

Graduate Certificate in Narrative Therapy
Dulwich Center
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Final Written Assignment by Kakia Baharakaki

“THE TREE OF LIFE”

A Collective Narrative Practice
in a classroom of 3rd Grade of a Private Greek
Primary School

2017

“Our struggle today does not mean that we will necessarily achieve change but, without our struggle today, perhaps future generations would have to struggle much more. History does not finish with us, it goes beyond”.

(Freire, 1999)

‘My role – and that is too emphatic a word – is to show people that they are much freer than they feel, that people accept as truth, as evidence some themes which have been built up at a certain moment in history, and that this so-called evidence can be criticized and destroyed.’

(Foucault, 1988, p. 10)

Abstract

Author

Baharakaki Kakia is a Cognitive Scientist, an Art Consultant and a writer of Children's Stories and haiku poet. She is enthusiastic with narrative therapy, poetry and practice of narrative therapy with individuals and groups. She likes to introduce new ideas from different artistic fields and approaches such as visual arts and poetry.

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Goals of the project

I strongly believe that this project will be interesting to apply it in a classroom environment. My primary goal is to present the benefits of such a successful approach of narrative practice in a classroom environment and test for first time my own limits and expectations in an educational context.

I am totally positive to the idea of exploring the impact of this work plan on pupils in order to see their interaction as a team in their relationships and their ability to "see" themselves through the eyes of their classmates by asking them to share their personal stories and experiences of their lives.

As a facilitator/future-councillor, I was feeling very honoured to be in a position of witnessing the children's life stories and together finding ways to think new and meaningful stories for their present and their future. My curiosity, as a facilitator is to explore pupils' **interaction** in order to get to know each other better and strengthen their **relationships** with their own history, their personal experiences, and significant people in their lives.

Moreover, I wish to explore how they will take the advantage to learn more about their **diversity** and **individuality**, in order to co-exist and collaborate more harmoniously. Through their teamwork they will interact each other and maybe they will find out more ways to approach each other's difficulties.

An important additional part to my research plan will be the use of **haiku poems** in order to connect their **thoughts, plans, hopes** for their lives in future and connect them with the branches of the tree (write some poems with their hopes, expectations and dreams). Haiku poem is the shortest kind of poem in the world with strictly 17 syllabus.

Theoretical Foundations of the TTL

A story can also be called a narrative. A narrative is a metaphor which implies that people experience their lives through the stories they tell about themselves. The stories of our lives give the framework for our experiences, and thereby patterns to our experiences (Lundby, 1998). The “lived narrative” of your or my present experience is much like a spoken narrative (Bruner, 1990). We make a story out of lived events as we are experiencing them, creating “logical” connections: E.g. relating two events such as cause-effect, reason-result, etc.

Just as later events in a spoken narrative cause us to reinterpret earlier events, so events in the lived narrative of experience cause us to reinterpret earlier experiences. Events in both spoken and lived narratives are generally compatible with our broad expectations. When they are not, we tend to come up with stories about the unexpected events in an attempt to convert them into something that would be more expectable, given the new information we have to account for them. This is true for both spoken and lived narratives.

Ncazelo Ncube, psychologist and narrative therapist for REPSSI became interested in narrative therapy when she met children in vulnerable situations who did not react as victims in these situations. Narrative practice then became an important inspiration for her to discover these stories that were seldom told (Løge, 2010).

When these subordinate stories are told and developed, the child is invited into a new “position” –important for avoiding re-traumatisation. These “**safe territories**” are important for the development of new stories of identity, and these new “positions” are important for later when traumatic experiences might be talked about (White, 2004).

Many participants of TTL have never viewed their lives by looking at all the positive things or at what they have achieved. Often the narrative stops with where the individual is now, no tentative narrative has been created for the future. The opportunity that the participant gets to show his/her tree to the group helps to “**thicken**” these narratives. This is considered an important mechanism of narrative development. Telling stories about the self to others helps to develop, confirm, sustain and potentially alter the personal meaning of one’s stories (Thorne, 2000 in McLean & Pasupathi, 2011).

By **drawing the tree which** represents the individual participant, the participant is **externalising himself**. It is then possible for the participant to engage with himself in a new and different way. This objectification is considered crucial in narrative therapy (White, 2004). Ong (2000) goes on to show this to be necessary with individuals who have an oral tradition.

People often experience a rather tenuous hold on what Michael White (2000) ‘**sparkling events**’ (unique outcomes or exceptions). These sparkling events are those that contradict the problem-saturated stories of people’s lives, and the deficit-centre accounts of their identities. When taken into the story-lines of people’s lives, these events contribute to the thickening of the alternative stories in their lives, and provide the foundations of new possibilities for action in relation to addressing their concerns or problems. Writing them down, further helps to ‘**rescue**’ these ‘**sparkling events**’ from simply disappearing as a part discourse without coming into focus.

The ‘Tree’ as a Metaphor

Michael White uses a wide range of metaphors within narrative therapy such as travelling metaphors, club metaphors, building and scaffolding metaphors and map metaphors (White, 2007). A tree in many cultures is seen as a sign of life and of growing up. Common characteristics connected to a tree are that they grow slowly, grow upwards and are needed. In this way the tree presents the individual’s **values, skills, social and cultural support** in the **past, present** and **future**. The forest of trees represents the extended support system that the individual has (Ncube, 2006).

The Tree of Life

Description of the group. In my group, ten twenty seven pupils were participating, 15 girls and 15 boys, aged 8.5 to 9 years old. They all came from around the same middle or high socio-economic backgrounds. All of the participants seem to know each other’s. The narrative project lasted 7 days, during May, for two school-hours each time.

I introduced myself and then I asked them if it was ok to spend the next two hours together talking about ourselves, our lives and experiences.

-“How will we do it?”, and I answered “by our knowledge of trees”.

We first discussed generally about trees and how many kinds of them did they know around their place. We talked about olive trees, masticha trees, fruit-bearing trees such as orange trees, apple trees etc. The children at this point showed interest and I also presented and explained the "Tree of Life" and that if they wanted they could draw and paint their own which would consist of the following.

Now the children should draw their tree. We explain how properties a tree has can symbolize different part of life:

The roots of the trees are an incentive for children to talk about: Their origins (villages, cities, countries), family history (origin, family name, background, extended family). Those who loved, contributed, influenced positive and who have taught children the most about life, the beloved.

- Their part at home, and a song or dance from where they come from.
- Their favourite places, favourite song and favourite dance.
- What gives them power? What keeps them stable (people, spirituality, food, music, etc.)
- Who they are when they need power.

The ground: The terrain represents where the child lives in the present and a few from the activities that are in the everyday life of the child. Questions like the following: How are things round you nowadays? Who is present in your life? How do you spend your time? What are your days like?

The tree trunk What skills and abilities do you have? Which ones do you use every day, or often? What can a good friend say about you?

The branches The branches of the tree represent the hopes, dreams and the wishes that every child has for the direction of his life. As the child painting the branches, the counselor can ask questions about the story of these wishes, dreams, hopes and how these may be associated with important others in children's homes.

When I heard about the hopes and the dreams have been preserved in the lives of children, I also asked how the child managed to keep and maintain these hopes. I asked about the hopes they have for the lives of other children, adolescents and adults and also hopes that they have for their community.

-What are your dreams for the future?

-What direction do you want your life to take?

-What do you hope might happen?

The leaves represent important people for the child. These could be people who are still alive, or they might have died. Regardless of that, they are just as important. As these people are so important some children talked about people who have lost and they were upset. So, I asked the **following questions:**

-Did you have beautiful moments with this person?

-Why was this person so special to you?

-He liked to remember it in the ways that you now remember him/her?

Some children told stories about what was important in the child's relationship with the person who died. This honors the relationship the child has and can also lead to how children continue to think and remember the ones they have. It is also possible that children include pets, fantastic friends and characters from stories as leafs of their trees.

The fruits represents the gifts they have been given in life (material gifts or things people did for them, such as giving care or support or love of the others). These are further opportunities to invoke the influence of others and to recognise the contribution of others to their sense of self. At this point I asked:

-Why do you think this person gave you that?

-What did you appreciate to be led to give you this gift?

-What do you think you offered in your own? In the roots, in the ground, in the trunk, in the branches, in the leaves and fruits.

Children found ways to write or draw representations of their own history, activities, skills, dreams, important people and gifts.

While the children are drawing, I asked appropriate questions about roots, skills and abilities and so on. This seems to help them get going. When the children finished, they hunged up their trees alongside one another in their classroom. The children got asked to take turns in presenting their trees to one another. While they were telling their story I asked them questions which helped them to elaborate on what they are saying.

For instance, I asked: "How did you manage to do that? Who taught you that? How long have you nurtured that hope and those dreams? What helped you – despite all your difficulties– to preserve those dreams? I invited the other children to write a sentence or two more on the tree trunk describing what they think is that child's skills and abilities. Perhaps they could elaborate on this with a little story?

When the attention goes to the trunk of the tree, one is given an opportunity for children to talk and represent through painting some of their **skills**. These include skills that are obvious when talking about their **everyday life**.

Skills that children show in other aspects of their lives. On the days that end in the exercise of the "Tree of Life" I got information about various skills that children demonstrate and helped them to include them on the trunk of their tree. Skills about how long the child has them and whether they have learned them from somewhere. In particular this encourages these stories to be told about them. Skills and information to be recorded on the tree. As long as they are children draw on the trunk, discussions can be made about it with special memories that the child can recall. These are **valuable memories**.

PART 1. "Drawing it"

The first part of the exercise involves plotting the important events of the participant's life on the tree.

The **roots** represents where the participant comes from (past). That is referred to "**Re-membering**": where the person can be asked about what the significant person contributes to their life and how they might see them now. Re-membering involves the person in deliberate and considered re-engagement with the identities in one's life. *Michael White describes identity as being composed of an association of life that comprises the significant figures from a person's life, past or present. (White, 2007, p.129).*

The **trunk** of the tree represents where the individual is now (present).

The **branches** represent the participant's dreams for the future (future).

The **leaves** represent important people in the participant's life; they may be both deceased and alive (honouring important relationships).

The **fruits** represent the gifts that the participant received from these important people. This may include both physical gifts and important lessons learnt in life (gratitude for the relationships)

PART 2. "The forest of life"

When the children finished painting the trees, I called them to stick the paintings to the wall. This created a forest from beautiful trees. Then we called some volunteers to share their stories with the whole group. In the beginning, not many hands responded to the invitation. It needed an effort to "open" children and share their experiences. The willing children with their classmates. As each child spoke, we were informed of the hopes and their dreams. During their presentations I did different questions about their hopes and dreams, how they managed to keep them and others in their family they knew about it. The answers to these questions were from heart and hot.

With the trees of life stuck side by side, we got a little time to mirror in the woods with the beautiful trees with all shapes and sizes. We all sat down to appreciate our forest. At this point I did a refurbishment, to watch the strong roots that we all seemed to have.

I also mentioned the dreams and hopes we have for our lives. I talked about the people we are connecting with. They taught many things in our lives and they continue to care and support us in different ways. I gave examples for some of the people mentioned by children.

Presenting the Tree to the group and receiving compliments from the group. Each participant gets the opportunity to present his tree to the group. After the presentation the members of the group get the opportunity to give compliments to the participant who has just presented. Compliments are written on 'tag-it' bits of paper and attached to the tree. I (facilitator) take notes as the participant presents – these notes are written on to the certificate to be handed out.

PART 3. "When the storms come". As a facilitator, I lead the group in a discussion about what can be done when problems arise. This allows the children to talk about the problems in their lives, but from the safe place that has been created in the first two steps of the approach. Now they can talk about problems but in the context of the strengths and knowledges of their lives.

It was time to talk about difficult times and storms on a stable and safe place. Trees like us often face hazards. "We are beautiful trees, with strong roots, beautiful leaves and fruits. Despite how beautiful they are they at risk?" "No", they answered. Tell me some of the dangers of trees". "Fires, cut, garbage, kicking, lots of rain, lightning, water scarcity, old age, death". A safe pass for the risks. "So we face dangers and problems like trees, forests. We named the problems of the class of children: *Much reading, anxiety, racism, poverty,*

quarrels, accidents, parenting, internet bullying, school problems, war, hunger, homeless children, homelessness.

We gave "a voice" to the bad things.

Question: Is it a mistake of the tree or forest that came the storms?

Children: No trees are not responsible.

Question: Can we blame the children for?

What do you do when there are problems and storms in your lives?

Are there ways of reacting? Things to Do? Are you trying to protect yourself and others like animals?

How are animals protected in storms?

They answered that animals are hidden between each other protect/nest building between them shaking for heat. So the animals are not passive, they react to the difficulties. These are the ways of animals.

-What about children in the storm-problems? Are there ways of reacting? Are they trying to protect themselves and others, like animals?

Children answered that they can do the following in order to protect themselves:

-They talk to parents and friends.

-They talk to someone they trust.

-In the neighbor, friend / relative.

-They can go away and protect themselves.

-Speak to their teacher.

-Pray.

-Ask for help.

-To report to the police.

-Speak to a special advisor.

Clearly, the children's home is very well run and the children receive a high standard of care and safety, with opportunities for education and social

pursuits. I had the opportunity to see them interacting with each other in a happy and harmonious way.

I asked from children to write down their reflections about what happens when storms come in to their lifes. I gave them the following sentences to think about:

-The storms come and go.

-Stories that make them happy.

-How do they help in the support and happiness of others?

Most of the children's answers were connected with their family/friends and how they helped them in difficult moments such as accidents or difficulties with their lessons:

"Storms come and go, and the tree still stands on the ground. These roots are the strongest in the world. I remember when I hit a corner at the kitchen table. And I remember getting up (Marianna X).It makes me happy when I think of my family. I help with continuing to support others (Marios K.).

One day I hit in a glass-pointed corner and took blood from my fore head and it hurt a lot (Penelope). One time when I first went to school with kids, it was very nice (Alexander).When the storms come and go I'm afraid. When my torso falls but I will always know it will not fall and my roots are strong (Eleonora K).

My difficulties are the tests, but fortunately they are over. The story that makes me happy is in the summer because we dive into the sea. I help him/her to be afraid of doing things (Afrodititi). It makes me happy when I spend wonderful moments with my family. I help others by giving them courage (Nikos G). What made me happy was when my brother was born (Panos B). When there is a difficult time, I have to go ahead and not keep it going. (Evangelina).One day I hit a glass table in the corner. My parents took me to the hospital and they supported me and they helped me a lot. I did three stitches but I did not mind (Cynthia)We need to help our peers and help them with their difficulties and problems. We must be faithful to our peers and friends (Christos).

We look at our trees and we see that everything has beauty, they are separate and they all make a beautiful forest, in different shapes and sizes. We are aware that they have strong and strong roots that we all seem to have. We have dreams and hopes for life.

We connect with people around us who care and support us in many ways. (Examples). Others are living and not others, but we keep keeping them in our soul with beautiful memories of all the things they have given us. Relationships between us continue to support us in many ways as we continue our lives. What common are the trees and the ways in which we support trees that belong to the same forest.

4. Awarding certificates. A certificate is presented to each participant. The notes that I, as a facilitator, took during the participant's presentation were read out for all to hear. The certificate identifies their **strengths**, their **knowledges** and the significant people in their lives. The alternative story thickens, enriches and creates links to significant persons in their lives.

(These certificates are generally given in the company of the significant people in their lives, so that there exists the opportunity for **Outsider Witnessing**. -In our case we did not have the availability of time to organize a visit from parents etc.

5. Haiku poems- "Haiku Tree of Friendship & Hope". A big Tree of Friendship and Hope created by Greek pupils to the "Children who Suffer but survive". These 17 syllables, arranged in a traditional format of three lines with 5 syllables in the first, 7 in the second and 5 in the third is, of course, a Haiku.

Structure of "Tree of Life"

1. Making our 'Trees of Life'
2. 'Forest of Life': together, as a group we are stronger than each individual
3. 'Storms' of life: problems and difficulties that affect children of the world who suffer from various dangers and survival difficulties.
4. The effects of these 'storms' on our hearts and minds.
5. What can children do about the problems and their effects?
6. When 'storms' are not around: happy times, overcoming difficult moments.

Presentation of Findings –

'and then I realized... this is me'

The pupils indicated during the workshop that they got to know themselves. Most of them expressed the importance of “becoming aware of their own strengths”. The words “encouraging”, “motivating” and “happy” were used by the children to describe the effect of the feedback that they received during TOL. A number referred to this opportunity as one where they got to know themselves in a new way. “The paper that I had, that had all the comments on from the other participants and, and I then understood... this is me”. (child 5)

“It is very important to know who you are...we were together with others, and then they, they told me who I was and I really appreciated this”. (child 1). A number of participants expressed a distinct feeling of surprise at the positive feedback that they received.

“I don’t know if I am good or bad, but they see me all the time, and so, so they know who I am... And then I realize that I am a good person and not a bad person, and that I am not just a nuisance to others”. (participant 3)

The children talk about the compliments as encouraging and further elaborate that they get to know themselves. When asked what they thought of TTL, they say it was good, further alluding to the fact that they were left with a distinct ‘good feeling’.

“Learning from Each Other”

Many of the pupils indicated that getting to know the other participants in the group was significant for them. Some spoke of learning about the “**importance**” of friends. In most of the instances where the informants spoke of friends they were referring to the part of TOL where they gave honour to the important people in their lives.

‘During TOL you meet again your classmates and get to know them’

It became obvious that the participants got to know each other in a different way from before. All the participants attend the same school. From the **scaffolding** questions it became clear that they viewed learning new things about their classmates as important. It was not clear if the participants had very much to do with each other outside of TOL, but it was clear that they appreciated getting to know each other in a **new way**.

One gets to know more about those whom I know..., I got more information about them and learned something new...During TOL I met my classmates in an another way and I begin to know them better.... (child 7)

I learned a lot of things that I did not know before, but now I know...I, I learnt things about their origins, their activities, the important people for their life so this is quite important. (child 1).

One of the participants explained that he learned that he **could not do things alone**, and that when he needed help he should ask for it. I learnt, in a way, that one can't do everything alone without help, but that one needs to, like, ask... help (child 7)

It becomes obvious from this data that the informants do not view what they learnt about themselves as the only benefit of TOL, but also what they learnt from others. One of the children refers to the **sharing of experiences** with each other. Others talk of learning about **children who suffer**. (At this point, I have started the discussion about children who suffer all around world, because of difficult life conditions –e.g. war, earthquakes, natural disasters etc.-.

“my friends/classmates...they helped me”

One of the participants spoke about how friends made him feel better. He went on to point out that it was not necessarily the friends that he had made in the group, who made the difference. When asked about what they learned from TTL, many of the participants mentioned **“the importance of friends and family”**. One child spoke about friends outside of TOL workshop.

I became a bit sad when I started to think about where I had come from... but it got better... My friends, they helped me, not those in the group, but when I went home, when we play (basketball) together and talk together, then I began to feel a little better... (child 7).

The honouring and acknowledging precious relationships is considered to be a way that TTL counselling process is linked to the daily lives and support structures of the participants. It is clear that there was more to the workshop than learning about one's self. The **ability to viewing one's self as connected** increased in intensity during this workshop.

‘I see what the tree is about. I understand it all..’

One participant pointed out that trees produce, and clearly draws the parallel between that of being a tree and that of being a person. The **‘Tree of Life’ is like a person** (child 6). It has been said: **‘A picture paints a thousand words’** and this is what seems to have been the experience of the participants with the **mental picture of a tree being used as a metaphor for life**. The participants showed no difficulties engaging with this metaphor, who within a short while began to refer to themselves as trees. This was especially seen

during the part of TOL regarding coping with resistance. (Notes made during participative observation). This confirms in these instances that culturally appropriate metaphors may be viewed as a strength of TOL.

'I looked at the tree and I saw who I am'.

All the informants spoke about how the different parts in their life-stories were connected "your past, where you are now and where you are on your way to..." was mentioned by many. Because when we started with the tree, we started with the roots, which shows where we come from, and then we drew all the way up to the leaves and there we wrote down what we want to become, and this is motivating...Even when people have big problems. (participant 5).

For example, the 'Tree of Life' is what a person is, for example where you started as a very young kid and where you are going now as a grown-up kid, what you have done, from where are you. Then I look at this tree and I see who I am. I look at it from the roots and then upwards. (participant 3).

Haiku Can Facilitate and Document Healing

"17 syllables can say quite a lot"

The ancient and formal poetic form of Haiku can be a profoundly effective tool in psychotherapy, both diagnostically and for goal-setting purposes. Art and healing can facilitate each other nicely.

Narrative Therapy assumes that each person feels, reacts, processes experience and lives in a way that is consistent with a particular "Narrative" they have of and for themselves. The technique further posits that this personal narrative can be revised and rewritten with the goal being to composing one which renders life more satisfying and less conflictual.

A derivative of this idea is that of encouraging and helping the children to write only 17 syllables to express some key notion about themselves as place to begin treatment. These 17 syllables, arranged in a traditional format of three lines with 5 syllables in the first, 7 in the second and 5 in the third is, of course, a Haiku. For example:

Spring is in the air

Flowers are blooming

Children are laughing

Most children who can both think and write, are able to gather a seemingly simple thought into a deceptively brief 17 syllable formation. The tight limitation of the Haiku form tends to make the task of writing something less intimidating for many people and because it is so contained, finding interpretive meaning in these three brief lines is much easier than finding meaning in a larger piece of writing.

I have found the technique to be useful with children as young as 8 as well as with adults of all ages. As with Narrative Therapy from where the notion is derived, the Haiku written at the outset of **alternative self-reflection** is understood to reflect some essential belief the child has about themselves. As **self reflection progresses**, new Haikus are composed. Each successive three lines reflect both change that has occurred and direction for further movement.

The Haiku provides both **autobiographical reflection** for the person while, concurrently, making conscious for both consultant and therapist, a meaningfully explicit sense of direction. The Haiku form is short, specifically constructed and not difficult to master for anyone interested in doing so.

Its application as a tool on the therapeutic process has not been well developed and exploited on behalf of the children we see. It is time to bring this ancient and honored poetic form into the treatment of those who come to the facilitator (therapist) to get help feeling better and in more control of their lives. **Art and healing are not mutually exclusive.** The controlling factors are the willingness of the facilitator (therapist) and child (client) to, together, try something unfamiliar to benefit the one of them who has come for help.

Haiku written in Greek (translated in English)

<p>Μη χτυπάς φίλο τη πλάτη θα γυρίσει μόνος θα μείνεις.</p> <p>Κράτα φωτεινή στα φύλλα της καρδιάς σου λάμψη ελπίδας.</p> <p>Μικρό λουλούδι χαμογέλα στον ήλιο τον πιστό φίλο.</p> <p>Γιατί σωπαίνεις; Στης φωνής σου τη γροθιά. Διώξε τον φόβο.</p> <p>Τον νταή μην κάνεις τους φίλους σου αν θέλεις να μη τους χάνεις.</p> <p>Το δίκιο σου σώζεις στη ζωή σου αν κρατάς τόνους χαμηλούς.</p> <p>Δώσε το χέρι αμοιβή σου η χαρά αλληλεγγύη</p>	<p>Not banging A friend the back will turn will stay alone.</p> <p>Keep light in your heart's leaves there's a shine of hope.</p> <p>Small flower smile sun the faithful friend.</p> <p>Why don't you speak? In your voice fist send away your fear.</p> <p>Don't act as a "bully" if you want not to lose your friends.</p> <p>Your right you save in your life if you keep tones low.</p> <p>Give your hand your reward joy solidarity.</p>
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Appendix 1

ΔΙΠΛΩΜΑ «ΔΕΝΤΡΟΥ ΖΩΗΣ»

Απονέμεται

στον/στην.....

γιατί απέδειξε στον εαυτό του/της και στους άλλους ότι έχει δεξιότητες και ικανότητες που συνεχίζουν να τη συντηρούν στη ζωή.

Επίσης έχει ειδικά όνειρα και ελπίδες για τη ζωή, όπως.....
.....

Οι δεξιότητες και οι ικανότητες του/της περιλαμβάνουν.....
.....

Τα όνειρα και οι ελπίδες του/της είναι.....
.....
.....

Θα ήθελε να εκτιμήσει τους παρακάτω ειδικούς ανθρώπους στη ζωή του/της.....
.....
.....

Υπογραφή

Ημερομηνία

DIPLOMA "TREE OF LIFE"

Awarded to

Because he demonstrated to himself / herself and to others that he / she has the skills and abilities that continue to sustain it in life.

It also has special dreams and hopes for life, like
.....
.....

His / her skills and abilities include
.....
.....

His / her dreams and hopes are
.....
.....

Would like to appreciate the following special people in his / her life
.....
.....
.....

Date

Signature