



Leaving the river: transcending loss, illness and depression



Evelyn Berde

Evelyn Berde has spent her professional life as a teacher, a Child Life Specialist, and practicing artist. Her work is included in the collections of Children's Hospital, Boston, Oregon Gallery of Art, Portland and Harvard University. The installation, *Leaving the River* – over 40 pieces: paintings, sculpture, photographs, collage and mixed media – is 'a work in progress' as transcending grief and loss are ongoing, evolving, life-long experiences. Evelyn's own words best sum up the healing connections between grief and the arts as well as the power and preciousness of continuing bonds with those we have lost: 'Creating *Leaving the River* has allowed me to incorporate both the pain and the joy that expressing our most vivid memories can offer. The greatest gift I have given myself as an artist is to offer it to others. . . . The past few weeks of writing and speaking about *Leaving the River* have made me see and feel that I am truly out of the water.'

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On 12 July 1956 my brother Danny drowned in the Charles River in Boston. He was nine and I was six. Danny was my friend, my protector, my love. We went to school together, slept together, played together and cried together. When Danny died, everything in my life changed.

One Friday night several years ago when my son was a teenager he did not come home from his outing with friends. The panic I felt then, the immediate and utter despair, and the scenes

of pain and death I entertained that night somehow brought to the surface something in me that had been lying beneath my consciousness. It was as if everything I had stored away inside myself for years and years came forth – everything that had anything to do with the excruciating loss of my brother Danny and with the pain and sorrow I had felt for so long because of the body that was mine, a body I had always seen as 'deformed' by congenital scoliosis and rheumatoid arthritis.

With the help of my therapist of 35 years, I began to put my own memories and feelings into my art – which up until that time had been mostly still life, celebrating the vibrancy of all that is beautiful around us. My paintings often got at the sadness, yearnings, and inner lives of others, but this time I needed to represent myself, and canvas and color were not enough. Over several years I created an installation, *Leaving the River*, its purpose to bring forward the memories of my own childhood to the present. As I worked on the various pieces, it became clear that I wanted this collection of paintings, sculptures, photographs, and re-creations of the various spaces I have inhabited to be more than a simple collection of childhood memories. I wanted this work to reflect the journey I've made from my own childhood to the life I have now. I hoped that it would not only help me with the long lived grief I felt, but would also show the various stages of pain, and healing and acceptance that all people who experience loss and abandonment and sorrow must experience. These pieces have shown how art is for me one of the strongest sources of survival in my life. I hope that my art can do for others what it has done for me.

July 12, 1956

I remember my mother telling Danny that he had to be home in one hour. He checked his Mickey Mouse watch, grabbed onto his friend's hand and marched down the street to the Charles river Playground. This was the first time my parents had allowed my brother to go away from our Boston neighborhood down to the River with a playmate. The sidewalks were filled with children playing marbles, drawing with chalk, jumping rope, and licking popsicles. Suddenly my mother rushed out of our red brick apartment building. Her face was flushed a dark pink as she told me to stay with the children I was playing with; someone else's mother watched over us. 'He's in big trouble! He should have been home by now,' yelled my mother as she dashed to the river.

The next thing I remember was the sound of my mother sobbing as she was lifted down the street by two large police officers. 'Danny! Danny! Oh, my God, Danny!' Over and over she cried out as windows quickly opened to her sorrow. 'Where's Danny,' the mothers kept calling out. 'Helen, Helen, what happened?'

Where was Danny? I was stunned to see my strong mother being held up on either side of her by two strange men. Where was my brother? Where was my Danny?

They carried my mother up the stairs to our flat. Many people followed after her. I was told to stay outside for a while and play. NO! NO! What happened? Where is Danny? Police cars arrived. Then the parish priest ran upstairs. My father came home from work. My aunts came running over. Finally, someone took my hand and walked me into our kitchen. My mother was sobbing holding my three month old baby brother against her. My father was wiping his eyes and drinking his whiskey. My three year old brother was standing in a doorway, and I was all alone. Danny had drowned in the river. He was playing too near the water

and had fallen in. His friends had run for help, but when they returned, Danny was gone. When my mother arrived they were dragging the river for my brother's body, and had just pulled his shirt out of the water.

My brother. What happened to him? Why is he gone? Why did he play near the water? Was he scared when he died? Did he open his mouth? Did he swallow some of the river? Did he see fish? Was he scared? Did he call for me? Is he watching me? Is he an angel? Is he good? Am I bad? Why wasn't I chosen to be angel?

Everything in our lives changed, forever, on July 12, 1956.

I'm sorry I'm gone

'God had plans for him,' Mister Connolly said as everyone sat around the dining room table eating and nodding in agreement. I sat on the floor next to the table and saw all those relatives and friends crying, drinking, and even singing as they tried to find a reason for Danny's death.

'He was probably worried that he was gonna get a lickin' for getting his clothes wet.' God probably wanted to keep Danny from going off to war when he grew up. God only takes the good children to heaven to be angels with HIM.

NO. Danny's not an angel. He's not here. What happened to him? Why are you saying these things? Why are you singing? Why are you drinking? I tugged on my aunt's dress to ask my own questions. She lowered her face to my own. The smoke from her Chesterfield blended with the stench of whisky and made me back away from her cherry red mouth.

'Do you think Danny saw fish when he was under the river,' I asked.

She told me to stop being silly. Danny's an angel now.

An angel? No he is not. Danny is not an angel. Danny is my brother.



My favorite dress

My favorite dress had strawberries on the front and little white dots covered the material. Red rick-rack decorated the sleeves and the skirt puffed out like a marshmallow or an upside down umbrella. It was my favorite dress, but I never felt it against my skin. The only thing I felt against my body was plaster. Every year, they wheeled me into the Plaster Room at Mass General to saw off the cast I had worn the previous year and to make me a new one. To break the cast, I would have to lie on leather straps, suspended over a huge bucket where rolls and rolls of plaster were soaking in hot water. It was time for the old cast to come off. The Plaster Man would stand over me with a machine saw. As he revved up the motor, it sounded like I was being bulldozed like the buildings outside my house. He would show me using his own hand that 'this saw won't cut through to your little body. I promise. It can only saw through plaster.' I never ever believed him.

I wished so hard that Danny was there to hold my hand. I held my breath and wondered why if he really was an angel, he couldn't help me?



Mary in May

Sister Agnes Marie was bursting with excitement as she announced: 'Children, today is the first day of May, the month of our Blessed Mother, Mary!' My second grade classmates and I sat in our seats, hands folded, totally focused on Sister's freshly washed face. She was dressed in black, and the starched white collar of her habit seemed to scratch her throat as she spoke. 'Every day we will decorate the altar for Mary, and at the end of the month every single child in St. Josephs will march in the May Procession.

'You little children will be dressed in smocks and each one of you will receive a pair of wings to wear on your back. You will be

Mary's chosen Angels,' the young nun told us.

Mary, the Virgin Mother of Jesus was the Queen for the day. The red altar in the classroom was beautiful, decorated with crisp white doilies, wax flowers, ribbons, buttons, hold cards and candles. It was magic. As we lined up to walk through the streets of the West End, the nuns made final wing-checks. Sister Agnes Marie patted my head and announced: Evelyn has a brother who is a real angel living with Holy God. I couldn't even feel the wings against my plaster cast. I did not want Danny to be an angel. I wanted my brother, my Danny, back.



Decision

Being born with congenital scoliosis was 'My Cross to Bear'. My family told me this again and again throughout my childhood. 'Jesus died on the cross, and suffered for our sins. YOU are suffering now, and Jesus is with you while you are suffering. This is your cross to bear'. Never made sense to me.

When I was 17, my doctors decided that my curved spine was getting worse. A new treatment called 'halo-femoral traction' was being tried on selected patients. I turned 18, while in traction. This wonderful fact allowed me to finally have a say in what was done to my body.

The Chief of Orthopedics and some other doctors sat with my Mother and me and told us what they were planning to do next.

'The traction didn't give us enough correction. We want you to rest, and come back for another round of surgeries, traction, surgeries, traction, and more surgery. It will take about two years, but we think it will help your scoliosis', the Chief said.

My mother gasped, I was in shock.

While I was in the hospital, my high school art teachers took my portfolio to Massachusetts College of Art. They came to visit me and would bring application forms to fill out. They believed I would be a good art teacher. The college accepted me to begin classes in the Fall of 1968. I would be the first person in my entire Irish-American Family to go to college.

My mother and I talked about the future. 'You are 18, now. You can make the decision. I can't tell you what to do about this. You've been through enough!'

I sat with a soulful orthopedic resident on the eve of my decision. My body and spirit were exhausted. 'I feel like they are experimenting on me! I might become paralyzed! At least I can exist in this shape. I can live a decent life. I can go to college and start my career,' I said.

'What do you, in your heart, think you should do?' asked the resident.

'I want to go home, get well, and go to college in the Fall. How does that sound to you? If you were me, what would you do?' I begged for an answer.

'Go to college,' he stated, his words like a proclamation of my freedom.

When I told the Chief of Orthopedics what I had decided, he told me I had made the wrong choice. 'You will be dead before you are 30! You will be bent over and not able to breathe! You will become paralyzed!' he said.

'I believe I could just as well become paralyzed if I have the surgeries and the traction you're so strongly suggesting. Can you honestly say that this is not true?' I asked.

'I don't know,' he said. 'But, if you walk out of here, I will not take responsibility for what happens to you!'

The decision to leave helped me 'Soar' into the next part of my life. A new beginning. A new identity. A new me.



Acceptance

Acceptance/Rejection was a piece I did because my therapist asked me to try to paint how I felt about a new diagnosis I had received of Rheumatoid Arthritis, a painful disease to add to my already painful congenital scoliosis. I remember writing the words 'acceptance,' and 'rejection' all the way up and down the spinal column on my painting. My joints were on fire with pain, and I had to begin to think about how to incorporate this new disease into my daily life. How could I survive with both diseases and two young children? The reality that life is about balancing all that comes our way was helpful in keeping me healthy at that time.

Acceptance is a testament to the hard daily work of therapy. Coming to a place where I felt connected to the earth; connected to my family; connected to the Universe, and connected to my own body was so essential.



Leaving the river

My feet are in the water, though my body is not – in the water that took Danny away. When I was a child I imagined that my brother had sailed away from me a safe harbor, to a place where he would be valued; a place where he would never get slapped or beaten; a place where he would play forever and be happy. The only problem was that the place was far away from me.

The River is part of me. It is always present to my right and to my left. When I stand still, it flows past me with a force so strong that it can swallow up my brother's life, and my own. The river draws people to its shore just as my brother was drawn. What beauty called out to him? What movement, what sound; what light twinkling on the water's surface? Did he hear a voice calling out, 'I will rescue you and carry you to a better place; I will take care of you. Come join me in my swirling and I will carry you to a safer place.'

My feet are still in that water. Danny, I cannot leave you. I cannot abandon you. I will not leave you. Why did you leave me?

I forgive you for leaving me. I applaud you. You got away. You are an angel. You escaped. You spread your wings and flew away from your tortured life. I miss you so. ■



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