

FLOURISHING HOPE

by

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Flourishing Hope displays the strength of positivity within the human spirit using floral-based ceramic sculptures. The work is assembled out of various ceramic bulbs, shoots, and blooms, all of which are fragile and push ceramic materials to the limits. As the pieces of each flower are combined they become stronger. The collection of these floral pieces represents the power that the growth of positivity builds has within the human spirit. My work shows that despite the challenges that humans face in everyday circumstances, positivity within the human spirit can grow, strengthen, and manifest itself both externally and internally.

FLOURISHING HOPE

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by

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INTRODUCTION

Character Strengths: Positivity and Negativity

Pollyanna. The Pollyanna Hypothesis explains the human tendency to view life through a positive lens (Boucher & Osgood, 1969). Life, however, is not perfect and even though the world can be an extremely rosy place, suffering exists. It is difficult, if not impossible, to have a blind eye to suffering and to evil and its existence (Weiten, Dunn, & Hammer, 2011). The purpose of positivity is not to hide from the evil within the world. Rather, its purpose is to avoid the temptation to dwell on what humans cannot fix and cannot change. Positivity rearranges what can be a challenge and teaches humans to be strong, to keep peaceful minds, to be too large for worry, too noble for anger, too strong for fear, and too happy to permit trouble (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). It is important to note that we are drawn more towards negativity. We are far more familiar with the symptoms of depression rather than the symptoms of happiness. It is engraved in our culture. Bad news is more popular than good news.

Hope. There are many intricate pieces to positivity. Those pieces include hope, optimism, future-mindedness, and a positive cognitive, emotional, and motivational stance toward the future. Each one of these pieces provides a reason or backdrop to support why it is important, wise, and logical to be positive. These backdrops include: thinking about the future, expecting that desired positive events and outcomes will occur, acting in ways believed to make positive outcomes more likely, and feeling confident that these positive actions will ensure given appropriate efforts to sustain good cheer in the here and now and galvanize goal-directed actions (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Inspiration. Positivity can be inspired and can grow through love and the way it is put to practice. In Dr. Martin Luther King's book, *Strength to Love*, the forward written by Coretta

Scott King (2010) describes King's moral imperative for love as "the wellspring for the eradication of even these economically, politically, and social entrenched evils . . ." (p.2) Dr. King's work speaks about how the positive effects of love can eliminate that which is negative in the world (King, 2010). The inspiration behind Flourishing Hope began years prior to its completion and is based in a positive outlook on life which has been tempered via the influence of my brother, Matthew. My artwork shows inspiration through floral growth, in the abundance of its growth, and in how it spreads. The patterns that develop in my work mirror the pattern of inspiration as seen through the multiple individual pieces, something that grows incrementally and blooms over time. Sharing this experience through art is a way to visually communicate the existence of inspiration.

Stories

Gratitude. Every morning, I used to wake up and walk downstairs to see how my brother, Matthew, was doing and to help him get ready for the day. His neuro-muscular disease prevented him from completing many normal, everyday activities. As an early riser, he was always awake before me. I knew exactly why he was excited and happy to see me every morning. Through routine, I began to learn how grateful we are to have each other and to see why we should be grateful. I saw how lucky I am to be able to brush my own teeth or to be able to help someone else brush their teeth. Being grateful incrementally increases positivity for "as we are filled with gratitude, we experience a variety of positive emotions and may even be inspired to act in more virtuous ways (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). My work shows incremental growth which I relate to the growth of happiness in our lives, similar to the effect of gratitude.

Positivity in Action. In Matthew's last year of high school, he was starting to lose his ability to walk permanently. It was a scary time for him, my family and myself. He fell often and

his condition gradually got worse. One time, he fell and was down in a school elevator. His phone was within reach but he did not have the strength to use it. He was on the elevator floor for three hours before anyone noticed and found him. His attitude was amazing. Rather than becoming involved in the negative side of what had happened and what was happening, he remained positive. After the elevator incident, he and I joked about his skipping class that day by default, without penalty. Though losing the ability to walk was a serious reminder of the speed of deterioration from his muscular disease, he used humor as a key weapon in his arsenal to combat the overwhelming negativity and to continue feeding the growth of positivity within him and us. His positive outlook teaches me how we all can spread happiness like a bouquet of flowers. My artwork is very fragile, yet it displays the strength and the will to overcome negativity. In addition, each piece represents part of the whole, showing that it takes many different flowers to achieve a positive result.

Positivity and Accomplishments

As high school graduation approached, Matt emphatically told me that he wanted to walk across the stage to receive his diploma. He wanted to do it but I did not want him to try because he could fall. At graduation as they called Matt's name, he stood from his wheelchair and walked slowly across the stage, taking his time. He would swing one leg in front of him at a time. When he reached out to receive his diploma the entire gymnasium rose to their feet to and applauded him. I can still recall glancing around the crowd. I could not believe the number of people affected by his positivity and by his accomplishment. He was inspiring happiness. The moment was incredibly infectious and remains an inspiration for me today. He addresses life with such positivity which is an inspiring reminder for me and to others in terms of the will to overcome suffering through positivity. I often compare the laborious process of wood firing clay to

accomplishments that push humans to their physical limits to complete something that is difficult and challenging to achieve. Wood firing ceramics is incredibly laborious, with intense heat, and an escalation of effort. It is always a physically and mentally demanding preparing for and firing kilns. As a graduate student, one is in the position to lead. It is in these difficult work days that I think about what I am accomplishing and teaching. My efforts help drive others to accomplish similar goals.

FLOURISHING HOPE – A FLORAL METAPHOR

Flourishing Hope is based on a metaphor that displays the strength of the human spirit with floral-based ceramic sculptures. My work shows growing plants and flowers as a comparison to the growth of positivity within all of us. Plants and flowers physically grow and change as they grow. I see the growth of flowers as uplifting and inspiring, as being positive. I think of a blooming flower as the peak of all the challenges it triumphs through bad weather or even lack of rain. In addition, the variations in the growth in plants and flowers (i.e. different sized leaves, blooms, and stems) can be compared to the significant differences among each human in terms of their own unique human spirit. Flowers and plants grow incrementally each and every day. So, too, does the human spirit. Measuring the differences day to day would show slight changes from one moment to the next in both subsets. Plants and flowers start out timid, tiny, and vulnerable; as they grow they become stately and strong. The human spirit goes through a similar cycle. Plants can be allowed to grow on their own or they can be helped with the strengthening process. Likewise, the human spirit can grow on its own or it can be nurtured by others to gain its strength. Finally, as plants mature, they are triumphing over nature's elements such as wind, rain, drought, and cold. The maturation of plants is metaphorically similar to the maturation of the human spirit for as it grows and develops it is able to withstand many elements, allowing it to grow and flourish even during challenging and difficult times. The staged growth of my ceramic floral forms is similar to the growth in flowers and plants. Those stages include growth from a bulb to a shoot to a bloom in both ceramics and flora. My work demonstrates both plants maturing and positivity within the human spirit maturing, delicately balancing with fragility.

Humanity and Positivity

Positivity may start out as a small thought within a person. It may be just a moment in time that begins the process, and as that moment in time is nurtured, it grows and strengthens. In humans, an increase in positivity can be due to maturation or to a sudden desire to move away from negativity and it can manifest or spread. It can spread like a wild field of flowers. The height of human happiness takes a consistent effort to maintain. This is similar to a garden and the efforts to maintain it. Humans have a remarkable ability to overcome negative influences in order to remain in a state of positivity. It can affect everyone around us.

ESSENCE OF ASCENDING

Flourishing Hope is an abstraction of the physical extension between floral growth and positivity. It is particularly relevant in relationship to ceramics, clay, and the use of wood firing techniques. My firing process uses wood as a fuel to produce heat in a kiln. Ceramics and wood firing requires more than just one individual's efforts. Wood firing is usually under the cooperation of a group, working towards a common goal. Yet, an individual's efforts play a significant role within the entire wood fire group. Once the firing is complete there is a sense of accomplishment for the group as well as for the individual. Again, this arrangement is similar to the cycle of both floral growth and the growth of the human spirit. Flowers grow from a bulb to a stem to a bloom spreading to hundreds of blooms across a floral display. That type of growth is similar to the effects one individual can spread throughout a group. My work started out as an individual idea and personal project, but I needed and wanted the help of my fellow students to fire a kiln that I could not fire by myself. Facilitating such an event as a graduate student takes leadership and constant encouragement because it is an intensely laborious process. Those participating have similar goals that they want to achieve and they bear the benefits of the efforts. My project slowly grew in quantity and size becoming a large floral display and so did the positivity in those who were interested in helping out with the firings. Positivity in one person can inspire others, similar to the way my brother inspires me.

Each piece within Flourishing Hope has been created one pinch at a time, one bulb at a time, one shoot at a time, one bloom at a time, similar to the day to day growth of any flower and likewise, the growth of positivity within the human spirit. Wood firing techniques are lengthier than other firing methods with each step incrementally building on the previous step, fitting well with the concept of this work. It takes an incredible amount of work to achieve and consistency

is important. Flowers grow slowly and methodically. My work grows slowly and methodically in its creation, growing in quantity the same way as flowers do.

Once the clay has been fired it becomes ceramic material which is permanent. The clay is hardened by the fire and will last through time despite its fragility. Its longevity depends on the care it receives. The idea of permanency is an important part of my Flourishing Hope concept. I want happiness and positivity in my life and in all lives to last for a long time.

Furthermore, wood fire techniques are impacted by nature; weather can have an impact. The type of wood used can have an impact. The team assembled to help can have an impact, and the temperature of the fire can have an impact. These types of impacts are similar to the impact of rain or drought on flowers and/or the human condition. The process of making and firing and eventually showcasing work like Flourishing Hope is similar to the process of planting, growing, and harvesting of flowers. Each step builds upon the previous one. Each small effort is a step, in my ceramic sculpture and in positivity.

The process of working with clay offers an ongoing and hopeful sense of accomplishment in looking towards the future and wood firing is an integral part of the Flourishing Hope project. Wood firing is using wood as a fuel to heat a kiln. Wood firing is grounded in anticipation; it represents a moment of completion similar to that of a flower blooming. There is a gray area much like that of the growth of a positive human spirit. Until the kiln is opened, it is only faith upon which the artists rely. Though wood firing takes much planning, the outcome always has a range of possibilities. This range can be good or bad depending on the artistic framework. Nature has a significant role with wood firing. The elevation of the region, weather, and fuel are all important factors in the eventual outcome. Thus,

wood firing is a good fit with Flourishing Hope as it includes similar concepts to that of flora and positivity.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES

Using sculpture to display the fragility of the human spirit is a path traveled by other artists such as Stephen De Staebler. An international clay and bronze artist, De Staebler utilized his work to “call forth the many contingencies of the human condition, such as resiliency and fragility, growth and decay, earthly boundedness and the possibility for spiritual transcendence” (Wikipedia, n.d.). His work focused on abstract expressionism which is characterized “by non-objective imagery that appear[s] emotionally charged with personal meaning” (Khanacademy, n.d.). His primary medium was clay, however, he worked with bronze in order to create more gravity-defying forms. With bronze, he had the freedom to construct art that seemed to be “on the cusp of collapse” (Wikipedia, n.d.) Doing so allowed him to relate his work to the unstable nature of the human spirit. My work shows instability through fragility. The objects I make are counterbalanced to display the unstable nature of the material. They are delicately formed; therefore, they are pushing the material to its structural limit.

Andy Goldsworthy, a British sculptor, uses a process that includes pieces of nature like flowers, leaves, pinecones, and twigs. His conceptual focus on nature as being impermanent matches with his use of such material. He believes that “there is an intensity about work at its peak that [he] hope[s] is expressed in the image. Process and decay are implicit” (Metrick, 2003). By using a more permanent material such as clay, the lifespan of work increases, which may diminish the focus on decay, his original intent. Goldsworthy’s focus on the more negative aspect of nature (decay) may be in direct relationship to the products he uses during development of his art.

Peter Voulkos, an abstract expressionist during the mid-to-late 20th century, designed clay sculptures that “transformed clay into a medium that spoke to the human condition”

(Chattopadhyay, 2001). His work is visually heavy, more pronounced, and sturdy with ripping and tearing marks. These techniques can be described as more violent and aggressive in his approach. The scale of his work and the technique he was using was considered to be new, different, and eventually revolutionary. “Voukos’ work championed those very qualities in clay that had formerly been deemed its liabilities, such as clay’s humble relationship to the earth, its mutable, malleable essence, and its paradoxically durable yet fragile fired state . . . “ (Chattopadhyay, 2001). Voukos’ work is much more heavy than mine but we share a commonality in our interest in the human condition.

THE BUILDING OF FLOURISHING HOPE

The Bulbs. The process of building Flourishing Hope included building floral bulbs or pods via pinch pots. All of these are hand built and are made from red stoneware clay. The pinch pots are made using the palm of the hand and the tips of fingers. Small touches slowly begin to generate a form. Each pot grows as the repetitive movements of fingers and palm shape the form. During the creation of Flourishing Hope, this process was repeated over and over. This process is much like the consistent faith and work needed to grow positivity. Positivity starts small and it requires nurturing and repetitive efforts to overcome negativity.

WORK I - *The Bulbs*



The Shoots. The shoots are long thin coils made by rolling clay. One end of the shoot is tapered to emphasize upward sprouting growth much like the stem of a Surprise Lilly. The length of the coils ranged in size from 4-5 inches to 36 inches. The stems are rolled on a sheet of drywall and delicately shaped. The shoots become sprouts when connected to bulbs or pods. The long thin coils challenge the limitations of clay as a medium, which pushes the limitations of the

material. In the end, the shoots display fragility which represents the fragility of the human spirit as well as the fragility of flora.

WORK II - *The Shoots I*



WORK III - *The Shoots II – In Progress*



WORK IV - *The Shoots III – In Progress*



The Blooms. Blooms are tiny pinch pots assembled together. The blooms are comprised of 4 to 5 individual pinch pots. In order to create full shapes, air is trapped in the pinch pots. By doing so, they resemble expanded balloons rather than half deflated ones. Each bloom is a different size and a slightly different shape. The blooms lend visual weight as they are displayed next to the thin and long shoot representing the apex of growth.

WORK V - *The Blooms*



Three parts are assembled to complete the process: bulbs, shoots, and blooms. By making them separately and using concrete, metal pins and epoxy, the form and structure of the flowers is achievable. The process of building the individual pieces and the process of assembling the flowers (bulbs, shoots, and blooms) is a continued representation of the growth of flora as well as the growth of positivity within the human spirit. As the ceramic pieces are assembled, they grow from the ground up. Parts become whole. Individual pieces form a group, and groupings become a larger, more dynamic visual display. Epoxying parts and combining different colors open doors to giving harmony to what was once separate. This ceramic display represents the floral growth. I used parts from all areas within the kiln without emphasizing a few because it gives importance to the idea of community and not just a select few. Seeds become bulbs. Bulbs become shoots.

Shoots bloom. Individual flowers, when grouped together, show the strength and resilience of the growing season. This growth, too, can be compared to the growth of the positive human spirit and the human condition. One moment in time can spark a moment of happiness. That moment can grow into continued positivity. It is much like the cascading process that occurs each spring with early blooms later translating into hundreds of flowers and hundreds of blooms. Once the human spirit matures in a positive direction, it has the opportunity to spread – like a field of flowers or a ceramic display – to others. According to Weiten (2011), “Hope and optimism represent a stance toward the future and the goodness it might hold” (p.526).

WORK VI - *Flourishing Hope I*



WORK VII - *Flourishing Hope II*



WORK VIII – *Flourishing Hope III*



WORK IX - *Flourishing Hope IV*



CONCLUSION

Flourishing Hope demonstrates the ability of abstracted ceramic art to internally and externally display the growth of flora and the growth of positivity within the human spirit. Through its many pieces and parts to its dynamic final arrangements, this ceramic display demonstrates the ability of clay to conform to challenges presented and to adapt and become a powerful message.

This project would work well engaging a community of participants. Sharing the art experience is a way to share the growth of positivity within the human spirit. Introducing the element of sharing the art experience through the creative process is a way to spread the growth of positivity within the human spirit. By having the community engaged in the work, I would be sharing the art experience and removing the individual out of the work, thus strengthening my concept.

My work reflects a common story among humans. The work acknowledges that people struggle to remain positive, and yet the human spirit can overcome that struggle. The art forms visually depict that story. The flowers that worked so hard to bloom are examples of nature overcoming a struggle. In addition, the work is delicately balanced which relates to the human condition. My work brought life to such struggles and the way positivity grows, an idea which is not often discussed in everyday life. It taught me how to create an idea through structure. It taught me how to manage a concept within a project. Finally, I understand more about the intellectual journey of art.

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