

ABSTRACT

Vignettes of a Family

by
Leslie Pearson

December, 2011

Director: Christine Zoller

AREA of TEXTILE DESIGN

This written research document supports *Vignettes of a Family*, a mixed media art installation that examines memory and identity formation. Additionally, the transformative value of communication is explored through narrative therapy approaches such as letter writing and story telling. Through my investigations, I have deduced that having a better understanding of oneself is the key to understanding others.

Vignettes of a Family is a mixed media installation consisting of a series of ten digitally composed photographic images printed onto large-scale fabric panels. Within this body of work viewers are invited to share in the stories of triumph and hardships experienced by my own Midwestern American family.

Vignettes of a Family

A Thesis

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Master of Fine Art

by

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December, 2011

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INTRODUCTION

"Ninety percent of the world's woe comes from people not knowing themselves, their abilities, their frailties, and even their real virtues. Most of us go almost all the way through life as complete strangers to ourselves - so how can we know anyone else?" ~ Sidney J. Harris ~

During the past three years, I have worked toward developing a complex body of art that has at various times employed photographs, text, fabric, digital images, installation, audio, and video components. Using narrative as a counterpoint to imagery, my art explores life's complexities and offers insight into the human condition. I am interested in the way people absorb their everyday experiences and translate them into images and stories, specifically in terms of photographs, journal entries and letters. The majority of my work is autobiographical and reflects my thoughts about freedom, femininity, identity, overcoming personal limitations, and finding strength in things often considered weak or vulnerable.

Vignettes of a Family, is about the ways in which individual and collective memory shapes identity. In an effort to narrow down such a broad subject, I started with my own family history in an attempt to address universal concepts in a personal context. The questions "Who am I" and "Who are we?" are central throughout our lives and have long been a topic discussed among psychologists, spiritualists, and therapists. My goal for this body of work is to deal with memory as a tool to observing and understanding the past. Exploring memory becomes instrumental in defining and re-inventing identity. Memory is a process of retelling and connecting fragmented and dissipated stories in an effort to identify commonalities within the framework of "family".

EXPERIMENTS IN THERAPEUTIC APPROACHES

Much of the conceptual aspects of *Vignettes of a Family* were informed by the practices of psychotherapists Michael White and David Epston, who draw on the notion of narrative therapy through the use of letter writing. Narrative therapy holds that our identities are shaped by the accounts of our lives found in our stories. Within this framework of therapy, individuals are encouraged to tell their story or confront conflicts in a distanced way such as a written letter. This allows them to give a voice to their feelings and manage important emotional issues. This is very effective within the family dynamic because each member is able to see and better understand a situation or problem from the other's perspective. White and Epston's therapy revolves around the idea that "people experience problems when the stories of their lives, as they or others have invented them, do not sufficiently represent their lived experience. Therapy then becomes a process of 'storying' or 'restorying' the lives and experiences of these people" (White and Epston, 1990).

When I started working on this thesis, I could not help but feel that it would be therapeutic in many ways, to unearth the stories of my family history. I was not even sure why I wanted to do it, other than to have a better understanding of who I am, where I came from, and how these things have defined who I am today. My sister, who is only 17 months younger than I, has acted as a sounding board, correcting, clarifying, and adding to my foggy memories. Throughout the months of talking and reminiscing, there were many times when we had to stop and take a break. There were situations, behaviors, and family dynamics that we just could not wrap our minds around. The "whys" were still hanging in midair, but I continued on, knowing there was significance to the questions and an importance to the telling and understanding of my past. During this time, I discovered the work of media artist Adrienne Finelli, who uses

experimental documentary methods to give a voice to what often remains unsaid within the family structure. She describes family history as being shifting and dynamic, told through stories and memories, but never fully revealed. According to Finelli, “Many perspectives entangle and even contradict each other, creating new questions, further blurring the truth”. She creates single-channel videos, audio collages and multimedia installations in an effort to help people deal with the difficult chapters in a family’s story that become concealed secrets which are gradually buried and erased with each passing generation. With a social work lens, she acts as a mediator and the project functions as a type of intervention (Finelli, <http://www.adriannefinelli.com>).

Finelli’s work gave me the personal justification I needed to combine my interests in therapy with the visual arts as I pursued the themes of my memories and identity. This style of journalistic documentation, in conjunction with narrative therapy approaches, was the methodology I used when gathering stories for *Vignettes of a Family*. I conducted interviews, asked lots of questions, visited gravesites, wandered down familiar roads, recorded audio transcriptions and took video footage. These new stories became the collected memories I added to my own. I combined this new information with old photographs, journal entries, hand written letters and other collected ephemera. I thought of this research as an experiment in my own personal family therapy.

White and Epston use letter writing as a way of exploring the shaping moments of a person's life, the turning points, the key relationships, and certain memories that are still at the forefront of the mind. Usually, the focus is drawn to the intentions, dreams, and values that have guided a person's life despite the setbacks. “Often, the process brings back stories that have been overlooked - surprising stories that speak of forgotten competence and heroism” (White and

Epston, 1990). I found this observation to be completely applicable in many of the letters written in the research conducted for *Vignettes of a Family*.

The use of text is a recurring element within each fabric panel. It is incorporated as a visual representation of communication and as a way to draw out an emotional connection with the viewer.

In *Chronic Illness: Trauma, language, and writing: Breaking the Silence*, family therapist Peggy Penn writes, "our emotions are expressive acts and have powerful effects on the body...to be able to express your deep feelings around illness to those you love, produces physical relief and frees others to respond in kind". Penn also states, "I have been intrigued by the possibilities of helping people change the ways they see themselves and their relationships to important people in their lives through letter writing. I have found that whether the letters are sent, or whether the people to whom clients are writing are even alive; is not necessarily the point . . . We are all storytellers and the story that consumes us the most is the one we tell ourselves about our own lives (Penn, 2001).

In the following letter, my mom expresses her gratitude to her deceased mother for the sacrifices she made as a single parent. It is clear that the focus of the memory is built on the intentions of my grandma's actions:

26 April 2011

Dear Mom,

I want to tell you what a great mother you were. I know the road you traveled was a very rocky road. Taking care of two children by yourself, and putting up with all the mischief we could possibly get into wasn't easy. Working as many hours at your job that you could so we could have the things we needed and sometimes just something we wanted. I remember the long, black wig you bought me when I was in high school. After I saw it and tried it on nothing would do me but to have it. I think you scraped together every bit of extra money you could then went to the wig shop to buy it for me. I didn't

like myself back then and I thought any change would be for the better. All the time you knew what was going on. You helped me see and understand that change comes from within.

Mom I miss those great big hugs and having your shoulder to cry on, and hearing you say that everything is going to be alright, even if it wasn't. If I pass on anything to my children, it would be to share what you have and God will provide. I don't know how you did it but you always had more than enough and some to spare and share. I love you more than words could ever say.

Your loving daughter,

Debbie

After I received the letter in the mail, I asked my mom how it made her feel to write it, and if it offered any closure in terms of her mother's death. She said, "Letters always represent distance. Since her death was sudden, writing to her did help but I don't really want closure. I have so many memories of her and she's in my heart. We were and still are so close. People only need closure if they don't want to keep something open in their heart and mind."

As basic and simple as it seems to be, I believe the act of letter writing, sharing stories, and reflecting on the past has the potential to connect us to a deeper sense of ourselves. This is significant because our memories are key to identity formation, and memories can shape a person's perception of oneself in relationship to the world.

In a conversation with author Mauro Spicci called *Museums, Memory and the Shaping of Identity*, Professor Eviatar Zerubavel (Rutgers University) points out that memory is the process by which we transform unstructured past events into coherent historical narrations. "I actually think that past events are not very likely to have much meaning if they are not put into narratives," said Zerubavel. "Each event by itself has to be understood within a particular context, and that context is the narrative" (Spicci, 2011). He goes on to say that connecting one event to the context of another can give it a very different narrative and therefore will have a very different meaning. I believe this to be true in terms of the way two people can remember the

same scenario differently. Each person's perception of the experience can differ greatly depending on the way their previous experiences have influenced their point of view.

During a recent time of talking and sharing stories with my family, I realized just how differently we experienced the same situation. There were parts left out, and parts made up. In the telling and listening, my memories were changed, enlightened, and enriched. Not always for the better, but at least they became more accurate. I could literally see how collective memory plays a role in the reshaping of identity. As a child, I realized that my parents had worries and discord. Their incompatibility often overshadowed everything else. At one point my mom said, "it seems like all you remember are bad things, don't you remember..." and she went into several memories of her own and told of good times and fun experiences we have had together. Although I did not have these memories stored in my personal memory bank, knowing them now changes the way I feel about family and myself.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF SELF

There is something fundamental about wanting to understand the way we are and wanting to find meaning, purpose, and direction from our past. Sociologist Sarah Mequio, in her paper *The Formation of Personal Identity*, notes that the journey of self-discovery cannot be accomplished alone. “It involves taking into account various influences, people, and opportunities experienced throughout life” (Mequio, 2009).

According to New York University professor Marita Sturken, in a paper called *The Politics of Video Memory*, "The search for history represents a search for stability, community, and a home". Identity is constructed through the remembrance of certain historical moments, as well as through the forgetting and re-scripting of certain events. Yet, history outside of personal memory can be somewhat elusive and intangible (Sturken, 1996). That is the beauty of collective memory. Shared stories allow us to fill in the gaps and even see things in an entirely different way. Collective memory is the beliefs, propositions, and interpretations that others can learn through sharing and listening. The personal story is a cultural vehicle for identity acquisition. There is a strong link between personal storytelling and self-understanding (Cain, 1991).

I am interested in the social psychology of Self, specifically as it pertains to family. Thoughts, feelings, and behaviors are all variables that can be assessed in a person. We are all prone to social influence, even when we are not totally aware of it. Theories in sociology come from research into the everyday interpersonal relations influenced by past relationships. These external things shape individuals and influence their behavior (Allport, 1924).

There are also the private and covert aspects of Self – the internal thoughts, feelings, desires, and fears experienced but not necessarily expressed. Painful emotions and memories are

often put out of mind by the mechanism of psychological repression. These repressed memories also play a role in self-definition. Carl Jung, founder of analytical psychology, maintained that the exploration of the unconscious leads to self-knowledge (Jung, 1974).

Echoing Jung's view of the Self as being circular, I created *Vignettes of a Family* with a spherical component and injected my personal philosophy of the Self as being made up of body, spirit, and soul, with the conscious, unconscious, and the ego consisting within one of those areas. This is further elaborated on in the section titled Process, Materials, and Components.

BEYOND SELF – LIVING RELATIONALLY

One's sense of self is not fully developed by existing in isolation. "Because we identify ourselves partly in terms of kinship and other interpersonal relations and group memberships, other people must form a substantial part of our self-concept" (Marcus and Cross, 1990). Understanding yourself is important but finding freedom from Self through relationships with others is a key to feeling whole.

Without understanding the significance of communication, or how important it is to push through the uncomfortable parts of relationships, the easiest thing to do is just throw in the towel and say, "why bother with people, people just hurt each other". We need relationships because they help to define us and help us to move beyond ourselves. I am naturally more of an introvert and prefer the quiet peacefulness of my studio or a night in with a good book, to a crowded party any day of the week. However, I believe that there is a part of everyone who has a desire to share in community. While we are individuals, we are individuals dependent on relationships. Isolating ourselves from others only stifles us and makes us selfish, self-centered, and self-seeking.

Dr. Maxwell Maltz, in his book *Psycho Cybernetics*, said, "To live creatively, we must be willing to be a little vulnerable. We must be willing to be hurt a little, if necessary, in creative living. A lot of people need a thicker and tougher emotional skin than they have. But they need only a tough emotional hide or epidermis - not a shell. To trust, to love, to open ourselves to emotional communication with other people is to run the risk of being hurt. If we are hurt once, we can do one of two things. We can build a thick protective shell, or scar tissue, to prevent being hurt again, live like an oyster, and not be hurt. Or we can 'turn the other cheek,' remain vulnerable and go on living creatively" (Maltz, 1960).

PROCESS, MATERIALS, and COMPONENTS

Vignettes of a Family is a mixed media installation consisting of a series of ten digitally composed photographic images printed onto large-scale fabric panels. The panels are approximately 40 inches wide and vary in size from six to eight feet in length. Each panel is heavily hand embroidered and machine stitched to add an additional sense of color, depth, and dimension to the overall linear compositions. Each printed and stitched panel is combined with two hand-dyed panels of silk organza to create a triangular column of fabric that is suspended from the ceiling of the exhibition space. Within each of the triangular columns floats a fiber based sculptural element made up of several hollow, spherical forms that are grouped together in a linear format. The spheres are arranged by size from smallest to largest and smallest again, with the largest sphere resting approximately at the viewer's eye level.

The Panels

The printed fabric panels were created using scanned photographs, letters, and other personal ephemera. Using Adobe Photoshop, I constructed digitally collaged images with multiple layers. During this process I sorted through a variety of images and selected those I felt best represented the essence of each person I wanted to represent.

The hand embroidery was an important meditative process that forced me to sit and stitch for hundreds of hours. While my hands were busy, my mind was free to think about and digest the underlying reasons for the project, the people, and the stories that have played a part in constructing my memories, which have in turn shaped my identity. For me, the act of hand stitching is a very personal, sensory experience. Although laborious at times, there is a satisfaction derived from the rhythmic, ordered process, and body involvement. There is a meditative quality that occurs in working steadily with a single-minded intention that forces me

to slow down and quiet myself long enough to think and be in the moment. The stitching also adds a tactile quality, and an added layer of depth and dimension to the piece. The free motion machine stitching was a way for me to work a little more freely and spontaneously as I responded intuitively to shapes and lines, creating visual paths and extensions within the compositions using thread.

The silk organza panels are transparent and ethereal allowing the viewer to see through into the heart/core of the Self. Through my research, I have come to understand that when you get to know people, you get to know them from other angles and perspectives. Aesthetically, the spherical, triangular, and rectangular shapes that coexist within each column offer a sense of balance and variety. In the exhibition space, the ten fabric columns are suspended from the ceiling in a manner that serves as a path for viewers to pass through.

Significance of the Spheres

The spherical forms represent the multifaceted and multidimensional nature of people. They also represent the cyclical nature of how memory shapes identity. The circular form is such a powerful symbol with philosophical and psychological theories that relate the Self in conjunction to everything else. In an excerpt from *Being Spherical*, authors Phil Lawson and Robert L. Lindstrom describe the sphere as myth and metaphor:

“...As a symbolic representation of three-dimensional space, the sphere encompasses all things knowable - the atom, the cell, the earth, the sky and the universe. The sphere is the great container of all that is available to our senses and our scientific sensors. In the world of time, the circle represents the beginning, the end and a return to the beginning. The sphere and the circle represent both the journey and the destination. What is it that makes the sphere so pervasive and so mighty? Why does it appear with such regularity and prominence in every culture, region,

faith and epoch? Why does the sphere inhabit even our dreams? Because, when thinking about the sphere, or when using it to describe our experience, we are contemplating the totality of interconnection. In the sphere, we see everything in relationship to everything else. In the sphere we see the patterns of being” (Lawson and Lindstrom, 2004).

Making the spheres was a two-person job. My sister Leigh was my assistant. I set out to create something that would be ethereal and structurally sound. There was much trial and error before arriving at the final method employed in making the sculptural forms. Lengths of coarse yarn were coated in a mixture of water, white glue, and Plaverpol, a fabric stiffener. The soaked yarn was wrapped around rubber punch balls blown up to different sizes. When dry, the balls were popped and a hollow shell remained. The spheres were joined together and coated with a neutral colored spray paint to further seal and protect them. Over one hundred spheres were created for this installation.

Significance of the triangular form

In *Vignettes of a Family*, the triangular forms represent my personal philosophy from a Christian perspective regarding the three parts of man – the body, the soul, and the spirit. I believe that man was created as body and soul and is transformed by the indwelling of the Holy Spirit, and therefore, is three parts.

STORIES

"Stories move in circles. They don't go in straight lines. So it helps if you listen in circles. There are stories inside stories and stories between stories, and finding your way through them is as easy and as hard as finding your way home. And part of the finding is the getting lost. And when you're lost, you start to look around and to listen." ~ Deena Metzger ~

The individual fabric panels are a series of ethnographic vignettes. I use story telling as way to bring focus on individual moments or to give an impression of a character, an idea, or a setting. The stories are derived from both personal and collective memories. In some cases, the photographic images have become substitutes for real memories.

Theorists suggest that memory is not the only thing that can contribute to identity, but that the network of beliefs, values, desires, or the links between intentions and the later actions that carry them out can also serve as identity-constituting connections between persons at different times (Schechtman, 2005). It was in the writing of the following personal reflections that I have been able to find identity marking commonalities with my family, past and present.



Plate 1 - Pioneer Woman



Plate 2 - Pioneer Woman, detail #1

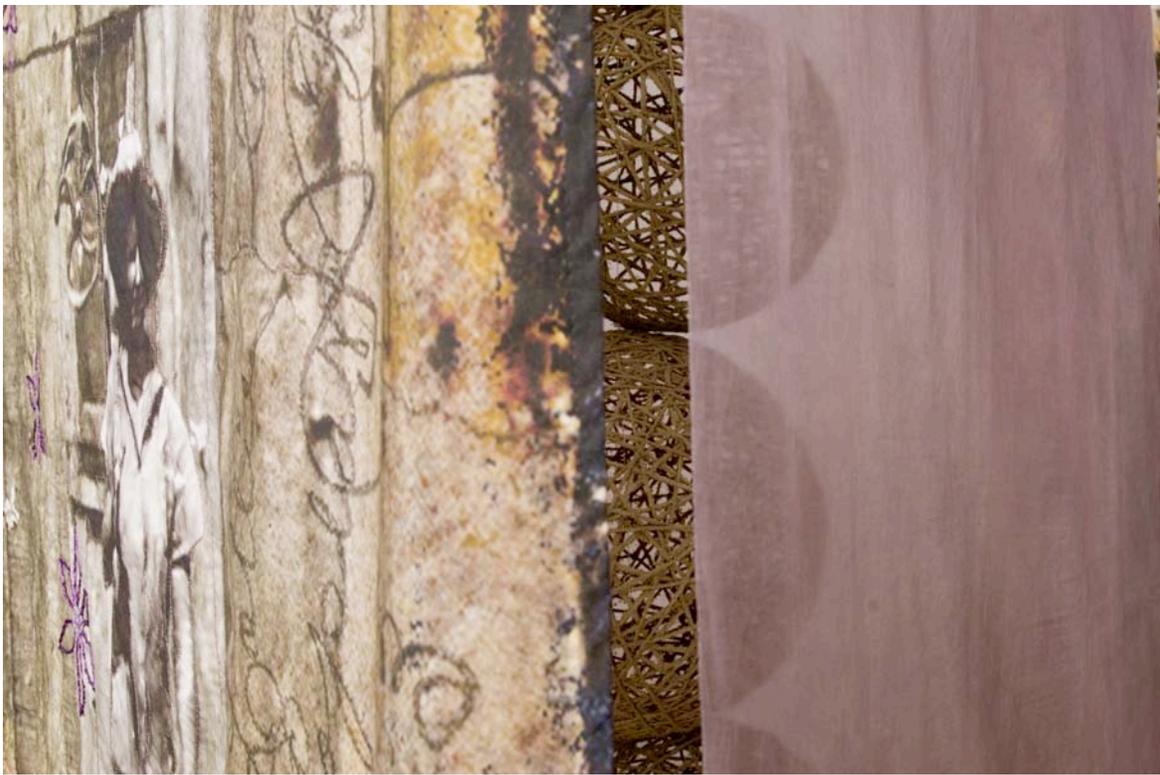


Plate 3 - Pioneer Woman, detail #2

Pioneer Woman (Plate 1)

Charlotte Rosetta (Stage) Casey, also known as “Lottie”, was the head of a homesteading family in a rural Missouri town called Poplar Bluff. She was a hardworking wife and mother of eight children. The town was named for the beautiful, tulip blooming poplar trees that covered the bluffs overlooking the Black River, which became the county seat in the mid 1800’s. The Casey’s made their way there from Kentucky and laid down roots. Generations later this is where I was born and raised.

The photo of Lottie included in Plate 1 was taken in the early 1900's during the construction of her home, which was being built on the family farm. Holding a pickaxe in each hand, the smile on her face shows that she is not afraid of a little hard work. The hand-embroidered purple flowers are the feminine balance to the masculine work she is performing. The floral pattern is based on a fabric design found on a dress she made for herself, and which I now have. Among the few material things left of Lottie are some photos, her marriage license, and an old scrap of paper marked "a family record" where she had written a list of names with births and deaths. This record was included in the digitally collaged panel to suggest a point of departure for the work.

Lottie had five children with her first husband, Joseph Marlette and after he died, she married James Turner Casey in February 1914. She had three more children, one of them, my grandmother Mildred. When Grandma was 13, her dad was working in an iron ore mine in the nearby town of Keener. Recent rains had caused a landslide within the mine, which trapped several men including James Casey. When they tried to pull him free, his broken ribs punctured his heart and his lung. Life was hard on the Casey family after James was gone, as he was their only source of income. Lottie continued to put out a big garden twice a year and they lived off of

what they grew. She canned, raised chickens, and somehow managed to get by. Eventually Lottie started doing odd jobs for a local family who owned a small general store. She washed their laundry and cleaned their house for 50 cents a week, which she traded in at the store for beans, rice, and other things they needed.

My aunt described Lottie as a well-liked woman who had a good sense of humor. Although I never got to meet Lottie in person, I did get to know her spirit through the life of my grandma. Lottie didn't let her struggles get the best of her. She kept moving forward and did what she had to do to survive. I admire her internal fortitude and like to think that the same strength runs through my veins.



Plate 4 - The Matriarch



Plate 5 -The Matriarch, detail #1



Plate 6 - The Matriarch, detail #2

The Matriarch (Plate 4)

Journal entry, September 20, 2011

As I'm writing this excerpt, my grandma is lying in a hospital bed in Missouri and is not expected to live out the week. The 16-hour drive that separates me from her seems like an eternity. At 96 years old, her body is frail and weak. Seeing her like this will be hard because she's always been so physically and mentally strong. In fact, she's the strongest person I've ever known and I would not be who I am without her. Selfishly, I want her to keep fighting to live, but her quality of life is so poor now I know she will be better off to surrender.

My identity is rooted and grounded in the strong matriarchal influences with which I was raised. My dad was the hardworking, silent type. He was there physically but seemed emotionally absent. Although he was loving and affectionate, he did not like to share his feelings or talk about important relational issues. His way of communicating was to ignore the problem or erupt in a violent explosion of anger; there was never an in-between. He escaped into his work where he spent the majority of his time. My mom struggled with her own issues and raising four kids was not easy. Luckily, my grandma lived next door. She filled in as a mother figure in all the ways my own mom could not. My siblings and I could count on her for everything. She was reliable and dependable, and not easily given over to her own emotions. She only thought of us. As a child, I never thought of my grandma as being a woman with hopes and dreams, or as having a youthful past with great loves. I thought that her life revolved around us, and the big pots of chicken and dumplings, soft yeast rolls, and hot blackberry cobblers she could make without even looking at a recipe.

Over the years, as I started paying attention and listening to her talk about her life, I realized there was so much more to who she was than a soft lap. She had a richness of spirit that was earned by the sweat of her brow, heartaches, loves, and losses. She was a woman who was

always in forward motion; there was never an end to her industriousness. She was the epitome of willful determination.

In 1916, Grandma was born in a log cabin and grew up on her family's farm in the rural town of Poplar Bluff, Missouri during the great depression. She loved riding her horse and being outdoors. When they did not have much to eat she would crave lard and onion sandwiches, which, according to her, was a real treat to get at the time. She said she used to dream of growing up and being able to eat whenever and whatever she wanted, but by that time the doctors started talking about how everything good to eat was bad for your health. I guess that explains why she always tried to love us with food.

She attended a one-room country schoolhouse where students ranged from first to eighth grade. Back then, as Grandma would say, the rule was 'spare the rod and spoil the child'. But she loved going to school and passed all eight grades. I learned all the basics from her - reading, writing, arithmetic, how to tell time, and how to cook.

On January 20, 1935 Grandma married her "sweet heart" John. They moved a few miles down the road and started their own family. Her first baby was a miscarriage that she buried under a flowerbed in a little makeshift casket made from a matchbox. Her second child, Jerry Lee was only eighteen months old when he contracted dysentery, an inflammatory disorder of the intestines. He had been very sick and then one morning he woke up full of energy and played all morning. Eventually he crawled up in Grandma's lap and she rocked him to sleep. After a while she realized he had died in her arms. I cannot imagine going through that kind of pain at such a young age without letting the root of bitterness take hold. She went on to have three more boys and a girl.

She took pride in the things she had and kept a clean house. Even though her sheets were only the worn out, discards from the Holiday Inn were she used to work as a cook, she would iron them after they dried on the line and would never let us get in bed with dirty feet.

On my last visit home she gave me a small metal box filled with things she thought I might like to keep. Inside the box were a few photos, a little bible, a lock of hair, the death certificate of her brother, and several brass bullets. I remembered the time she told me about how her brother had committed suicide in his home by shooting himself in the heart. These were the bullets that were found near his body. She was the one who went in and cleaned up the bloody mess and then made all of the arrangements for his funeral. The gravity of that set in as I held the bullets in my hand, knowing how hard that must have been for her to do. It is this strength that I admire so much about her.

Journal entry: September 22, 2011

Grandma was buried in a baby blue casket, in a grave behind the little Baptist Church that she had belonged to since 1952. Nestled there between my grandpa and my dad, I know I don't have to worry about her anymore. She was old and worn out but had a beauty that didn't diminish with time; it deepened and increased.

This woman was a role model to me for over 30 years, instilling in me her values, morals, work ethic, character, determination, stubbornness, and quiet dignity. She always worked hard for everything, and gave generously. She constantly thought of others before herself, and would have given the shirt off her back or her last bite to eat. She was a woman to be admired and celebrated; she was kindness, gentleness, and a soft place to fall. She cared for me, nurtured me, taught me, prayed for me, and continually loved me without asking for, or expecting, anything in return.

In the collaged image, grandma stands seemingly small yet powerful in her seat as

matriarch. A handwritten recipe in the upper right hand corner of the panel gives insight into her passion for cooking. The large tree she stands in front of represents her legacy. She leaves behind a lineage as long as Abraham, having had an influence in the lives of her children, grandchildren, great grandchildren, and great-great grandchildren. From Grandma, I learned how to love unconditionally. She did not hold on to the past, she was always in the moment and had the ability to forgive and love people in spite of themselves. Everyone needs someone in their life who can continue to love them no matter what.



Plate 7 - Working Man's Pride



Plate 8 - Working Man's Pride, detail #1



Plate 9 - Working Man's Pride, detail #2

Working Man's Pride (Plate 7)

"I am pleased with my hands...My hands do tell many stories. They are manly hands. A working man's hands." ~ Dylan Thomas ~

I have no personal memory of my grandpa John. Having died when I was only two, all I know of him comes from the images seen in old photographs and in the random little stories I have heard along the way. In the photos I have, he seems like a happy man. There is one of him standing with his coworker at the local high school where he worked as a janitor; he is smiling proudly with broom in hand. I chose this image as the focus of the fabric panel *Working Man's Pride*, because I think it best represents his character. Within the design is an old bank loan statement for twenty-five dollars. My grandma kept this paperwork for the next forty-something years as proof that the loan had been paid in full. He was a man who paid his debts.

He was a hard working, honest man who was devoted to his family and involved in his church. Among the few photographs was a little stack of his deacon's certificates. He renewed his standing each year as a deacon at Oak Hill General Baptist Church. The card reads: *This certifies that John Stucker of Butler County, and State of Missouri having heretofore been duly ordained, has this day been examined as to his moral, Christian and official standing by this Presbytery, and, being found worthy he is hereby approved and commended to all men as a worthy Christian deacon.*

Although I only knew him for a short time, his memory was ever present. I grew up on the land he and my grandma bought years earlier and was surrounded by people who knew and loved him. His smile could be seen on my dad's face, and my uncle's sense of humor and family values is a mirror of his own.



Plate 10 - Cancer is a Thief



Plate 11 - Cancer is a Thief, detail #1



Plate 12 - Cancer is a Thief, detail #2

Cancer is a Thief (Plate 10)

My dad's cancer journey began in 1996. It came as a shock to all of us when he was diagnosed and given six months to live. I was in my first year of art school and terrified at losing him to this terrible disease. He fought hard for two years going through the routine of chemotherapy treatments and emotional ups and downs. He dealt with his illness daily with an ebb and flow of emotions that ranged from fear, determination to overcome, despair, depression, anger, and finally, to acceptance, and forgiveness. It was during these two very painful years that my father developed a relationship with God. He found peace in his heart before he took his last breath. I was in the room when he died. As I held his hand, the last thing he said to me was, "everything I ever did was for you kids." In his final stages he was only a shell of who he used to be with his weight loss and vacant stare. His glasses were twice too big for his sunken face, which left him nearly unrecognizable. Cancer stole his body, but my father's presence lives on in our hearts and memories. In this life there are lessons that can only be learned by going through difficult experiences. It was at this place in my life that I realized I'm tougher than I thought I was. I was able to confront death and go on with my own life. As a young girl sitting with my dad as he lay dying, I held his hand and told him to go; that it was ok to die and that we would be ok. I discovered an inner strength that I did not even know I had.

People who are ill often struggle with issues of identity. According to A.W. Frank in *The Wounded Storyteller*, as ill people try to clarify who they are in the light of the illness, their inner voices tend to revolve around concepts such as: I cannot be who I was before. Do I know who I am now? How do I make my way to the next viable me? Sharing this inner dialogue can be therapeutic (Frank, 1986).

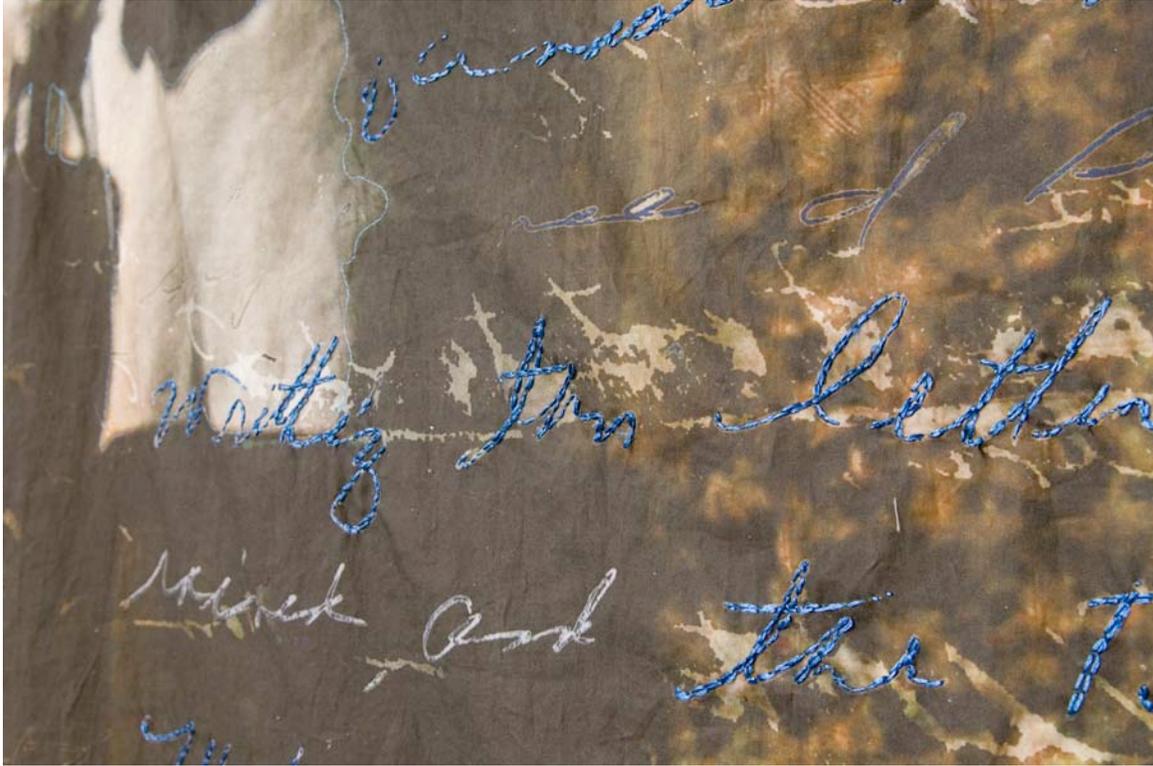
I observed this kind of behavior in my dad as he started to deteriorate. He was always able to preoccupy his mind with work and push his problems to the back burner. He was a mechanic, an auto electrician, and he owned his own business. It was very hard for him to accept that he could not do the physical labor that he did in the past. I believe it was his constant worrying that instigated his illness to begin with. The more he worried the sicker he became. His sense of identity shifted. If he was no longer the provider and the breadwinner, then who was he? This caused him to slip into a sad state of depression. He stopped communicating. When he died I opened the journal hoping to read special insights into his life or some shared wisdom. Unfortunately, the pages were filled with accounts of his efforts to do this or that in his shop or how he tried to go to work but got sick and had to stop, or how frustrated he was at not being able to work. The fact that he even bothered to write these things down was something outside of his character. There was no mention of his children or of his feelings beyond anger and frustration.

Had I understood the power of narrative therapy then, I would have written down my questions and encouraged my dad to write about his feelings. The focus of this kind of work, according to therapist Peggy Penn, is to "break the silence that turns the space between speakers into stone, and to help people regain a conversation in which they can rediscover intimacy and clarity" (Penn, 2001). The truth is, it is hard to look at someone you love who is dying and admit that you are afraid of what it will be like if they die. It seems selfish, especially when death is not something they can control. In my father's case, it was hard to confess his fears to those he loved, especially his spouse and children. These discussions could have been less painful in a written letter.

The collaged image shows my dad as a young man full of strength. On a rare fishing excursion with his dad and his older brother, he looks healthy and hopeful. The hand-embroidered cancer cells seem to overtake the image as they move across the composition. In the upper right hand corner is a photo taken near the end of his life. His expression is one of sadness and worry. He died at age 46, his weight having dwindled to only 114 pounds. To me, this image represents a true dichotomy of desired expectations and harsh reality. In many ways I still feel a sense disconnect when I think of my dad. I never question his love, but I have learned that communicating is important, no matter how hard it may be at the moment.



Panel 13 - Everyday Sacred



Panel 14 - Everyday Sacred, detail #1



Panel 15 - Everyday Sacred, detail #2

Everyday Sacred (Panel 13)

My great-grandma Clara was known for her pies. Her favorite, custard pie, was a very rich one made with simple ingredients. It was a plain mixture of milk, eggs, sugar, salt, and vanilla baked together in a buttery, homemade crust. She was born in 1904 in Greenville, Missouri where farm fresh eggs and milk were plentiful. She had a hard life raising her children on her own when her husband Curtis died in a blast fishing accident. They had three sons and one daughter, my grandma Hazel who we've always called BeBe. Clara never remarried but stayed close to her children as they grew into adults.

Although I did spend time with her, I only remember her as "old". She was a little lady with soft hands and a toothless grin. She shuffled around her apartment in house slippers, adjusting her hearing aids, and making coffee. She fell asleep so often in her rocking chair that there was a bald spot on the chair and on the back of her head where the two rubbed together.

The collaged fabric panel shows Clara in front of her home in Poplar Bluff, Missouri. Halos radiate from her, while her solemn expression and firm stance suggest a quiet dignity. A letter telling of her days spent talking with neighbors and picking tomatoes, is embroidered across the panel. She was dominated by a nervous condition fed by constant worrying and a fear of "what might happen". Therefore, she lived out her life as simply as she could. She found comfort in the ordinary rituals she created for herself and longed for peace and quiet. Her home was a sanctuary where she felt safe away from the unknown dangers of the world. Although I do not know much about her life, she was still an important figure in the history of my family, particularly in terms of the way her presence influenced the identity of my grandma and my mother.



Panel 16 - One Tough Broad



Panel 17 - One Tough Broad, detail #1



Panel 18 - One Tough Broad, detail #2

One Tough Broad (Plate 16)

Bebe lived in a little apartment in the housing projects on the south side of Poplar Bluff. We took turns spending the night with her on the weekends and during the summer, and relished in the conveniences that “town” living had to offer. A weekend at Bebe’s meant watching cable television, playing with neighborhood kids, and enjoying central heating and air conditioning. We would make quick runs to the grocery store and buy ice cream cones from McDonald’s. She always smelled like a medley of *Pall Mall* cigarettes, *Wrigley’s* spearmint gum, *Downy* fabric softener, and *Secret* deodorant. She was younger than my other grandma, spontaneous at times, and more fun. Unlike my grandma Stucker who was always cutting a switch off a tree to spank us with, Bebe never had to discipline us. We knew to be on our best behavior or else we might not get to come back to visit for a while. She loved to eat and was always thinking about food. She made the world’s best fried chicken. Actually, she could make the best fried anything. Her day-to-day routine was so non-eventful no one would ever guess what a full life she had lived as a young woman.

She was an avid canner and we learned about her life while popping bushels of green beans around her kitchen table. We would pop and talk the day away. She talked about her loves and her heartbreaks, her struggles, her restaurant and factory jobs, and her life as a single mom left to raise two children. Her first marriage did not work out, her second husband was an alcoholic, and her third husband was a louse who already had several kids of his own. Bebe could not stand having those kids around so one day when Fred was at work, she packed them up, put them on a train, and sent them back to their real mother. The lady had moxie.

She worked for years as the manager of a little place called Scott’s Café. She was a no nonsense woman who the locals called “Hard Rock”. Back then she was a thin, chain smoker

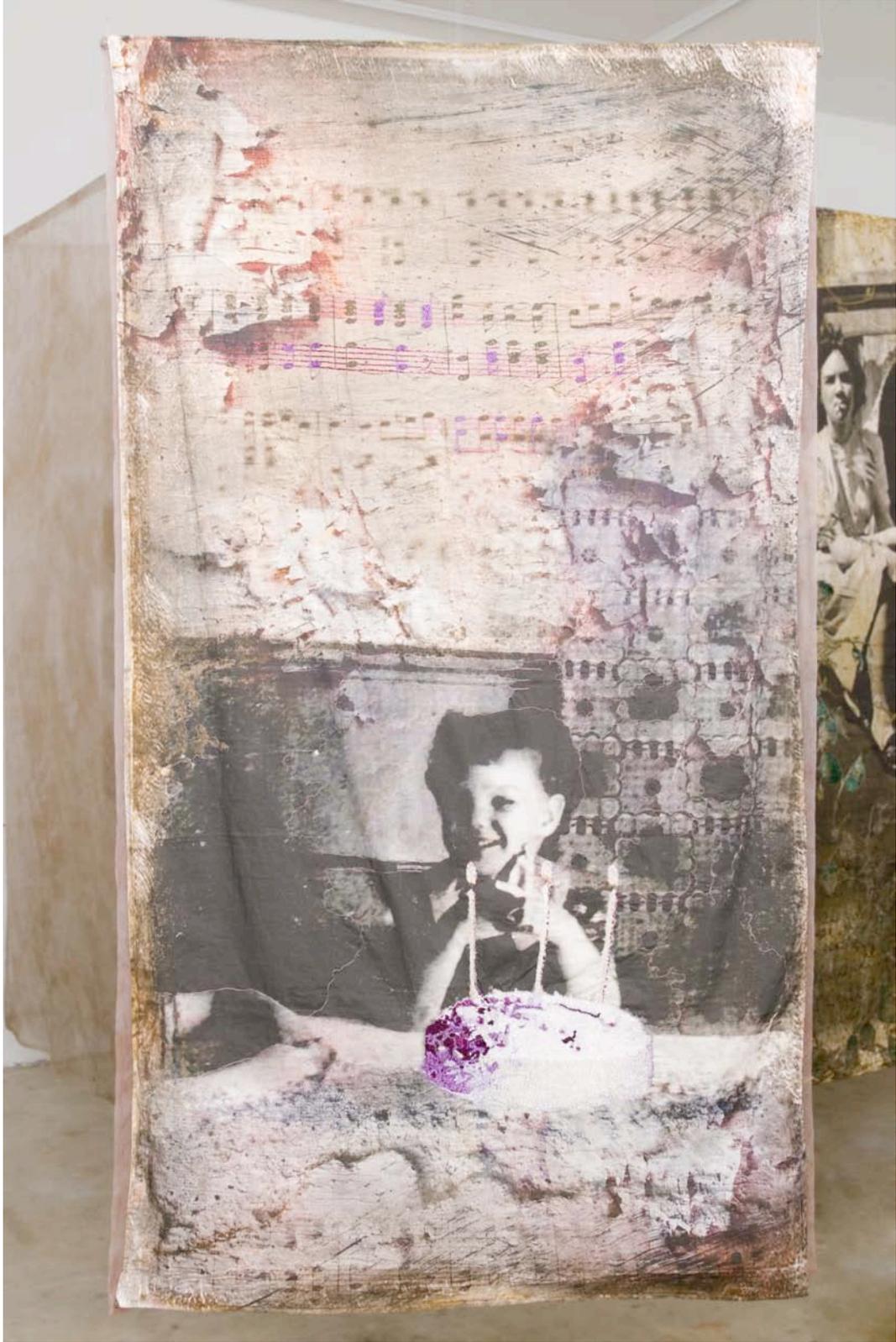
with a stern look and a sharp tongue. My mom once said, “the Bebe you know is not the mom I grew up with.” Bebe also told her, “if you ever see your dad, you’ll know it’s him because he’ll have a scar across his face where I slashed him with a jagged whiskey bottle when I left him.” I was told about her addiction to nerve pills and about the time she tried to cut herself off cold turkey and ended up in a mental hospital. My uncle said that one day he came home and found her standing on her bed trying to “pick the pretty flowers”. She thought she was in a field of flowers, but it was just her wallpaper. I just cannot imagine her like that at all. I guess time and age softened her; she stopped smoking and gained weight.

She was no stranger to sacrifice and had to work hard every day to pay her bills. She lived on a limited income and couldn't afford to buy Christmas or birthday presents. It did not matter because being with her was peaceful and when you walked in the door of her modest home, her arms would fly open in greeting and you could get lost in her rolls. Nothing will ever feel as good to me as one of her hugs.

She had a sense of humor and an edge about her that came out at unexpected moments. Watching television with her was fun because if she saw a good looking man she would say, “whew, I’d like to shake the sheets with him” or “uhmm, I’d like to wake up with his boots under my bed.” This was so funny because she would say them with her snow-white hair up in rollers, her heavy breasts resting on her big belly, and her teeth soaking in cup nearby. All of this “beautification” done, of course, for Sunday’s church service.

What I admired about this woman was her spunky tenacity. She used to say, “if there’s nothing you can do about it then don’t cry about it either, crying only makes your eyes swollen and your head hurt.” From Bebe I learned that no matter what life brings my way, I can handle it.

The collaged image shows Bebe as a young woman sitting in the window smoking a cigarette. A ghost image of my mom's dad fades away into the background. A hand embroidered green bean vine winds its way throughout the panel. The text layered within the composition is from the letter previously discussed on page eight.



Panel 19 - Birthday Wishes



Panel 20 - Birthday Wishes, detail #1



Panel 21 - Birthday Wishes, detail #2

Birthday Wishes (Plate 19)

Behind my mom's smiling face is a little girl who never really felt loved and valued. She did not know her dad, an alcoholic who left when she was about three years old. Starting at around eight years old, she suffered repeated sexual abuse from her stepfather when he returned home from the Army with a dishonorable discharge. No one ever knew about the abuse. Her mother eventually divorced the man and raised her and her brother as a single parent working full time. They lived in government housing. My grandma Bebe used to work at a restaurant called Scott's Café, and would often work such long hours that she would send dinner home to my mom in a taxi. Eventually, mom developed an addiction to nerve pills and other prescription drugs. When asked what led to the addiction she said, "any kind of bad addiction is a form of escapism. I was always worried, even as a little girl that I would not be taken care of. I never knew what it was like to have a father's love, someone to hold me and hug me without feeling threatened. I couldn't trust easily. Fear was prominent, so to escape the fear I tried to put myself in a spiritual and physical coma."

A traumatic experience like sexual abuse can leave a lasting emotional scar that often carries over into adulthood, frequently setting fear-patterns into motion that last throughout life (LaHaye, 1994). Therapist Peggy Penn points out that writing is a means to give ill or traumatized people a voice. The person is able to affect himself and others by naming the things that have lived in the shadows and to begin conversations that have otherwise been silenced. Writing empowers, and according to Penn, "perhaps most importantly, is that when we write we are no longer being done to: we are doing" (Penn, 2001).

My mom's addiction has affected her life and my life. It has been an issue too sensitive to talk about and too hurtful to ignore. Over time the problem has become like a cement wedge between us. It has been the obvious elephant in the room that we have sidestepped around. I have been confused by it and have often detached myself emotionally as a way to protect myself from being hurt or disappointed. What filled the space between us was silence and distance. It was only when I started this body of work that were we able to discuss the abuse and she was able to open up to me about what started it and how she has felt all these years: wounded, unworthy, unloved, and afraid. She is in a much better emotional place now and is finally getting control of her prescription drug addiction.

For me this was a testimony to the power of the narrative therapy approaches I had been researching. Mom shared these intimate details of her past with me in a text message. I was bold enough to ask questions and she was courageous enough to answer them. I read words as they came across the screen and felt like I was "hearing" mom's voice for the first time. It was an honest, direct and vulnerable conversation for both of us, and yet the texting allowed for a safe distance to express ourselves without the awkwardness of being face-to-face. Since this first started, we have continued our talks in person. My research has helped me to understand the need to really try and listen, to be patient, and to see things from her perspective. And most importantly, I realize that healing comes when people extend grace to each other and continue to love and forgive. Hand stitching the collaged panel was a labor of love. It is the most intensely stitched panel in the installation because this was a way of showing my mom just how important she is to me.



Panel 22 - Childlike Faith



Panel 23 - Childlike Faith, detail #1



Panel 24 - Childlike Faith, detail #2

Childlike Faith (Plate 22)

In a letter dated 2005:

"...Leslie, I don't know why I feel compelled to write this but I am. There are so many things about my life that I wish I could erase and wipe the slate clean. But I can't. The things I have done are done and I am so thankful that I serve a living God who has taken all my offenses, indiscretions, and even my presumptuous sins, and cast them behind His back to remember them no more. I know there were many times that I was not there for you when you needed me. It seemed I had my own little world that I lived in, and for some unknown reason I was trapped in that world. Raising four kids wasn't an easy job. Money, as you know was tight, there was always something we needed, maybe that little world was my way of escaping, I don't know. But one thing I always knew and still do is how much I love each and every one of you kids. I will always say, and you can probably say it before I write it, God searched over heaven and sent down for me the four best He had.

I know your grandma has had so much influence on your life, but I pray with all my heart that there has been something between us, something I have passed on to you, that I too will have made a difference in your life. Please, please don't think I'm jealous because God knows I really don't believe I could have made it without her. God put her in my life too for a purpose and you children gave her life.

Again I want to apologize for not being there for you. If you only knew how many times I sit on the couch and my mind flashes back to the times when all four of you kids would sit in front of the TV on the floor with Dad stretched out by the wood stove saying "oh this feels so good" and the raw peanuts he would put on a cookie sheet waiting for them to roast so we could eat them. And when we would all go down to Wanda's in Fisk and get ribs, rent movies and kick back and have family night. Oh God I miss that! Time goes by so fast. Maybe I'm feeling melancholy, or lonesome for things that used to be. I know there are always new things on the horizon. I know that I could pick up the phone and call you more often and that's nobody's fault but my own. I know I could send you cards or letters and that's no ones fault but mine. But I think of you more often than you could ever dream...

With all the love that's in my heart,

Mom

A response, 2005:

Mom,

I just finished reading your heartfelt letter. Thank you for taking the time to write so much and for being so open with your feelings. Grandma Stucker has been a very key person in my life, no question there, but I want you to know that you have been and still

are important to me. You are my mom and no one can take your place. You said in your letter that you hope there's been some way in which you've made a positive impact on my life and I immediately thought of several powerful ways you've helped to shape me into the woman I am today.

First, you have always encouraged me in my art. You never looked at it as something "less than" or as a hobby. You made me believe in my talent and helped me to see that what I do is a special gift from God. Your attitude let me see that you trusted in my abilities enough that I should pursue it further. I think a lot of parents might have said, "well, that's nice, you can draw but now seriously, what are you going to do with your life." I never had to go through the agony of wanting to do one thing but feeling pressure to do something else.

Secondly, you always spoke into my life the positive message that God has a great destiny for me. You've told me a million times and I believe it. When parents don't believe in their children how can they ever believe in themselves or see beyond their current circumstances? Without hearing you say, "you are going to be somebody someday", how would I have ever been able to see past my backyard? Now I can say I've seen and done so many things, and I can't wait to do even more. You helped me to see that I can accomplish any goal I set my heart and hands to do.

While it would be nice to pretend we've always gotten along and have never been a disappointment to each other, that's not really true. I know I was a strong-willed child, I know it hasn't been easy. And yes, there have been many times when I have felt that you were distant. I have wanted our relationship to be more than it is. I've wanted to share so many things with you but didn't because I felt for some reason that I needed to guard my heart. But I think God must have put it on your heart to write your letter because I have prayed that we can put the past behind us and move forward. Turn past hurts over to Him and allow Him to give us a new start that will continue to enrich throughout all of our tomorrows. I need and want you to be a part of my life.

Lately, I've tried to put myself in your shoes and I've imagined what my life would be like right now if I had four kids, very little money, and a husband who wasn't willing to communicate or share his heart with me. How different my life is than your life was at my age. I also know you didn't really have a chance to get to know who you were as a woman before you were taking on all the responsibilities of a wife and mother. Life is a learning experience...

With all my love,

Leslie

This collaged image is of my mom and her only brother. One of the most interesting things about my mom is that no matter what she has done or has gone through, she holds fast to a childlike faith in God. She believes wholeheartedly in a sovereign Lord who loves her in spite of herself. The simplicity of her faith is pure and truly has been, in itself, her salvation. The

frustrating part for me has been the duality of knowing what she believes and watching her live, at times destructively, sinking into patterns of addiction and isolation. Her reasons are understandable but it has still been hard for me. While self-medicating muffles the bad, it can also mute the good.



Plate 25 - The Patriot



Plate 26 - The Patriots, detail #1



Plate 27 - The Patriots, detail #2

The Patriots (Plate 25)

This image depicts two young girls from the 1940's, a time of war and American pride. They pose for their portrait with American flags, which seem to be nothing more than props they have been asked to hold without fully understanding the politics that these symbols carry. Although I do not know who these girls are, they illustrate the unspoken understanding within my family about having respect for one's country and remembering the sacrifices made by military service members. Our annual 4th of July celebrations were among the rare occasions I can remember as being wholly enjoyable. Most of our efforts at doing things together were usually overshadowed by stress, anxiety, and arguing, mostly between my parents.

Everything revolved around the cookout that would ensue and the fireworks that would follow at sundown. Perhaps the success of those days was due to the fact that they were not tied to a religious holiday. There was such a duality in the way we were raised. My mom is a devout Christian and my dad did not want anything to do with church or God. Large family meals held on Sundays, Christmas, or Easter often resulted in disappointment as we all tried to keep the peace and swallow the lumps in our throats. I will give my mom credit for trying hard to make things special. This tension is represented in the work by the somber look on the girls' faces.

The menu became a tradition that we could count on: thick, barbecued pork steaks crispy with char, oven baked beans with strips of sizzling bacon on top, corn on the cob drenched in real butter, a leafy green salad tossed with Italian dressing and a sprinkle of sugar, and homemade potato salad that was extra chunky and tart with yellow mustard and celery salt. My grandma Bebe would come over with a fluffy lemon Jello cheesecake. The atmosphere in the house was always more relaxed when Bebe was around. Wherever she was, that is where love was.

The summers in Missouri are hot and humid, but in early July the weather is still comfortable enough to be outside. Since we lived in a rural area outside of the city limits we always bought our own fireworks to shoot off. It was never anything over the top, just a few sparklers, some bottle rockets, spinners, and usually a pack or two of firecrackers to throw at each other. My dad would put the tip of his cigarette to the wicks and the dark sky would light up with colored flames and silvery sparks that left the air thick with smoke and floating paper.

When my husband and I were married eight years ago, we were determined to carry on some of the traditions we had grown up with. Between military deployments and obligations to be places during the holidays, we really had not made “traditions” a priority in our own little family until this summer when my sister and her six-year-old daughter came to live with us. By the time the 4th of July rolled around we were throwing the pork steaks on the grill and heaping our plates with homemade potato salad. For me, it was a re-creation of the happy memories I had of “home”. We could all see how bringing in a little tradition from our childhood enhanced our adult experience.



Plate 28 - Path Finder



Plate 29 - Path Finder, detail #1



Plate 30 - Path Finder, detail #2

Path Finder (Plate 28)

“When we seek for connection, we restore the world to wholeness. Our seemingly separate lives become meaningful as we discover how truly necessary we are to each other.”

~ Margaret Wheatley ~

No matter where I go, or how I try to reinvent myself, I am and always will be a mosaic of characteristics and sensibilities that are inherent to a small town girl. Once in a while something slips out that gives me away and I am reminded that I have still got some of that thick Black River mud between my toes. There has always been a gnawing desire within me to live beyond the simple upbringing that swaddled me into young adulthood. A small town, with its small thinking, has a way of getting into a person. It has a way of clinging to you like quicksand and pulling you down into itself.

I was a strong-willed and somewhat precocious child who realized early on that working hard was the way to make it in life. As the oldest of four, I developed a self-reliant disposition and became the stereotypical overachiever. I felt that my parents took a nonchalant attitude toward our education. With “average” being good enough for them, I started setting higher and higher expectations for myself. Not sure what constituted as an acceptable measure of success, I charted my path and set out to achieve my goals. There was never any pressure from my parents. In fact, the drive came from somewhere deep within. I have always had a sense of purpose and destiny. This is represented in the work by the photographic image and the graph. The photograph is of me as a child learning to ride my tricycle on my own. Although I am trying to navigate my way on the rocky path before me, I am preoccupied with the puppy I want to hold onto. The graph represents the idea of measuring oneself and charting a progression.

My path has been a winding one. I often struggle with balance and sometimes feel that I am simultaneously too much and not enough. When I am excelling in one area, I am falling short in another. I am finally starting to realize that I cannot do it all and my self-worth is not based on my performance or measured by my achievements, degrees, or exhibition record. My identity is defined by my character, not my accomplishments.

From my research, I am able to see that I am a compilation of the good and the bad characteristics of my family. I am a worrier, just like my dad. I am a hard worker, like my grandma, and I am a woman of faith, like my mom. I am not perfect by any means, but my heart is in the right place. When I fall down, I pick myself back up and keep moving forward. When I am stuck, I get a shovel and start digging.

INSTALLATION



Plate 31 - Installation view #1



Plate 32 - Installation view #2



Plate 33 - Installation view #3



Plate 34 - Installation view #4

CONCLUSION

My research was an effective experiment in integrating expressive work with forms of psychotherapy. Combining personal and collective memories with mind-body exercises such as letter writing and hand stitching was as a means to express myself imaginatively and authentically. This experience has lead to emotional reparation and transformation.

I am a woman who finds her voice through the visual arts and is seeking to understand herself and her place in the world. The purpose of this body of work was an act of self-discovery and an attempt to better understand myself. By looking to the past for answers and reconstructing memories, I have discovered the inherent characteristics that have formed my identity: true grit, a strong work ethic, determination, perseverance in the face of adversity, resiliency, and an unwavering faith in God.

PROCESS PHOTOGRAPHS



Plate 35 - Work in process: making the spheres



Plate 36 - Work in process: making the spheres, continued



Plate 37 - Studio (artist in home studio, assisted by sister Leigh Willis).

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