COLLECTING ROCKS, LEAVES, AND SEEDS: A JOURNEY THROUGH LOSS

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Try writing an ethnography of something very close to you... A family, silence and secrets, a few spoken words, a death, memory and love. An intimate culture, to be certain. This will take you beyond questions of participant-observation, unstructured data, case size, and interpretation. It will encompass your emotional and spiritual life, your very being. This is ethnography as the lived experience of the ethnographer.

(Quinney, 1996, p.357)

My son Nathanial was badly burned during the winter of 1996. Hours later in the hospital I watched him as he stopped breathing, as his heart stopped and as he turned a peculiar shade of grey. He had been born with multiple disabilities and death had always been a presence in my life with him. Yet I had never seen it this close before. I watched as if through a cloud of confusion as the medical staff seemed to move in slow motion and just as the crash cart was wheeled into the room he started to breathe again. He spent a month in the hospital and over the next year recovered from his burns. What I didn't know then was that this was to be just the beginning of a long season of loss. I was to encounter loss and death numerous times in the years ahead.

Over the next four years in a series of events unrelated to his burns, he had both eyes removed leaving him completely blind. He no longer reached for toys that dropped and his world became dark and restricted. Where once he used to push himself around in a walker, giving therapists and myself hope that maybe one day he'd learn to stand and walk, he was no longer able to tolerate weight bearing. Also, because of long periods of extreme pain requiring a level of care I was unable to give him, he was moved out of my home into specialized foster care. And I was confronted at a deep level with what it meant to mother, nurture, love and care for him.

I began to question and examine the place of loss within education. Max van Manen describes the essence of teaching and parenting as hope. Hope that growth will occur, change will result, and things will become something other than what they already are. He writes, "what hope gives us is the simple avowal: 'I will not give up on you. I know that you can make a life for yourself.' Thus hope refers to that which gives us patience and tolerance, belief and trust
in the possibility of our children." (1991, p. 68). Pedagogy, he says, is the art of tactfully mediating the possible influences of the world so that the child is constantly encouraged to assume more self-responsibility for learning and growth" (p. 80). This assumes a progressive move towards increasing self-reliance and independence.

While I agree with van Manen, and metaphors of growth, change, and development fit well within my philosophical framework, I found it was not adequate, nor did it fit the scope of my experience. While fostering development for my son is a constant concern and endeavour and every accomplishment and independent gain is a reason for celebration, I am also aware that independent living and independence in most life areas is not a realistic goal for him. Not only is lifelong dependency a reality for him, he had also experienced seasons marked by profound loss resulting in even greater dependence. How then did dependence and seasons marked by loss fit within the hope of education as van Manen describes?

A focus simply on growth and progress forward was limited and inadequate. It seemed necessary to broaden the scope of education to include, embrace, and welcome dimensions of dependency and loss. Loss touches each of our lives. It was my sense that in these places of loss, disability, and dependence one could find things of great value, perhaps a way of being with each other, of caring, of sharing self, and of receiving the other that did not depend on growth or achievement or on progress in learning.

As my thesis research took me back into this season of loss, I found that words alone were not adequate. Images held meanings and interpretations that words were not able to express. I found that it was only though the arts I was able to adequately explore and address these issues of loss. As Daniel Walsh writes, "art is a human construction, a tool that human beings use to make sense of their existence...It is not a medium for transporting meaning or beauty or truth. It is a tool for constructing meaning" (1994, p. 20).

As a textile artist, it was natural to explore and work through issues visually and the meditative aspect of quiltmaking lent itself to addressing deeply felt, emotional issues. Quilting is slow and time consuming. As a quilt is pieced and stitched the quiltmaker's grief, thoughts, hopes, and dreams are stitched in with the fabric and images. Angela Baker writes that the grieving and art making processes are interwoven as they both involve "losses and creation, destruction and reconstruction, and a reformulating of meaning and patterning" (1998, p. 87).

Quiltmaking situated me within the context of other women quilters both past and present. Art that connected public and private, and integrated my lived experiences as mother, teacher, scholar, and artist. Cloth and quilts, art that even though hung on a gallery wall still speak of home and children, of marriage, and sex, and birth and death, of cycles and seasons. As Robert Shaw writes, "For most quilters, the medium is the message, and it forms a major component of the meaning of their work" (1997, p. 16). In part it is the "slow meditative quality of work, the feeling that it is a female or feminine medium, and even that it seems fragile and impermanent" (p. 20). Therefore, it was both the process of making art and engagement with the textile medium, which allowed me to find my way both to the questions I was asking as well as in and through my inquiry. As Elliot Eisner writes,

alternate forms of data representation promise to increase the variety of questions that we can ask about the educational situations we study... we can expect new ways of seeing
things, new settings for their display, and new problems to tackle...put another way, our
capacity to wonder is stimulated by the possibilities the new forms of representation
suggest. As we learn to think within the medium we choose to use, we are more able to
raise questions that the media themselves suggest. (1997, p. 8)

Art making then, added a richness to life and to experience and offered a unique avenue for
exploration.

**Integrating Self as Artist as Teacher as Researcher**

I remember vividly my first encounters in school with clay and paint. I went to a small
Montessori School in rural Metchosin outside of Victoria. Our school was a large white house on
a beautiful beachfront lot. We did our schoolwork in the mornings with the afternoons devoted
to art, nature study, music, dance, and drama. We sculpted out of clay, spun and dyed wool
from the neighbour's sheep, wove at the large floor loom, painted, drew, made papier-mâché
puppets, pieced patchwork quilts, and built wooden book ends decorated with shells and
coloured glass found at the beach. Only a few clay sheep and shepherd, a worn woven mat, and
a couple of paintings remain from those years. But I still remember the feel of the clay between
my hands, the smell of the raw sheep wool, the pleasure of drawing in the garden surrounded by
flowers, and colours coming alive on my paper as I sat at the beach my paintbox open on my
knee painting the islands I could see in the distance.

For me this joy and pleasure was easily passed on in teaching. For years I had taught
adult and children's art classes and was currently teaching art methods courses for elementary
pre-service teachers. Still my greatest pleasure in teaching was being part of students’ discovery
and connection to studio processes. The theory, the lesson planning, the reflective, critical
thinking were all important. But it was the studio experience which was transformative for most
of my students. It was in working and engaging with the art materials, creating, imaging, often
for the first time since childhood, that hope and possibility, in essence life, was generated.

Nevertheless, in my own practice, this love of and need to create often seemed lost and
distanced in the daily demands of teaching, graduate course work, research, mothering, and
daily living. Art making, although central to my being, was often left as an extra. When I’m
finished this paper (or this course, or this presentation...) I’d tell myself, I'll walk at the beach
and photograph the rocks at low tide or maybe stitch the quilt that dances through my head as I
write. I’d think in images, ideas would take shape as images, experiences would translate
themselves into imagined quilts and other artworks, but I’d mostly just dream of having time to
make them visible and tangible. It was then, an unexpected pleasure to find myself in the midst
of a group of similarly minded artists and scholars.

As a group of graduate students we were looking for ways to integrate our selves as
artists with our research and our teaching. As art teachers, our artist selves were often neglected
and distanced, doing the often more immediate work of facilitating the art of others. As
researchers, we researched and inquired into art education practices, but it was not typically
centered in our own studio explorations. We set out then, to inquire into ways of returning to
studio practices as central, and into ways of working within the triad of ourselves as artists as researchers as teachers.

We recognized that there were ways of knowing, experiencing, engaging with the world, with ourselves, and with others, ways of learning, and being which were uniquely linked to the arts, visual arts in particular. As art educators we wanted to explore using visual art as research, as a process and method of inquiring into our teaching. Ardra L. Cole and J. Gary Knowles argue that the nature of teaching itself supports alternate methods of inquiry:

Teaching is a complex, dynamic, and socially constructed activity, sometimes impulsive, not always logical, often unpredictable, frequently intuitive, and invariably difficult to describe and interpret... If we characterize teaching as a form of creative expression—characterized as multimodal, nonlinear, and multidimensional—then it makes sense to search for ways of understanding teaching that are also nonlinear, multimodal, and multidimensional. (2000, p. 63)

In our attempts to find and work within a holistic framework and practice it became necessary to embrace, integrate, make connections, and work within the relation of all parts of ourselves. To quote Dennis Sumara and Terrance Carson:

Those who involve themselves in holistic focal practices understand that one's evolving sense of identity and one's daily practices must always be, in some way interpreted in relation to one another (p. xv)...who one is becomes completely caught up in what one knows and does...it suggests that what is thought, what is represented, what is acted upon, are all intertwined aspects of lived experience and, as such, cannot be discussed or interpreted separately (1997, p. xvii).

Studio based inquiry was not a new idea to me. Using studio processes as a way of investigating, sorting, figuring out, constructing, and re-constructing meaning was already a familiar practice. In the summer following Nathanial’s first serious near death experience and for several years after I found myself compelled to go outside, searching, exploring, investigating, looking for something, although I didn’t know exactly what, camera in hand. I used countless rolls of film photographing rocks and shore and beachside crevices.
As I explored and photographed I realized I was looking for something permanent, something lasting, something eternal made tangible and visible. And as I walked and looked over the grey sandstone rocks at my parent’s retreat on Saturna Island I was led by a promise:

*I will give you treasures of darkness
riches stored in secret places*

I found that in the detail, in the lines and crevices, in the green of the seaweed, in the shapes and contours of the rocks, I began to see reflected back incredible beauty. It was a sustaining glimmer of hope that if there were treasures in darkness, beauty in barrenness, there might also be life in death. And I saw life growing in unlikely places. A tuft of grass squeezing through a tiny opening. Tidal pools in the rounded sandstone hollows scattered along the coastline. Rock that had seen the changes of centuries, sculpted, worn, and ageless. And I found my questions reflected in and taking shape through the images of the rocks and in my photographs.
Artful Research

In our weekly artist/researcher/teacher meetings we were continuously drawn back to the problem of how art was research, and how to distinguish art practice from art as research. Certainly, not all artistic/studio practice could be classified as research. When was art (just) art, and when was it research?

Robyn Stewart, in a paper arguing the validity of art as research, discusses how art based research is like other forms of qualitative, and also quantitative, research methods. Visual art research echoes the interests of other forms of research, in "originality, being primarily investigative, and having the potential to produce results sufficiently general so that the human stock of knowledge, theoretical and practical, is recognizably increased" (1999, p. 2). She writes, "visual research models can be described as processes of reflective, critical inquiry which are concerned with the advancement or extension of knowledge, new discoveries, solutions to problems and conceptual progress" (p.3). Rhonda Watrin emphasizes that art is at times like qualitative research in that it "seizes the fullness of lived experience by describing, interpreting, creating, reconstituting, and revealing meaning" (1999, p. 93).

Rhonda Watrin describes similarities between qualitative research and studio art practice. Both artist and researcher examine, describe, interpret, and draw meaning from the "lifeworld" or lived experience. "Descriptive writing, like artwork, cuts through surface appearances and penetrates into the meaning of events, places, people, or processes" (1999, p. 94). Art making, like qualitative research, is a combination of intuition, subjectivity, and objectivity which leads to insight and understanding. The analysis of data is similar to the artistic process in that it involves divergent thinking, inductive reasoning, making connections, and communicating meanings. She writes:
Phenomenological inquiry is not unlike an artistic endeavour, a creative attempt to express our experience of the world... It parallels art in that it is unique, holistic, analytical, evocative, precise, universal, powerful, and sensitive. Hermeneutic phenomenologists use texts and their own experiences as data. Artists create text as they draw from their own experiences and understanding. Hermeneutic phenomenologists and artists are both engaged in processes that synthesize knowledge, as well as describe and interpret lived experience in the search for meaning. (p.97, 98)

While there may be similarities between visual research and other forms of qualitative or quantitative research, the unique beauty of it lies in its artistic intent and process. We can, for example relate how qualitative and quantitative forms of research are similar. They both are systematic, investigative, and original processes. However, the richness of qualitative methods can only be described in terms of its difference. Its strength is in the lived, felt, descriptive, nature of experience.

As we continue to explore and to redefine our understandings of research, it is important to investigate new and alternate methods of investigating and reporting which work specifically and uniquely within the problem, question, or experience being studied. As Shaun McNiff writes, "there are manifold issues and problems to be studied and...they will require equally diverse methods of investigation. We must get beyond the attempt to impose a single type of research onto every life situation" (1998a, p. 12).

Fluid Spaces

Robyn Stewart (1999) asserts that art as research must have an investigative intent. Art practice, while it may be innovative, original, systematic, and imaginative, is concerned primarily with product not investigation. Although I agree with this, I have difficulty with attempts to set definitive boundaries. If we have a holistic view of research and art production, both the process of creating, the research, and the final product are integral to the final outcome. Neither can be separated out as independent parts. Rather it becomes an interplay of image, inquiry, and art production. I prefer the term fluid spaces, as if the lines between art as practice and art as research flow back and forth, and in and out, each influencing, directing, and informing the other.

Writing, imaging, creating, researching within this fluid space makes it a more complex place to define. This is one of the problems Elliot Eisner (1997) addresses in relation to arts based research as one of the goals of social science inquiry is to be precise and to reduce ambiguity. Yet it is exactly this ambiguity, complexity, and place of paradox which becomes, as Ted Aoki describes, a place of "generative possibilities" (1996, p. 12). Shaun McNiff asserts that education of the imagination "requires [italics added] sustained encounters with uncertainty" (1998b, p. 23).

He writes, "trusting the process is based on a belief that something valuable will emerge when we step into the unknown" (p. 27). As we surrender and let go of control, we are able to be transported to a new place. Losing one's way, loss, and letting go are inherent in the creative
As a sculptor and colleague of mine continually asserts, just let go, follow the process, as it's in the letting go that we find. I find my explorations of loss reflected in the processes of creating art.

The process of art-based research is not one that is easily defined as the artistic process is often by nature ambiguous and uncertain. It would be impossible (or at the very least, dry and prescriptive) to devise a method or sequence of steps to art based research. It is precisely this uncertainty and ambiguity which holds open a place for new life, for renewal, and for possibility (Jardine, 1992). It's in the not knowing, the "knowing by unknowing" (Shantz, 1999, p. 65), the setting out on an undetermined adventure that we experience the "vibrant difficulty" (Jardine, 1992, p. 126) of visual arts inquiry.

**Stitching Fragments**

As I began to investigate, construct, and tell narratives of mothering, of loss, of grief and of hope, both the process of research and the story fabric evolved as both written and visual, an interplay of image and text. Both the visual and textual elements were significant in the research process as both my writing and my art making/quilting were the processes by which the narratives unfolded.

I began with the images of seeds.

Fruit ripe and full encasing seeds and the hope of new life. Seeds hidden in dark places released in death and bringing forth life again.

Cycles of birthing and dying.

Images of being pregnant and full. Full of joy and sorrow, and of loss and grief.

Slowly, as the images emerged in cloth and in colour, warm, tactile, held in my hand and carefully stitched, I found myself imaged, and the narratives began to take shape.

The first image I stitched was a green pepper.

I looked at it and saw myself reflected back.

Here I am cut open.
Seasons of generativity, fragrance, and abundance. Through fall and winter and death and dying. Leaves falling, colours intensified, becoming brilliant and beautiful, spinning and dancing in the wind.

Through the harsh, cold, barren, desolate winter.

We tend to live as if life goes on forever. As if it’s a continual pressing forward, gaining and achieving. Yet death follows life a certainly as fall and winter follow spring and summer. It’s this contrast that brings depth and brilliance to life. Like colours in a quilt against the black bringing out the richness of each colour.
It took me along shorelines and beachside pathways, collecting rocks like tears, held in my hand, heavy like rememberences of all the sorrows. Joys and sorrows together, emptiness and fullness, presence and absence, like the squares and spaces making up my quilt. Looking into that emptiness, living in the loss, and finding my way to being at peace with emptiness and absence, to letting go and letting be.

Themes of hope emerged, hope that even in loss and grief and death one could find incredible beauty, dignity, and strength. Hope that winter doesn’t
last forever. Hope that life, like the first spring flowers, would always push up through the ground again.

And with the hope of spring my quilt was finished yet still left open with spaces un-done. A story that resisted closure.
As I shared these images and stories, both spoken and unspoken, with my students, the classroom was opened as a sacred space. Their stories echoed with mine. An invitation was extended, and a space opened for questions and genuine conversation. As David G. Smith writes a teacher who lives well, with a healthy remembrance, is able to talk in such a way that students can learn to see that there is more to life than what appears on the surface - that there is indeed an Other side to everything, a silent archeology in every speech, a secret which inspires the saying, indeed an absence which is always present...and remembering well does not mean just remembering happy times, that is suppressing the fire by which we might be refined. More importantly, remembering well means remembering how each of us might struggle through life's bittersweetness with the kind of courage that enables life to go on. (1994, p. 179-80)

Carl Leggo writes, "to live well takes courage and humility" (2000, p. 2). It takes both courage and humility to embrace our full humanness, not separating or distancing ourselves from others, but embracing and connecting to the humanness both in ourselves and in others (Remen, 1999). It is in this we can find authentic human connection. It is this willingness to live fully, to live well, and to live a life of awareness and openness where we know life so intimately we are able to "trust and accept life whole, embracing its darkness in order to know its grace" (Remen, 1999, p. 37) which speaks to our students and can impart courage and hope.
Fragments (1999)
Fabric, leaves, rocks, shells, twigs, seeds, moss, lichen, kelp, acorns, pinecone, wool, sequins, mirrors.
93 x 136 cm
Endings and Other Beginnings

A month ago during an individual education plan meeting, we sat around the table, Nathanial's teacher, the classroom aides, his therapists, foster parents, and myself. One end of the table was left empty as if to invite in others from his past and Nathanial sat at the head in his wheelchair and laughed. He laughed through most of the meeting, reaching out to touch the people on either side of him as if to say how much he loved them and appreciated them being there. I noted how the circle had grown over the past four years and how his years of critical illness had allowed others to share in his care and receive in return the love and relationship of a delightful little boy. I noted as well how the loss of his eyes had forced him to become much more interactive and communicative.

It was clear now that he would never learn to walk and very possibly never stand. His vision was completely gone. He had become more physically dependent and other problems had become more pronounced. And it was clear that he would not be returning home. Yet these losses had resulted in gains that were harder to define. In things perhaps only the arts could adequately express. In the beauty of relationship, in the strength of the spirit, in the love given and received, in compassion and caring, in lives and hearts enriched and expanded, in courage and faith, and in hope that even in the darkest coldest winter, spring would always come again. And I began to feel a sense of closure. This season had ended and another begun.

I don't know what's ahead. It's certain there will be more loss one day. Yet, I see loss differently now. A difficult and painful thing to be sure, but the beauty of it, like the fragile skeleton of a leaf with its delicate veins exposed, is a rare gift. Loss and grief, a treasured space if we let ourselves linger there a while, and trust the journey.
References


