⁶⁴ In this passage, again, Baca connected with art and nature. "Looking up at the stars, I wished he could tell me what to do. I missed him [his grandfather], missed his Indio roots and the Indio culture that offered kindness and understanding. I wished I knew how to survive in the woods like Marcos. I wanted to take off across the snow and lose myself in the forest, moving over boulders and through trees, my path illuminated by the moonlight."⁶⁵ But in this passage, he was left by himself with no one and nothing, feeling "utterly alone."⁶⁶ Unfortunately, the commute life domain of traveling from place to place with joy was cut short with Baca's prison sentence. The only commuting he experienced was in his recollections of the past in his mind. This led to the rich but painful interiority he faced in solitary confinement.

Possibilities and Pedagogy: Beth Campbell's Artwork, *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances*

Examining Baca's experience through the framework of life domains is a means to highlight the development of identity and motivation. Baca says, "The person I have become, who sits writing in this chair at this desk, has been forged by enormous struggle and unexpected blessings, despite the dehumanizing environment of a prison intended to destroy me."⁶⁷ Baca demonstrates how life choices can shape one's direction meaningfully by evolving from his negative underpinnings in confronting his past. In turn, he reconfigures his life domains positively. The series of

life choices that Baca is faced with is much like the series of varied conceivable actions that Beth Campbell's visual art exhibit, *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* stems from. Campbell explains how her work is about possibilities.⁶⁸ Campbell's tenets for future actions and possibilities examine how the "what if" scenario of choices give her viewers a window into what might have been or what could be for the future by having them envision themselves in a myriad of possible real or imaginary bifurcating projected outcomes. These possibilities can be playful and humorous, but they can also be serious and introspective.

Campbell's work starts with an ordinary action such as, "I just sat on my brand new glasses while getting into the car."⁶⁹ She then uses lines to illustrate her flow of thought from what could happen next represented by a diagram. These ideas branch out to multiple possibilities for what could happen next so that the entire framework of her design is representative of cause and multiple effects that could occur from one single event. It is an existential technique that offers complex consideration to simultaneous choices existing in the same time frame in life and offers an exploration of writing in an entirely new way. By negotiating situational outcomes that yield infinite possibilities, one's path is chosen because identity and choice converge. The following photo illustrates Campbell's work:⁷⁰



In a classroom setting I might use a design such as this to ask students to connect Campbell's illustration of life choices to Baca's. For example, if the future potential for Baca led to his not getting arrested and serving prison time, he might have 1) worked construction 2) gone back to school 3) married 4) moved 5) found a better job 6) become homeless 7) done more drugs 8) discovered another talent 9) gotten cast in a movie 10) won the lottery. Each of these given scenarios could be formed into secondary scenarios and so forth. In working through Baca's real situation in the memoir, however, he demonstrates a constant pattern in solving his problems by finding his truth of identity and this is how he is able to heal himself. He then reaches out to healing his community of family and friends.

Exposure to art, like Baca's autobiography and Beth Campbell's visual art exhibit, *My Potential Future Based on Present Circumstances* can

help bridge divided communities to re-examine values and heal. By envisioning these outcomes, students can more positively shape their futures. Students can mirror Campbell's work in examination of their own health and life domains by designing their own models. Students' own critical observations will enable valuable life choices from a more powerful personal standpoint. The real outcome is in making authentic choices for one's future in examining past and present decisions. In doing so, specific paths can be forged while others can be avoided. Thus, an emphasis on the arts can help take some of the guesswork out of identity building and health and replace insecurity with confidence by working through varying choice scenarios, such as Campbell's work shows. Furthermore, the strategy for building arts-based research projects, as highlighted by Campbell's art, can bring students together collaboratively.

Through careful examination of the intersections where life domains occur, wellness can be achieved by altering these spaces in enacting preventative measures and making deliberate choices. Art can be a pedagogical means for this access to occur and can build on student strengths. Lyubomirsky and Diener show how building on student strengths increases the development of self-awareness, builds confidence, optimism, self-efficacy, sociability, and strengthens the immune system, as well as encourages active involvement with goal pursuits in one's environment.⁷¹ Baca says, "Writing letters added an exciting dimension to my lackluster days and gave me a sense of self-esteem."⁷²

Art can open up a new series of events. As seen in Baca's memoir, the last life domain, education, was purely and luckily coincidental. Baca's illiteracy was transformed because of his curiosity and determination to learn how to read in his early 20's through his correspondences. When Baca first received a letter in prison he says, "I hadn't a clue as to who would be writing to me. It was a one-page letter written on a church notepad sheet, and I spent days trying to decipher the cursive writing, tracing words to understand which alphabets they were, figuring slowly by sounds what the sentence was. It was in English, but the writing was shaky, which made it even harder to read."⁷³ Writing was an inspiration for him. Baca explains how, "Letters made a big difference by breaking up the day's monotonous tedium, and the guys waiting anxiously at the bars when mail call came."⁷⁴ Healing and the art of writing became an obsession for Baca. He says, "The only thing that really bothered me was when the guards tore up all my journals and confiscated my books."⁷⁵ Baca's identity evolved as an artist. He was nourished through his opportunity and accessibility to literacy. This allowed Baca to connect on a deeper level to express himself through linguistic nuances. Baca explains this transition in saying, "Language gave me a way to keep the chaos of prison at bay and prevent it from devouring me; it was a resource that allowed me to confront and understand my past, even to wring from it some compelling truths, and it opened the way toward a future that was based not on fear or bitterness or apathy but on compassionate involvement and a belief that I belonged."⁷⁶

The education life domain was transformative for Baca when he says: "Reading books became my line of defense against the madness."⁷⁷ Baca reversed his cultural capital through developing literacy and this changed his entire perspective. Baca says, "I remembered lines and stanzas from Neruda, Emily Dickinson, and Rilke. I'd go over plots, characters, styles, and descriptions of landscapes in novels by Hemingway and Faulkner."⁷⁸ Education for Baca was a pathway to survival and led to wellness in his life domains and for his emotional, social, spiritual, physical, intellectual, vocational, and environmental wellness components, which realigned into a positive framework.

Human roots are founded in art. It's no accident that the cavemen painted to tell their stories or that the Greeks and Early Moderns loved drama! Catharsis is essential to the universal human experience. It seems a no-brainer that literature and art can move people towards empathy and understanding for others by reading about them and stepping into their shoes for a short span of time like an actor does and in so doing, deepens the self. As Baca says, "Poetry and music blocked out all other life."⁷⁹

Instructor Methodology for Questioning

In reaching students, introspection can be a place of inclusion for examining one's personal home environment. Students can start by asking questions. The exploration of art involves asking questions because it entails creative thinking for problem solving at its core and provides Deweyian real world experience. Warren Berger, journalist and author of *A More Beautiful Question*, suggests reframing the old model of lecture style teaching by asking questions. Berger's methodology for questioning can be applied for how students can further analyze Baca's memoir. His methodology has three parts in rethinking problems and how their solution can come to fruition. The first part is to understand the underlying philosophy or "why" something is done a certain way.⁸⁰ In applying this line of questioning to Baca's memoir, the analysis can be directed to the overarching context as to what caused Baca's life to derail in the first place. Re-examination for this could consider what values society imposed on Baca's family and how it impacted their choice making. The larger question that could be asked is, why were there inequities for Baca and his family? The drastic measures that were taken were not Baca's parents' first choice for action, but were down the list in reaction to their circumstances. Societal pressures and anti-immigrant status led to their actions for survival. The second question Berger emphasizes is the "what if" phrase.⁸¹ In other words, in reframing "what if," this question is asking to consider how might circumstances be changed for the better and what proactive behavior could be enacted to make these changes. People can't always change their environment/circumstances, but they can take personal steps that are positive and can redirect towards their aims, or destination. By actively visiting options, growth can occur in setting up a plan. Baca enacted the "what if" in his education life domain by becoming literate. His ability to read and write opened his future for more options which were available to him. Baca's memoir offers

a model for action for FYW students. The overarching question is, what if literacy through art could be enacted as a viable means towards wellness and individual sustainability? The third tier that Berger sets up for his inquiry is in creating a solution, or in “how” something might be changed.⁸² One could consider what the ideal outcome could be if the potential for it were to exist. For Baca, this meant attaining literacy. He asked to take classes throughout his time in prison, but his request was denied. Despite this setback, outsiders wrote to him in prison and he was able to teach himself how to read and write. The higher level question for instructors might be, how might literacy in combination with art become a more valued practice?

Conclusion

Documentary proof of building stronger ties and bridging communities together through art and healing is a gift presented through Jimmy Santiago Baca’s highly impactful memoir, *A Place to Stand*, where multiple life domains powerfully intersect and are transformed from toxicity to positive action. Art, like Baca shows the reader, opens multiple possibilities for artistic and practical student participation in life and leads to wellness.

Health is a serious business that needs institutional accountability and art is a positive vehicular means for this to occur. As seen from the example of Baca’s work, emphasizing and requiring humanities classes, such as literature, positive psychology, art, drama, music, and general health education should be added to curriculums as essential foundations for learning to provide immediate resources for students’ fundamental growth for identity building and health practices because they are excellent access points for students to begin taking charge of themselves independently. These classes are not only essential for “Adulthood” - meeting challenges, developing life skills, exploring art, creating new innovations, strengthening motivation, furthering career paths and goals, and so forth, but also tap into hidden potential and provide deeper resources for creative problem solving and provide an outlet for life’s enjoyment. Classes could include elements of the narrative writing format for building empathy which is already embraced by Medical Humanities departments and integrated into nursing programs. These simple but important additions could be part of the larger context for collegiate study and aspects of these elements could be partially incorporated into first year writing and first year experience classes.

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- ¹⁰ *Ibid*, 141.
- ¹¹ *Ibid*, 136, 141.
- ¹² *Ibid*, 78.
- ¹³ *Ibid*, 84.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid*, 43.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid*, 44.
- ¹⁶ *Ibid*, 24.
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- ²⁶ *Ibid*, 18.
- ²⁷ *Ibid*, 5.
- ²⁸ *Ibid*, 29.
- ²⁹ *Ibid*, 35.
- ³⁰ *Ibid*, 201.
- ³¹ *Ibid*, 234.
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⁸² *Ibid.*