

TITLE SLIDE

It is an honor to stand before you today as the 2025-26 John and Betty Michael Autobiographical Distinguished Lecturer. I am humbled by those outstanding scholars in the field of art education who have stood before me. I am grateful to Miami University for this invitation. Thank you, Amanda Alexander, Stephanie Danker and Luke Meeken for your behind-the-scenes attention to details to make this all happen.

CHANGE SLIDE *Dancing with My Bones***Playwright's Note: Title Explanation**

Dancing with My Bones is the title of a piece of artwork that I created while on a vision quest retreat when I spent a weekend in solitude, walking, meditating, and making art, for my 50th birthday. Beads and found objects in each section represent significant people and different aspects of my life. The silver filagree tubes flanked by moonstone beads represent my bones, connecting everything together, while the goddess amulet symbolizes the divine feminine and creative energy.

Why An Artist's Life in Three Acts... When I was in graduate school, I recall reading a book that stuck with me titled Every person's life is worth a novel. It was written by Erving Polster, a Gestalt therapist, who believed that everyone's life is filled with stories to be told. If we stop to observe our own lives, these stories could fill the pages of a novel. In my work, I look at things as though they are plays being acted out. Lives are filled with dramatic narratives and that need be acknowledged, written, and performed. So, following Polster's argument, every person's life is a play.

Prologue

Dancing with My Bones: An Artist's Life in Three Acts is an autobiographical playlet with vignettes about my personal and professional life as an artist, art therapist and art educator and the interconnectivity of my art practice, my therapy practice and my teaching practice. The words and images scroll like those seen in a dream, a phantasmagoria so to speak.

Act 1: Coming to Voice

To borrow some word from bell hooks, “*Coming to voice is not just the act of telling one’s experience. It is using that telling strategically – to come to voice that you can speak freely about other subjects*” (1994, p.148).

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(Image JUG Club: NO boys Allowed, Kay, 2020 p. 101)

Scene 1: The story begins

My story begins in Memphis Tennessee, where I was born. I was about age 6, a happy-go-lucky little girl with curly, dark hair. I loved to play grocery, make art, and have meetings of the J.U.G (just us girls) club in my playroom on the second floor of our blond, brick bungalow on Belvedere Street in Memphis, Tennessee.

CHANGE SLIDE (Image Button Box, 2013)

I took *great delight* in playing in Grandma Annie's button box creating art with buttons and beads.

I wondered? How *DID* I learn to express myself or to come to voice, as described by bell hooks? I continued to scroll through images in my head for answers.

Quietly. By being a good girl, making good grades and by making art.

Art became my pull thread, a connecting cord, a way to create myself. I could speak better through my art...*and* my creativity gave me voice.

I rolled through more images.

I saw "*how to*" art books, art kits, and supplies. Oh...how I loved the smell of a new set of crayons or the sight of freshly sharpened, colored pencils to do art projects.

Scene 2: Artful responses

Growing up, I frequently constructed aesthetic responses to class assignments. Two projects stand out from Ms. Scherr's junior high classes.

***FIRST...* in science I made a fish mosaic using different colors of dried beans, and split peas, for scales gluing everything to a piece of plywood.**

***SECOND...* for social studies, when studying Ancient Egypt, I created a paper mâché sarcophagus and spray painted it gold.**

***THEN...* I mummified my Barbie, wrapping her in torn sheets I**

dipped in tea, *AND...* sprinkling her with pickling spices, glitter and beads before closing the lid! I earned A's on both assignments!

Scene 3: The high school years

During high school my passion for making art continued. Two experiences stand out.

The first I was being elected as co "art" historian of our B'nai Birth Girls (BBG) youth group with my best friend Cheryl. We would have sleep overs, stay up all night and spend hours visually documenting events and accomplishments in a large 18" x 24" format scrapbook (way before scrapbooking was the rage). That scrapbook was entered in an international competition, and ours won a first place!

Two another experience popped into my mind. This time its Mrs. Wilson, my high school art teacher who dressed in monochromatic colors - pink, maroon and red or avocado, kelly and forest greens. *OH...* how she disturbed my adolescent

sensibilities! Looking back, she reminded me of Ms. Valerie Frizzle, the magic school bus teacher.

Mrs. Wilson must have helped me find my aesthetic voice because she inspired me to study art in college!

I went on to receive my BFA in Graphic Design from then Memphis State University. I got a job after I graduation in the University Advertising and Marketing Department as a graphic designer. I loved working there with talented artists and creatives where I designed some award-winning publications, posters, brochures for Continuing Education.

CHANGE SLIDE

(Image The Psychology of Children's Art)

Scene 4: Something's missing

Despite enjoying this work, I wasn't satisfied but didn't understand why.

Then, one day, while researching a graphic design project, I stumbled across a book in the stacks of the library. *The*

***Psychology of Children's Art* by Rhoda Kellogg and Scott O'Dell explored developmental stages in children's artwork, providing direction on fostering creativity without intervention.**

***This book changed the trajectory of my life.* I realized that I was fascinated by the psychology and stages of child art and wanted to work with children. So... decided to switch careers completely and to go to graduate school to become an art therapist. *BUT...* this was a *BIG* challenge because where I was living at it at the time, there weren't any art therapists in the state of Tennessee *AND* there were no art therapy programs.**

As a result, I petitioned the University to let me design my own. With a supportive committee that included, a special educator, a psychologist and a sociologist, we developed my program. I took courses across the University and completed my master's degree in Individual Studies.

ACT 2: Therapy

Scene 1: More Education

I started going to art therapy conferences and reading everything I could to learn more about the field of art therapy. What I discovered was that to realize my goal of becoming a registered art therapist, I needed more education; specifically, courses taught by art therapists. *OH NO!* How was I going to manage that?

At one art therapy conference in Kansas City, I met my future husband, Scott, who is here tonight! Scott's dad Robert was chair of the art department at Pittsburg (no H) State University, in Kansas. Bob wanted to know more about art therapy because they wanted to start a program. His sons came to an event at the conference to meet women. Scott claims he also wanted to learn about art therapy. The rest is history!

Shortly after that conference, I managed to move to St. Louis where I enrolled in the *St Louis Institute of Art Psychotherapy*. Scott moved to St Louis too. We bought a restaurant.

While in this program, that was essentially another master's degree, Scott ran the restaurant that was near the University of Missouri at St. Louis (UMSL).

While in St Louis, I developed art therapy programs in hospital waiting rooms and clinics at a Cardinal Glennon Children's Hospital. I was hired as the first art therapist at a large metropolitan hospital, St. Johns Mercy Medical Center, where our son Clayton was born. I started the program and did what I called *Ping Pong Table Art Therapy*, because I had art therapy groups in the rec room on the psychiatric unit. *While it was less than ideal*, I didn't mind because the patients, staff and doctors could come in and see what we were doing. Not private but it was great advertising!

Over my time there, art therapy spread all over the hospital to all the psychiatry units - acute care, comprehensive care, eating disorders, adolescent, and senior adults *TO* rehab, the burn unit and pediatrics, where I started a Child Life Program.

Scene 2: Art is the therapy

I often said that my practice as an art therapist was my art. I collaborated with other art therapists and music therapists designing expressive therapy interventions that used metaphors, materials, and our creativity to engage patients to promote therapeutic growth and change.

As an artist, I used my creative vision and artistic sensibilities to bring new perspectives to those I work with in the art therapy. I created art with/for people to promote healing, growth, and change.

As a therapist, I used the arts to help resolve individual/family challenges. I worked with the imagery, the imagination & the metaphors inherent in their expression. I worked with art materials, art processes, and therapeutic and artistic interventions,

CHANGE SLIDE *Image Firey Hot Collage*

I worked with the creative process involved in art making & believe it was enhanced life and healing by helps others to see themselves in new ways.

As an educator, I imparted knowledge about the use of art in the healing process and guided others in accessing their creative source(s). I educated others that their creative acts can help organize and create new forms from the complexity, confusion, and chaos in their lives.

Scene 3: The Time of my Life

I had the opportunity to direct a psychosocial art therapy program in the special education school for students with social and emotional disorders at Catholic Children's Home in Alton, Il. Students were referred from their home school district (some were bused 25 miles away) to this specialized school. This school had a full cadre of support services – speech therapy, recreation therapy, art therapy, music therapy,

counseling, and social work. We all worked together with children K-12 with a wide range of abilities, diagnoses and behavioral challenges, individually, in small groups and with full classroom. Students often called me as their *art teacher* instead of their *art therapist*, which was fine, even though I didn't have a degree in Art Education.

Every year we transformed the art room into a gallery. All the kid's artwork, which was created in therapy, was included.

Everyone received participation ribbons, which they carried around proudly! The staff, teachers and families were amazed at the stories the students told through their artwork.

One student who I worked with for several years is Monika. She had been in and out of state hospitals and treatment centers. She had many diagnoses and had been prescribed quite a few different medications, that according to Monika, didn't help.

She was creative and loved art! I was able to hire her as our work study student in art therapy helping prep materials for groups, keep the room organized, and do special projects.

Additionally, we met weekly for art therapy, so she was in the art room almost daily.

CHANGE SLIDE *Childhood Revealed*

I submitted two of her pieces to the book, *Childhood Revealed, Art Expressing Pain, Discovery & Hope* sponsored by the Child Study Center at NYU. Of 600 submissions, 100 were accepted including both of Monika's. Her artwork would be published in a book and in a travelling show. She was thrilled and I was too!

This powerful and illuminating book provided a peak into the inner worlds of children with emotional, psychological, or physical problems. In addition, the work was exhibited at the Whitney Museum in NY.

CHANGE SLIDE *THORNS*

The school sent Monika, her mother and me to the show where we met all the other kids whose work was featured AND we

Katie Couric, who wrote the forward and delivered the opening remarks. One of Monika's large paintings *Thorns* was front and center when we entered the museum. *How excited we all were to see it!*

Her description that hung by her painting read "I'm the circles, my mom and dad are the triangles, trying to keep me from death."

As you might imagine, this was major turning point in Monika's life.

CHANGE SLIDE *The Time of my Life*

After we returned from the show, we began work on *The Time of my Life*. We worked together in therapy weekly for 6 months on this piece. Monika explored aspects of herself, she hadn't examined in her therapy process. When asked to write an artist statement for this piece she wrote: *This is powerful because it represents what art therapy is. This piece shows the transition from the way I was, to how I am now and how I want to be.*

CHANGE SLIDE LILITH'S SHIELD

Artifacts created during therapy and independently utilize creative energy and the expressive arts to guide the image making process. It is the image that integrates the mind and body where understanding and healing reside.

POSTSCRIPT:

Monika wrote to me years later, that she was doing great, thanked me and told me she wanted to go to art school and hope to become an art therapist.

Act 3: Art Education

Scene 1: What's Next, meeting Debbie

The words of Dan Fogelberg song seem particularly apropos now:

And you don't know what you're gonna do next

You wait for the sun, but it never quite comes

Some kind of message comes through to you

Some kind of message comes through

And it says to you

Love when you can, cry when you have to

Be who you must, that's a part of the plan

Await your arrival with simple survival

And one day we'll all understand

One day we'll all understand

One day we'll all understand

My family moved to Northern Illinois, and I resigned from a position at the special education school. I wanted to concentrate on my artwork, so I began exhibiting and selling my Contemporary Story Beads.

CHANGE SLIDE SHADES OF GREEN

My artwork connects to the rhythm of soul, mirrors female spirituality, celebrates milestones, losses and transitions and is part of me re/search practice. It is therapeutic or spiritual in nature and constitutes narrative art and craft.

CHANGE SLIDE LIFE'S NATURAL ORDER

In my artwork, I played with color and texture, mixing the precious with the mundane, and experiment with energy, light, movement, and sound. Each piece has its own narrative, its own story.

I was also practicing independently as a board-certified art therapist at the Center for Counseling and building my practice.

I loved making and selling my artwork and loved my work at the center. Yet things weren't coming together, until

I met Dr Deborah Smith-Shank. I heard that there was an art therapy program at Northern Illinois University that was nearby and was curious about teaching courses.

My curiosity led to lunch conversation at a little Thai restaurant in DeKalb. I learned from Deb that the due to state cuts the art therapy program was cut. She encouraged me to enter their doctoral program instead, to combine art education with my

skills in art therapy. I questioned how I would fit coming from a therapeutic background. Debbie and I talked about how my knowledge and experiences in art therapy seemed foreign to many of the concepts and practices in art education. We often had conversations about what Deb described as *“the artificial and modernist conceptions of disciplinary boundaries that kept the fields of art education and art therapy so very territorial”*. The choice to pursue a doctorate in art education was not an easy one, but I did it. And in no time, I was immersed in teaching and learning about art, education, and research.

Debbie said I was a “strong force for reconciliation” since “contemporary art education was a field with amorphous and postmodern borders whose content [could] only be enriched by someone challenging boundaries.” She understood!

Scene 2: Everything is connected

What I began to understand was that everything was connected. There were no mistakes. Art was integral in my

research practice, and my teaching was part of my art practice. I was able to infuse my therapeutic skills in my work. I found my creative voice in my tripartite identities as art therapist, art educator and artist/researcher, which are inextricably linked and essential for me to balance multiple realms and roles.

I knew no other way. I know no other way.

My work bridges the two hybrid fields: art education and art therapy. My interest in narrative story telling-that encourages personal reflection, self-knowledge, and healing in the context of making art - is evidenced in all that I do: my scholarly publications, my dedication to art education and art therapy, and certainly in my own art.

CHANGE SLIDE Homage to Friedl

As a Jewish, female artist, scholar, and teacher, my work has been inspired by Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, the

Bauhaus-trained artist, renowned for her work with children at the Terezin concentration camp outside Prague.

Scene 3: Serendipitous encounter

After I graduated with my doctorate in Art Education, I began applying for jobs in higher education. One of my Professors at Northern Illinois University, Dr. Kerry Friedman told me about this job in Philadelphia at Temple University at Tyler School of Art. I didn't think I wanted to move to the east coast, but I applied anyway. In a very short time, I got a phone call from Dr. Jo-Anna Moore, had a phone interview, and a week later I was invited to campus for an interview.

Jo-Anna picked me up at the Philly airport for my interview at Temple. She gave me her cell phone number with clear instructions where to meet her. She said, "call me when you are in baggage claim".

I did. I said, "I'm here". Jo-Anna said, "*turn around*, here I am", and I turned around and there she was! We both laughed!

Ever since I landed at Temple, Jo-Anna has been a mentor, confidante, colleague, and a dear friend. She has always supported me by attending my presentations at conferences, reading writing drafts, listening, providing insights, and advice. She even covered taught my classes when I went in Budapest to complete my research and teaching Fulbright Bridging Borders: Art Therapy and Art Education in 2011.

CHANGE SLIDE Visual Essays Poster

While in Hungary, I taught art therapy classes at two Universities Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design and Elte University, a public research institution. I also did research at the Jewish Museum in the archive of 4000 pieces of children's artwork created in camp under the guidance of Friedl Dicker-Brandeis.

Jo-Anna mentored me toward tenure, even after she retired in 2013. She has continued while I've been department chair over the last nine years. She always reminded me of what's important:

- 1) Make everything as clear as a bell, easy for them to say yes**
- 2) Telescope it!**
- 3) Do what's best for the students, and**
- 4) Most of all... family is everything!**

Jo-Anna died last August and her influence on me and my work will carry on.

Epilogue

Joni Mitchell wrote in the song The Circle Game. The chorus goes like this...

We're captive on the carousel of time

We can't return we can only look

Behind from where we came

And go round and round and round

In the circle game

CHANGE SLIDE Bricolage

I've come full circle.

Bricolage is a three-dimensional representation of my teaching philosophy. Large objects symbolize key concepts: communication, culture, community, and critical reflection; small unifying beads signify my identities as artist/researcher, art therapist, and art educator and the interdisciplinary domains -- art, education, and therapy.

As the Canadian novelist and poet, Margaret Atwood puts it in her 2006 book, *Moral Disorders*,

“I see it in retrospect, indulgently, from the point I have reached now...how else can I see it” (p. 88).

Like the myth “phoenix rising from the ashes,” I see as I look back, an ongoing process of *becoming*, a cycle of regeneration, and transformation, growth, and triumph.

CHANGE SLIDE RIZ

In conclusion, I have a few parting words, my top ten list, so to speak.

Some of my own and some from people I admired.

- 1) Find your pull threads.
- 2) “Be who you must, that's a part of the plan”
- 3) Everything is connected.
- 4) There are no mistakes.
- 5) Stay connected to your creative core.

- 6) Follow your bliss.**
- 7) Pay attention to the cycles of nature.**
- 8) Be open to possibilities.**
- 9) Take risks.**
- 10) Be bold, AND carry on**

Thank you for listening.